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## Hunter-Gatherer Prone Burials of the Kubenino Site, NW Russia (c. 5000 cal BC) : Normative or Deviant Burials?

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## **INTERARCHAEOLOGIA 6**



INTERARCHAEOLOGIA 6

**ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANALOGY**

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**Edited by**

**Marko Marila, Marja Ahola, Kristiina Mannermaa and Mika Lavento**

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# **HUNTER-GATHERER PRONE BURIALS OF THE KUBENINO SITE, NW RUSSIA (C. 5000 CAL BC) – NORMATIVE OR DEVIANT BURIALS?**

**MARJA AHOLA, EKATERINA KASHINA & KRISTIINA MANNERMAA**

This paper concerns Stone Age hunter-gatherer mortuary practices from the perspective of prone burials, i.e., the rare tradition of burying the deceased on their stomach. By using prone burials from the Neolithic hunter-gatherer site of Kubenino (northwestern Russia) as an example, the paper aims to understand whether the burials differ from the normative burial rituals of the respective period and region, by exploring how common the practice of prone burial was among the Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer populations of the northern European boreal zone. Furthermore, by comparing the Stone Age prone burials to inhumations in other body positions, the paper will explore whether this practice can be defined as a deviant mortuary practice. As an additional tool of interpretation, we will also use ethnographic analogues from historical hunter-gatherer and pastoralist populations of northern Eurasia.

*Keywords:* Kubenino; hunter-gatherer archaeology; mortuary practices; prone burials; deviant burials; normative burials; inhumation burials

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In late 2016, a new Russian-Finnish collaboration was launched in order to how the prehistoric hunter-gatherers of North-Eastern Europe buried their dead. As a first case study, we revisited the burial finds from the early prehistoric site of Kubenino (northwestern Russia) (Kashina et al. 2017), excavated in the early 1930s by Russian archaeologist Maria

Foss (Foss 1938). Resembling hunter-gatherer burials unearthed from other Northern European Stone Age burial sites (Gurina 1956; Oshibkina 1989; Larsson 1989; Larsson & Zagorska 2006), the Kubenino burials were also partly furnished with ochre, as well having rich grave assemblages of bone, antler, and stone artefacts (Foss 1938, 75). What was remarkable in the Kubenino materials, how-



**Figure 1.** Kubenino burial 3 *in situ*. Photo by unknown photographer/Property of State Historical Museum, Department of Written Sources, fund 487, section 23, number 72.

ever, was the positioning of three individuals in a prone position, i.e. on their stomach (Fig. 1). Since prone burials are often associated with negative concepts such as punishment or marking outcast status (Arcini 2009), the Kubenino burials were initially calling for the interpretation of deviant burial.

Deviant or non-normative burials are usually associated with bizarre practices such as decapitations, or strange body positions that differ from the normative burial ritual of the respective period, region, and/or cemetery (Murphy 2008). The individuals buried in this way can include criminals, women who died during childbirth, unbaptized infants, people with disabilities, and supposed revenants, to name but a few. It is noteworthy, however, that studies dealing with deviant burials have been primarily concerned with the Iron Age or historical periods (e.g. Murphy 2008; Gardela 2015; Vargha 2017; Moilanen 2018;

see, however, Strassburg 2000), i.e. periods with written records. When working with deep prehistory like the Stone Age, the picture becomes more blurred. Indeed, even if the phenomenon of a prone burial position does exist during the Stone Age, it is nevertheless unclear whether it was related to same negative connotations as prone burials from later periods. Moreover, without being able to access written records or living tradition, can we even recognize what is a normative or a non-normative mortuary practice?

In this paper, we aim to understand whether the Kubenino burials differ from the normative burial ritual of their respective period and region, by exploring how common the practice of a prone burial was among the Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer populations of the northern European boreal zone. Furthermore, by comparing the Stone Age prone burials to inhumations in other



body positions, we will explore whether this practice can be defined as a deviant mortuary practice. As a further tool of interpretation, we will also use ethnographic analogues from historical hunter-gatherer and pastoralist populations of northern Eurasia. Even though the use of ethnographic analogues have been criticized for casting an ethnographic schema back in time (e.g. Insoll 2004, 53–59), the use of this approach has nevertheless been widely accepted and used in archaeology (e.g. Zvelebil 2003; Lahelma 2008, Mannermaa 2008, Conneller 2013; Kirkinen 2015), and offers a much needed substitute for a written record or a living tradition.

## **MESOLITHIC-NEOLITHIC HUNTER-GATHERER MORTUARY PRACTICES IN THE EUROPEAN BOREAL ZONE**

To put the Kubenino burials into context, we will begin by offering a short introduction to the mortuary practices of the Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherers in the European boreal zone. According to recent archaeological studies, the hunter-gatherer populations of the European boreal zone buried their dead with varying and complex practices (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2003; 2006; Mannermaa 2008; Larsson 2009; Ahola et al. 2016; Törv 2016). The dead were, for example, given inhumations and cremations, but at the same time scattered loose human bones have also been documented from contemporary settlement sites. In prior studies, loose human bones with or without cut marks have often been interpreted as evidence of cannibalism (Sørensen 2016, 65 with cited references) or destroyed

burials (e.g. Foss 1938). Recently, however, an interpretation relating to other types of mortuary rituals (e.g., air burials) and post-mortal manipulation has been favoured (Nilsson Stutz 2014; Törv 2016).

