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Christian Influences on East Sámi Burial Customs

Paula Budó i Rosa

This paper focuses on the investigation of Eastern Sámi burial customs before and after the transition to Christianity (AD 1550-1750) and considers the area variations that are present in the Sámi world. The main research question that this article aims to answer is how Christianity changed the structure of Eastern Sámi religion, as reflected in the burial customs. Did the introduction of Christianity change the basic aspects of Eastern Sámi rituals and beliefs, or did the Sámi only borrow some symbols and tendencies from Christianity, while keeping the essence and main structure of their pre-Christian religion?

To answer this question, I focus on the religious traditions, archaeological material, and location of the Eastern Sámi graves. In addition to Eastern Sámi material, examples from other areas, such as Trøndelag in Norway or Norrland in Sweden, are used when relevant. The first half of this paper provides a description of pre-Christian beliefs of the Eastern Sámi, followed by a description of the characteristics of Eastern Sámi burial customs before and after the transition to Christianity (AD 1550-1750). The second half of the paper turns to a discussion surrounding the Eastern Sámi burial customs to evaluate the changes and continuities in Eastern Sámi religion, with particular focus on burial customs and beliefs during the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Due to the complexities and regional variations found within both pre-Christian and post-conversion Eastern Sámi graves, providing an extensive overview of the different types of graves and scholarly work for each type is essential before this paper can focus on addressing any potential changes and continuity of practices. In order to follow the new lines of the archaeological discipline regarding Indigenous Archaeology and Sámi Archaeology, ethical aspects and a critique of previous practices are taken into consideration throughout this paper.

The Sámi settlement area, today known as Sápmi, has traditionally been divided into Western and Eastern Sámi areas, separated in accordance with their languages and cultural characteristics (Schanche 2004: 9; Sergejeva 2000: 5-7). Eastern Sámi groups have traditionally lived on the Kola Peninsula (modern-day Russia) and the adjacent mainland area (Norway, Finland and modern-day Russia). The Eastern Sámi group is subdivided into the following five subgroups: Inari, Skolt, Akkala, Ter and Kildin or Kola Sámi (Sergejeva 2000: 5-7).

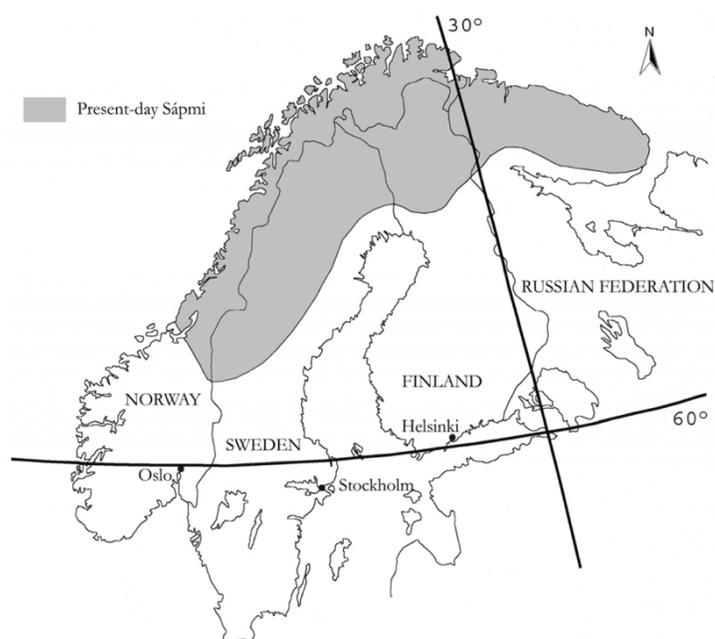


Figure 1. Present-day map of the traditional core territory of Sámi population (Ojala 2009: 68).

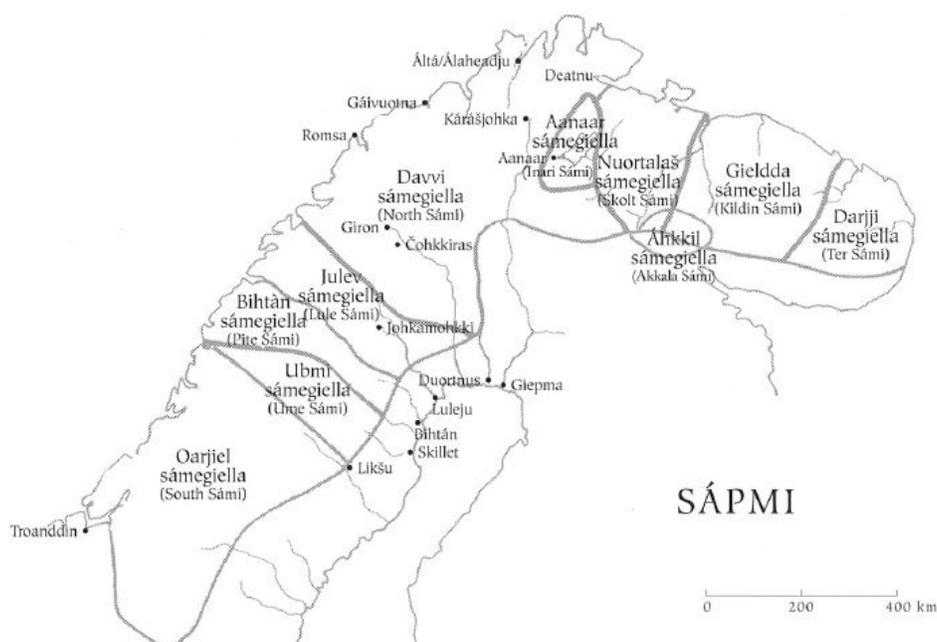


Figure 2. Map of Sápmi territory with territorial's delimitations according to Sámi spoken languages (Ojala 2009: 73); Original version in Veli-Pekka Lehtola's (2004) book, *The Sámi People*.

Sources and Source Criticism

In this paper, I use the terms pre-Christian and Christian to define the customs before and after the Sámi's transition to Christianity. However, this terminology does not represent two periods with a clear breakpoint. As I comment on later in this paper, some of the pre-Christian beliefs of Sámi peoples remained in practice following the conversion to Christianity. When using the term pre-Christian Sámi, I refer to habits and ideas that are associated with the Sámi and are assumed to originate during the pre-Christian period.

