

ALTERNATIVE ARCHAEOLOGY AND NEW AGE TRADITIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how esoteric traditionalism in contemporary Russia searches for legitimisation using alternative archaeology. Although New Age spirituality is often considered a private religion, some of its manifestations have a significant impact on the public sphere. The author demonstrates that the New Age in Russia contributes to redefining of categories of religion, science, and cultural heritage through the construction of sacred sites and discursive opposition to academic knowledge. The research is based on analysis of media products that present esoteric interpretations of archaeological sites in southern Russia and ethnographic data collected in a pilgrimage to the dolmens of the Krasnodar region.

KEYWORDS: New Age spirituality • traditionalism • alternative archaeology • sacred sites • cultural heritage • Caucasian dolmens

INTRODUCTION

In this article I am going to discuss contemporary Russian traditionalism, specifically the version expressed through the language of New Age spirituality. I understand New Age spirituality here as a broad set of ideologies and practices that have a common intellectual source – Western esotericism. More specifically, I will discuss alternative science and archaeology, which are popular tools for the legitimisation of religious ideas.

In Europe today there are numerous movements that aim to revive Native Faith, pagan or indigenous traditions (Rountree 2015; Harvey 2020). These are usually new religions whose participants are looking for resources to establish a continuity between modern practices inspired by a critique of modernity and the traditions of pre-modern life. In Russia, similar trends can also be found among proponents of Slavic neopaganism (Aitamurto 2016), various Native Faith activists (Broz 2009; Shtyrkov 2015), and followers of some new religious movements based on ideas of New Age spirituality (Andreeva 2015).

Scientism is now an attractive source of legitimisation for a wide range of religious organisations, from traditional churches to recently emerged movements (Hammer and Lewis 2010). Alternative archaeology plays a prominent role in this process (Lewis 2012). Archaeology as an academic discipline originally had an ideological significance

as well; it was not only tasked with the scientific study of the past, but also with establishing continuity between pre-modern times and modern nation-states (Smith 2001). Alternative archaeology, while diverging from academic science in its attitude to the scientific method, at the same time takes over the ideological function of archaeological knowledge. Sometimes this turns out to be more in demand, as alternative expertise satisfies the need for new identities, as I will show using the example of dolmen representation in contemporary Russia.

In Russia, there are not so many explicit adherents of neopaganism, around one percent (Sreda 2014), and we can find similar statistics in Western countries as well (Frisk 2007: 109–110; Berger 2009). However, some New Age beliefs can be quite popular (Houtman and Mascini 2002; Fisk 2007: 111–113; Sreda 2012a; 2012b). Since the collapse of the USSR many books on alternative history, neopaganism, and New Age have appeared in Russia (Laruelle 2012), some of them have been published in quite a significant number of copies (Melleuish et al. 2009: 1487). One can meet admirers of such literature not only in well-organised New Age and neopagan communities but also in pilgrimages to archaeological and natural sites, where the imagined past finds material forms.

There are several famous routes of esoteric pilgrimage in contemporary Russia that have attracted researchers' attention over the past decade, namely the archaeological site of Arkaim in Ural (Schnirelman 2011), Okunevo village in Omsk oblast (Seleznev 2014; Golovneva and Shmidt 2015), and the dolmens of the north west Caucasus (Andreeva 2014).

Dolmens became a place of pilgrimage for thousands of people in the second half of the 1990s when Vladimir Megre started publishing the *Ringing Cedars of Russia* book series and mentioned dolmens of Gelendzhik as structures where one can establish a personal connection with representatives of an ancient civilisation and learn some of their wisdom (Megre 1997). Megre's books caused the appearance of a new religious movement called Anastasia. Anastasia followers have presented statements about the need to abandon urban life, create eco-settlements, establish patriarchal families and practice a vegetarian diet as part of living according to messages from the 'wise ancestors'. All these values were described as ancestral traditions, and many pilgrimage activists are expressing them in excursions, books, films, music, etc. Since the dolmens are archaeological sites of the Bronze Age, alternative archaeology among Anastasians and other supporters of New Age spirituality has become an attractive way to assert such beliefs.

New Age spirituality is often considered a highly individualised form of religious life or "private religion" (see, for example, Luckmann 1990; Roof 1999; Possamai 2003; Lau 2015), and the position has been criticised by several researchers (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Altglas 2014; Redden 2016). In this article, I would like to demonstrate how New Age traditionalism in Russia is becoming a public religion in the sense that Jose Casanova (1994) understands this phenomenon. Communities of New Age followers are often defined by external observers like the state and academic science as religious groups, while New Agers themselves resist the logic of secular actors, and achieve some success in this. The very ability to participate in the negotiation of key categories of social imagination can be defined as an inherent feature of public religion.