From an archaeological perspective, the most common hunter-gatherer mortuary tradition is an inhumation placed in a shallow pit that corresponded to the physical size of the deceased. These inhumation burials have been discovered as solitary graves, settlement site graves, and as cemeteries (e.g. Gurina 1956; Larsson 1988; Zagorskis 2004 [1989]; Törv 2016; Ahola 2017a). According to radiocarbon dates (e.g. Zagorska 2006; Piezonka et al. 2014), the same cemetery sites were sometimes used for long periods of time, suggesting that memory and past generations played a significant role in hunter-gatherer funerary practices (Ahola 2017b). Since archaeological evidence also suggests the presence of post-mortem body manipulation and secondary burials (Larsson 2009; Törv 2016), the mortuary practices seem to have been conducted in multiple episodes at least in some cases.

According to archaeo-thanatological analyses (Nilsson Stutz 2003; 2006; Törv 2016), the dead were usually carefully positioned in the grave in a lifelike manner, and sometimes placed on platforms or paddings. In some cases, the body was also wrapped. It also seems that variation in body positioning was a norm (Törv 2016). However, even though the body could be arranged in various ways, extended supine position and flexed position seem to dominate (Nilsson Stutz 2003, 333–335; Löhmus 2007, 37–40). In many cases, the initial body position seems to imitate a sleeping position (Törv 2016, fig. 80).

In most cases, the hunter-gatherer inhumation burials were furnished with a variety of grave goods and ochre. The grave goods include, for example, tools and decorations made of bone and antler (e.g. Gurina 1956; Zagorskis 2004 [1989]; Kostyleva & Utkin 2010) along with artefacts made of stone and amber (e.g. Zagorska 2001; Ahola 2017a). In some cases, animals or parts of animals – for example bird wings – have also been placed in the graves (Mannermaa 2008). Curiously, pottery does not seem to be common in hunter-gatherer burial contexts (Larsson 2009; Ahola 2017a).

### **‘NORMATIVE’ AND ‘DEVIANT’ IN MESOLITHIC-NEOLITHIC HUNTER-GATHERER MORTUARY PRACTICES**

Considering the complexity of Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer mortuary practices, tracing normative and non-normative burials is a difficult task. Since an inhumation burial in a cemetery is something very common to many modern cultures, it is easy to interpret such a tradition as a normative mortuary practice (cf. Nilsson Stutz 2014). However, as Mari Törv (2016, 232) has pointed out, the total of all known European Mesolithic hunter-gatherer inhumation burials does not even amount to one generation of population. Even though many sites are not totally excavated – or even discovered – this phenomenon nevertheless suggests that the practice of an inhumation burial seems likely to be a marginal burial concept among Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherers (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2014; Törv 2016, 336–337).

The idea of Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer inhumation burials as deviant burials is not new. In fact, prior studies from the 1950s onwards have already suggested that only very special people, such as shamans, would have received an inhumation burial, while the major part of the population was treated according to differing mortuary practices (e.g. Gurina 1956; Edgren 1966; O’Shea & Zvelebil 1984). According to Jimmy Strassburg (2000), instead of shamans, these inhumation burials could also represent the feared and rejected outcasts of the society. Considering all the ritual activity at hunter-gatherer cemeteries – votive deposits (Zagorska 2001; Kostyleva & Utkin 2010), the existence of multiple fire places (e.g. Vikkula 1987; Butrimas 2012), along with the location of the burials in a close vicinity of settlements – it seems reasonable to assume, however, that the dead given an inhumation burial were rather honoured than rejected. This line of interpretation is also supported by the above-mentioned core mortuary practices that can be connected with positive associations, such as care, connection, and body integrity (Nilsson Stutz 2003; Nilsson Stutz 2010; Ahola 2015; Törv 2016).

To sum up, when we consider the hunter-gatherer burials from the perspective of normative and deviant mortuary practices, two factors arise. Firstly, the low amount of known inhumation burials suggest that this mortuary practice might have itself been a marginal burial concept: a deviant burial. Secondly, archaeological evidence from these burials suggests that these people were nevertheless buried with positive associations, such as care and body integrity. Accordingly, when we consider the prone burials within



**Figure 2.** Sites mentioned in this article. Map by Kristiina Mannermaa (source for background map: <https://mapswire.com/maps/europe/europe-physical-map-blank-large.jpg>).

this tradition, we are already dealing with an overall context of non-normative burials. By piecing together the total amount of prone burials from the hunter-gatherer burial sites, we can see how common this practice was and, consequently, whether we are dealing with a marginal practice within a non-normative practice. Furthermore, by comparing e.g. the grave structures and burial customs of the prone burials to burials in more common body positions, we can also see whether there are further differences in these burials. These differences might give us a clue as to why the prone burial position was practiced.

