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Animal Bones in Ritual Accumulations at Monkys Uriy

At Monkys Uriy, a late 16th to early 17th century fort on the Bolshoy Yugan River, in the taiga zone of the Ob basin, Western Siberia, bones of wild animals (reindeer, elk, brown bear, and wolf) and those of domestic dogs were found, together with artifacts, in residential areas. We describe ten ritual accumulations of bones, species composition, that of skeletal elements, types of fragmentation, and the ages of the animals. Seven accumulations of bones were found at residential quarters. Six of these contained complete or partial skeletons of reindeer and cranial bones of elk. These accumulations may indicate construction sacrifices and those marking childbirth. Three bone accumulations found outside the residential area include bones of dog and brown bear, evidently sacrificed during funerary rites. Ethnographic and folkloric evidence suggests that such sacrifices were practiced by the Yugan Khanty as late as the 19th and 20th centuries and had been rooted in ancient traditions of Ugrians and Samoyeds.

Keywords: Taiga zone, Western Siberia, bones, ritual accumulation, funerary rite, Yugan Khanty.

Introduction

The medieval population of the taiga zone in Western Siberia regarded mammals as major components of the environment and the subsistence strategy of the community. Along with other natural objects, mammals played a significant role in the mythology of taiga residents, and were characters in their rites, the remains of which form a ritual accumulation. In our viewpoint, a ritual accumulation includes traces of ritual behavior and objects included into the activities that cannot be related to household or

economic practice, but can often be associated with these through a system of mythological ideas. We pay special attention to the artifacts and bone remains that denote the area of ceremonial activities by their composition or location. These features may also be useful in reconstruction of the religious and ritual activities of the population.

The fort of Monkys Uriy (Chastukhinsky Uriy) is among the few sites relevant to the indigenous population of the taiga zone in the Ob basin that have yielded well-described and analyzed archaeozoological assemblages (Kosintsev, 1994, 2005; Lobanova,

Kosintsev, 2015). This study is aimed at attribution of animal bone remains discovered at Monkys Uriy.

The material cultures and toolkits of various population groups vary according to external factors, while ritual behavior based on mythological ideas remains. Thus, we have a set of data and sources suitable for historical reconstruction and identification of populations that left archaeological records.

Description of the site and the archaeozoological collection

Monkys Uriy is a small municipal center of indigenous territorial communities that was in use in the 15th–17th centuries in Western Siberia. The remains of Monkys Uriy (the fort of Chastukhinsky Uriy) are situated in the Surgutsky District of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, 4.3 km to the southwest from the Ugut settlement (60°28'23.6" N, 74°00'10.4" E). The fort is located on the terrace remnant of the left bank of the Bolshoy Yugan River, at the confluence of the Neksap brook and the Chastukhinsky Uriy former riverbed.

Chastukhinsky Uriy (the remains of the historical town of Monkys Uriy) was discovered by a specialist in local lore, P.S. Bakhlykov, in the early 1980s. The initial archaeological studies were carried out by the expedition headed by V.I. Semenova in 1990 (Semenova, 2005). In 2011–2013, archaeological studies of the fort were continued by the expedition of OOO “NPO *Severnaya Arkheologiya-I*” headed by G.P. Vizgalov, O.V. Kardash, and N.V. Shatunov.

As a result of these archaeological studies, two stages of the town's development have been established: a *yurt* tribal village; and the fort of Monkys Uriy, which existed over a comparatively short period (about 150 years) as a place of residence and economic and ritual activities for a single ethnic group. Monkys Uriy was a fortified settlement, with defense and residential area consisting of five buildings situated on top of the remnant. The slopes and the foothill were used as economic and production areas (Fig. 1). The excavations also revealed a burial ground, which included the graves of people killed during military attacks. The objects of the burial ground were located within the area making a sort of cemetery. Ritual practice was carried out inside the defense and residential area (Ibid.: 86–88).

During the excavations, bone remains were collected that had accumulated at the times of the construction, existence, and destruction of the fort

of Monkys Uriy. On the hill slopes, some materials were found that had been brought there later, during deformation of the cultural layer.