One of the main obstacles in the study of pre-Christian Sámi religion is the lack of primary sources from Sámi perspectives. Most of the extant written accounts were composed by clergymen and missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These sources carry a European religious perspective that may distort interpretations of Sámi culture. These sources' validity presents three main problems: the subjectivity of the writer; the imposition of the writer's worldviews and their assumptions that there was a homogenous Sámi religion; and finally, the recording of these traditions took place after Sámi beliefs were already influenced by Christianity (Svestad 2013b: 115). These biases are not reflected in the archaeological material, which points to the heterogeneric nature of Sámi burial practices across periods and regions. Regional variation is therefore very clear, but there are overarching shared features that are also prevalent in the material (Schanche 2004: 4; Svestad 2013b: 115).

The lack of Sámi written sources emphasises the importance of the archaeological material. Studying the archaeological remains alongside the secondary sources that are available thus allows us to interpret the material more fully and can help to clarify any previous misinterpretations made by modern scholars or what has previously been distorted to fit into an Early Modern narrative. A lot of the existing scholarship is based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century excavations that were performed by scholars who neglected to consult the local Sámi populations regarding the burial context. Furthermore, these excavations were primarily conducted to collect human skeletons for research (Aronsson 2012, Svestad 2013a). The research involving human remains presents complex challenges. For archaeologists and anthropologists, human remains represent a source of knowledge about people, places, conditions and developments (Fossheim 2013: 7). However, it is important for us to remember that excavated remains also represent people who were once alive, and to respect the remains' religious and cultural significance to their descendants. The discussion of the ethics surrounding research that involves human remains is a sensitive matter. Different

attitudes on the ethics of this topic have surfaced in the research and excavations involving the different regions of Sápmi. In recent years, Sámi people have become involved in the discussion surrounding the archaeological material found throughout Sápmi (Watkins 2005; Smith and Wobst 2005; Ojala 2009; Aronsson 2012; Holand and Sommerseth 2012; Spangen, Salmi and Äikäs 2015). Archaeological works like Luk'jancenکو's study of the Kola Sámi (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 202) or Olsson's 1915 excavation from Rounala in Karesuando Parish (Aronsson 2012) do not use an adequate methodology when it comes to being respectful of the excavated human remains. Both of these studies are an example of a disrespectful act of collecting material culture through excavations from sacred sites, as they exhumed the remains without permission from the local inhabitants of the region. Yet from my point of view, the data obtained from these unethical excavations is still significant for research going forward because the information that was collected is unique and, unfortunately, the archaeological process cannot be redone. Therefore, it is imperative that the material from Luk'jancenکو's excavation does not go to waste, but it is equally crucial that the scholars reinterpreting this material are aware of the ethical problems associated with excavation and acknowledge these issues in their work.

Sámi Archaeology is part of the sub-discipline known as Indigenous Archaeology. The term Sámi Archaeology is still controversial in some research ambits, due to the fact that in some cases, it might be perceived as a more political archaeology than mainstream archaeology (Spangen, Salmi and Äikäs 2015: 1). The concept of Indigenous Archaeology can be considered relatively recent (Smith and Wobst 2005; Atalay 2006; Nicholas 2008; Aronsson 2012; Svestad 2013; Watkins and Nicholas 2014; Spangen, Salmi and Äikäs 2015; Hillerdal, Karlström and Ojala 2017; Spangen, Salmi, Äikäs and Fjellström 2020). Indigenous critiques of archaeological practice are establishing new directions for an archaeology practice that is more politically aware of, sensitive to and harmonious with the goals of the indigenous communities (Smith and Wobst 2005: 6). Indigenous Archaeology was conceived as part of the process of decolonising the archaeology practice and has been used as a tool against the previous unethical methodologies and theories (Hillerdal, Karlström and Ojala 2017). As a result, archaeologists are having to re-think the archaeology theory and practice established during the past decades and centuries (Smith and Wobst 2005: 6). It is important for scholars to continue to be critical when approaching Indigenous Archaeology, to ensure the avoidance of re-establishing or enforcing colonial structures (Hillerdal, Karlström and Ojala 2017). George Nicholas (2008) posits that Indigenous Archaeology consists of an archaeological

expression (theoretical and practical) where the discipline interacts with values, ethical practices and indigenous sensibilities. To achieve this inclusivity, projects directed by or in collaboration with indigenous communities, with a critical perspective, are created. According to Nicholas (2008: 1660-1661), the goal of the field going forward should be to support a more representative, responsible and relevant archaeological approach towards the indigenous communities.

The inequalities in previous archaeological practices need to be repaired, and the understanding and interpretation of the archaeological record should emphasise the incorporation of indigenous perspectives. The key for scholars going forward is to continue to decolonise the discipline through the cooperation between the scientific and indigenous communities (Ojala 2009; Hillerdal, Karlström and Ojala 2017). It is fundamental that archaeologists facilitate the presence and participation of indigenous voices because indigenous peoples often share ‘historical trauma’ caused by previous experiences of colonisation, marginalisation and discrimination (Hillerdal, Karlström and Ojala 2017). It is important to understand the early interactions of these communities and archaeologists, in order to address past mistakes and move forward (Smith and Wobst 2005: 9). Throughout the twenty-first century, new legislation has resulted in increased Sámi involvement in controlling both their tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Watkins and Nicholas 2014: 145; Spangen, Salmi and Äikäs 2015). Sámi parliaments have been established in Norway, Sweden and Finland (with a Sámi Assembly in the Murmansk Oblast), where human rights and indigenous issues are treated (Spangen, Salmi and Äikäs 2015; Spangen, Salmi, Äikäs and Fjellström 2020: 8-9).

General Outline of the Pre-Christian Religion

Drawing on a critical reading of the archaeological record, Sámi religion prior to the conversion to Christianity was generally characterised by an animistic worldview¹ (Schanche 2004; Helander-Renvall 2010: 47-48) with shamanistic elements. The religion was flexible, dynamic and open to individual interpretations. As Svestad (2013b: 116) describes, Sámi religion lacked a fixed liturgy, scripture, or priesthood. Rather, the religion was defined by actions, narratives, myths and material utterances. The *noaidi*, the Sámi shaman, was one of the main figures in Sámi religion. They were the mediator between humans and the divine, and a guardian of morality (Bäckman 2013 [1984b]: 25; Schanche 2004: 4). However, the role of the *noaidi* was complex and consisted of multiple responsibilities and a variety of ways

to achieve them. The *noaidi* was able to find answers to the eternal and fundamental questions of life through a soul-journey (Bäckman 2013 [2005]: 40), where the *noaidi* travelled to the ‘Otherworld’.

