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Creating a sense of belonging: religion and migration in the context of the 3rd millennium BC Corded Ware complex in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region

Marja Ahola

Although not often discussed in an archaeological context, religion plays an important role in human migrations by working as an anchor of collective identity and distinction among the migrants. By establishing permanent religious structures – such as burials – the newcomers can also use religion as a tool to indicate an enduring presence in their new homeland. Remarkably, such practices can also be seen among the groups connected with the Corded Ware complex that migrated and settled in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region roughly 5000 years ago. According to the material remains of the mortuary practices associated with this complex, these people did not travel alone; they carried with them a novel religion. Defined in this paper as a ‘steppe-originated religion’, this belief system continued mortuary practices known from the Pontic Steppe, while also incorporating material and ritual elements from different regions over the course of time. Despite this syncretism, the core ideas of the religion nevertheless persisted. As these ideas seem to relate to the mixing of past and present generations, as well as the merging of homeland and new land, this religion could have provided much-needed aid and comfort for a people on the move.

INTRODUCTION

Roughly 5000 years ago, cord-decorated pottery and battle axes (Fig. 1) of the so-called Corded Ware Complex (henceforth CWC) appeared in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region (e.g., Lõugas et al. 2007, Nordqvist and Häkälä 2014, Nordqvist 2016, 2018). According to recent genetic analyses (Saag et al. 2017, Mittnik et al. 2018), these pots and axes did not travel alone, but along with new genetic lineages – new people – who also arrived in the area. Although the picture is still largely blurred, the genetic data nevertheless allow us to move past the discussion of whether the migration event ever occurred, and to step into a more nuanced discussion of the relevance of the different aspects of the relocations (cf. Trabert 2019). Indeed, in the field of migration studies these nuanced discussions are now a regular part of the ongoing debate, as they aim to understand issues related to migration and gender, explain community creation, and investigate migrant group identity, to mention but a few of their

Marja Ahola, Email: marja.ahola@helsinki.fi Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

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subjects (Gold and Nawyn 2013). Although archaeological research lacks the privilege of access to the realm of living tradition, associated questions have nonetheless recently been addressed, for instance by investigating the significance of the migrants’ material culture (e.g., Naum 2015, Holmqvist et al. 2018, Trabert 2019).

This paper contributes to the more refined discussion on prehistoric migrations by exploring the CWC migration to the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region from the perspective of religion. Although not often discussed in an archaeological context, religion plays an important role in human migrations. For example, in forced migration, religious identity is often the root cause of the flight, while also offering emotional support for the immigrants (Goździaik and Shandy 2002). According to Paul Johnson (2012), religion migrates with people because migrants can carry religion with them more easily than, for example, agricultural, architectural, or culinary cultural clusters. Aside from being easy to carry, religion also works as an anchor for collective identity and distinction among the migrants.

However, religion does not come without politics and power. On the contrary, political and religious actions are largely entangled. For example, the manipulation of traditional ritual practices has been seen as a way to legitimize political change, by framing the new within the symbolism of the old (Kertzer 1988). For example, early Christians commonly built their churches on locations of prior sacred sites (Grinsell 1986). Such practice not only saved time from constructing a new building; the message of the new religion was probably transmitted more easily from a location where people had previously been accustomed to perform their religious practices. However, cosmological knowledge can also be formalized in its structuring principles through completely new religious practices (Fowles 2013). Aside from converting people to this cosmological knowledge by force, the introduction of new religious practices might also happen as a broadly participatory action that can be promoted, e.g., as a way for the participants to gain access to new supernatural powers (Baltus and Wilson 2019). At the same time, however, the introduction of these practices can bring power to the individuals that have access to this esoteric knowledge and the expertise to conduct these practices. In the context of migration, such processes might be able to change even the socio-political organization of the area of immigration.

Despite the important role of religion in human migrations, religion and its role in the 3rd millennium BC migrations have remained largely an untouched subject. This is not entirely surprising, since the definition of ‘religion’ has long been connected with cultural evolutionist thinking, in which monotheism is seen as superior to concepts such as animism,
magic, and ancestral cults (Bielo 2015, pp. 6–7). At the same time, the definition of ‘religion’ is also seen specifically as a Christian project (Asad 1993), as well as an expression of Western colonialism, in which a division between sacred and profane is forced on systems that did not foster such a dichotomy (van der Veer 2014). Consequently, it has been proposed that the whole concept of religion is inapplicable to non-Western contexts (Dubuisson 2007), and that there cannot even be a universal definition of religion, as all such definitions reflect more of their historical and ideological context than the phenomenon itself (Asad 1993, p. 29).

However, to make the definition of religion more inclusive, recent theoretical advances emphasize religious practices and the materiality of religion over inner belief separated from an action (e.g., Fogelin 2008a, Meyer et al. 2010, Bowles 2013, Christensen et al. 2013, Baltus and Wilson 2019). As Baltus and Wilson (2019, p. 439) explain:

The performative processes of religion provide the means by which ideologies and cosmologies are lived, experienced, transmitted, and transformed. These practices are material - engaging things and places that are powerful or vibrant (à la Bennet 2010) - as well as multiscalar, occurring on a personal, daily level as well as part of larger communal events.