The archaeozoological collection totals 1908 mammal, bird, and fish bones, 99 % of which belong to 11 species of modern domestic and wild mammal. The collection of mammal bones is dominated by the reindeer *Rangifer tarandus* (1057 spec.) and elk *Alces alces* (400 spec.) bones. The proportions of bones of other wild animals are far less numerous: beaver *Castor fiber* (63 spec.), brown bear *Ursus arctos* (52 spec.), and wolf *Canis lupus* (17 spec.). Solitary bones of the following species were also found: fox *Vulpes vulpes* (6 spec.), white hare *Lepus timidus* (4 spec.), polar fox *Vulpes alopes* (2 spec.), glutton *Gulo gulo* (1 spec.), and sable *Martes zibellina* (2 spec.). Domestic animals were represented by dog *Canis familiaris* (81 spec.) and possibly domesticated reindeer. A notable feature of this bone collection is the complete absence of bones of horse *Equus caballus*, which are very abundant at many archaeological sites in the taiga zone of Western Siberia (Kosintsev, Morozov, Terekhova, 1988: 62). This probably indicates the functionality of the site. The majority of fur-bearing animals are represented exclusively (fox, sable, glutton) or mostly (hare, beaver) by mandibles, some of which show holes for attaching to clothes. The collection of bones of reindeer, elk, and bear contains elements of all skeletal parts. Almost all ungulates' bones are heavily fractured. Bear bones are mostly intact, excluding some tubular bones of the upper parts of extremities. All dog bones recovered from the site were intact at deposition, and represented mainly skeleton parts.

The spatial distribution of the animals' osteological remains reveal ten bone accumulations, likely associated with ritual activities (Fig. 1). These accumulations may be subdivided into two groups. Group 1 represents accumulations of bones that are sometimes associated with burials of complete (or fragmented) animal bodies in pits or corners of dwelling houses. Group 2 consists of intact post-cranial skeletons (or fragments of these), and also cranial bones (skulls and mandibles) of predators and ungulates mostly relating to human burials, or less commonly to material remains of funerary rites.

We shall describe seven accumulations of animal bone remains and associated artifacts, which originated from the activities of the fort's residents, during its construction and functioning.

Accumulation 1 was recorded in the northeastern part of building 2.3 (4), in pit VII (Fig. 1). It was found and described by Semenova in 1990. The pit,

89 × 46 cm, was situated below the building's floor, which suggests that the pit was dug before the construction of the building. In the middle of the pit, an antler fragment was located, underlain by skull fragments and bones belonging to three reindeer bodies. The associated artifacts included a borer, eight palmate pendants, and two silver cone-shaped pendants (Semenova, 2005: 24). All tubular bones, some phalanxes, and a considerable number of the vertebrae were fractured, suggesting that the animals were eaten. Bones of three animals were mixed, which indicates their synchronous deposition; judging by the age of the young animal, this was late summer–early fall (Kosintsev, 2005: 158). The density of the bones, and the absence of any traces of wooden or birch-bark

lining between them, suggest that the animals' remains were wrapped in reindeer skin (Semenova, 2005: 87).

Accumulation 2 was recorded in the southern corner of building 2.5 (6), in pit VIII (Fig. 1). It was described by Semenova in 1990. The pit, 57 × 50 cm, was almost rectangular. Fractured reindeer bones (21 spec.), isolated elk bones, and a beaver bone were situated close to the walls. The southwestern part of the pit revealed the upper portion of a reindeer skull with small antlers, and a fragment of an upper jaw. At bottom of the pit, remains of wooden planking, charcoal, and burnt clay pieces were observed (Ibid.: 28). Zoological identification showed that skeletal reindeer parts from pit VIII belonged to two animals (younger than 3 years and older than 5 years), which