Hansen and Olsen (2014) note that landscape was a very important element of Sámi beliefs. No sharp line of division existed between culture and nature (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 337). Sacrifices were made at places in the landscape called *sieidi*,² or offering places, where stones, and in some cases wooden objects, were deposited. These offering gifts can be interpreted as a request for permission to take something from nature or as a way of thanking nature (Schanche 2004: 5). These offering sites have different morphologies, including depressions and cairns. An example is the mountain Stuorra Ruito on the Varanger peninsula, or circular offering sites; for instance, Biekkanoaivi in Nesseby (Äikäs and Salmi 2013; Hansen and Olsen 2014: 9–38; Spangen 2016). The *sieidi* were used by individuals, families (Rydving 2004: 97–98), and the local community, or *siida*³ (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 167). *Sieidis* could be natural landscape features or wooden items, and many of these sites were destroyed by Christian missionaries (Vorren 1985: 76).

Hansen and Olsen (2014) discuss Sámi beliefs surrounding souls or spirits (Svestad 2013b: 122), which is an important aspect of the burial customs, as well as the Sámi perception of death. The Sámi believed that humans had two separate souls: the body soul and the free soul. The body soul is alive as long as the person is alive, and this soul is connected with the physical human body. When a person dies, the body soul remains with the skeleton (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 111). The second soul, the free soul, is active when the body is not in its normal state, such as in dreams, visions and trances. After death, the free soul gradually releases itself from the body in preparation for its next existence in *Jábmiid-áibmu*, the world of the dead (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 111). This soul can make trips as a ghost, but for these trips, the free soul needs space to go out from the grave. This necessity is often reflected in the grave construction, as described below. The usefulness of the free soul depends on the correct sacrificial rituals, which living people perform after a person has died. The free souls of dead people can be useful in daily life, for example, in reindeer herding (Svestad 2013b: 122–123). At the same time, isolating the dead was necessary to avoid conflicts between the dead and the living. The souls of the dead cannot return passing over water, which is an important characteristic for the location of graves (Svestad 2013b: 123).

Christian Influences

As Hansen and Olsen (2014) report, Sámi religious expressions started changing through contact with Christianity. Sámi groups had been in contact with Christianity in various ways during the early medieval period (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 160). However, the most influential moments for the Christian influence over the Sámi was at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, when manifestations of Sámi religion were criminalised (Rydving 2004). Sámi religious expressions were considered witchcraft by the Christian missionaries, and towards the end of the seventeenth century, there were multiple trials against Sámi individuals who were accused of witchcraft (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 322). Norwegian and Swedish authorities tried to eradicate *noaidis*, through the grand-scale collection and destruction of the ceremonial drums that were used by *noaidis* during the aforementioned soul journeys. Christian missionaries forced Sámi people to visit their own *sieidis*, and then the missionaries either destroyed the sacred sites or compelled the Sámi to destroy the sites themselves (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 325-326). The Christianisation process developed differently in different Sámi areas, but the two main commonalities of the conversion of the different regions of Sápmi were the prohibition of Sámi practices and the imposition of the Christian religion (ideology, symbols, baptisms, the establishing of monasteries and churches and so on) on the Sámi (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 317-318).

This imposition of the Christian religion is visible in the Sámi burial traditions in multiple ways. Some of these changes only had an effect on the disposal of the burial, for example in the introduction of the use of coffins (Svestad 2013b: 123). However, other changes connected to the location of graves had more repercussions, such as the necessity to bury the deceased in Christian cemeteries. For the Eastern Sámi people, who traditionally had a nomadic reindeer herding way of life, and did not have one permanent settlement, the necessity of burying the dead in cemeteries led to the appearance of temporary graves (Storå 1971: 106, Sergejeva 2000: 12-19), which will be discussed further below.

According to Rydving (2004: 92), the destruction of Sámi *sieidis* and the punishment of those who continued with Sámi religious practices were the main factors that weakened the Sámi religion. It could thus be argued that the missionaries' objective was accomplished. However, as archaeological material shows, for example, through finds such as holes in graves that enabled the mobility of the free soul, some Sámi beliefs remained after Christianisation. In certain areas and in different ways, Sámi people developed strategies to continue their own

religious practices in private Sámi contexts after the Christianisation of the wider Sámi societies (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 319).

Pre-Christian Sámi Burial Customs

Diversity is a clear characteristic of pre-Christian Sámi burial sites. The use of *pulka* (the reindeer sledge), hollowed tree trunks, coffins, or no container, could appear in different graves from one burial site. The corpse could be wrapped in animal skins or in birch bark, which is another important feature of the pre-Christian period. An example showcasing the diversity of pre-Christian Sámi graves is from the Pasvik Skolt Sámi burial ground on the Todd'suel Island in the Pasvik River, located in north-eastern Norway. Here, thirty-one graves and six different grave types have been uncovered (Storå 1971: 136). The presence of water is a typical element for the selection of burial sites, while another typical characteristic is the presence of grave gifts such as household utensils or ornaments.

According to Bäckman (2013 [1978]: 160), the Sámi population knew that death was irrevocable. Their death signalled the end of the corporal life and the beginning of a spiritualised condition. However, the worship of the dead was also the oldest element in the Sámi religions, emanating out of affection, hope and fear. A deceased person left the community and entered another state of existence, as the Sámi believed that the deceased still possessed the capacity of affecting their living relatives (Bäckman 2013 [1978]: 160, 141).

The type of grave used in Sámi contexts is directly related to geological conditions, as well as the formative processes of the landscape and the Sámi interpretations of said landscape (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 109). Environmental factors would determine the location and construction of burials and sacred places (Svestad 2013b: 122). As Manker (1961: 202) describes, the inhumation of Sámi graves was at most one metre deep. The depth of the grave is connected with the belief in the two souls noted above and the journey of the free soul, which I return to discuss in more detail. Schanche (2004) proposes that the landscape defined the Sámi culture. It is, therefore, important for scholars to take into consideration the bond between people and landscape when we study the Sámi past (Schanche 2004: 9), since the landscape shaped Sámi beliefs. An important element in Eastern Sámi contexts was that the grave must be beyond the water, since the Skolt Sámi people believed that the free soul of dead people could not return over water (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 207). For this reason, islands, hillocks and high places near rivers were often selected by Sámi people to bury their dead (Storå 1971: 128).

