

## Sacred landscapes of Siberia: symbolic uses of space by hunter-gatherers

Peter Jordan

*There have been few studies of how hunter-gatherers venerate topographic features and transform them into cultural landscapes by building structures and depositing artefacts. Ethnographic investigation of the material culture of the Khanty of western Siberia has documented this process, which has important implications for archaeologists studying past hunter-gatherer communities.*

The Khanty, who occupy parts of the catchment of the River Ob (Fig. 1), are one of Siberia's indigenous minorities. Many of them continue to live in small remote settlements where they gather resources from the local taiga (boreal coniferous forest) by hunting, fishing and foraging. Despite long-term contacts with the Russian state, their local languages, clan organizations and other social and religious customs continue to flourish. Many of these rich traditions are reflected in the symbolic meanings attached to features of the local topography. These meanings are linked, in part, to the conduct of routine activities such as hunting or fishing, but they also involve the veneration of sacred places, shrines and burial grounds.

### Colonial history

Archaeological and linguistic evidence indicates that the Khanty (and other local ethnic groups such as the Mansi and Selkup) represent the oldest known indigenous inhabitants of western Siberia. However, throughout this long history of cultural continuity they have never been culturally or economically isolated. Before the sixteenth century AD, they engaged in

trade that linked them to Central Asia and Byzantium (Constantinople), through the paying of tribute to the Tarter Khanates in southern Siberia. After the Russian conquest of western Siberia in the sixteenth century, which was driven by the demand for luxury furs to sell in the lucrative European market, the former north-south axis of trade was reoriented westwards by the Russians. Indeed, the Russian desire for valuable Siberian furs has been compared to the thirst for gold and silver that led to the conquest of Central and South America by the Spanish.<sup>1</sup>

After the Russians subjugated the local communities by force, they built a series of fortified settlements along major river routes and imposed a fur tax on every adult male, which had to be paid annually at government-held outposts. So valuable were furs to the state economy that native land rights were enshrined in law to prevent the occupation of lands by incoming Russian migrants. This extractive relationship amounted to de facto apartheid,<sup>2</sup> and it continued into the Soviet period, with the Khanty and other groups contributing fur, meat and fish to the state economy, which they ostensibly obtained by traditional methods necessitating long periods

of absence in the remote bush. Thus, in this part of western Siberia, there are extremely long-term continuities in patterns of landscape occupation, which relate first to the local ecology and secondly to the role of the Khanty in the world economic system. The Khanty have not been passive victims of change wrought by external forces. Indeed, instead of dying out, they have developed a symbiotic economic relationship with the Russian state.

### Local ecology and seasonal mobility

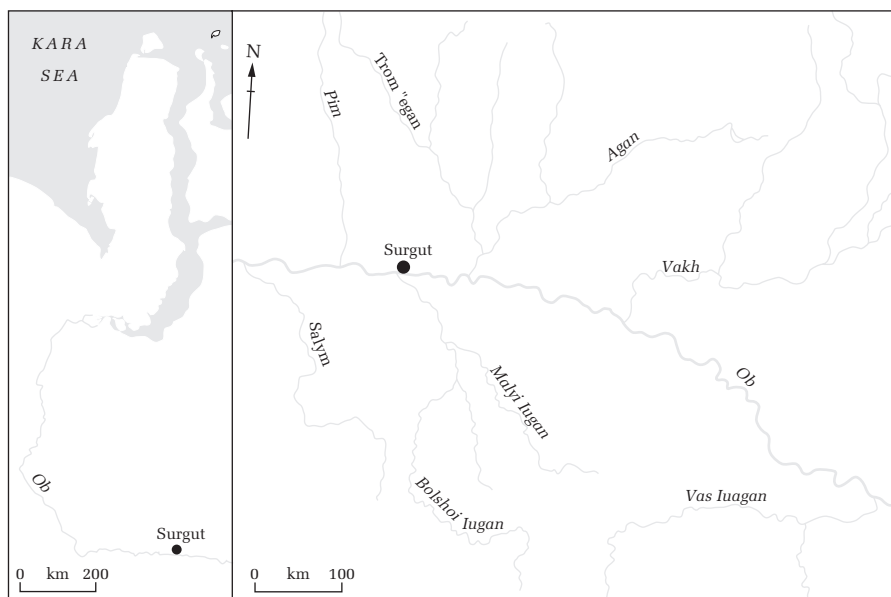
The strongly seasonal character of the Siberian environment results in the uneven distribution of resources over the landscape at different times of the year. Here, and throughout much of the circumpolar north, the common response to this has been the practice of seasonal mobility, in which household groups move their place of residence to be close to different resources in different seasons. In western Siberia, communities gather for summer fishing along the main rivers and in lakeside locations, then disperse in the winter to distant hunting grounds, where elk (moose) provides the main source of meat, and fur-bearing animals such as mink, sable and squirrel are hunted and trapped to satisfy the demands of external trade and tribute.