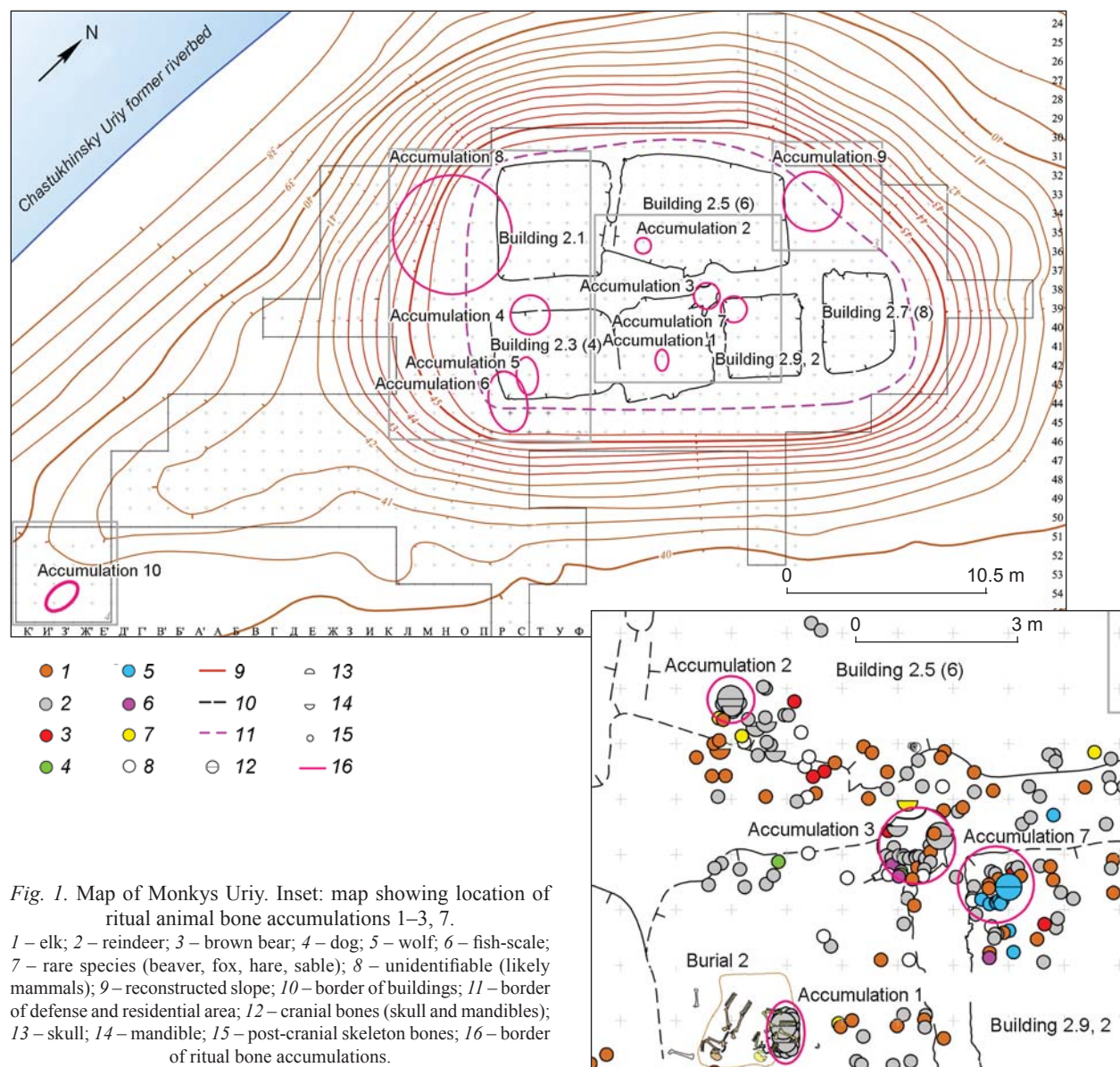


Fig. 1. Map of Monkys Uriy. Inset: map showing location of ritual animal bone accumulations 1–3, 7.

1 – elk; 2 – reindeer; 3 – brown bear; 4 – dog; 5 – wolf; 6 – fish-scale; 7 – rare species (beaver, fox, hare, sable); 8 – unidentifiable (likely mammals); 9 – reconstructed slope; 10 – border of buildings; 11 – border of defense and residential area; 12 – cranial bones (skull and mandibles); 13 – skull; 14 – mandible; 15 – post-cranial skeleton bones; 16 – border of ritual bone accumulations.

were killed and butchered in late fall–early winter (Kosintsev, 2005: 158–159).

Accumulation 3 was recorded under the northern corner of building 2.3 (4), in pit XIX (Fig. 1). It was studied in 2012. The pit, 1.5×1.5 m, had an amorphous shape, which was probably due to destruction during the building of the fort. The pit contained 39 bones of various animals, mostly those of reindeer (30 spec.). The pit was most likely dug during the yurt period of Monkys Uriy's history.

Accumulation 4 was recorded near the western wall of building 2.3 (4) (Fig. 2). The bones belonging to this set were identified on the basis of the inventory of the 1990 collection, and studied in 2011. The accumulation was not associated with either pits or hollows. About 50 reindeer bones belonging to at least 2 animals, and six elk bones, were concentrated in a small area approximately 4 m^2 .