The first type of grave that can be found in an Eastern Sámi context are scree and rock graves. This type of grave had a wide geographic distribution. Scree consists of large and loose broken stones that are located at the side of a mountain, or in areas that are covered by stones. These scree graves are found in northern Norway, in Trøndelag and Norrland in Sweden, in Finnish Lapland and on the Kola Peninsula in Russia (Svestad 2011: 43; Hansen and Olsen 2014: 108). Chronologically, scree graves start to appear in the last millennium BC and continue, with some modifications, until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to AD 800, most of these graves are located in Eastern Finnmark in Norway. During the Viking Age and early Middle Ages, scree graves became more common in the coastal zone from Eastern Finnmark to Salten in Nordland, as well as in the northern Swedish mountain zone. After AD 1700, these graves seem to only occur in the south Sámi area (Schanche 2004: 83; Hansen and Olsen 2014: 109).

The graves were placed in scree and beneath rocks, and their morphology vary. However, a common factor of these burials is that the dead were buried in individual graves (Bäckman 2013 [1978]: 30). Another common factor is the lack of soil in the construction. Hansen and Olsen (2014: 108) describe that the corpse was wrapped in birch bark or placed in reindeer sleighs (*geres* or *pulka*). The body was collocated in an airy chamber surrounded by walls of stone, which could be natural or man-made. The chamber was then covered with slabs from the scree. These graves were designed with some apertures and gaps made for the mobility of the free soul (Svestad 2013b: 122-123).

According to Hansen and Olsen (2014: 110), bones of mammals, fish and birds were deposited in these graves, alongside other common objects like bone tools, utensils, and stone artefacts. In the graves dated from the fourth to tenth centuries, some imported ornaments from other regions have been found. Furthermore, there is no differentiation between male and female graves, and from the archaeological material, they appear to be numerically equal as well. As Svestad (2013b: 119) argues, this type of grave appears near sacrificial sites and sanctuaries. An example of this can be seen at the cemetery at Mortensnes in the Varanger Fjord, where a sacrificial enclosure and the sacred Bear Stone, a *sieidi* related to the bear cult (Svestad 2013b: 115), is found in the same location as several scree graves. Since the scree constitutes what can be called a 'dead static landscape' without vegetation, it could represent the realm of the dead, Jábmiid-áibmu (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 110). The existence of grave gifts, such as tools or amulets, is one of the most illustrative signs of pre-Christian customs because it demonstrates the Sámi beliefs of an afterlife (Manker 1961: 211-212). One

example, described by Manker (1961: 212), is the Mortensnes (Varanger) burial context of grave number 16, where a variation of materials was found. These grave gifts consisted of fishhooks, arrows, knives, fragments of wood and quartz, numerous bones of birds and fish, metal ornaments and remains of skis and staffs (Manker 1961: 212).



Figure 3. Scree grave at Čiesti/Fugleberget near Mortensnes, Varanger (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 109).

A second grave typology are the stone coffins used by the Skolt Sámi in north Finland and modern-day Russia (Storå 1971: 87). These coffins consist of a hollow with stone walls placed on top of each other, which do not reach more than the surface ground level. The base of the grave consists of small stones or of thin and flat slabs of stone, with a larger flat stone placed at the head and feet of the coffin. The corpse's head was protected by three stones, which were propped up against each other. Larger slabs of stone were used for the coffin roof and over it, and on top of which were more layers of stones. Like the scree graves, this type of grave was built for individuals and various utensils such as arrows, fishing hooks, animal bones or amulets, were placed inside the grave (Storå 1971: 87). In this type of stone-coffin grave, the body would be wrapped in skins, or birch bark, and would lay in a hollowed tree trunk in the form of a boat or trough (Storå 1971: 92).

A third type of grave documented in Eastern Sámi context in pre-Christian times are graves above surface. The Sámi graves that are on or above the surface could be permanent or temporary seasonal graves, where the dead body was laid on the surface of the ground and

covered with snow in winter, or a wooden or stone shelter (Storå 1971: 98). Graves that are constructed of piles of stones and graves in caves can also be considered as this type of surface grave (Storå 1971: 100). As a result of late 1960s investigations, it was believed that there were also crematory graves,⁴ however further archaeological investigations have since denied this (Hedman and Olsen 2009: 4-6). Regarding the relation between the coffin and the dead, Manker (1961) defines the different types of coffins that were used by Sámi people, including Eastern Sámi, during pre-Christian times. Trees were the main resource from which Sámi coffins were constructed. These coffins consist of a chest made from birch bark, plank or logs in boat-shaped sledges. Hollowed tree trunks were also used for adults, while coffins hollowed out from logs were used for children. It is not clear when the use of reindeer-sledges (*pulkas*) started (Svestad 2013b: 123), but it could be a very old tradition, as there are indications of such burials that date to the first millennium BC (Murashkin et al. 2016: 190-191). The entire body of the deceased was wrapped in birch bark, and it was important that the wrapping of the full body was done correctly to avoid the body soul slipping away (Manker 1961: 209).

After the Transition to Christianity in the Eastern Sámi Region

Following the Eastern Sámi's conversion to Christianity, burying their dead in churchyards became an obligation. However, these cemeteries are still located beyond the water, in line with earlier pre-Christian traditions. Temporary graves appear as a short-term solution on the occasions that the dead could not be buried in a churchyard immediately after their death. Wooden coffins became more common during the Middle Ages and the graves are given superstructures on some occasions. In the post-conversion grave structures, the holes for the movement of the free soul are still present. Another changing element following the Eastern Sámi's conversion to Christianity is the use of clothing for shrouding the body. The use of birch bark did not have a practical purpose during this period, whereas prior to their conversion, it was used to warp the corpses. The Christian cross was introduced as a symbol, which became part of the grave monument (Manker 1961: 214). Necessary utensils for the next life were still present in the Christian graves as burial gifts. In addition, new rituals after the death appeared, where a Christian priest played a necessary role. The heterogeneity of the constitution of the graves was still visible during this period, such as in the structures of graves.