## THE KUBENINO SITE

### *The site*

Now that we have set the scene, it is time to return to the Kubenino site. The multiperiodic Stone Age settlement site of Kubenino is situated roughly 4 km to the south from the town of Kargopol, the capital of the Kargopol district, Arkhangelsk region, Russian Federation (Fig. 2). The site is located on the right shore of the Onega River, which runs from Lake Lacha to the White Sea. It is situated on a slightly elevated area, which extends approximately 500 m along the river bank, and is bordered by two streams on both sides (the Northern stream has the name Polyanochniy or Polyanostniy – ‘the meadow one’).

The first excavations were conducted at the site by Maria Foss during the 1930s (Foss 1938), and continued sporadically for several decades through the 1970s under several site directors. According to data from the 1930s to 1970s (Foss, 1938; Kozyreva 1967; Kuratov et al 1976), the settlement territory was partly covered with bushes and the dominant plant type throughout the site was grass. The cultural layer started right under the modern surface, and has a homogenous character: humified soil of black colour with a thickness of ca. 40 cm. The settlement area seems to have been damaged by river waters along the shoreline (Polyakov 1882, 9–10); for example, Foss's excavation pits were completely merged with waterline (Fig. 3). In fact, the Kubenino

site might contain several occupation phases, according to the changing river level (Oshibkina 1978, 62). There is no doubt, however, that the place itself was good for year-round fishing. Indeed, such a location is typical for hunter-gatherer settlements of Russian Plain forest zone (Oshibkina 2003, 243).

During her excavations, Foss studied an area of approximately 600 m<sup>2</sup> and revealed the remains of a row of features belonging to different chronological stages: a rounded shallow dwelling pit, slightly dug into the intact clay layer, several open-air fireplaces, and a workshop for polished tools. The find material of the site consisted of numerous ceramic sherds (Ceramics with pit and comb decoration dating to 5th–3rd Millennium BC



**Figure 3.** Kubenino site under excavation in 1930. *Photo by unknown photographer/Property of State Historical Museum, Department of Written Sources, fund 487, section 18, number 205.*

prevails among them), stone tools and flakes, bone and antler artefacts, and personal ornaments, such as tooth pendants and slate rings, that date mainly from the 5th Millennium to the 3rd Millennium BC. Some flint tool forms, however, could also derive from the (pre-ceramic) Final Mesolithic period, dating to the 6th Millennium BC.

#### *The Kubenino burials*

Aside from the Stone Age settlement material, the Kubenino site also yielded several fragments of human bones along with remains of six articulated skeletons, of which three were buried in a prone position and three in a supine position (Foss 1938; Smirnov 1940; Kuratov et al. 1976). The Kubenino supine burials were discovered at a depth of ca. 20–30 cm with their heads to the south (Smirnov 1940; Kuratov et al. 1976). Two of the burials lacked burial goods (burials 4 and 6) (Smirnov 1940; Kuratov et al. 1976), while one (burial 5) was accompanied by bone tools (Smirnov 1940).

The Kubenino prone burials were dug to a depth of ca. 40 cm, and in all the prone burials the individuals were positioned slightly crouched from the elbows, with wrists under pelvis<sup>1</sup> (Foss 1938, 75). According to recent calibrated AMS dates obtained from bone artefacts deriving from burials 2 and 3, the prone burials date to the edge of 6th and 5th Millennium BC (Kashina et al. 2017), making them possibly coeval with the ceramic tradition (the so-called ‘Kargopol’ ceramics) preceding the Comb Ware and Pit-Comb Ware traditions (e.g. Tarasov et al. 2017).

Of the three prone burials, two (burials 2 and 3) contained rather well-preserved human skeletal material and grave goods mainly consisting of bone, antler, and teeth. In con-

trast to these burials, burial 1 did not contain any finds, and the human remains, especially the upper part of the skeleton, was only poorly preserved (Foss 1938, 78). The individual inhumed in burial 3 had received the richest grave inventory, consisting of several bone, antler, and flint artefacts. Burial 3 was also the only burial at the Kubenino site that was furnished with ochre, discovered at the bottom of the burial pit together with small charcoal fragments (Foss 1938, 78).