Accumulation 5, consisting of two separate clusters, was recorded in the southern corner of building 2.3 (4) (Fig. 2). It was studied by Semenova in 1990; later, the accumulation was identified by the present authors on the basis of Semenova's records. The location of

the bones makes it possible to assume that they were deposited in two pits below the floor of the building. The clusters contain skeletal parts of three reindeer individuals (bones of crania, extremities, and axial skeleton; 57 spec.) of various age. The accumulation comprises fragments of at least two crania, one of which shows pedicles. The two pits might have been a single whole.

Accumulation 6 was recorded in the southern corner of the defense and residential area, below the southern corner of building 2.3 (4), and below its floor (Fig. 2). The bone accumulation, of irregular shape, not exceeding a size of 3.5×1.5 m, contained 38 bone fragments. The original number of bones might have been greater, but during decomposition of the cultural layer, the majority of bones (73 spec.) were shifted down the slope. No pits or hollows were noted in association with this bone accumulation. The central part of the accumulation was embedded in the layer with lenses of burnt soil, saturated with charcoal and animal bones. The majority of the uncovered bones are cranial fragments or mandibles of elk (40 spec.), some of which are paired; and also bones of all skeletal

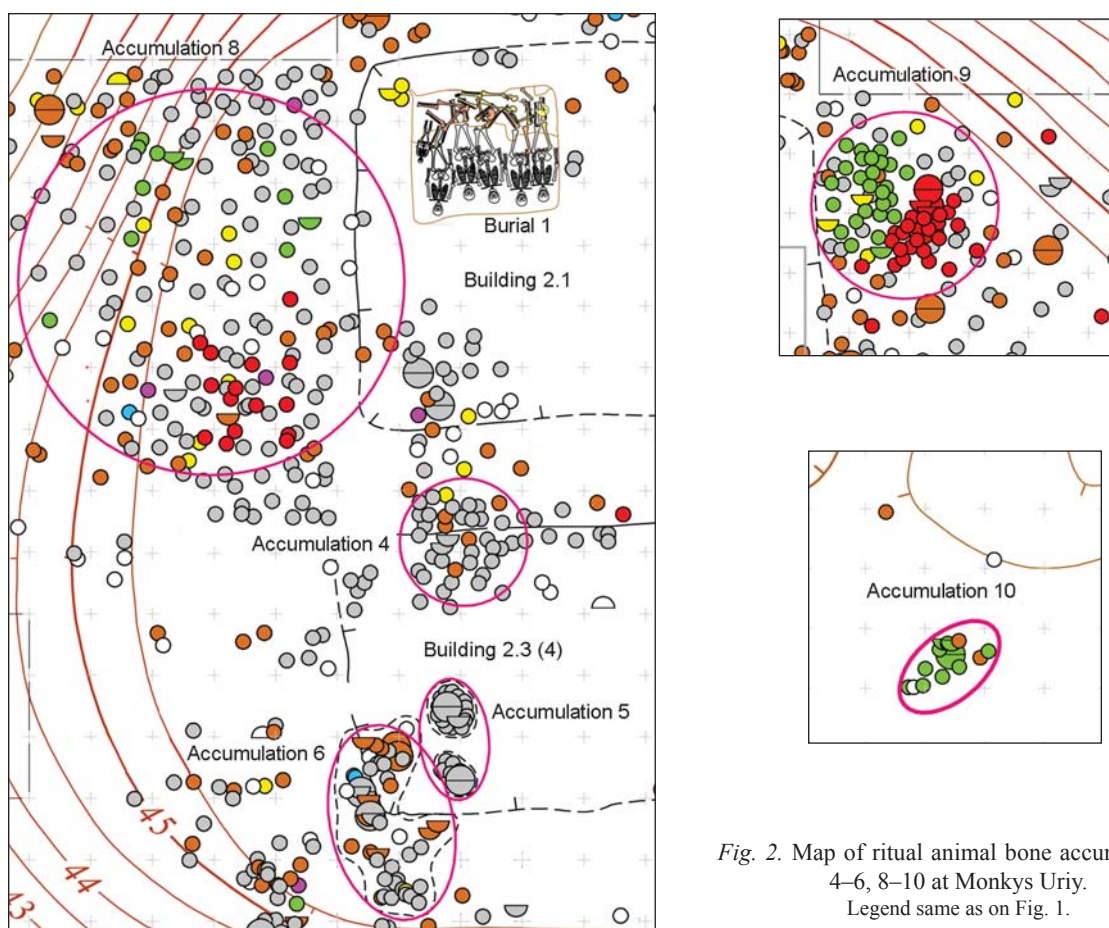


Fig. 2. Map of ritual animal bone accumulations 4–6, 8–10 at Monkys Uriy. Legend same as on Fig. 1.