Indeed, when emphasising religious practices and the materiality of religion, it becomes evident that things, bodies, places, and practices are not something added to a religion, but rather are inseparable from it (Meyer et al. 2010). For example, icons or talismans are not inanimate objects, but agencies within themselves. Similarly, places are the scene between bodies, things, and practices in which religion happens. Since religion is even ‘unable to do without things, places, or bodies’ (Meyer et al. 2010, p. 210), the material record of prehistoric religions is, in fact, no less important than more recent sources concerning questions of inner belief and experience, only harder to reach. To put it differently, even though the dogma behind the archaeological record might be long gone, the phenomenon can nevertheless be studied further by investigating how, when, and where this religion happened materially.

Since the immaterial is made material through religious practices, a dialectic must also exist between ritual and religion (Fogelin 2007). As Fogelin (2007, p. 56) explains, this means that aspects of one are necessarily related to the other. Accordingly, by investigating how, when, and where the people connected with the CWC buried their dead, we should also be able to explore the role of death and the dead within their cosmology. Since CWC burials have been investigated around Europe for decades, we already know that these people commonly buried their dead as single burials under barrows with a west-east orientation (Furholt 2014, p. 70). The burials typically show gender-based differentiation in body positioning, with the males being placed in a crouched position on their right side, head to the west, and women on their left side with head to the east (Furholt 2014, Fig. 2). Male graves are also associated with axes, while pottery vessels were placed in the burials of both genders. Although regional variation occurs, e.g., in the shape of the grave and in the presence or absence of a covering barrow (Furholt 2014, pp. 75–76), the mortuary practices nevertheless share enough common ground to be acknowledged as the shared ritual performances of this particular religion. Indeed, as Bourgeois et al. (2017), note:

The very similar way in which CWC communities created burials and dressed their dead highlights that these communities shared information on this burial ritual over a large area. A person from the Czech Republic attending a funeral in the Netherlands would have recognized and related to many of the actions carried out during the burial ritual.

Although archaeology might never fully grasp the meaning of these mortuary
practices, the archaeological record with its time span of thousands of years is especially suitable to tracing change and continuation, and in this sense the way religion travelled with people. Indeed, before the appearance of the people connected with the CWC, the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region was inhabited by hunter-fisher-gatherer communities who buried their dead in differing manners. Although the archaeological burial record concerning the hunter-gatherers is scarce from ca. 3500 cal BC onwards, it seems that these communities followed the core practices documented from earlier burial sites (e.g., Tõrv 2016, Ahola 2019). Although other mortuary practices, such as air burials, probably also existed (Tõrv 2016, pp. 336–339), most of the excavated hunter-gatherer burials from the region represent single or multiple inhumation burials in varying body positions (e.g., Zagorskis 2004, Nilsson Stutz 2006, Butrimas 2012, Tõrv 2016, Ahola 2019). The buried bodies were occasionally tightly wrapped, or placed either on soft containers or platforms, or buried with a set of objects including personal ornamentation or tools made of stone, amber, bone, and antler.

Although the burial customs of the hunter-gatherers already differed from the CWC mortuary tradition, further differences can also be seen in the materials that have not been included in the graves. Indeed, in contrast with the CWC burials, stone axes are not commonly discovered in the Neolithic hunter-gatherer burials of the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region. For example, of the over 300 hunter-gatherer burials of the Zvejnieki cemetery, northern Latvia, axes or adzes have been discovered from only four graves (Zagorskis 2004, appendix 1). These items are also rare in the Finnish hunter-gatherer burials (Ahola 2017a, p. 208). In addition, if pottery is present, it often represents sherds or partial vessels rather than intact vessels (Zagorskis 2004, pp. 69–72, Kriska et al. 2007, Ahola 2017a, pp. 211–212). Accordingly, when we compare the CWC mortuary practices to the hunter-gatherer burial traditions, it seems evident that a novel funerary practice, encoding a novel religion, arrived with the groups connected with the CWC.

In this article, I aim to dig deeper into this phenomenon and 1) explore what could have been the role of this religion during the migrations, and 2) investigate what happened after this religion was introduced to the area. Rather than exploring what studies concerning the Proto-Indo-European language, occasionally connected with the CWC (Kristiansen et al. 2017), might say about religion and migration, I will direct my attention to the important questions of how, when, and where this religion happened materially. My special emphasis will be on sites that contain both CWC and hunter-gatherer burials. That is, places that could have been, for example, taken over by the immigrants, or sacred sites in which we see an interaction between the hunter-gatherer communities and the groups connected with the CWC (Ahola 2017b, pp. 108–110). At the same time, I will explore the materialization of the novel religion within other hunter-gatherer burial contexts, and also investigate whether traces of the hunter-gatherer cosmology can be seen within the CWC burials of the region.

EXPLORING RELIGION AND MIGRATION IN 3RD MILLENNIUM BC EUROPE

A NOVEL RELIGION FROM THE PONTIC STEPPE?

