

Karhunpeijaiset The Bear Funerals of Finland

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Introduction:

The bear has long been a sacred animal to the Finnish. According to Finnish myth, the bear was lowered down to earth from Ursa Major on silver chains. When a bear dies, it returns to the sky where it can be reincarnated and born again on earth. It is believed that pre-Christian Finland was animistic and followed shamanic practices that came down through Siberia. Though there were “high gods” the local spirits and the ancestors were of more importance, as they had much more effect on daily life. Bears were considered a highly ranked and important spirit of the forest. They represented the bond between humans and the spirits, as well as the boundaries of life and death. The bear was believed to be able to take on a more human “bruin” form that was capable of hearing and understanding human speech. As a bridge between human and the spirit world, they were highly important.

Given their high status, and magical nature, it was thus important that the killing of a bear be handled very carefully and with respect, or the spirit of the bear would be unable to return to the sky. The angered spirit of a bear could cause great damage to a people, causing illness and death. Honoring the spirit of the bear was so important, ritual practices lasted into the Christian period, and as late as the 1800s.

Every aspect of a bear hunt, from the planning phases, to the internment of its bones, was carefully conducted in ritual. One of the most important aspects of this rite was the feast, during which the bear was celebrated to appease its spirit and ensure its return to the sky. It is difficult to collect early full accounts of the bear feast, as the Finns themselves had no written

language, only oral tradition. Still, academic examination of these traditions tell us these rituals have been occurring much earlier than their collection, and gives us a glimpse into the traditions of early Finns. In this paper we will examine, the difficulties of re-creating Finnish history, the importance of the bear, the great feast, and my own recreation of aspects of this rite.

The Difficulties of Finnish History:

Finnish history in SCA period can be especially hard to recreate. Although we have gravesite artifacts from the Stone Age on, the Finns had no written language until the 1500s. Even then it was mostly used by the church, not the common folk. Finnish as a written language didn't become really naturalized by the local Finnish population until 1835 when Finnish nationalism and a bid for independence began to surge. The written language was not officially recognized until 1863. (Britannica, n.d) Descriptions of the Finns from within period usually come from outside, often from the Swedish or Russians. Unsurprisingly, records often come from Christians bishops and priests as the Christianized the region. As you can imagine, this creates considerable difficulty in researching early Finnish culture. Experts tend to agree, however, that the oral traditions collected can be traced to the pre-Christian and early Christian beliefs of the Finnish people.

Both pre-Christian magic and Christian era folk magic in Finland was primarily conducted through song. The Kalevala, the national epic of Finland, is a collection of "rune-songs" collected from the oral traditions of the Finns. Its parent source the Suomen Kansen Vanhat Runot (SKVR), is the most comprehensive account of pre-Christian mythology and religious beliefs, consisting

of over 100,000 poems. These poems show both pre-Christian and Christian tradition. In the 12th century Sweden began to Christianize Finland, and the oral traditions captured in the Kalevala show the transition state between nature worship and medieval Christianity. (Bonser, 1924) In this collection we see the origin of the bear as a celestial spirit coming down from Ursa Major, as well as many myths of the bear's life on earth as well as bear hunting and feasting traditions. Although the poems were not collected until well after period, linguistic experts have been able to date rune songs based on language structure and content.

"The origins and dating of the poems have been discussed since the publication of the Kalevala. As a result, the long durée linkages between language and the central elements of pre-Christian mythology have been recognized. The oldest elements, such as the bear myth, have been connected to circumpolar hunting populations, and these verses hypothetically date back to the Stone Age. The latest ones, in turn, depict historical events from the Christian era." (Kirkinen, 2017)

The Bear's Importance in Finnish History:

We can see the importance of the bear throughout the history of Finland in artifacts found in the region. As early as the stone age we begin seeing artifacts such as daggers and axe heads carved into the shape of bears. Researchers have also found over 100 iron age bronze bear tooth pendants. The pendants are found particularly in the southwest, and appear only in the graves of women. While natural bear claws and teeth seem to have been available to everyone, bronze cast amulets appear to have been reserved for women only. This leads

archaeologists to believe they were associated with fertility. (Kivasalo, 2008) We also know that bear pelts, paws and claws were an important part of human cremation and burial. Gravesites were often found with remains of claws, teeth or hair. This lines up with several of the SKVR poems that put bears in the center of human transition to death and the afterlife. (Kirkinen, 2017)



Stone Age bear dagger

KM13438:1 National Museum of Finland



Figure 1. Use of bronze-tooth pendants in a costume. (1) Bronze pendants as a set on the waist have been found at the Kirkkomäki cemetery in Turku. (2) A single pendant attached to a chain holder (Turku, Kirkkomäki). (3) A bear-tooth pendant on a chain. Another example of a single pendant in a chain arrangement on the breast has been found in an inhumation grave in Kalvola, Häme. One pendant was also placed in the double grave of a man and a woman (Masku, Humikkala). (4) Two pendants joined together (Lieto, Merola). (Kivisalo 2006.)