parts of reindeer (52 spec.). Some bones show traces of burning. Accumulation 6 was partially excavated in 1990. It cannot be excluded that accumulation 5, consisting of reindeer bones, was originally a part of accumulation 6.

Notably, accumulation 6 also includes six Russian coins from the 16th century, and a few lead bullets. The appearance of the coins suggests the development of a ritual accumulation. The bullets might have gotten there during military attacks on the fort.

Accumulation 7 was recorded in the western corner of building 2.9.2 (see Fig. 1). It contained 13 bones from a mature wolf: intact skull, left mandible with a partially missing canine, all cervical vertebrae except vertebra 1, and the next five thoracic vertebrae. The cranial bones were embedded in a pit below the building's floor; the cervical vertebrae were recorded in the overlying cultural layer. A fragment of a tree-twig was inserted into the stem of vertebra 7. The thoracic vertebrae were located separately, in association with a disintegrated hearth. It seems that a part of the wolf's vertebral column and its head had been hafted on a twig and stored (smoked?) near the hearth. The cranial bones were likely redeposited lower during reconstruction of the hearth. On the basis of the available data, it is hardly possible to identify the purpose of this bone accumulation. No data on similar cult objects have been found either in ethnological or archaeological literature. This accumulation can be dated to the period of existence of Monkys Uriy.

The seven described bone accumulations clearly testify to the ritual activities of the residents during the construction and use of the fort of Monkys Uriy. We shall not analyze each of these accumulations separately, because we believe that all the accumulations (with the possible exclusion of accumulations 6 and 7) were constructed for one and the same purpose and were based on religious ideas. Accumulations 1 and 2 (pits VII and VIII, excavations of 1990) were unambiguously identified by Semenova (2005: 86–88) as cult objects, on the basis of K.F. Karjalainen's data. The traditional ideology of various peoples implies that the ritual (sacrificial) accumulations placed on or under the ground were dedicated to the deities of the Lower World. In the religious tradition of the Yugan Khanty, there are two most powerful underworld deities. The first one is *Khyn-iki* or *Mykh-iki* ('earthen (underground) man')—an evil deity of the Lower World personifying death-forces and influencing the life of people of the Middle World in the same way as heavenly deities do. In the Lower World, this evil deity is opposed by the good female deity *Mykh-anki* or

Mykh-imi, meaning Mother-earth (or literary 'earthen woman'), who is not the wife of *Khyn-iki*. Rituals dedicated to *Mykh-anki* are executed on a regular basis; along with objects, the sacrifice usually includes a female reindeer. During the ritual, upper turf layer is taken away, a reindeer hide with head and antler, where the reindeer bones are wrapped, is placed into the hollow and covered with the turf, so that the antler and nose of the animal protruded from the ground. Sacrifices for *Mykh-anki* mark the childbirth or the death of relatives. This ritual is also obligatory for men when they reach maturity (become *iki*). It is believed that sacrifices for *Mykh-anki* should be performed by families (Vizgalov, Kardash, 2010: 110).

Karjalainen also mentioned sacrifices for the spirit of soil at a residential area. During this ritual, bones wrapped in hide were buried either in dwelling under the plank-bed at the back wall, or near the dwelling, or beyond the settlement. The reindeer was a conventional sacrificial animal; the traditional time for this ritual was late summer–early fall (Karjalainen, 1995: Vol. II, p. 98; 1996: Vol. III, pp. 64–66). Generally, such rituals were performed to mark the transition of a person from one status to another, in order to protect this person from the evil deity of the Lower World, who was able to harm living people. It should be noted that construction of, and moving into, a new house implied changes in an individual's status, rather than just in living conditions: i.e. transition from one state to another, when a person becomes vulnerable to both natural and mythological forces.