According to Foss (1938, 78), the individual buried in burial 3 was a “Stone Age giant” with a height of 1.93 meters and was positioned with his head to the SSE. This ‘giant’ was treated with numerous bone ornaments, discovered mainly from the neck and pelvis area of the skeleton, as well as with several bone arrowheads and other bone and flint artefacts. This burial also included a roughly made human figurine (Fig. 4). Curiously, aside from the neck and pelvic region, many of the finds in the burial were discovered from around the head area of the deceased. For example, a fragmented flint spear point was discovered underneath the skull, with its other fragment positioned to the left of the skull (Foss 1938, 78). This artefact (Fig. 5) was missing the middle part, which makes us suggest that it was intentionally broken. Remarkably, according to recent zooarchaeological analysis conducted by the third author, many of the bone and antler artefacts were also deliberately fragmented. For example, the tips of several bone points from the burial were also broken (Fig. 6).

Differing from the large individual inhumed in burial 3, according to Foss (1938, 78) the length of the skeleton in burial 2 was 1.5 meters. This individual was positioned

with the head towards the SSE, and since a 2–3 cm thick layer of humus was documented underneath the skeleton, the burial pit was possibly furnished with some organic material. The find material of the burial consisted of several bone and antler artefacts along with a unique find of a fragmented human figurine (Fig. 7), discovered directly on the left tibia bone (Foss 1938, 78). Similarly to the deceased, the figurine was also positioned in a prone position.

### MESOLITHIC AND NEOLITHIC HUNTER-GATHERER PRONE BURIALS FROM NORTH EUROPE

In addition to re-visiting the Kubenino burial finds, we also searched for other prone burials from the respective period and region. The data was collected solely from written sources (i.e. publications and field reports), and no new analyses were conducted. As a result of this search, we discovered a total of 28 ad-

ditional prone burials from nine sites (Table 1). Most of the sites (Ivanovskoye VII, Karavaikha, Minino, Mys Brevenniy, Sakhtysh IIA and Sakhtysh VIII) are located in Russia, two of the sites in Baltia (Kreiči<sup>2</sup> and Zvejnieki), and one in Scandinavia (Skateholm II). As most of the Stone Age prone burials lack radiocarbon dates, the burials have been given a relative date that, in many cases, covers several millennia. According to stratigraphy and archaeological finds and contexts (Briussov 1961; Oshibkina 1978; Utkin & Kostyleva 2001; Kostyleva & Utkin 2010), however, prone burials from the Russian territory most probably date to ca. 6000–4500 cal BC.

When the Kubenino prone burials are observed together with these other prone burials from the respective period and region, several points of connection can be made. Firstly, prone burials occur together with inhumations placed in other positions, both in settlement sites and cemeteries. Secondly, Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials seem to be furnished in a very similar manner to other inhumations, implying that some of the individuals would have received grave goods and ochre while other not. This is also the case with individuals buried in other positions (e.g. Gurina 1956; Larsson 1989; Larsson & Zagorska 2006; Kostyleva & Utkin 2010). Thirdly, similarly to inhumations in other body positions, prone burials also represent both single inhumations and multiple



**Figure 4.** Potential human figurine from Kubenino burial 3. *Photo by I. Seden'kov/State Historical Museum, Moscow, Russia.*



**Figure 5.** Partial flint knife from Kubenino burial 3. *Photo by I. Seden'kov/State Historical Museum, Moscow, Russia.*



**Figure 6.** Needle-shaped bone points from Kubenino burial 3. *Photo by I. Seden'kov/State Historical Museum, Moscow, Russia.*

**Figure 7.** Human figurine from Kubenino burial 2. *Photo by I. Seden'kov/State Historical Museum, Moscow, Russia.*

burials of men, women, and children from different age groups. It does seem, however, that adult or mature men dominate the material.

What is remarkable, however, is that in most cases prone burials represent only a fragment of the burials unearthed from these sites. In fact, the Kubenino site, with three supine burials and three prone burials, is the only exception to this pattern. Accordingly, the prone position seems generally to be a marginal mortuary practice that can thus be interpreted as a deviant. Moreover, when the position is observed in the light of more common burial positions, it is evident that the position of the prone individuals did not aim to mimic a life-like position. On the contrary, the bodies were often placed in an extended prone position, with either one or both hands positioned beneath the pelvis. Consequently, the prone burials do not bear any resemblance to, for example, people sleeping on their stomach.

However, at the same time it is evident that the individuals were also buried with care. For example, in the case of the Kubenino prone burials, 'the giant' received rich grave goods, some of which seems to have been intentionally broken, and ochre. These practices – reported also in other hunter-gatherer burial sites (e.g. Zagorskis 2004 [1989], 83; Ahola 2015, 35; 2017; see also Chapman & Gaydarska 2007, 95) – suggest that a range of activities took place at the time of the interment. This, on the other hand, sets these



Mesolithic and Neolithic prone burials apart from the prone burials recorded from later periods. Indeed, in many of these later burials, the body of the individual has clearly been carelessly tossed into the burial pit and shamed, for example by beheading the body (e.g. Murphy 2008; Arcini 2009).