The Eastern Orthodox Church first came to modern-day Russia in the tenth century, and Christianity began to spread gradually from this period onwards. Monasteries extended

their administrative power and influence in the Sámi regions from the end of the fifteenth century through missionary work. Eastern Sámi were in contact with Christianity for some centuries before they were converted by Russian Orthodox missionaries or monks around AD 1550 (Sergejeva 2000: 20-21). Due to this previous contact and interaction with Christian peoples, Eastern Sámi were already familiar with Christian practices, which perhaps made the conversion easier (Sergejeva 2000: 20-21). In addition, the monasteries promised to protect the Sámi people against western attacks (Sergejeva 2000: 20-21).

According to Sergejeva (2000: 23), some Christian ideals gradually merged with Sámi beliefs. Occasionally, these Christian beliefs complemented the Sámi beliefs, while on other occasions, they replaced Sámi beliefs altogether. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, church leaders began to act condescendingly towards the beliefs of the Sámi, resulting in the Sámi having to break with their own principles, ways of life and rituals, which had endured in spite of the Sámi having accepted Christianity. Another type of Christianisation strategy that must be considered is the construction of churches and fortifications as a physical manifestation of the Church's power and capacity (Ojala 2009: 206; Hansen and Olsen 2014: 257). The conversion of the Eastern Sámi was, nevertheless, different from the conversion of Western Sámi peoples, who saw more aggressive conversion processes between AD 1650 and 1750 (Svestad 2013b: 118; Hansen and Olsen 2014: 318).

One type of grave that can be found after the Christianisation of the Eastern Sámi are temporary graves. Burying the dead within a churchyard became an essential Sámi practice after the rise of Christian influences. If it was not possible to bury the corpse in a churchyard immediately after death, the body would be buried in a temporary grave until it was possible to rebury the dead in a churchyard. According to Storå (1971: 103), the use of temporary graves may have been initiated for other reasons. Firstly, the temporary burials could have been a reaction to the climate conditions. In winter, it was not always possible to dig graves in the frozen ground, so the corpse may have been buried in a temporary grave until the summer, when a proper grave could be prepared. In the summer, bodies could not be transported by sledge, so perhaps a temporary grave would have been used until the arrival of winter and snow enabled transportation by sledges. In these cases, archaeological material suggests that the Skolt Sámi used aerial graves, like trees or platforms, and would leave the body to dry so that it would be easier to move in winter (Storå 1971: 108). Secondly, a few Skolt communities had seasonal settlements and, if only one of these settlements had a cemetery, the person could not be permanently buried until the change of season and

settlements arrived (Storå 1971: 202). These temporary burial types consisted of tree burials or platform burials, a tradition which stems from an earlier pre-Christian Sámi burial custom (Storå 1971: 116).

In the Skolt Sámi territory, the so-called grave-house burial custom is also a common grave type still present after the conversion to Christianity. This burial type refers to a superstructure built over the grave that resembles a small house. Storå (1971) argues that some variation exists between these grave houses. This burial custom was still practised in the orthodox churchyard of Sevettijärvi in Northern Finland in the late 1950s (Svestad 2013b: 128) (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Grave house at Sevettijärvi (Storå 1971: 319).

One type of grave house is a construction made of one to three planks laid on top of each other, and another type consists of a large and timbered superstructure that was more than one storey. The last type of grave house consists of a round tree trunk on either side of the grave, with a ridge roof built directly on top of the tree trunks.

The grave house was as large as the grave itself. In all types, a cross was either placed at the foot or in the middle of the grave. On some occasions, the grave houses were painted red, and they occasionally had some decorations, as well. A small window would traditionally be implemented at the western part of the superstructure and above the head of the corpse. This window or hole penetrated the inside the coffin, which allowed contact between the deceased and living people that the person left behind. The window was also used to offer food to the body or to introduce incense. The ‘feeding’ of the deceased continued for several

weeks after the burial (Storå 1971: 155-156). The tools used for digging the grave were usually placed in the grave house. Burial gifts, such as axes, fishing tackle, reindeer meat or small jars containing spirits, would also occasionally be left in the grave house (Svestad 2013b: 128-129).



Figure 5. Grave house (*domvit*) from the Eastern-Sámi churchyard in Sevetijärv; the aperture for the ‘souls’ or ‘spirit’ is visible (Svestad 2013b: 129).

Storå (1971: 148-149) states that the Skolt Sámi may have borrowed the custom of graves houses from the Russians of Karelia, who used dwelling houses with many of the same construction details to bury their dead, or perhaps from older northern hunting peoples’ traditions. An example of this type of Sámi grave is found by the Tuloma River, where there are three graves with superstructures resembling houses, probably dating to the nineteenth century. The roofs were built with two sloping boards, on which a third board was placed in a horizontal position. A kind of roof ridge was placed on top of the horizontal board. At the southern wall of the house, there was a little rectangular aperture related to the movement of the soul (Storå 1971: 144; Svestad 2013b: 128-129). Another example is found in the Island of Mogilnyi, at the Lake Imandra, where Sámi graves houses similar to the ones found by the Tuloma river were discovered (Storå 1971: 144).

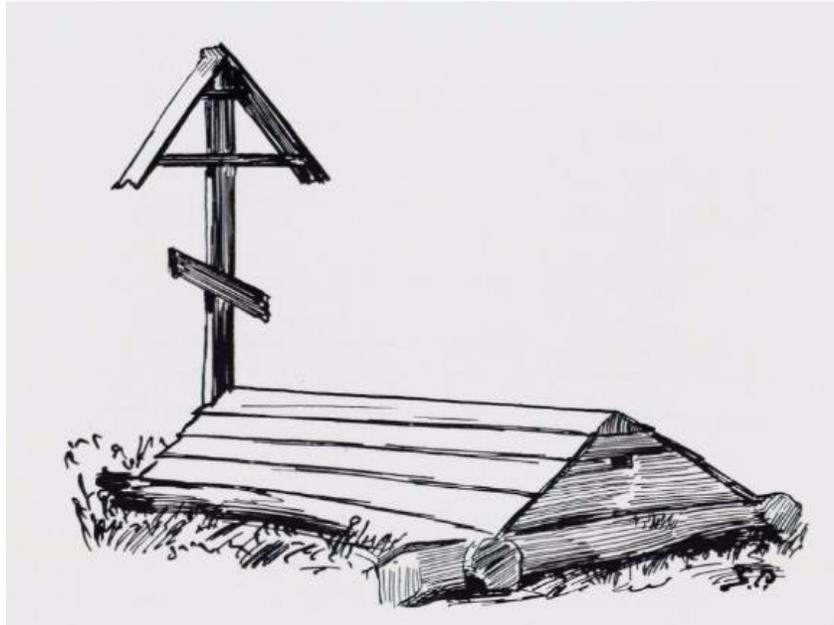


Figure 6. Grave house (*domvits*) from a Suonikylä Skolt burial ground (Storå 1971: 317)