Chronological attribution of bone accumulations 1–7 can be reconsidered on the basis of the abovementioned ethnographic evidence and excavation materials. Accumulations 2 and 3 from pits VIII and XIX respectively, as well as accumulation 4 unassociated with any pit or hollow, contain bones of other animals along with the reindeer bones. These accumulations belong most likely to the period of initial occupation of this remnant, when three dwellings of Monkys Uriy yurts were constructed on the hill top. New settlers seem to have believed that sacrifices would express their respect to the underworld deities and ensure their protection. It cannot be excluded that these accumulations were dedicated to *Mykh-anki*, 'Mother-earth'. During the subsequent reconstruction of dwellings, these early accumulations were damaged. Therefore, their informational potential is not as high as that of other bone accumulations.

Most noteworthy is accumulation 1 associated with pit VII. Its remarkable feature is the presence of personal adornments, suggesting the high social status

of the donors. Moreover, the bone arrowhead in this accumulation might have implied some protective function. Judging by the pit's location, the ritual was performed inside a newly built dwelling, and could be hardly related solely to protection of the house itself. Because the pit is rather shallow and the bones were likely wrapped in an animal hide, this sanctuary can be attributed to a sacrificial ritual dedicated to *Mykh-anki*, possibly performed on the occasion of childbirth. The noted scarcity of such accumulations indicates that such a ritual was not performed in connection with every childbirth. Apparently, these are the remains of sacrifices on the occasions of the birth of immediate heirs to the clan heads or tribal chiefs.

Accumulation 6 most likely represents the sacrifice to the deities relating to completion of the dwelling's foundation construction and preparing the building ground before erection of the whole defense and residential area. This accumulation is characterized by the presence of silver coins, which at that time became an essential feature of sacrifice at common sanctuaries in northwestern Siberia. The coins suggest not only the purpose of this ritual accumulation, but also the period of its creation: at the turn of the 16th–17th centuries—more exactly, no earlier than 1596. The accumulation was definitely dedicated to all deities. However, taking into consideration that this was a sort of “burial” of the remains of a ritual performance, animal bones, and coins of two types, it can be hypothesized that the accumulation was intended for the deities of the Lower World: *Khyn-iki* and *Mykh-anki*. The location of the ritual accumulation is also meaningful: this is the southern corner (southern part) of the defense and residential area. At Fort Nadym, a ground with a spot of burnt soil was also adjacent to the southern corner of the defense and residential area. At this fireplace, common sacrificial rituals were performed; the participants left here bones and skulls of the sacrificial animals (Kardash, 2013: 59–62).

Some bone accumulations were not directly associated with dwellings. In our view, three such accumulations associated with burials 1 and 3 represent funerary rites.

Accumulation 8 was recorded in the southwestern part of the defense and residential area, 2–5 m to the south of burial 1 (see Fig. 2). The accumulation contained dog bones (37 spec., belonging to at least two individuals) and brown bear bones (25 spec., fragments of diaphyses of femur, tibia, and ulna upper part, bones of the left and right front paws of a mature animal, and also cervical and thoracic vertebrae). We believe that bear's skull and mandibles from the tomb filling also

belong to this accumulation (Kosintsev, 2005: 159). All the bones were recovered from the upper part of the cultural layer, at the external rampart. Such a large number of bones at this place was barely possible during the period of existence of the town. We suggest that the scattered distribution of the bones was a result of soil creep, possibly stipulated by the growth of tree roots. The animal bones were clustered on an almost horizontal area close to the burial. Near this place, on the slope of the hill, an elk skull and two reindeer skulls were found.

Accumulation 9 was recorded in the northeastern part of the defense and residential area, in the upper part of the cultural layer, to the northeast of burial 3 (see Fig. 2). The accumulation included an intact skull and two mandibles from a brown bear, placed on a left scapula. The cranium vault was punched on the right side; the lower canines were partially missing. Nearby, 14 bones of bears' fore and hind limbs were situated, belonging to at least three individuals. There was also a part of the dog's skeleton, and separate bones of at least two other dogs (37 spec. in total). The location of this bone accumulation almost coincided with that of accumulation 8 near burial 1. This is a section of the external rampart and a relatively horizontal ground close to the burial. The bone remains of accumulation 9 were almost not subjected to redeposition; therefore some dog bones were found in anatomical order. Occurrences of elk skull and extremities and reindeer bones within and near this bone accumulation could hardly be associated with the funerary rite; though the bones scattered over the slope might have been originally placed next to the burial.