It thus seems plausible that even if the prone position can be defined as deviant, it might not have been related to negative meanings among the Stone Age hunter-gatherers. In fact, according to Leszek Gardela (2015), a cross-cultural exploration of the prone burial tradition has shown that the practice was endowed with a wide range of meanings – and not necessarily always with negative connotations. Indeed, even though in some hunter-gatherer prone burials (Zvejnieki burials 37, 39 and 70, Mys Brevenniy burial 2 and Karavaikha burial 28), the body of the individual was also covered with large



**Table 1.** Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials from European boreal zone.

Site	Location	Prone burials	Relative dating	Radiocarbon dating (BP)	Short description	Inventory	Noted pathologies	Literature
Ivanovskoye VII (Settlement site with five burials)	Russia	Burial 4	6th millennium BC		male (mature), extended prone position with hands under pelvis, traces of chopping on leg bones, long leg bones of an adult woman discovered under the body	-	-	Kostyleva & Utkin 2010
		Burial 5	6th millennium BC		female (adult), extended prone position with hands under pelvis, body halved (upper part of the body positioned upright and lower part of the body horizontally), lower parts of limbs and feet absent; burnt remains of wooden pole between the two body parts	-	Acetabulum asymmetry, different length of thighbones (lameness?)	Kostyleva & Utkin 2010
Karavaikha (settlement site and a cemetery of 38 burials)	Russia	Burial 28	6th-5th millennium BC		female (young adult), extended prone position with hands under pelvis, tightly wrapped, several large stones placed on the body, small fireplace with burnt animal bone upon the burial	-	-	Brusov 1961; Utkin & Kostyleva 2001
Kreiči (settlement site and a cemetery of ca. 20 burials)	Latvia	Burial 21	late 5th-3rd millennium BC		head SE			Zagorskis 1961
		Burial 22	late 5th-3rd millennium BC		head SE, a pit with pottery discovered under the burial			Zagorskis 1961
Minino (cemetery of ca. 20 burials)	Russia	Burial 4	6th-5th millennium BC	(Aar-5787) 6680±50; (Aar-5788) 6165±45	male (adult), extended prone position with hands under pelvis, ochre at the head area	Fragmented bone point (barbed)	-	Makarov 2007
Mys Brevenny (settlement site with eight burials)	Russia	Burial 2	6th-5th millennium BC		adult (sex not determined), extended prone position with hands under pelvis, large stone placed on the pelvic area	Two flint arrowheads	-	Oshibkina 1978
Sakhtysh Ila (settlement site with a multiperiodic cemetery of 15 burials)	Russia	Burial 12	6th millennium BC	(Gin-7185) 6110±200	male (adult), extended prone position with hands under pelvis	-	-	Kostyleva & Utkin, 2010; Piezonka et al. 2013
		Burial 22	6th millennium BC		female (young adult), extended prone position with hands under pelvis, tightly wrapped	Two bone daggers, tooth pendant and a barbed point (?)	-	Kostyleva & Utkin 2010
		Burials 61A & B	6th millennium BC	61A: (Aar-15052) 6356±23	Burial 61A: female (young adult), extended prone position with hands along the body, partly destroyed, ochre beneath the skull Burial 61B: child (2 years old) in extended (?) prone position, placed between the hips of burial 61A	Bone awl, knife and unidentified bone tool	-	Kostyleva & Utkin 2010; Piezonka et al. 2013

Hunter-Gatherer Prone Burials of the Kubenino Site

Sakhtysh VIII (settlement site and a multiperiodic cemetery of ca. 20 burials)	Russia	Burial 29	6th millennium BC		male (adult), extended prone position with hands under pelvis	-	-	Kostyleva & Utkin 2010
Skateholm II (settlement site and a cemetery of ca. 60 burials)	Sweden	Burial 33	6th-5th millennium BC		male (mature?), extended prone position with right upper limb rotated inward and shoulders projected upward, head and upper left side tucked against the wall of the grave	Several bone points (both by the skeleton and in the filling)		Larsson 1988; Nilsson Stutz 2003
Zvejnieki (settlement site and a multiperiodic cemetery of ca. 300 burials)	Latvia	Burial 37	6th millennium BC		male (adult), extended prone position, left arm stretched by the side, right forearm drawn up to humerus with fingers at shoulder, large stone at feet	Two bone pendants	Left clavicle with possible indications of tuberculous on posterior border of medial articulation, occlusal caries on 2nd molar of lower jaw	Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
		Burial 39	6th millennium BC	(Ua-3635) 6775±55	male (mature), extended prone position, face turned to right, arms close by sides, legs crossed at knees, small amount of ochre around head, two large stones by the head		Arthroitis with Pommer's knots on humerus	Zagorskis 2004 [1989]; Zagorska 2006
		Burial 43	6th millennium BC		infant, extended prone position, middle of the skeleton destroyed, intensive ochre surrounding the skeleton	38 perforated tooth pendants and two incised pendants at pelvis and middle above and below the skeleton		Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
		Burial 63	6th millennium BC		male (adult/mature), extended prone position with head turned to right, left arm stretched and partly under pelvis, right arm flexed with elbow projecting outwards and hand under waist, small amount of ochre around head, right elbow and legs		Traumatic lesions on left parietal	Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
		Burial 70	8th-7th millennium BC		male (adult/mature), extended prone position with head turned to right, arms by the sides, two large stones covered the head and chest and one stone the toes of the individual			Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
		Burial 90	6th millennium BC		badly damaged skeleton in extended prone position (upper skeleton down to pelvis missing), positioned across burials 91-92 (collective grave)	two flint flakes		Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
		Burial 177	late 6th-5th millennium BC		male (mature), extended prone position, arms by the sides, right forearm below the pelvis, left forearm on the pelvis, legs together	bone arrowhead		Zagorskis 2004 [1989]