To understand the role of religion in the CWC migrations to the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region, I will start by exploring what happened a few generations before in Central and Eastern Europe. During this period, novel burial practices also appear in this region. In contrast with the collective burials of the Neolithic farmer communities (e.g., Kristiansen 1989, Furholt 2019), these
practices highlighted single burials of gendered individuals that were positioned in a flexed position on their side (Furholt 2014, p. 75–76). The burials were often (but not always) covered by a mound. The tradition seems to have originated in the Pontic Steppe and was probably introduced to Central and Eastern Europe via intensive social networks and migrations associated with the people living in the steppes (e.g., Harrison and Heyd 2007, Allentoft et al. 2015, Haak et al. 2015, Kristiansen et al. 2017, Preda-Bălănică et al. 2020). The novel funerary practice spread rapidly, and within just a few hundred years it was practiced throughout various regions of Europe (Furholt 2003, 2014).

Although the origins of the CWC have commonly been connected with the so-called Yamnaya migrations from the steppe to south-eastern Europe (Allentoft et al. 2015, Haak et al. 2015, Kristiansen et al. 2017), the material culture of the CWC burials does not resemble the Yamnaya burials west of the Black Sea. Indeed, the Yamnaya graves of south-eastern Europe usually contain ochre, while being otherwise devoid of any other grave goods (Heyd 2011, p. 540). Similarities can be seen between the Yamnaya kurgans and the CWC barrows, as well as in the tradition of burying a single individual underground (Harrison and Heyd 2007, Kristiansen et al. 2017). Nonetheless the use of beakers, stone axes and, e.g., so-called hammer-headed stone pins (e.g., Tebelškis and Jankauskas 2006) have more common ground with burials from the Pontic Steppe (e.g. Shislina 2008). Nevertheless, the CWC grave and burial customs seem to underline a steppe-identity, and accordingly encode a movement of a novel religion from the Pontic Steppe to the west. Consequently, in this paper this religion is defined as a ‘steppe-originated religion’.

According to archaeological evidence, the steppe-originated burial practice – defined by Martin Furholt (2019) as the ‘Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Single Grave Burial Ritual Complex’ (henceforth SGBR) – was present in the archaeological record for a millennium at least. Indeed, aside from the groups connected with the CWC, many archaeological cultures roughly contemporary or succeeding the complex (for example, the so-called Bell Beaker, Unětice, Mierzanowice, and Nitra cultures) follow the SGBR tradition (Furholt 2019, p. 117). This phenomenon seems to suggest that this funerary practice – or the religion it encodes – was somehow appealing to the people of 3rd millennium BC Europe. It may have been that the core assumptions of this religion were durable even when translated into different contexts. Perhaps the religious practices themselves were easy to learn and required relatively little esoteric knowledge, at least, these seem to be the two qualities that define religions that spread successfully (Csordas 2009).

In fact, for people on the move, religion offers a way to create a sense of connectedness and control over their new homeland. For example, religion provides a way for the migrating people to take or retake control over their lives, and shape and sacralise spaces during their relocations (Horstmann and Jung 2015, p. 2). On the other hand, by establishing a permanent religious institution – such as a burial mound – migrants can indicate an enduring and committed presence in their new homeland (Goździak and Shandy 2002, p. 131). From this perspective, it is no wonder that, for example, the people connected with the Yamnaya raised thousands of mounds in the Southeast European lowlands: these constructions would have underlined the enduring and committed presence of the migrating people within the immigration area (Heyd 2011, p. 535, 546).

NEGOTIATING WITH THE SUPERNATURAL TO CREATE A SENSE OF BELONGING

Building a barrow or sacralising a location by other means is only half of the story,
However. Indeed, to inscribe themselves more durably into history, people have often reactivated important sites from the past by building new monuments on these locations (Bradley 2002, Olivier 2011). For example, the Greeks of the Classical Age erected shrines on sites thought to have been the scenes of mythological battles, while in Mesopotamia, Babylonian shrines were erected on locations that were originally older holy sites (Olivier 2011, pp. 15–16). Even in European prehistory, important burial sites have often been either continuously in use for millennia or were reused after a considerable hiatus of several hundred years (e.g., Wessman 2010, Williams 2013, Ahola 2017b). For example, the people connected with the Yamnaya in south-eastern Europe occasionally made new internments in their burial mounds (Heyd 2011). In this sense, the barrows acted not only as landmarks of their committed presence in the area but also as repeatedly used communal places, ‘sites of memory’, where social memory was recalled and passed on (Zerubavel 2003, p. 6). Since these sites were probably also seen as powerful liminal places, a new burial in such a place would have provided a way to re-enact links with either ancestors or the supernatural (Williams 1998).

Interestingly, recent studies have shown that groups connected with the CWC also reused older burial monuments with new burials (e.g., Holtorf 1998, Malmer 2002, Ebbesen 2008, Bourgeois 2013, Jeunesse 2014, Tunia and Włodarczak et al. 2016, Ahola 2017b, Malmström et al. 2019). Although some of the reused burial sites have been identified as previous CWC graves (e.g., Tunia and Włodarczak 2016, p. 224), considerably older monuments were also chosen as burial locations. For example, several megalithic tombs of the Neolithic Funnelbeaker culture (henceforth TRB) were reused by single grave culture groups (a local variant of the CWC) in Northern Germany, Denmark, and Southern Sweden (Holtorf 1998, Malmer 2002, Ebbesen 2009). In Northern Germany (Holtorf 1998, p. 26), most of these megaliths had already been covered over by earth when the new burials were made, and accordingly they had to be carried out by breaking into the monument. Although these break-ins could be conducted from either side of the monument or from the top, the new burial was usually positioned near the top of the chamber so that it did not disturb the older burials. Remarkably, a similar pattern also occurs in Poland, where the groups connected with CWC also reused TRB monuments for new burials that did not disturb the previous ones (Tunia and Włodarczak 2016). Accordingly, it seems that the older burial was intentionally treated with respect, and that the intention of the new burial was not to destroy the older one, but rather to be associated with it through direct proximity.