There is archaeological evidence that this form of mobile economy has been practised in the region for at least the past 3000 years and, although in their ecology and behaviour the forest Khanty broadly resemble high-latitude foragers in the boreal coniferous forests of North America, their history includes a long and unique experience of contact with adjacent pastoral and agricultural societies. In addition, their complex ritual uses of the landscape appear to have many uniquely Siberian elements.

### Khanty society and perceptions of the landscape

How is the forested landscape perceived and inhabited by the present-day Khanty groups, who still practice their traditional lifestyle of mobile hunting, fishing and gathering in different basins of the River Ob's tributaries (Fig. 1)? Each group distinguishes itself by dialect, dress and other aspects of material culture, and minor differences in subsistence practices. Here Khanty society is divided into three clans (bear, elk and beaver), each of which consists of many smaller lineages, with marriage between clan members considered taboo. The clan system is also linked to land ownership. Lineages of related men (patrilineages) occupy base yurts (groups of log huts; Fig. 2) and associated hunting lands, located along different stretches of the Ob's tributaries.

The Khanty believe that the high god Torum resides in the upper world of the sky, but that many of his first-generation



**Figure 1** Western Siberia: the homeland areas of the eastern Khanty people are located on the eight named tributaries of the River Ob.

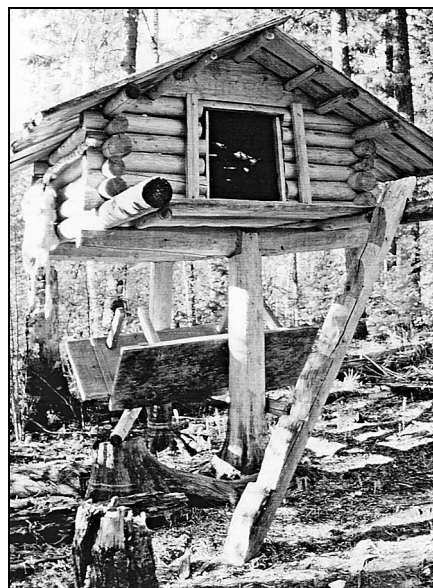


**Figure 2** A riverside base camp or yurt, composed of the log cabins and storage huts of six Khanty households; the people are watching an elk being butchered by the man at the lower left, March 1999.

offspring, each a major deity, dwell in particular river basins. There each acts as a patron who protects the river's human community, and ensures health, welfare and hunting success. The first-generation offspring of these patron deities reside in a series of sacred local shrines (Fig. 3), each associated with a corresponding patrilineal settlement. In the deep taiga, other sacred places are associated with forest spirits, who must be left material offerings when humans re-enter particular tracts of the landscape, usually at the start of the hunting season. Hunting and trapping is explicitly regulated through patrilineal territoriality, and there are also exclusion zones around sacred sites and cemeteries; hunting on these lands of the sacred and the dead is an offence comparable with hunting on the land of another patrilineage. Holy sites and the rituals enacted at them are closely associated with particular lineages, so that the communities' responsibilities to the sacred places express, map and validate broader patterns of landscape ownership.

According to local belief, the resources hunted, fished and gathered, especially the animals, are under the divine ownership of a range of powerful deities. As a result, daily existence is precarious and vulnerable, not because the Khanty are unskilled in their daily foraging activities but because survival is thought to depend

mainly on personal and community relationships with this range of spiritual beings. It is they who enable foraging to be enacted successfully through the taking (not regarded as the killing) of elk, fish and



**Figure 3** A sacred shrine in the forest not far from the local yurt settlement; it is the home of guardian spirits where ceremonies take place and around which hunting, fishing and gathering are forbidden.

other resources. When a hunt has been successful (Fig. 4), the hunter is said to have been given the animal by its divine keeper. In this way, every person and social group is, at all times and in all places, bound into a complex web of relationships with, and obligations to, a range of deities, who aid, protect and support them.<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to move through life or the landscape without reference to these spiritual forces; indeed, it is inherently dangerous to ignore them.