This study is based on five months of participant observation and 50 interviews with organisers, activists, and participants in pilgrimages to dolmens in Krasnodar Krai. In the analysis presented here, I relied on fieldnotes, recordings of excursions to the dolmens, interviews with guides, and media materials relating to my informants' activities.

EXCURSIONS TO DOLMENS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS, SECULAR, AND BEYOND

Interpretations of history and the archaeology of the dolmens of north west Caucasus shared by pilgrims contradicts official archaeologists. According to academic archaeology and history, a culture of dolmen builders has a very contingent relationship to contemporary ethnic cultures. However, in Soviet archaeology and, partially, in today's science there had been a common notion of dolmen building culture as being the predecessor of aboriginal societies living in subsequent periods, including various Circassian ethnic groups (*abkhazo-adygskiy obshchnosti*) (Markovin 1978: 325), who are also a significant part of current population of the region. New Age pilgrims often criticise this idea and instead describe dolmens as sites of Russian ancestors, relying on the versions derived from folk history literature, including the *Ringing Cedars of Russia* (FM 2015–2018).

Aside from an act of cultural appropriation of archaeological sites, alternative experts attempt to reconsider the ways of social categorisation that seems to be inappropriate for them. It should be noted that uncontrolled pilgrimage to the archaeological sites, together with the lack of state protection of dolmens, is treated as a crucial problem by officially affiliated archaeologists. Viktor Trifonov, a researcher from the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences, pays a lot of attention to this situation in several papers. Trifonov and his colleague refer to the problem in the following way: "Bonfires made by tourists near the monuments and various forms of mistakenly understood 'landscaping' [*blagoustroystvo*] of dolmens and the territory around undertaken by the occult sects [*okkul'tnyye sekty*] and members of pseudo-scientific movements are especially destructive for the megalithic buildings" (Kulikova and Trifonov 2001: 94).

By members of "occult sects" and "pseudo-scientific movements" archaeologist Trifonov and specialist in cultural heritage protection Ol'ga Kulikova mean New Age pilgrims, whose presence near dolmens is quite visible. Representatives of state and official archaeology exclude pilgrims from the project of dolmen preservation, considering them a critical factor and putting them in the category of 'religion' in its marginal version.

Alternative experts always refer to this disagreement in lectures and excursions as well as in interviews describing the main points of the debate with archaeologists. This debate is imaginary in many respects, as it takes place without scholars' presence and is rather a part of ordinary pilgrims' performance. The discussion contains two main arguments, both based on prescribing to official archaeology a set of assumptions that to a prescriber – an alternative expert – would seem utterly naive. The first common argument is expressed in the following part of excursion recorded during the fieldwork.

The science claims: dolmens had been built by ignorant people, who were afraid of natural power. Yes, it was the Bronze era. Ancient man wasn't familiar with the production of iron. But let's see, was he so ignorant? Front side [of the dolmen] is a trapezium, and it is symmetric and proportionate. With the trapezium form of front and back walls, the building acquires the form of a pyramid, which is very sustainable. There had been many earthquakes during the millenniums. Any of them could lead to the destruction, and the dolmen would fall like a house of cards. But it didn't happen, because of the genius of the dolmen builders. (FM 2015)

As we see here, academic knowledge is presented through the notion of dolmen builders as people unable to create sophisticated architecture due to the level of their cultural evolution. Following simplified interpretation of evolutionary theory, alternative experts inscribe to archaeologists the notion that every ancient culture was not sufficiently civilised. The second argument refers to the archaeological interpretation of dolmens as burial structures:

Because of the focus on the fact that these [dolmens] are just coffins, as most of our archaeologists put it, there is a lack of respect to dolmens. Well, it is just a coffin; it is just a burial structure. But the fact that these are non-usual buildings, these are ancient sacred places, which had been worshipped not only by our ancestors but also by many generations of local tribes, means something. (FM 2016)

The discourse of alternative experts is characterised by the intentional shift between academic and mundane languages, and we can see how it works in the citation above. The academic term 'burial structure' is presented as equal to the word "coffins", and by making this comparison, my informant – very experienced tour guide Stanislava – demonstrates the deep connection between the archaeological interpretation of the site and its spiritual meaning. The reference to the burial function eliminates the spiritual significance of dolmens, ignoring the worship that had been taking place for centuries. It is important to remember that, for many pilgrims, dolmens are containers of living ancestors' souls, and that many pilgrims seek the experience of the transcendental through such an interpretation. Even for those who reject the idea of dolmens as places of the ancients' spirits, the notion of archaeological sites as records of ancestors' knowledge and experience relevant for today is highly significant, and they repeat it in lectures, excursions and everyday conversations (FM 2015–2018).