The tradition of reusing considerably older burials for new internments is interesting because these sites were probably no longer commonly used communal places, but rather places that had lost their original meaning and consequently could be reinvented (Olivier 2011, p. 70). Indeed, Williams (1998, p. 103) has suggested that the practice of burial reuse could have been significant in a variety of ways. It could have, for example, worked as a means to support claims and rights over land and wealth, and served to legitimize political strategies in the present. For example, immigrant Germanic groups of Anglo-Saxon Britain probably reused older monuments to portray themselves as the legitimate heirs of the ancient peoples or supernatural beings that originally built these structures (Williams 1998, p. 104). Accordingly, by reusing an older burial mound, religion could also be used to claim rights over the land; if the supernatural beings or the ancestors accepted the new burial, the presence of the immigrant people would be accepted as well. In this sense, the reuse of an old burial monument for a new
burial would have been the ultimate tool to create a sense of belonging in a new land.

However, the groups connected with the CWC did not only reuse older burials to create a sense of belonging. A similar affinity to the past can also be seen in other aspects of their material culture. Indeed, among the groups associated with the CWC in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden, new pottery vessels were manufactured by adding parts of older vessels into the clay matrix (Holmqvist et al. 2018, see also Larsson 2009). Remarkably, even though the new vessel was made of local clay, the small pieces of old vessels added into the clay matrix had a foreign origin. As Holmqvist et al. (2018, p. 89) explain:

> It might be that the foreign grog represents traces of potters who arrived at a new home (e.g., due to migration or marriage), with their personal ceramic utensils. These beakers were later recycled as temper in new ones, as a way of keeping a symbolic connection with past generations and the Corded Ware community at large.

With this mix of past and present generations in burials, as well as the joining of the soils of the homeland and new land in craftsmanship, the people were able to create a continuous link between past and present, and accordingly establish a sense of belonging to the new land.

STEPPE-ORIGINATED RELIGION IN THE EASTERN AND NORTHERN BALTIC SEA REGION

THE MATERIALIZATION OF THE STEPPE-ORIGINATED RELIGION IN THE EASTERN AND NORTHERN BALTIC SEA REGION

After setting the scene, it is now time to return to the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region and explore how the above-described phenomena unfold there. The most prominent materialization of the steppe-originated religion is, of course, the appearance of the SGBR style burials. According to the sparse radiocarbon determinations available (2018, Fig 7, Ahola and Heyd 2020, Appendix), the first CWC graves of the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region date to ca. 2800 cal BC, while the youngest graves associated with the tradition date to ca. 2300–2200 cal BC. In contrast with CWC graves recorded elsewhere, the graves from the region generally lack burial mounds, and accordingly represent flat burials that are situated either as solitary graves, settlement site graves or in small cemeteries (2018, 540, Ahola and Heyd 2020, pp. 87–88). Nonetheless, the graves mainly follow the material culture and burial customs of central and northern European CWC graves, and contain, e.g., battle axes, bone pins, and items made of the bones and pelts of domesticated animals (Loze 2006, Lõugas et al. 2007, Ahola et al. 2018, Ahola and Heyd 2020). However, pottery is commonly present only in the Finnish graves (Ahola and Heyd 2020, p. 86), and ceramic vessels are rare in the burials south of the Gulf of Finland (2018, p. 540). Since only about 20 graves of the total of ca. 100 internments (Ahola and Heyd 2020, p. 14) have been radiocarbon dated so far, any possible temporal variation between these graves is more or less blurred.

Aside from burial contexts, thousands of battle axes have also been discovered as stray finds in the region (e.g., Johanson 2006, Nordqvist and Häkälä 2014). Although these finds have often been interpreted as the remains of destroyed burials (e.g., Nordqvist and Häkälä 2014, p. 12), in Estonia many of these axes have been recovered from wetland contexts (Johanson 2006, for a similar phenomenon in Northern Germany and Denmark, see, Iversen 2016, Schultrich 2018). That is, places that are usually connected with votive deposits (Bradley 2000). Although no exhaustive study covering the whole of the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region has been conducted so far, the phenomenon
nevertheless suggests that a wider system of rules, patterns, and connections (à la Fogelin 2008b) emerged in the context of taking battle axes out of circulation. This, on the other hand, suggests that the religion in question was not materially manifested solely in the mortuary realm, but also within other ritual practices.