Khanty shamans (individuals endowed with special spiritual power) are believed to be able to contact the deities directly by means of "sky-flying",<sup>4</sup> and to bargain for health, hunting success and community welfare. Communion with the deities is also vital for the rest of the community, but it is only possible to open channels of communication by means of material offerings. These gifts must have been altered from their natural state by human action, and they are then ritually deposited at a range of sacred sites, which vary greatly in importance according to the genealogy of the spirit resident there. These sites are often places of special natural beauty; islands, hills, groves and long promontories extending into the multitude of lakes that characterize this part of Siberia. Visits to them correspond with general patterns of movement in the landscape, including the cyclical coming together and dispersal



*Figure 4* Hunters return to their yurt settlement with butchered elk carcasses on two cargo sledges, March 1999.

of communities, which articulates closely with the annual round of hunting, fishing and gathering, and the strong seasonality of the west Siberian environment.

### **Ethnographic insights and hunter-gatherer archaeology**

Can these ethnographic insights make any contribution to archaeological research on the hunting and gathering way of life that sustained humans through most of their history? Studies of contemporary hunter-gatherers cannot be blithely projected onto the prehistoric past, but they can provide useful models for archaeological research. However, appropriating images of present-day communities in Siberia and comparing them with the prehistoric past invites accusations that the Khanty communities of today are being cast as primitive isolates, miraculous survivals from a stone-age past. When discussing the role of ethnography in archaeological interpretations of hunter-gatherers, we should be absolutely clear that these Siberian communities are thoroughly modern, their lives rooted firmly in the challenging economic, political and ecological contexts of the contemporary world. Moreover, as we have seen, their lifeways represent cultural adaptations to both local ecology and colonial history. In the past three decades the cultural survival of indigenous communities throughout western Siberia has been, and

remains, directly threatened by the environmental pollution and social upheaval wrought by the exploitation of some of the world's largest but most remote reserves of oil and gas, which underlie many of these communities' ancestral homelands.<sup>5</sup>

A major difficulty in archaeological research on hunter-gatherers has been that, although ethnographers have often described items of material culture in detail, they have devoted little attention to the complex ways in which artefacts and structures are actually created, used and discarded. However, it is the result of these actions, in the form of scatters of artefacts, deposits of refuse and abandoned structures, that constitute the physical essence of the archaeological record.

A further problem arises when archaeologists try to use ethnographic data on hunter-gatherers to interpret the past. Hunting and gathering peoples often move great distances during their seasonal rounds, yet studies of their material culture have tended to focus on the composition of local campsites, not on broader patterns of routine and ritual engagements with the local topography. In particular, "little attention has been paid to the ways in which hunter-gatherers treat elements of the natural world, singling them out for special veneration".<sup>6</sup> Moreover, ethnographic studies have tended to emphasize the dependence of hunter-gatherers on the

location and availability of local plant and animal resources in accounting for patterns of seasonal movement and food procurement. There have been few studies of the symbolic dimensions of hunter-gatherer patterns of land use, and most of them have been undertaken among the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

One result of the tendency of ethnographic research to ignore the more symbolic dimensions of hunter-gatherer land use has been that archaeological studies of hunter-gatherers have also tended to emphasize their ecological adaptations. This is partly related to the fact that, with the exception of stone tools, artefacts made by prehistoric foragers tend not to survive, but it is also linked to the deeply entrenched misconception that hunter-gatherers live simple lives, based primarily on the hunting and consumption of game. The ways in which contemporary hunting and gathering communities perceive, in their own cultural terms, the landscapes they inhabit, have seldom been studied, and there are even fewer studies of how these more symbolic dimensions of landscape perception are reflected in the use and deposition of items of material culture.