According to Storå (1971: 207), the Skolt Sámi death-related rituals observed following their Christianisation can be sorted into five different groups. Storå's study is primarily an ethnographic reconstruction of Skolt Sámi burial traditions. First are the rites before the moment of death. Prior to their death, the dying person was placed on a suitable board. The kitchen utensils were taken out from the house, so they would not be contaminated. If they had children, the dying person distributed bread and commemorative gifts to their children so that they would have abundance of these things throughout their lives (Storå 1971: 206). After the transition to Christianity, it was important that the house where the dying person was placed remained silent. The second ritual took place at the moment death occurred, when apertures in the house or the tent were opened to let the soul leave. However, the main entrance was not opened in order to prevent the soul from coming back inside (Storå 1971: 210). The body of the deceased was then washed, and the deceased received the 'holy papers' (Storå 1971: 269). These holy papers were leaflets on which Russian prayers were written and were obtained from a priest (Storå 1971: 214). Thirdly, there was a ritual for the time period between the death and the burial. During the first three days following a death, the deceased was considered as a guest and taken care of as if a baby. Everybody had the duty to wait upon the dead, and no working, nor washing of themselves, was permitted. During this time, the coffin was constructed by a boat-builder (Storå 1971: 269). Three days after death, the burial was celebrated. A piece of white cloth was tied to the reindeer that pulled the body for the burial procession (Storå 1971: 269). The last group of

rites, or memory rites, were done on the third day after the funeral, then forty days or six weeks after the funeral, and again three years after. The main element in these commemorative feasts was the meal served in memory of the dead. All of the family members of the deceased took part during these collective feasts of remembrance (Storå 1971: 270).

The use of cemeteries and the presence of Orthodox crosses becomes present in Kola Sámi burial traditions following their conversion to Christianity. Kola Sámi groups started burying their dead in cemeteries during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as a result of the conversion to Christianity. The Kola Sámi communities had two different settlements: one for winter and another for summer. If the summer and winter settlements were near each other, there would only be one cemetery for that community. However, if the summer and winter settlements were far apart, it was common for each settlement to have its own cemetery. Another possibility in the Kola Sámi context was the existence of spring or autumn camps for individual families. In these cases, the families would have a small family-only cemetery near the spring or autumn camps (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 202).

Luk'jancenکو (1985: 203) proposes that Kola Sámi people preferred to build their cemeteries on high ground and beyond the water, using the island of Chalmny-Varre (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries) or the side of Lake Imandra, both in Murmansk, as examples. According to the C-14 datings from the graves of Lake Imandra, the burials can be dated to the second half of the second millennium BC (Ojala 2009: 211-212). From this example, it is possible to observe how the pre-Christian belief that water worked as an effective barrier preventing the dead returning to the world of the living survived into Christian practices (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 208-209; Svestad 2013b: 123). The Kola Sámi graves described by Luk'jancenکو consist of an oval marked ring of boulders, which could be interpreted as an Orthodox cross at the foot of the grave. Inside the oval marked rings, there was a covering of large stones over the head and smaller stones at the foot. The majority of the crosses had a type of roof that was made of two boards in the form of a gable, which covered the upper part of the cross. In some cases, these wooden crosses had a carving of the face of the dead. Unless there was an influence of Orthodox Christianity, it is believed that this practice came from a pre-Christian Kola Sámi custom (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 208-209). The cross was placed on the grave several days after the burial (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 205). This type of grave is a good example of the intersection of pre-Christian and Christian burial customs.

The depth of the graves in the cemeteries studied by Luk'jancenکو vary from 40 to 50 centimetres to 1 or 1.5 metres. In rocky areas, the graves tended to be shallower. According to Luk'jancenکو (1985: 204), the depth depended on the soil conditions. The position of the grave varied relating to the points of the compass. In Chalmny-Varre, most of the corpses lie Southeast(head)–Northwest, in Iokanga, Northwest (head)–Southeast, and in Pulozero, West (head)–East (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 204). The deceased were buried in board coffins with a lid. The bodies lay face up with the hands crossed across the chest or belly. In pre-Christian times, a sled or *pulka* was used instead of a coffin. However, with the influence of Christianity, *pulkas* were replaced by coffins (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 204; Svestad 2013b: 123).

The axe used to dig the grave was placed at the right side of the body. This axe was also used to make circles around the grave, which were intended to restrict the deceased from leaving the grave. Archaeologists have found remnants of birch bark in the coffins. It is believed that, following their conversion to Christianity, the birch bark did not have a practical reason to be there, contrary to the pre-Christian times when it had a useful role for wrapping the corpse (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 205; Svestad 2013b: 126). Lukjancenکو's study also considers the rituals that took place during the burials. The close family of the deceased did not participate in some aspects of the preparation of the body, such as the washing and dressing of the deceased, the preparation of the coffin or the digging of the grave.

In the Kola Sámi tradition, after the transition to Christianity, there was another type of grave: the cenotaphs. These graves were only used when someone perished, and the body was never retrieved. As it was impossible to bury the unbound corpse in the churchyard, the living group would instead construct a symbolic grave. In the symbolic grave, the community buried an empty coffin. One example of this practice is the cenotaph found at the Chalmny-Varre burial ground. This cemetery was in use during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the coffin, there was a small bit of human collarbone. The grave marker was a board covering with a cross, on which the carved outline of the deceased's bearded face was clearly visible (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 206).

Discussion

The border between the Eastern pre-Christian burial customs and the Eastern burial customs following the conversion to Christianity is fluid, which makes the study of the rituals harder. We have more information from some areas, but this does not allow us to discuss the region as a whole. Additionally, some grave material has been destroyed by treasure hunters (Storå

1971: 86), which makes it even more difficult to create a general understanding of Eastern Sámi burial customs. In this section, I will discuss Sámi ideas regarding the soul, as well as the material and the location of the Eastern Sámi graves. These are the topics which I consider to be central to Sámi burials customs, and the topics that allow us to observe what the transition to Christianity meant in terms of the funerary practices of the Eastern Sámi groups.