THE REUSE OF HUNTER-GATHERER BURIAL SITES

Although the CWC burials of the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region differ from the central and north European graves, for instance in terms of grave custom, they nevertheless share the practice of reusing older burial sites for new internments. However, differing from the visible TRB megaliths, these sites are compromised of ‘invisible’ flat cemeteries (Table 1). For example, at least three burials assigned to the CWC have been discovered at the Zvejnieki cemetery in northern Latvia (Fig. 2, Table 1). Since over 300 hunter-gatherer inhumation burials dating from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic (ca. 7000–3000 cal BC, Meadows et al. 2018) have been unearthed from this cemetery, the site was clearly an important communal place for the hunter-gatherer groups of the region (Nilsson Stutz et al. 2013). Accordingly, even if the cemetery is not a monumental burial site as such, its location on an island and its long-term use over several millennia might nevertheless have made it monumental in the minds of the people (Ahola 2017b). According to the radiocarbon data available (Meadows et al. 2018), the Zvejnieki burials associated with the CWC were added to the hunter-gatherer cemetery a few hundred years after the hunter-gatherer groups had ceased to use the place as a cemetery. Similarly, at the Kukkarkoski I cemetery in southern Finland (Fig 2 and Fig 3), the single CWC burial unearthed from the cemetery succeeded the previous hunter-gatherer graves by several hundred years (Ahola 2019, Appendix 1). Although radiocarbon data from these cemeteries is scarce, it seems that, similar to the situation in central and northern Europe, the CWC people seem to have chosen sites that were no longer actively used as burial sites. What is remarkable, however, is that even though positioned as flat cemeteries, these burials also do not disturb the previous burials (Zagorskis 2004, Figs 3–4, Ahola 2019, p. 63). It thus seems that either the huntergatherer underground burials were marked somehow, or their exact location was remembered for a considerable time.

However, even though groups in this region connected with the CWC reused older hunter-gatherer cemeteries, the practice was not as common as in Central and Northern Europe. Indeed, aside from the above-mentioned Kukkarkoski I and Zvejnieki sites, CWC graves have only been discovered at the hunter-gatherer cemetery of Jōnsas, Southern Finland (Fig. 2, Purhonen 1986). Since the poorly preserved Jōnsas hunter-gatherer graves lack radiocarbon determinations, the graves could also be contemporary with the CWC interments (Ahola 2017a, pp. 108–110). However, given the scope of the reuse practice among the CWC groups of Europe, it seems more reasonable to assume that the Jōnsas hunter-gatherer graves did indeed precede the CWC phase of use. This idea is further supported by the fact that shards from a Corded Ware pottery vessel were also discovered upon one hunter-gatherer grave, possibly having been left as a votive deposit (Ahola 2016).

PAST GENERATIONS OUTSIDE THE BURIAL REALM

On some rare occasions, CWC burials have also been located within prior hunter-gatherer settlement sites (Table 1). Although this phenomenon is recorded only north of the Gulf of Bothnia, settlement sites
associated with the CWC have also commonly been founded on abandoned hunter-gatherer or farmer sites around the Baltic Sea region (Lõugas et al. 2007, p. 22, Larsson 2009, p. 68, Nordqvist and Hākālā 2014, p. 6, Piličiauskas 2018, pp. 214–221). The reuse of older settlements has, for instance in Finland, been interpreted as being based on practical reasons (the phosphate-rich soils being suitable for pastoral farming due to differing vegetation types, Äyrāpää 1939, p. 118). Still, Larsson (2009, p. 68, 410) has suggested that the groups associated with the CWC in eastern central Sweden might also have reused these sites to connect with a mythical past. Indeed, just like modern day archaeologists, these people may have recognized the material remains – stone axes, pottery sherds, and stone flakes – in the soils of the older sites and thus intentionally chosen them for their own settlements. In this sense, these sites also portray religion in action outside the funeral realm. In fact, it seems that by reusing these sites

Fig. 2. The locations of the burial and settlement sites from of the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region that have been reused with new burials by the groups connected with the CWC. Map: M. Ahola (2020).
the people mixed the material remains of the past and present generations in a very similar manner as they did when reusing older burial sites.

In a wider context, the practice of using earlier settlement sites as burial sites is also documented in central Europe, where flat CWC graves have been discovered, e.g., in TRB settlements (Dobrakowska and Włodarczak 2018, p. 153). Moreover, when moving further to the east, the tradition can also be noted within the Fatyanovo culture, the Volga catchment variant of the CWC (Nordqvist and Heyd 2020). It is thus reasonable to assume that abandoned, older settlements could also have been considered
as sites where links with the ancestors and the supernatural could be re-enacted. Accordingly, instead of seeing these sites solely through the lenses of mundane or accidental practices, the reactivation of these old sites can be understood as a way for the people connected with the CWC to inscribe themselves durably onto the history of the immigration area. However, the practical and spiritual reasons do not need not to exclude each other. Rather, the soils of these sites could have been seen as suitable, e.g., for pastoral farming, because the supernatural powers of the site made them so.

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN OLD AND NEW COSMOLOGIES

When the graves positioned in the old hunter-gatherer sites are investigated in more detail (Table 2), it is interesting to note that, in general, the Finnish and Russian Karelian CWC graves follow the SGBR style more closely than the Latvian graves. Indeed, the Zvejnieki CWC graves contain roughly only half of the main elements of the SGBR, while also displaying heavy influence from hunter-gatherer mortuary practices. The most striking element is the absence of battle axes, even from the burials of mature males, along with the tradition of placing a pottery vessel in the grave either as an incomplete pot or as scattered sherds (Table 2: Zvejnieki burials 88 and 137). Furthermore, even though two of the buried individuals were positioned in a crouched position, another of the deceased was also placed in a supine position (Table 2: Zvejnieki burial 88). Connecting the graves even more closely to the hunter-gatherer mortuary traditions, one of the graves contained a small amount of ochre, while some were also filled with black earth containing hunter-gatherer settlement site finds (Zagorskis 2004, pp. 28–29, 34). Indeed, the use of black earth to fill the burial pit or cover the bottom of the grave is a relatively common feature of the hunter-gatherer graves of the Zvejnieki site (Zagorskis 2004, pp. 81–82). This was a remarkable practice, as the black earth was collected from nearby abandoned settlement sites, and has been explained as the hunter-gatherer way of creating a meaningful link to the past (Larsson 2017).