Fig. 2. The practice of leaving claws in skins can be observed also in ethnographic collections. An x-ray of an East Karelian skinned bear paw (SU 4986: 5) shows that the skin was separated from the paw with the 3rd phalanges attached to it. Photo: Conservation laboratory, the National Museum of Finland.

Hunting the Bear: The Bear Funeral or “Great Feast”

Since the bear was a sacred spirit of the forest, close in importance to a deity, killing and consuming one was tricky business. If improperly done, the spirit of the bear could seek vengeance, causing spiritual and physical illness, chaos and death. Three major functions were achieved during a bear feast. The first was that the village was protected spiritually before, during, and after the hunting and eating of the bear. The second was that the hunters were absolved of the killing of the bear, and the third was that the bear was buried properly so that it could return to the sky to reincarnate.

By hosting an elaborate feast for the bear the hunters were able to convince the spirit of the bear that it died by accident, and that the hunters were innocent. "When the bear was killed, or possibly not until the feast, the bear's death hymn was performed. In it, the slayers say that the bear has died after falling from a tree, it has caused its death itself, or the death is labelled an accident, for which the hunters are not responsible. Explanations of the death are found also in the lore of other Arctic hunting peoples. Some Siberian peoples have blamed the killing on strangers, usually Russians." (Sarmela, 2006)

The SKVR details some of the aspects of the bear feast via rune song. Linguistically experts have dated these songs to period, but one of the earliest outside acknowledgments of Finnish bear ceremony written in period (albeit very end of period) occurred in 1640. Bishop Rothovius condemned the Finnish bear rites, saying 'men drank beer from a bear skull and growled like bears' (Kivasalo, 2008) The first recording of a full ceremony is from the Viitasaari text and was likely written by a clergyman in the Viitasaari parish. It is dated somewhere between 1600-1700, and gives a much more thorough description. An even later transcription

breaks the rite down into no less than 14 parts, from hunting to burial, showing that the ritual grows more elaborate as time passes.

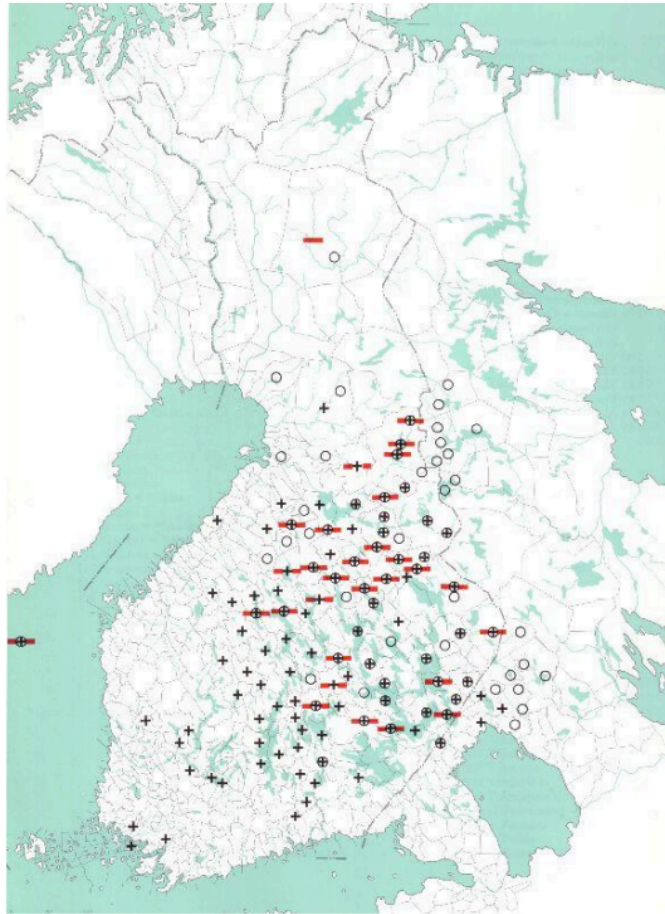
Hunting took place in the winter, when the bear would be ambushed during hibernation. Careful rituals and songs would be set into place around the den, the village, and the hunters themselves. When the bear was slain, the men brought the bear corpse back to the village. As the bear was brought in women of child bearing age were not allowed to look upon the bear, for fear of its virility. The carcass was then brought to a host house where the matriarch of the family would take the bear in as the honored guest of a feast. Often this feast would be carried out as a wedding, with a maiden being chosen to be the bear's bride. Much of the ritual consisted of back and forth dialogue in the form of rune poems between the hunters, matriarch of the home and the bear. The bear was placed in a seat of honor for the proceedings. (Sarmela, 2006)