The Importance of the Free Soul

Human behaviour becomes regulated and routinised because of our active cohabitation with things (Olsen 2013: 206), and the Eastern Sámi people had the habit memory of making a hole during the construction of the graves. Prior to their conversion to Christianity, the tradition of creating a hole in the grave was a fundamental part of the process of the grave construction. Sámi people had a complex vision of the souls; there was a lot of fear around the souls themselves and what these souls could do to the living people. I find it likely that this fear of the souls, in combination with the established habit of leaving space for the soul in the grave construction, is what caused the custom of drilling these holes to linger after the conversion to Christianity. The free movement of the soul appears to have been an element that was too important to the Sámi consciousness for even their conversion to Christianity to remove the tradition entirely or replace it with another burial practice.

Eastern pre-Christian Sámi graves were not buried deep in the ground, due to the importance of the free soul's movement. Shallow burials after conversion suggests that the beliefs concerning the twofold soul were so important in Sámi culture and practices that they remained in existence, despite the conversion and influence of Christian religion. As far as I am concerned, this continued tradition of shallow burials is yet another example for the importance of habit memory. From years of repetition, post-conversion Sámi coffins were built with holes or gaps for the soul and their graves were not buried particularly deep. This is the way that Eastern Sámi groups learned how to bury their dead as the burial customs were passed down through generations. Although parts of their burial rituals were changed with the influence of Christianity, the construction of the graves remained unchanged. According to Eastern Sámi traditions and through their habit memory, this was the only possible way to construct graves for their dead. As I have demonstrated, the Eastern Sámi population must have understood these characteristics as an essential condition for the construction of the graves.

The Sámi understanding of the soul seems to be reflected in the burial materiality, both in pre-Christian and Christian burials. Although the morphology of the graves and the treatment of the corpse changed with Christian influence, the importance of the souls, especially the free soul, and its nature and role after the life, did not seem to change. This is evident because the free soul is still present in the burial rites after the conversion to Christianity (Storå 1971: 189). The material proof of the enduring importance of the free soul is unmistakable in the existence of holes in grave houses, interpreted as windows for the movement of the free soul. This custom was still practiced in the Orthodox churchyard of Sevettijärvi in Northern Finland until the late 1950s (Svestad 2013b: 128). Another example of this practice could be the burials excavated in the churchyard of Gullholmen in the municipality of Tana in Sweden. According to Svestad (2013b: 127-128), most of the coffins documented in Gullhomen have small holes drilled at the short end of the coffin. Most of these holes were asymmetrical, so they would not have been used for a practical reason such as transporting the coffin. I agree therefore with Svestad's proposal that these holes were made for the movement of the free soul of the dead (2013b: 127-128).

The continuation of the burial traditions surrounding the soul may also be described as habit memory, as defined by Henri Bergson (1991): a non-cognitive form of memory accomplished by repetition, as an embodied habit (Svestad 2013b: 130). As Bergson puts it:

Like every habitual bodily exercise, [these memories are] stored up in a mechanism which is set in motion as a whole by an initial impulse, in a closed system of automatic movements which succeed each other in the same order and, together, take the same length of time (Bergson 1991: 80).

In my opinion, as Svestad (2013b) and Olsen (2013) expose regarding habit memory, the Sámi cult of the soul continued after the transition to Christianity because the concept of the soul and its material tradition were so inculcated and important in Sámi tradition.

The Material in the Graves

There is a great variety in the materials that are included in the Eastern Sámi burials. Following the Sámi transition to Christianity, not all of the grave goods remain the same as the pre-Christian goods. Some of the materials are replaced by others, some materials persist

but change their role in the grave, while others altogether disappear. The use of wooden coffins increased, and the shrouding customs changed with the transition to Christianity. An example of these changes following the conversion to Christianity is reflected in the Kola Sámi burial customs, who replace the use of *pulka*, the aforementioned sledges, with the use of wooden coffins. Near the confluence of the Kista and Varzuga rivers, located on the Kola Peninsula, there is a small cemetery, dated to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that contain some of the earliest coffins in a Sámi context (Svestad 2013b: 123–124).

In the pre-Christian burials, birch bark was a basic element in Sámi graves, which was used to wrap the body. The use of birch bark as wrapping material gradually changes and the birch bark starts to only be used to cover the body. Its use begins to become more symbolic than practical, and during the Middle Ages, the birch bark used to wrap the body was eventually replaced with an ordinary dress (Svestad 2013b: 123). In my view, the change in the use of birch bark suggests that the continued usage of birch bark after the conversion is the result of habit memory in Sámi burials. However, I propose a difference between the use of birch and the habit memory of creating the holes in graves, which I have discussed in the previous section. The birch bark is still present in the graves, but the practical use of the bark (wrapping the body) has changed. This could result from the fact that the use of birch was based on a belief that changed with the arrival of Christianity, and this change of ideas is perhaps the reason as to why birch bark was still present in the graves, but in a different form. In some cases, there is a combination of pre-Christian practice and Christian practice, such as the use of the Orthodox crosses with carved faces, found in the cemeteries of Kola Sámi. It is thought that the particular practice of carving faces came from an ancient Sámi custom (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 209), where the ritual consisted of depicting the face of the deceased. Following the transition to Christianity, the Orthodox crosses would have been added to the face-carving ritual.

The continued inclusion of metal objects in the graves is an entirely different case. In Eastern pre-Christian Sámi graves, objects made of metal had a sacred character and were the most frequently present artifacts found in the graves (Schanche 2004). Knives, axes or jewellery were included in the grave as a method of protection for the deceased in their next life. This practice continued in Christian burials, in my opinion, because of the importance of protecting the soul and the person in the next life. The presence of metal goods perhaps shows continuity of this belief and the importance that Sámi people still placed on the next

life. The same situation is found in animal pelts deposited in the grave, as described in the Kola Sámi burials (Luk'jancenکو 1985).

The Location of the Graves

Apart from the change in materials buried inside the coffins, there were also some changes surrounding the location of graves and their nature. One of the major changes is that the Sámi people began to bury their dead in Christian churchyards. One example is the Sevettijärvi churchyard located in northern Finland (Svestad 2013b: 129). This change in location meant that the Sámi needed to create a temporary solution for the instances when the body could not be moved to the churchyard. This is presumably why temporary graves appear. Bodies were buried temporarily in a manner similar to the old Sámi burial customs; for instance, with the bodies being placed in trees or on platforms (Storå 1971: 103-108). In my view, when Sámi people introduce the custom of burying their dead in churchyards, the problem of not always being able to immediately bury the deceased following their death arose. Confronted with this problem, it is understandable that Sámi people referred to their habit memory of the pre-Christian burial types as a temporary solution.