Given the above, the Zvejnieki burials seem to represent a case in which traditional cosmologies negotiate with the new. This is not surprising though, since every religion is

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Table 1. Summary of reused burial and settlement sites from the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Archaeological context</th>
<th>Dating</th>
<th>Type of reuse</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jönsas</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>hunter-gatherer cemetery</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Five CWC burials</td>
<td>Purhonen 1986; Ahola 2017b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kehioja</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>hunter-gatherer cemetery</td>
<td>5th Millennium BC</td>
<td>Single CWC burial</td>
<td>Kivikoski 1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kukkarkoski I</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>hunter-gatherer settlement site</td>
<td>4th Millennium BC</td>
<td>Single CWC burial</td>
<td>Torvinen 1979; Ahola et al. 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ravi</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>hunter-gatherer settlement site</td>
<td>4th Millennium BC</td>
<td>Single CWC burial</td>
<td>Äyräpää 1921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uusi-Jaara</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>hunter-gatherer settlement site</td>
<td>5th-4th Millennium BC</td>
<td>Single CWC burial</td>
<td>Äyräpää 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zvejnieki</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>hunter-gatherer cemetery</td>
<td>7th-4th Millennium BC</td>
<td>Three CWC burials, possibly more</td>
<td>Zagorskis 2004; Jones et al. 2017; Meadows et al. 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2. Summary of the corded ware burials interred in older sites in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Burial no</th>
<th>Radiocarbon determination (uncal BP)</th>
<th>Short description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jönsas I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>11473 ± 110</td>
<td>A possible double burial with no preserved human remains. The grave consisted of two oval-shaped burial features side by side, surrounded by a small ditch-like arch. Two Corded Ware vessels (discovered in shards) were positioned on opposite sides of the grave (NE corner &amp; SW corner) and two four-sided axes located on the SW side of the grave.</td>
<td>Purhonen 1986; Ahola 2017b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jönsas II</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>4181 ± 60</td>
<td>A rectangular-shaped single burial with no preserved human remains. A Corded Ware vessel was discovered in an upward position at the NE end of the grave.</td>
<td>Purhonen 1986; Ahola 2017b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jönsas III</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>1242 ± 90</td>
<td>A rectangular-shaped single burial with no preserved human remains. A Corded Ware vessel located at the NE corner of the grave while the filling of the pit consisted of small pottery shards, stone flakes and burnt animal bones that probably derived from the settlement soils.</td>
<td>Purhonen 1986; Ahola 2017b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jönsas IV</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>4181 ± 60</td>
<td>A Corded Ware vessel in an upward position. A C W vessel (a cup) was discovered from the feature itself. Small amount of pottery shards were also collected from the northern side of the burial feature.</td>
<td>Purhonen 1986; Ahola 2017b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jönsas V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>4181 ± 60</td>
<td>A rectangular-shaped single burial with no preserved human remains. A Corded Ware vessel was discovered from the location of the grave prior to the excavation.</td>
<td>Purhonen 1986; Ahola and Heyd 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kehioja</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 (Hela-4083)</td>
<td>A possible double burial with no preserved human remains. Two Corded Ware vessels (discovered in shards) were positioned on opposite sides of the grave (NE corner &amp; SW corner) and two four-sided axes located on the SW side of the grave.</td>
<td>Torvinen 1979; Ahola and Heyd 2019; Ahola 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kukkarkoski</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>4181 ± 60</td>
<td>A Corded Ware vessel was discovered from the location of the grave prior to the excavation.</td>
<td>Torvinen 1979; Ahola and Heyd 2019; Ahola 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Burial no</td>
<td>Radiocarbon determination (uncal BP)</td>
<td>Short description</td>
<td>Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ravi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A possible burial that was almost completely destroyed prior to excavations conducted during the early 20th century. The burial might have been an underground inhumation portrayed by a dark, sooty layer with the diameters of ca. 0.5 × 2 cm that was discovered from the depth of 40 cm. An almost complete Corded Ware vessel was obtained as a stray find nearby this feature. The vessel was also discovered from the depth of ca. 40 cm.</td>
<td>Åyrāpā 1921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uusi-Jaara</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A possible burial that was destroyed prior to excavations conducted during the 1920’s. According to the finder, the feature consisted of ‘black soil and pieces of charcoal’ at the depth of ca. 50 cm and was accompanied by shards from a Corded Ware pottery vessel and a battle axe.</td>
<td>Åyrāpā 1927; Ahola and Heyd 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zvejnieki</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
<td>A poorly preserved burial of a child buried in a supine position head to South. Large granite stone left of head at shoulder. A partial Corded Ware pottery vessel (representing the basal part) positioned at left shoulder.</td>
<td>Zagorskis 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zvejnieki</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>(Ua-19.811) 4280 ± 60</td>
<td>A poorly preserved burial of a mature male with determined steppe-ancestry. The body of the deceased was positioned on left side with head to East. The dead was accompanied by a bone awl of sheep/goat bone (positioned at the back of the skull), two tooth pendants (dog and beaver teeth) and a bone chisel made roe deer long bone that was surrounded by a layer of ochre. In addition, potsherds of an Corded Ware amphora was discovered from various places in the grave. The grave was filled with black earth.</td>
<td>Zagorskis 2004; Lõugas et al. 2007; Jones et al. 2017; Meadows et al. 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zvejnieki</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>(Ua-15.545) 4190 ± 90</td>
<td>A burial of an adolescent in a crouched position with head to WSW. A pair of ornamented antler plaquettes were discovered at the wrists of the individual, otherwise the grave was devoid of finds. The grave was filled with black soil that contained some settlement site finds.</td>
<td>Zagorskis 2004; Loze 2006; Meadows et al. 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
syncretistic and incorporates cultural, material, and ritual elements over time (Clack 2011). Although the other reused sites seem to follow the SGBR tradition more closely, the Zvejnieki site is not unique. Instead, further evidence of religious syncretism can also be detected from other solitary graves associated with the CWC (Ahola and Heyd 2020). For example, even though the Finnish CWC graves contain pottery vessels, occasionally, these items are not intact beakers but partial vessels (Ahola and Heyd 2020, p. 87). Although this could also be a taphonomical issue, further connections to the hunter-gatherer mortuary traditions exist in the inclusion of additional pottery sherds from different vessels, in the placement of vessels upside down or in the replacement of the battle axe with an adze of the hunter-gatherer tradition (Fig. 4, Ahola 2019, p. 56, Ahola and Heyd 2020, pp. 87, 95). As two ‘battle axe imitations’ (i.e. battle axes lacking the know-how of actual axe production) have also been discovered in a narrow burial below a stone cairn that was located outside the core area of the CWC habitation in Finland (Äyräpää 1952), the influence seems to be go the other way around as well. Indeed, a similar case has been noted from the island of Gotland (Sweden), where battle axes have been discovered in burials associated with the Pitted Ware culture (a Scandinavian hunter-gatherer group that is partly contemporary with the CWC) (Malmer 2002, p. 93, see also Coutinho et al. 2020). It thus seems evident that the groups connected with the CWC interacted with the local hunter-gatherer communities in ways that resulted in religious syncretism.