The challenge for archaeologists is to try to link to surviving physical remains the symbolic dimensions of hunter-gatherer land use that ethnographic studies reveal. For example, deposits of bones found at



**Figure 5** A cache or midden where bones of elk and wild deer have been deposited; traditionally, each household maintained one such midden in the forest at some distance from the yurt settlement.

archaeological sites tend to be regarded as domestic waste, evidence either of the subsistence economy or of feasting events; and yet, as the British archaeologist Richard Bradley has argued, "In neither case is it asked why they should be found at distinctive places in the landscape, and this is where a new study might begin".<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

It is clear that most ethnographic studies offer little to archaeologists who wish to include in their interpretations of the prehistoric past the ritual and symbolic dimensions of hunter-gatherer landscapes and material culture. Nevertheless, where appropriate ethnographic insights have been employed, it has proved possible to include these dimensions in rich and detailed interpretations.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnographic studies of material culture, and of how symbolic meanings are physically expressed in the landscape, can generate comparative models that are useful to archaeologists, as is shown, for example, by study of the material and landscape correlates of shamanism,<sup>9</sup> of the routine and ritual treatment of animal bones, including the location and composition of bone caches (Fig. 5), and of the ways in which sacred sites are marked and venerated by the deposition of artefacts. Ethnographic study of the Khanty of western Siberia is providing new insights into the complex relationships that link local ecology, material culture and sacred landscapes, and the implications of these relationships for the archaeological investigation of hunter-gatherer societies of the past.<sup>10</sup>

hunter-gatherer worldview, and other elements of cultural continuity can generate rich insights into the prehistoric past. See for example C. Tilley, *Material culture and text: the art of ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991), M. Zvelebil, "Hunter-gatherer ritual landscapes: spatial organisation, social structure and ideology among hunter gatherers of northern Europe and western Siberia", in *Ideology and social structure of Stone Age communities in Europe*, A. van Gijn & M. Zvelebil (eds), 33–50 (Analecta Praehistorica Leidensia 29, Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, 1997), and M. Zvelebil & P. Jordan, "Hunter-fisher-gatherer ritual landscapes: questions of time, space and presentation", in *Rock art as social representation*, J. Goldhahn (ed.), 101–127 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 794, 1999).

9. See Jordan (2001, 2003: n. 3 above).
10. I wish to thank all the Khanty people who welcomed and assisted me during my fieldwork in their homeland. Funding for the fieldwork was provided by a Hossein Farny Scholarship at the University of Sheffield, the Emslie Horniman Scholarship Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and an Ethnographic Fieldwork Award from the Finno-Ugrian Society.

### Notes

1. See pp. 38–42 in J. Forsyth, *A history of the peoples of Siberia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
2. See p. 88 in P. D. Jordan, "Cultural landscapes in colonial Siberia: Khanty settlements of the sacred, the living and the dead", *Landscapes* 2, 83–105, 2001.
3. See P. D. Jordan, "The materiality of shamanism as a 'world-view': praxis, artefacts and landscape", in *The archaeology of shamanism*, N. Price (ed.), 87–104 (London: Routledge, 2001) and pp. 281–2 in P. D. Jordan, *Material culture and sacred landscape: the anthropology of the Siberian Khanty* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2003).
4. "Sky-flying" refers to the flight of a shaman's soul to other realms of the cosmos to make direct contact with powerful spirits living in the upper and lower worlds; see Jordan (2001, 2003: n. 3 above).
5. The Khanty have been struggling to protect their clan lands from continued oil and gas development. Dr Andrew Wiget (awiget@nmsu.edu) has been a significant coordinating figure in these campaigns; he can be contacted for further information. See also A. Wiget & O. Balalaeva, "Saving Siberia's Khanty from oil development", *Surviving Together* 46, 22–5, Spring 1997, and A. Wiget & O. Balalaeva, "Black snow, oil and the Khanty of West Siberia", *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 20, 13–15, 1997.
6. Quotation on p. 26 in R. Bradley, *Altering the earth: the origins of monuments in Britain and continental Europe*, (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1993).
7. Quotation on p. 38 in R. Bradley, *An archaeology of natural places* (London: Routledge, 2000).
8. Many of these studies have used ethnographic models from Siberia to explore hunter-gatherer ritual landscapes in prehistoric northern Europe, arguing that broad similarities in ecology, the sharing of identifiable elements of a circumpolar