Even though the Eastern Sámi people began to bury their dead in churchyards, the location of the cemeteries was still determined by older Sámi beliefs. Cemeteries were located beyond the water, as they traditionally were in pre-Christian period. This stemmed from the belief that water was an effective barrier in preventing the deceased from returning to the world of living. As shown in the analyses of Bäckman (1978) and Svestad (2013b) above, the Eastern Sámi were afraid of the free souls coming back to the land of the living. Therefore, it is likely that they preferred to continue with their pre-Christian practice of choosing a burial location beyond water, as a method to prevent the dead disturbing the living communities (Svestad 2013b: 123). The location choice could also be an example of habit memory, similar to those that I have suggested in the earlier examples of pre-Christian traditions carrying over to the Christian burials. Alike the previous hypothesis that the burial traditions surrounding the souls continued post-conversion was a result of the Sámi fearing these souls, the continued connection between burial location and its proximity to water could also stem from the importance that the souls had in the pre-Christian Sámi world and their fear of the power of the free souls after a person's death.

Another example of continuation of pre-Christian practices in the Eastern Sámi cemeteries is the use of oval stone rings on boulder graves (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 207; Svestad

2013b: 126). Stones were important in burial customs because of their sacred character, and it has been suggested that stones were connected with the cult of ancestors (Luk'jancenکو 1985: 207). As we have seen with the metal objects, the sacred character of the grave materials was deeply rooted in pre-Christian Sámi beliefs. The materials' connection with ancestors was deeply important for Eastern Sámi people. It is for this reason, that the practice of using oval stone rings in these graves outlasted the transition to Christianity.

I have explored many differences between Sámi religion and Christian religion, and how these differences translate onto the Eastern Sámi burial customs. However, there is one major religious notion that is completely different between the two religions. Christianity has a fixed liturgy and interpretation that are determined by the head of Church. Christianity is also less personal on an individual level, as well as less being fluid, than in the Sámi religion (Storå 1971: 254). As a result, I suggest that as the Christian influence became more prevalent in Sámi communities, the Sámi religion became more restrictive and less personal. The rites become defined, and the presence of the priest became indispensable, for example, in obtaining the holy papers. Although the role of the *noaidi* was to help with the pre-Christian burial traditions, from my point of view, the priest's role is absolutely essential for the Christian burial rites. In addition, an economic aspect also appears following the Sámi conversion, because, as Storå (1971: 254) explains, payments from the family of the deceased had to be made to the church for the sacrifices for the deceased (Storå 1971: 254). These payments that Storå (1971) discusses, in my view, introduces a kind of business transaction to the burial ritual, which was not present in pre-Christian Sámi culture.

Conclusion

The main focus of this paper is to address how Christianity changed the structure of Eastern Sámi religion, as reflected in their local burial customs. Once a full overview of the pre-Christian and post-conversion Sámi burial rites is considered, it is possible to return to the initial question of how the conversion to Christianity is reflected in Eastern Sámi burial sites.

As demonstrated in my application of habitual memory, the Eastern Sámi concept of the soul was maintained after the transition to Christianity, which is particularly visible through the existence of holes in the graves. The continuation of these holes indicates that movement of the free soul continues to be present in Eastern-Sámi Christian burials. Additionally, the change of the grave's location is one of the most significant changes after the transition to Christianity. Firstly, the bodies had to always definitively be buried in a

churchyard. Secondly, the impossibility of always carrying the body to an appropriated burial site forced the creation of temporary graves. Yet, even though there were changes in grave locations, these burials were still located beyond the water as in pre-Christian times, which signifies that the belief that souls could not return over the water was maintained following conversion.

Although the coffin format was standardized through the introduction of wooden coffins in churchyard burials, summer graves and pre-Christian coffin types, like boat-shape sledges or tree trunks, were also still used. Post-conversion Sámi burial rituals adopted the characteristics of Christian burial traditions; the main characteristic being the indispensable role of the priest during the burial rites. New traditions were adopted by the Eastern Sámi because of the influence, and in some cases the imposition of, the Christian religion. However, there are two possible reasons for the continued maintenance of some pre-Christian features. One potential reason could be the prevalence of habit memory, while the second possible reason could be that the pre-Christian Sámi beliefs were strong among Sámi Eastern people. In my opinion, both of these factors probably shaped the material expressions of the Eastern Sámi burials.

In conclusion, following the Eastern Sámi's transition to Christianity, certain symbols, like the cross, and other characteristics of the Christian religion, like churchyard burials and shrouding the corpse with clothes, were adopted by Eastern Sámi people. The influence of Christianity therefore provoked some modifications in the customs and materials of Eastern Sámi burials. In some cases, these modifications were drastic, like the change in the shrouding material of the corpse changing mainly from being constructed of birch bark or animal skins, to the use of clothes. In other cases, some of these burial modifications still preserve some pre-Christian elements; for instance, burials in churchyards being strategically separated from the living communities by water reflects a continued tradition of the pre-Christian Sámi belief whereby water was considered protection from the dead for the living. Furthermore, other elements of the pre-Christian Eastern Sámi beliefs, such as holes in coffins that allowed the retreat of the 'free soul' following the burial rite, as well as the presence of metal objects in graves, continued following conversion. Overall, Eastern Sámi burials continue to show a heterogenic nature in all the periods.

Notes

¹ An animistic worldview consists of a culture where nature is considered alive. Animism predominantly relates to how human persons relate to the world and includes social space for humans and non-humans to interrelate to each other (Helander-Renvall 2010: 44). For further information regarding the animistic worldview, consult Helander-Renvall (2010). For further information regarding Sámi worldviews, consult Ojala (2009) and Hansen and Olsen (2014).

² I mostly use North Sámi terminology and orthography here, as it is the language that is used in the majority of secondary sources that I refer to concerning the general pre-Christian religion.

³ Sámi local community.

⁴ Nils Storå (1971) suggests that some indications of Skolt Sámi crematory graves exist in Finland (1971: 92-93). Later, it was discovered that these rectangular structures delimited with stones were actually hearth-row sites, not crematory burials. It was not until the 1980s that these hearths emerged as an individual category in Sámi archaeological studies (Hedman and Olsen 2009: 4-6).

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