Accumulation 10 was recorded to the south of the defense and residential area, at the foothill (see Fig. 2), in the economic and production area. The accumulation included dog bones (11 spec., belonging to a single individual). These were embedded in the upper portion of the cultural layer, to the south of the hearth. Nearby, several copper arrowheads were found—elements of the funerary rite that was related to the burials of the town defenders. The dog bones are located at some distance from the burials; nevertheless, their association with funerary accumulations is highly possible, because a dog is an important domestic animal, with a special status in the ritual practice of the town residents. Association of these bones with artifacts supports this inference.

Notably, only in accumulation 10, a fragment of dog's skull was found among other dog skeleton remains; not a single dog skull was discovered elsewhere at the site. Other accumulations reveal a

comparatively large number of intact dog mandibles, including paired ones.

Bear and dog bones, clearly coupled together, have been noted in association with the burial of the town defenders. A bear humerus was found near the women's burial in building 2.3 (4); isolated dog bones were recovered next to the wall of this building.

There are some hypotheses concerning the interrelation of bear and dog in the religious and ritual practices. At Bolshoy Yugan, the main deity and guardian of the river and local people is the third son of the supreme god Numi-Torum, named Yagun-iki. His personification is a bear (Vizgalov, Kardash, 2010: 104–111). In our view, the occurrence of bones of a bear, an earthly representative of Yagun-iki, a son of the supreme god, close to human burials attests to the high social status of the buried. This idea was supported by Semenova, who referred to Karjalainen's data concerning killing of a bear on the occasion of human burial and placement of the skull, teeth, and post-cranial bones into the graves of shamans as the attributes of assistant-animals (Karjalainen, 1994: Vol. I, p. 82, 96; Semenova, 2005: 88).

Other ethnographic data testify that the indigenous population of the Bolshoy Yugan basin used bears' skeletal parts for ritual and even magic purposes. The people believe that the head and hide of the bear in the ritual position (the head and the paws turned up) protect the souls of the living people from the dead relatives, *mayachkas*, who were able to carry off the soul of a living person to the Lower World (Kulemzin, 1984: 130, 131). At the site under study, bear bones were found both next to the grave pits and inside the graves, which, according to indigenous peoples of Siberia, are new homes for the dead. In conformity with these ideas, bear remains near each grave probably performed the protective function.

Funeral ceremonies were held not only to protect the living from the dead, but also to please the dead relatives, possibly in expectation of their support in the other world (Karjalainen, 1994: Vol. I, pp. 128–129). The southern groups of the Ob Ostyaks believed that the souls of those who died unnaturally (were killed by people or wild animals) would go to the cosmological upper stratum, while those died naturally would go to the Lower World. They used to say, "Those who died a violent death or was killed by bears would immediately go to Heaven. Those who died in their beds or any other natural death would have to serve the strict god in the underworld for a long time..." (Ibid.: 142). These ideas might be taken as a ground for interpretation of the function of the bear remains. It is possible that

bear bones are the remains of the sacrifices that had been made to protect the living from the dead, and to create the best conditions for dead relatives to get to the supreme god in the Upper World. It proves the bear to be a mediator and a guard at the route connecting the Middle and the Lower Worlds (Schmidt, 1989: 15, 18). Notably, the proposed interpretation is only one of a plethora of possible explanations.

What is the role of a dog in this tandem? In the perception of the Siberian indigenous peoples, a dog possessed a special cult status relating to its function as an intermediary accompanying the dead to the Lower World. The dog sacrifice was an ordinary event in the ideology of the Samoyed tribes in the Lower Ob region. In contrast, the Ugrians, mostly various Khanty groups, forbade dog killing (Perevalova, 2004: 289). By way of exception, the northern Khanty tribes practiced both traditions. Some clans perceived the dog as their divine protector and had the relevant sanctuaries, as well as special sanctuaries where vicarious sacrifices were performed in cases of intentional or unintentional dog killing. Other clans practiced dog sacrifices (Ibid.). The rituals of the Yugan Khanty relating to dogs are specific among other Ugrian tribes in the Middle Ob basin. Until recently, there has been a general custom to kill the dog of a dead hunter and to leave its body at the hunter's tomb. A similar rite existed in the Kazym River basin (Kulemzin, 1984: 142). It is possible that the ethnographic data concerning the different attitude to the dog of the Samoyed and Ugrian peoples represent some recent or local custom. The traditional perception of a bear as a "divine creature" was typical of both Nenets and Khanty peoples. Nevertheless, only Khanty and Nenets of Khanty ancestry practiced brown bear hunting, especially hunting for ritual purposes (Golovnev, 1995: 461).