Once the bear had been properly welcomed, the meat could be prepared. This had to be done carefully, as this too, could greatly anger the spirit of the bear. Some records indicate that the eating of the bear would also sold to the spirit of the bear as "accidental." The main course of the feast was a pea soup made with the meat of the paws and head. Special ale would be made for the occasion. The consuming of the head would have been a communal celebration, with the brain shared among the guests. The Viitasaari text says there were two reasons for the eating of the head. "There are two versions of the head-eating verse (appendix). The original is likely to have been the idea that the skull-eaters took the bear's sense of smell, sight and hearing for themselves, in order to possess the bear's senses, and the power of his paws and sharpness of his claws in addition. Thus, the slayers assumed the bear's power in the natural

environment surrounding the hunter. In the eating verse of the swidden community, the bear is deprived of its sense of smell, sight, hearing and sharpness of its claws, so it could no longer pose a threat to cattle. The bear was rendered harmless.” (Sarmela, 2006)

When the meat was consumed, the hunters would remove the teeth from the skull to make amulets, which would be distributed to the hunters and their families. The removal of teeth and claws from the carcass also helped ensure the spirit of the bear was harmless. Every bone was collected and placed in a bowl. The skull and bones then were processed to a burial site in the forest. All the guests would rise, and then proceed into the forest. The procession was lead by the bride, an ale bearer, the singer of songs, and then anyone else who wished to take part. The remains were taken to a tall pine or spruce tree. Waiting there would be another singer, representing the spiritual guardian of the bear. And exchange, via rune song, would occur between the guardian and the procession singer. The guardian would question the party whether the bear was hunted and treated correctly. The procession singer would ensure the bear was treated with respect. The ale bearer would then distribute ale and the procession would drink. The skull would be hung high in the tree, and the bones buried at the tree’s roots. This funeral ceremony ensured that the spirit of the bear could return to the sky, and reincarnate, returning to earth. (Sarmela, 2016)

Archive map of Ritual Bear Hunting in the Finnish-Karelian area



1. Ritual killing the bear
O variants of hunting and feast songs:

The Birth of the Bear, Leaving for the Den, Awakening the Bear, Death of the Bear, Escorting the Bear, Welcoming songs, Beginning the Meal, Hunters Praise.

2. Returning the bear
== variants of returning songs
Eating the Bears Head, Carrying the Skull, Skull Tree Verse

3. Bear skull trees
+ records of skull trees and/or memories of skulls placed in a tree

(Finnische Volksüberlieferung, map 1; Finnish Folklore atlas, map 1)

SKVR Rune-Song examples:

Included are a few of the poems related to the Karhunpeijaiset, translated into English, There will be an additional “song book” included in the display with more songs, in Finnish and English. It is important to note that these English translations are from 1800s Finnish, to 1800s English. Even more specifically, the English translations were trying their best to recreate a very specific style of Finnish rhythm and language, so it sounds quite different to the ear than modern poetry.

The Origins of the Bear –

Where was Bruin born honeypaw turned around?

That's where Bruin was born honeypaw turned around.

High up in the heavens on the Great Bear's shoulders.

How was he let down?

By a silver chain in a golden cradle.

SKVR VII, 5:3932

The Death of the Bear

Greetings, Bruin, welcome!

Reach out your hand, gnarled one's son

give your hand to the crooked bough

slap at the pine tree branch!

It wasn't I who met the bear

or any the rest of my mates.

You, yourself, fell off the spruce

slipped from the bent bough yourself

pierced your berry-filled belly

shattered your golden maw.

SKVR I, 4:1207

Eating the Bear's Head

I drew the knife from my waist
the sharp blade from my sheath
with which I'll take old Bruin.

I'll take old Bruin's snout
for my own snout
along with the snout before
but not to be the only one.

I'll take old Bruin's ear
for my own ear
along with the ear before
to sharpen my own hearing.

I'll take old Bruin's eyes
along with the eye before
but not to be the only one.

SKVR VII, 5:3403

I'll take old Bruin's nose
and leave him with no scent.
I'll take old Bruin's ear
and leave him with no hearing.
I'll take old Bruin's eye
and leave him with no sight.

SKVR VII, 5:3390

Carrying the Skull

Golden one, get on your way
money precious get moving
along the golden lane
along the silver road!
You'll not be taken far from here
just to a pine tree on a hill
a juniper at the field's far edge.
There the wind will meet your needs
the wave will drive you perch
on one side a whitefish strait
nearby the sweep of a salmon sein.

SKVR VII, 5:3390

Skull Tree Verse –

Where did you send your catch
take your fine booty?
Have you left it on the ice
or tossed it on the road
or drowned it in an ice pool?

I didn't leave it on the ice
or drown it in an ice pool
or toss it on the road.
I set it in a pure clean tree

right in the smallest pine
a fir tree with a hundred sprigs.
Set it there to watch the moon
to know Otava, the Great Bear
to fix its eyes on the sun.
SKVR VII, 5:3396

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