TRAVELLING WITH RELIGION

In his recent paper, Furholt (2019) argues that the CWC should not be seen either as a biological population or as a monothetic archaeological culture, but instead should be regarded as a set of burial principles shared
by many 3rd millennium BC communities. Since a dialectic exists between ritual and religion (Fogelin 2007), in this paper, I have argued even further, and suggested that the material remains of these burial principles encode a shared religion that originates in the Pontic Steppe. However, as this religion travelled with the people to northern and central Europe, and all the way to the Baltic Sea region, it was also converted into something new by incorporating material and ritual elements from different regions during different times. For example, even though there are SGBR elements present in the Zvejnieki burials described above, the way these components were used as part of the mortuary practice might have been alien for people living in the original past homeland. In this sense, Fehrolt (2014) is right when stating:

(...) when comparing Corded Ware traits in different regions, we have to acknowledge that these vessels and weapons as symbols were integrated into clearly diverse ways, and they were altered and transformed within local contexts. So, what the Corded Ware elements meant in one region might have been very different from what they meant in another.

However, since these symbols – and the religious practices relating to the symbols – were durable even when translated into different contexts, the core ideas of this religion likely persisted. This could be due to the fact that religion plays an important role in human migrations: it creates not only a sense of collective identity and distinction among the immigrants, but can also be used to build a sense of belonging to the new land (e.g., Goździak and Shandy 2002, Horstmann and Jung 2015). For example, when the groups connected with the CWC arrived in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region, they created – and manifested – an enduring and committed presence in the area by burying their dead in the new land.

These religious practices not only enforced the collective identity of the group but also resulted in a religious landscape that connected the people to the new land in a very powerful way. In this sense, the core ideas of the religion might have persisted simply because they were needed.

At the same time, the steppe-originated religion seems to have been very adjustable. Indeed, in the light of the hunter-gatherer and CWC burials of the Baltic Sea region, the groups associated with the CWC interacted with the hunter-gatherer communities within the sphere of religion. However, this interaction did not result in a situation in which the steppe-originated religion took over the old belief-systems, but rather, in a religious syncretism to which both traditions contributed. In fact, this aspect of openness and negotiation could also be one of the reasons why the religion was so durable and appealing. Indeed, if the novel religion was practiced in a broadly participatory way, all interested parties could take part and gain access to the novel supernatural powers. At the same time, however, the people who had access to the esoteric knowledge, and who knew how to perform these rituals, gained mundane respect and power.

A good example of the negotiative nature of the steppe-originated religion is the practice of burial reuse. Indeed, while burying the dead among your own ancestors relates to an affinity to past generations, burying your dead among the ancestors of others might tell a completely different story. However, in the light of the archaeological record, the groups associated with the CWC did not aim to destroy the older burials and thus take over these important locations. On the contrary, when the practice of reuse is explored in detail, it seems that the new burials were made in connection with the older ones with an attitude of respect; despite breaking into an old burial mound to create a new grave, for example, the previous burials were never destroyed. From this perspective,
it seems that, rather than taking over older sites, the people aimed to negotiate their presence in the area.