	Burials 178-182	late 6th-5th millennium BC	Burial 179: (Ua-19807) 5895± 70 Burial 182: (OxA-5970) 6195± 60	Collective burial of five males, all in prone position. Burial 178: male (adult), placed along the south side of the grave in extended prone position, right leg along the S side of the grave, left knee projecting sideways, ochre at head region. Burial 179: male (adult), extended prone position with head turned to left, right arm by the side, below ribs of burial 178. Burial 180: male (mature), laid in prone position along the S side of the grave, turned slightly to left side, arms by the side, right leg slightly flexed, left leg missing, traces of ochre around skeleton. Burial 181: male (adult), placed next to burial 180 with head turned to right, arms by the sides, right elbow projecting slightly outwards. Burial 182: male (mature), extended prone position, head to right, arms by the sides, knees and feet close together, small amount of ochre around skeleton	Burial 178: fragmentary tooth pendant & toothed spearhead	Burial 182: signs of injury on skeleton (four round holes in pelvis, punctured from front; lumbar vertebra shot through and flint flake lodged in third thoracic vertebra). Burial 181: healed injury on forehead; first lumbar vertebra with stage II deformative spondylosis with Pommer's knots. Upper two cervical vertebrae with indications of synostosis	Zagorskis 2004 [1989]; Zagorska 2006
	Burial 298	late 6th-5th millennium BC		male (adult), extended prone position, arms by the sides, skeleton surrounded by black earth with small amount of ochre around the skull			Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
	Burial 207	late 5th-3rd millennium BC		infant, extended prone position, head turned to left, right arm by the side, left arm slightly flexed with forearm under pelvis, thick layer of ochre around the skeleton, part of collective grave of four individuals (burials 206-209), other individuals either on supine position or on extended position by the sides of the grave, a votive deposit consisting of 33 objects at the feet of burial 207	biseral harpoon, several flint objects and flakes, fragmentary bone point and fragments of amber tablet		Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
	Burial 268	late 5th-3rd millennium BC		male? (adult), extended prone position, arm bones poorly preserved, legs turned slightly to right			Zagorskis 2004 [1989]
	Burial 287	late 5th-3rd millennium BC		female (mature), extended prone position, head turned to left, lower part of the body destroyed by later disturbances, an infant placed between the knees of the female			Zagorskis 2004 [1989]

stones (Table 1) – a tradition that brings to mind magical precautions against evil forces from later historical times (e.g. Gardela 2015) – nothing else in the burials suggest that these individuals were rejected. In fact, since large stones have also been used to cover the graves of individuals placed in a supine position in all of the sites in question (Oshibkina 1978; Zagorskis 2004 [1989], 17; Utkin & Kostyleva, 2001, 58), this practice cannot be connected solely with prone burials.

Also differentiating the Mesolithic-Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials from the deviant burials of later periods is the fact that traces of violence or other precautions taken against possible revenants are relatively rare (see however Ivanovskoe VII burial 5 and Zvejnieki collective burial 178–182 in Table 1). Indeed, although Lars Larsson (1988, 44) has interpreted the flint arrowheads discovered in the Skateholm prone burial (Table 1) as having been shot at the grave, the way the projectile points ended up in the filling is unclear. Aside being shot, these items could also have been intentionally positioned in the filling – a phenomenon recorded, for example, from the Finnish territory (Ahola 2017). Furthermore, according to Gardela (2015, 113–114), in most folkloristic instances describing the fear of the undead, the deceased is placed in a prone position (and sometimes further mutilated) if the deceased was suspected of, for example, vampirism and the grave was thus reopened. However, in the case of the Skateholm burial – the only prone burial subjected to archaeo-thanatological analysis in which it is possible to determine whether the burial is a primary or a secondary (e.g. Duddy 2009) – the individual was clearly placed initially in a prone position and the burial pit

filled immediately (Nilsson Stutz 2003, Appendix 1).