Thus, alternative experts challenge the archaeologists' exclusive right to interpret dolmens as sacred places, highlighting their inability to understand the evolution of the dolmen builders' society and the spiritual connection between the ancient past and modern people. Such a vision of archaeological knowledge is only partially correct, and alternative experts in many respects deal not with archaeology itself, but with a specific image of it shared by adherents of New Age spirituality. Viktor Trifonov demonstrates his recognition of the fact that dolmens are quite sophisticated in terms of architecture, and their construction demanded a certain degree of professional knowledge and the level of cultural evolution:

[D]olmens of the western Caucasus present one of the earliest examples of the tradition of the cult construction of megalithic buildings, characterised by regular multi-tiered masonry squares, pseudo-dome structures, the usage of developed

forms of columns as support for ceilings, relief façade décor, decorated stele and zoo-morphed circular sculptures. [...] It also should be noted that sizes, layout, and facing show that dolmens had been functioning as public sacred spaces, shrines, or even temples. (Trifonov 2009: 161)

In addition, the burial function in Trifonov's writings does not exclude the sacredness and spiritual significance of megalithic buildings. Even though alternative experts have many opportunities to show the contradiction between their knowledge and archaeological knowledge, they prefer to produce disagreement in less obvious points. This demonstrates the crucial epistemological tendency of New Age spirituality defined by Michael Barkun as stigmatised knowledge. Barkun includes in the notion of stigmatised knowledge such things as esoteric belief, conspiracy theories, and interpretations of history through the idea of the Golden Age. He mentions that proponents of stigmatised knowledge try to defend it by stressing opposition to power institutions and the mainstream, even when such knowledge itself is a part of the mainstream. (Barkun 2013: 26–27; 37–38) Using such opposition, alternative experts legitimise two essential ideas of New Age spirituality, namely perennialism (a traditionalist view of history as the process of cultural degradation) and holism. The latter plays a crucial role in New Age discourse, allowing it to challenge the dualism of material and spiritual which is a significant characteristic of modernity (to which esotericism opposes itself) (Hanegraaff 1996: 119–152).

NEW AGE TRADITIONALISM IN THE MEDIA

Spiritual interpretations of dolmens and features of the New Age discourse reproduced by alternative experts sometimes penetrate the broader media. One of the experts I interviewed, and cited above – Stanislava Fialkovskaya –, has been studying dolmens from the perspective of alternative archaeology since the end of the 1990s, together with her husband (and also my informant) Dmitriy Dmitriyev. Both have work experience in the secular tourism sphere and give lectures for spiritual seekers living near dolmens in the summer season. Studying the dolmens for them is a very personal story, allowing them to prove their New Age beliefs and acquire expert status among pilgrims. Some pilgrims and other alternative experts refer to Dmitriy and Stanislava's texts as legitimately scientific, which became evident when I attended lectures given by Dmitriy for pilgrims and discussed Dmitriy's theory with other tour guides (FM 2015).

In 2012 they were invited to participate in a film about Caucasian dolmens produced by the My Planet TV channel, which is a part of one of the largest and the most influential media holdings in the Russian Federation, the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, with financial support from the pro-government Russian Geographical Society academic foundation.

The film is a 25-minute documentary in the Miracles of Russia series that reproduces essential idioms of national history and visualises national landscape by showing different Orthodox Christian, Buddhists and Islamic sacred places, natural objects (lakes, mountains, islands) as well as cities and towns as attractive from the perspective of tourism. The film, *Caucasian Dolmens*, contains a narrative collected from several inter-

views among which two are the most important. One was given by professional archaeologist Nikolay Sudarev, from Moscow Institute of Archaeology of Russian Academy of Sciences, who was working on the excavation of an ancient Greek shrine near Anapa town at that time. Dmitriyev and Fialkovskaya were the leading experts in the film, being presented as archaeologists and geologists (which is partially true, both have work experience in these fields) who discovered that dolmens are the remnants of the Slavic-Aryan civilisation. The last is a pseudo-ethnonym spread in alternative (usually neopagan) history literature in Russia used to describe direct ancestors of Russian people as the first Indo-Europeans (Schnirelman 2012: 50–74). Episodes that have interviews with archaeologist Sudarev do not contradict the main idea of the film and even seemingly support it.