Judging from the above data, it can be hypothesized that the bones found near burials 1 and 3 belonged to the dogs owned by the town residents buried in these graves. In addition, the joint location of bear bones and probably complete dog skeletons suggests that dog was perceived as a companion to the bear en route to the other world.

In this respect it is not clear why the dog burial (accumulation 10) was located close to the hearth. The post-funeral hearth of the Khanty is a feature of the funeral ceremony; it exists at every cemetery. It is quite likely that special dog sacrifices were also performed, in addition to the sacrifices of dogs owned by the dead. Anyway, we have interpreted accumulation 10 as post-funeral, relating to funeral ceremonies. It should be added that the noted evidence of dog sacrifice suggests

that the fort's residents were involved in the Samoyed cultural tradition, most likely originating from the Selkups rather than from the Nenets one.

To sum up the description of the traces of funerary rite, let us discuss the sacral significance of reindeer in the culture of the indigenous peoples of the taiga zone of the Ob basin. According to ethnographic evidence, reindeer sacrifice was as an essential part of the funeral ceremony in the culture of the Yugan Khanty (Karjalainen, 1994: Vol. I, pp. 114–115; Kulemzin, 1984: 142–143). The majority of the Ob Ugrians regarded reindeer as one of the most significant “gifts” to the dead relative: in the afterworld, it would serve as a riding animal for the dead owner. At the grave, the reindeer were killed that were previously used by the dead person. During the rite, reindeer carcasses were either left intact on the grave, or were eaten during the ritual feast, in which the soul of the dead also “took part”. After that, the bones were either buried, or wrapped in the hide and left on the ground or hanged on a tree (Kulemzin, 1984: 142–143). The sledge and harness were placed next to the grave. There is archaeological evidence of the use of reindeer for transportation by the residents of the town. The archaeological data suggest that two-reindeer sleigh was most typical. Pairs of reindeer skulls were found 3 m to the south of accumulation 1 (burial 1) on the slope, where the bones could have been shifted, and 3.5–4.5 m to the north of accumulation 2 (burial 3). This was apparently not a coincidence: a large proportion of reindeer bones found close to accumulations 8 and 9 belonged to sacrificial animals, which had been killed during funerary rites at the graves. Judging by the dispersal of the bones over the slope, the bones were originally wrapped in reindeer hide and left on the ground. Subsequently, when the hide had decayed, the bones were dragged around the graves and down the slope of the hill.

The proposed interpretations are highly hypothetical. Nevertheless, analysis of the bone remains provides important data for the reconstruction of particular ideological perceptions of the ancient population of the Bolshoy Yugan basin.

Conclusions

Analysis has shown that some bone remains form accumulations, associated with spatial distribution of the settlement: buildings or burials. At least seven bone accumulations can be identified within dwellings. These possibly reflect the rituals relating to the functioning of

the town, construction and economic activities, and family traditions. Three other accumulations were found on the hill slope outside the residential area, and show evidence of funerary rites.

Some of the bone clusters including artifacts can be interpreted as ritual archaeological accumulations. Bone and copper arrowheads concentrated around burials are the artifacts associated with funerary rites. For that reason, occurrence of copper arrowheads near the dog burial located at the foothill, rather far from any human grave, suggests that this animal burial was associated with funeral ceremonies. The personal adornments recovered from pit VII can also be regarded as a similar marker. Such artifacts might also be present in other bone accumulations; however, it is now hard to determine whether they were lost during the period of the town's functioning, or later. In this case, the accumulation of reindeer or bear bones can be interpreted relying on the ethnographic and folkloric data. Such analysis makes it possible to identify the bone remains and to reconstruct the household and ritual activities of the people. Thus, reconstruction of the mythological worldview and cultural traditions of the population becomes possible.

The described ritual bone accumulations correspond to the culture of the Yugan Khanty, which was recorded by ethnologists in the 19th–20th centuries. This allows us to correlate the population of the 20th century with that of the 16th–17th centuries and to determine the ethnicity of the town residents, which might serve as a basis for study and identification of the population that occupied this area in the earlier periods.

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