## HIDING FACES?

To understand the underlying reasons to bury the deceased on its stomach within a hunter-gatherer context, we turned to ethnographic materials. However, when reviewing the ethnographic literature, it soon became evident that prone burials – indeed any burial position – were only rarely mentioned. Similarly, we did not find any accounts of deviant burial practices. Although this could indicate that such mortuary practices did not exist among historical hunter-gatherers or pastoralists, a prone burial has nevertheless been discovered, for example, from a Medieval Yakut burial ground (Bravina et al. 2016). According to ethnographic accounts (Bravina et al. 2016, 243 with cited references), among the Yakuts this practice was reserved for the dangerous deceased that included, for example, shamans and suicide victims. Curiously, according to Estonian folklore, the prone position is also connected with shamans. Indeed, according to this tradition (Wiedemann 1878, 443–444 according to Waronen 1898, 51) the return of a shaman's soul from a shamanistic journey could be prevented by placing the body of the trancing shaman in a prone position. Even though this folkloric account does not deal with death or mortuary practices, it does imply that the souls of potent individuals were feared, and that special actions could be taken in order to control these individuals.

Considering the above, it could be plausible that the prone position was used as a precaution to diminish the powers connected with special or potent individuals. In fact, although

we did not encounter prone burials from other sources, one reoccurring practice did catch our eye; it seemed that many hunter-gatherer and pastoralist populations of northern Eurasia thought that the soul<sup>3</sup> was located in the eyes of the individual (Harva 1933, 175). It was for this reason that shamans commonly wore masks, to hide their souls from the spirits they encountered. For the same reason, the eyes or the face of the deceased were also covered with, for example, fish skins, cloth, or different items that were placed on top of the eyes (Harva 1933, 192–193).

Interestingly, the practice of covering the eyes and the face of the deceased is also present in Stone Age hunter-gatherer mortuary practice. For example, at the Zvejnieki cemetery, amber ornaments were found in the eye sockets of the deceased, in burials dating to the late 5th–3rd Millennium BC; the head region of these individuals was also intensively strewn with ochre, and in some cases plastered with a layer of clay (Zagorska 2001, 112; Nilsson Stutz et al. 2013). This tradition has also been recorded from 4th Millennium BC hunter-gatherer burials in the Finnish territory, and was interpreted as the presence of a death mask (Edgren 2006). The tradition could, however, also be associated with the uses of masks for transformation and changing identity (cf. Pizzorno 2010). Similar potential masks have also been unearthed from prior hunter-gatherer burials dating to the 7th Millennium BC, e.g. from the cemeteries of Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov in Russia (grave 115 of an adult man) (Gurina 1956) and Donkalis in Lithuania (grave 2 of an adult man) (Butrimas 2002; 2016) (Fig. 2). In these burials, animal tooth pendants were found on the eyes and face of the deceased, probably

indicating a mask or other headgear, but evidence of clay or other material used for the gear has not been observed. The head region of these individuals was nevertheless intensively strewn with ochre.

In the light of these examples from hunter-gatherer burials, it seems reasonable to assume that the practice of hiding the face and eye area was sometimes considered significant. Indeed, this practice suggests that there was also ambivalence within the hunter-gatherer mortuary practices, and the dead body or the powers connected with the liminal stage of the corpse (cf. van Gennep 1960) were considered as harmful. Curiously, a similar tradition can even be seen in many anthropomorphic items in which the eyes are represented very vaguely. For example, a human-like antler figurine discovered from Estonia and dated to the end of the 7th Millennium BC (Jonuks 2016) seems to lack eyes all together, while in the Kubenino figurines the eyes are marked by an empty space beneath pronounced brows (Fig. 7). Although we do not know whether the eyes were marked by, for example, unpreserved organic materials or with colours, it does seem that they were nevertheless presented differently than the other facial features. The most striking example, however, comes from the Kubenino site, where the figurine discovered in burial 2 (Fig. 7) was also placed on its stomach. The practice of burying the figurine in a similar body position as the deceased does seem to imply that the item possessed similar qualities as the buried individual.

In the light of the above discussion, it could be suggested that the practice of placing the individual in a prone position relates to a tradition in which it was important to

hide the face of the deceased. In fact, a similar interpretation has already been suggested for the case of Early Medieval prone burials from Poland (Gardela 2015). According to Gardela (2015, 109), one plausible explanation for these prone burials might have been the widespread belief in the so-called evil eye, a malevolent gaze of the dying or the dead which could bring misfortune or even death. Perhaps this tradition is indeed a long one, and in a Stone Age context was practiced by hiding the face with a mask – or by placing the dead in a prone position.

However, since masks and prone burials both represent rare mortuary traditions among the Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherers, this practice was clearly applied only in special cases. One reason might have been the presence of a deformation that, instead of being considered as a negative trait, was something that made the individual special or potent. Such an interpretation has already been made in cases where a Stone Age individual or individuals with severe pathologies has been buried with an exceptionally rich inventory (Porr & Alt 2006; Trinkaus & Buzhilova 2018). For example, the adult woman buried in the famous Bad Dürrenberg Mesolithic burial site (Fig. 2) suffered from an atlar anomaly that could have caused variants of altered states of consciousness in the individual (Porr & Alt 2006). This, on the other hand, may suggest that the individual was a shaman. Based on the animal tooth pendants and the Cervidae antlers found in the head region, the probable shaman might also have worn a headpiece that covered the eyes (Grünberg 2001, 156; Porr & Alt 2006, 396).