Interestingly, there seems to have been differences in the ways that the groups connected with CWC reused older monuments in different parts of Europe. Indeed, it seems that older burial monuments were more frequently reused in central and northern Europe (e.g., Holtorf 1998, Ebbesen 2008, Tunia and Wlodarczak 2016) than in the northern and eastern Baltic Sea region. There could be several reasons for this phenomenon. For example, there might have been more need to claim rights over land in the more densely populated central Europe than in the Baltic Sea region. Indeed, since the groups connected with the CWC likely practiced a differing subsistence system than the local populations (e.g., Cramp et al. 2014, 2018, Sikk et al. 2020), heavy competition over resources and places for living might not have been necessary. Indeed, while the hunter-gatherer groups preferred locations by the water for their settlements, the dwelling sites of the groups associated with CWC seem to be located further inland (Äyräpää 1939, Sikk et al. 2020).

It could also be possible that the more monumental burial structures of central and northern Europe demanded more attention than the ‘invisible’ hunter-gatherer flat cemeteries of the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region, or that the flat cemeteries were not as easy to discover, or as accessible. This being said, it must be noted that CWC burials are nevertheless present at the Zvejnieki cemetery. Since Zvejnieki was clearly the most important hunter-gatherer mortuary site in the eastern Baltic Sea region, by reusing this site with new burials the groups connected with the CWC were already making a clear statement of an enduring presence at the area. In fact, maybe there was no further need to claim rights over land or negotiate with the supernatural, when this was already done at the ancient Zvejnieki. From this perspective, it is interesting that the Zvejnieki burials are indeed among the oldest radiocarbon-dated graves associated with the CWC in the region (Piličiauskas 2018, Fig 7, Ahola and Heyd 2020, Appendix). Although these burials are likely not those of the pioneering migrants, they might represent burials of the people who first settled in to the region.

Given the above, it is interesting that the practice of CWC burial and settlement site reuse intensifies north of the Gulf of Bothnia. Although this phenomenon could be a mere bias created by a small data set, it could also suggest that the northern territory was no longer under the ‘ancestral influence’ of Zvejnieki, or that the reused Finnish and Russian Karelian sites were more influential than the poorly preserved and less studied material suggests. Indeed, due to the poor preservation of organic materials in the acidic Finnish soils, radiocarbon determinations from the burials are scarce (Ahola and Heyd 2020, p. 83). However, the Kukkarkoski 1 burial contained remains of a wooden chamber that dates roughly contemporary with the younger Zvejnieki burial (Table 1, Ahola and Heyd 2020, Appendix: Kukkarkoski 1). In the light of these scanty data, the graves located in the hunter-gatherer cemeteries seem to date to the earlier part of the CWC occupation in the region, and accordingly emphasize the need to negotiate the people’s new presence in the region.

Remarkably, when the patterns emerging from the burial record are compared to the other material remains of the groups associated with the CWC, it seems that negotiation between past and present, and new land and homeland, seems to be a reoccurring theme in the archaeological record of the CWC in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region. Indeed, aside from older burial sites, the groups connected with the CWC also used old, abandoned settlement sites both as places for living and for burying the dead. At the same time, new pottery vessels were
manufactured by adding pieces of old vessels – incorporating past generations of potters and the soils of their past homeland – to the clay matrix (e.g., Holmqvist et al. 2018). Since in the past ritual practices were not as clearly separated from the other aspects of life as today (Bradley 2005), the presence of similar patterns within the ritual and domestic realms suggests that merging past, present, new land and homeland together were at the core of the steppe-originated religion. Indeed, for a people on the move, a religion emphasizing these elements would have been a strong companion to travel with. Since the 3rd millennium BC seems to have been an era of movement and migration (e.g., Allentoft et al. 2015, Haak et al. 2015, Sjögren et al. 2016, Saag et al. 2017, Holmqvist et al. 2018, Olalde et al. 2018), this religion could have provided much-needed aid and comfort both during these relocations and after settling in a new area. Ultimately, this might have been the key factor in the durability and appeal of the steppe-originated religion.

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ORCID

Marja Ahola @ http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2279-3788

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NOTES

1 In this paper, the northern and eastern Baltic Sea region comprises the modern-day territories of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and the Republic of Karelia (Russia).

2 The amount of CWC related burials in Zvejnieki could even be higher. However, since Baltic hunter-gatherers also occasionally positioned their dead in a crouched position (Törv 2016), burials defined solely by body positioning (Zagorskis 2004, p. 97) have been excluded from this study. Accordingly, only burials also accompanied by SGBR style grave goods have been included in Table 2.

3 At the Zvejnieki cemetery, only a fragment of the excavated burials have been dated (Meadows et al. 2018, Table 2), while at the Kukkarkoski I cemetery, radiocarbon dates have been obtained from only two graves of the total of 13 (Ahoła 2019, Appendix 1). Moreover, since the Kukkarkoski I graves are almost totally devoid of preserved human remains, the radiocarbon data derives from the burial structures.