Although evidence of pathologies or deformations are not common in our material,

they are nevertheless present in some of the prone burials (Table 1). It must be noted, however, that evidence of deformations or pathologies were not systemically collected from the other burials of the sites. Thus, we do not know how many burials in other body positions show evidence of, for example, deformation. Moreover, the trait that made the individual somehow potent might have also been subtler. Indeed, even if Foss did not note any pathologies in the Kubenino individuals, the same line of thought could be applied to burial 3, in which the individual was of considerable size. Indeed, even though the size did not affect the health of the individual, it could have nevertheless been considered to be a similar anomaly, and thus contributed to the chosen burial position.

It must also be noted that even if the archaeological evidence suggests that death masks or other items were only rarely used to cover the faces or eyes of the buried individuals, such items could also have been made of perishable materials. For example, at the above-mentioned Yakut burial ground, birch bark was used to cover the head of one individual (Bravina et al. 2016, 252–253). Additionally, in the Finnish territory, some sporadic Neolithic hunter-gatherer burials show evidence of a tradition in which the head region was covered solely with clay, or with clay and items made of unperishable materials (Ahola 2017, 209).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have compiled together the current data on Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials from the European boreal zone. By focusing especially

on the Kubenino site in NW Russia, we have explored whether the individuals buried face down represent a deviant burial practice or not. By observing the Kubenino burials in the light of other Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials, we were able to conclude that the number of individuals placed on their stomach is extremely small compared to burials in other body positions. Accordingly, among the Stone Age hunter-gatherer inhumation tradition of the European boreal zone, prone burials clearly represent a marginal burial practice.

However, when the practice of a prone burial was given a closer look, it became evident that aside from the body position nothing else calls for an interpretation as deviant. Rather, it seems that the individuals placed in a prone position were otherwise treated similarly to other burials, with the same varying grave goods and practices as the other inhumations. Thus, differing from the revenant burials of later periods, it seems that the hunter-gatherer individuals that were given a prone burial were not intentionally humiliated. This, on the other hand, suggests that even though the practice might have been deviant, it might not have been associated with negative concepts.

According to our data, some of the Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials were, however, associated with evidence of violence or mutilation, along with pathologies that would have been visible during life. Such evidence is present, for example, in the Zvejnieki multiple burial 178–182 and in the Ivanovskoe VII prone burials 4 and 5. It seems, however, that rather than seeing these people as revenants, they might have been considered as potent or special.

Since these people might have possessed special powers in life, their dead bodies might have been considered as potentially dangerous and thus in need of special treatment.

Although speculative, we suggest that the tradition of a prone burial was a way to diminish the powers attached to the potentially dangerous dead, by hiding the face or the eyes of the deceased. By observing the tradition in the light of both the ethnographic and archaeological record, we noted that this practice was applied to special people and conducted in multiple ways. For example, both the archaeological and ethnographical evidence show that, occasionally, the face of the dead individual was covered with, for example, cloth, clay, birch bark, or artefacts. In addition to using artefacts to hide the face and eyes, the tradition of placing the individual on its stomach could have been a way to make the eyes and the face invisible. What is remarkable is that in a Mesolithic-Neolithic hunter-gatherer context the practice of hiding the face and the eyes was not applied only to humans, but also to human-like figurines and other items.

To conclude, we suggest that Mesolithic-Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials from the European boreal zone represent a deviant burial practice within an inhumation burial tradition that can itself already be referred to as deviant. In this sense, it is evident that the hunter-gatherer mortuary practices are not only numerous but also very complex, and in order to further understand the mortuary practices further study is needed. In the future, the Mesolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherer prone burials should be subjected to osteological, paleopathological and archaeo-thanatological analyses, and new ra-

diocarbon dates and isotopic analyses should be obtained. If suitable material is available, ancient bacteria DNA could also be traced from the individuals buried in a prone position. In theory, this method could reveal pathologies that are invisible to the naked eye, but which nevertheless could have contributed to the chosen funerary practice.

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## NOTES

- 1 The current location of the Kubenino human remains is unknown, and thus we must rely solely on the observations and documentation made by Foss. Indeed, according to the documentation of the burials, the skulls of all the individuals seem to have been badly damaged. However, without further analysis it is impossible to tell whether this was due to a deliberate act of skull fragmentation or a natural taphonomic process.
- 2 Due to the limitations of the studied material, information on the Kreiči burials is scarce. However, since these burials represent Stone Age hunter-gatherer prone burials from our region of interest, we nevertheless decided to include them in the study.
- 3 Differing from the modern western view, many hunter-gatherer populations believe that humans and animals have several souls, of which one was located in the facial area of the individual (Harva 1933, 175–175).