Avoiding a detailed description of the film, I would like to focus on how the authors applied the same discursive tool as we saw in the analysis of New Age experts' narratives. At the very beginning of the film, the authors assure us that the academic interpretation of the dolmen's function focuses on burial. Such an understanding is marked as a position of old-fashioned 'Soviet science', which is also common for New Age experts, considering atheist Soviet scholars as being unable to recognise the spiritual aspect of ancient cultures (FM 2015). The image of 'old' and 'new' progressive sciences typical to esotericism, i.e. implying that New Age spirituality will provide humanity with a new scientific worldview based on holistic principles (Hanegraaff 1996: 62–64), acquires here its historical contextualisation. What is presented as a superficial, academic version of the history of dolmens, is thereby refuted by an alternative view, and Dmitriyev with Fialkovskaya turn out to be its leading spokespersons.

We see how Dmitriy and Stanislava (in collaboration with a geophysicist) face certain anomalies whilst investigating the mountain with two dolmens on top of it. When noting this fact, the authors make an announcement, according to which dolmens are located on rifts in the Earth's crust. Then the authors pose the question: how could ancient people define tectonic rifts to build dolmens on them? The answer according to Dmitriy's:

I suppose that the tribe of Slavic-Aryans constructed dolmens, our direct ancestors. When the construction of dolmens had already begun, and dolmen culture had emerged, the Hittites came here, who are also known as the Maikop culture. Afterward, we know them as the Circassians [*Adygi*] and the Abkhaz. It is a straight genealogical line. (*Caucasian Dolmens* 2009)

Thereby dolmen builders are presented as the ancestors of the Russian people, and contemporary Circassians and Abkhazis are not called indigenous. Stanislava continues Dmitriy's thought:

Dolmens were constructed during the Golden Age era when people were living in harmony with nature and the universe. Humanity had many skills and much knowledge in those times. [...] Dolmen builders were a tribe of shaman-priests who had expertise in maths and physics. These people were familiar with astronomy, and they observed cosmic cycles. (*Ibid.*)

Following the idea of the alternative experts, the authors of the film interpret dolmens through a nationalist perspective rejecting the so-called position of Soviet science and

discarding the status of Circassians as descendants of the dolmen builders. Thus, the contradiction mentioned above between 'old' and 'new' sciences is employed to reconsider the ethnic map of the region and the issue of continuity.

Appealing to the interview with archaeologists specialised in ancient Greeks studies, especially Sudarev, journalists highlight the idea of continuity between Greek settlements located in southern Russia and the dolmen culture. They use citations that seem to them relevant to prove the following point: in many respects, Greeks enriched their culture by borrowing from the religious and spiritual worldview of the dolmen builders. For instance, the cult of Demetra, embodied in the shrine that Sudarev excavated, was defined as a cultural form derived from the fertility cult of the dolmen builders. The authors compare Demetra and Persephone's statue founded by archaeologists with the images of woman's breasts on the dolmen façade, and present Dmitriy's comment about the genealogical link between them as the correct version of history.

Furthermore, official archaeologists' attempts to define dolmens as burial structures, while being mentioned, are nevertheless rejected as mistaken. However, Sudarev's hypotheses about the prevalence of the idea of reincarnation in ancient cultures, including the dolmen builders, finds support. I suppose that reincarnation is so significant as a theme in New Age discourse as well as in the film because of its seeming opposition to the idea of death and the lack of archaeologists' attention to the spiritual link between the ancient past and the modern world. Lastly, the final monologue is made by professional archaeologist Sudarev, and it matches in many ways the ideology behind the Miracles of Russia project and the My Planet channel.

Archaeological sites, cultural heritage are the things that unite us with global civilisation, something that makes us closer; and furthermore, these sites can attract new tourists. They can attract people, who would see this and understand that we are not the periphery of global civilisation, but a part, its participants from ancient times. (*Caucasian Dolmens* 2009)

A year ago, before this project had started, the head of the My Planet channel Nikolay Tabashnikov produced a documentary about excavations of the ancient Greek city Fanagoria on the Taman peninsula (Krasnodar krai). Tabashnikov has been working on state television for many years. He also established an Archaeology foundation, organising an expedition to archaeological sites of Russia and the Crimean peninsula. The documentary is titled *Taman: A Cradle of Russian Civilisation* (2011) and it expresses the idea of continuity. As Tabashnikov puts it at the very beginning:

Taman is a unique place. Only here you can literally feel the history. [...] Without a doubt, it is a place where Russian civilisation began. This land remembers not only ancient Greeks, Scythians, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Khazars, and Alans. It is here where one of the first Russian principalities, Tmutarakan, appeared. The very fact that the Greeks founded their cities here 2,500 years ago, and that these cities existed for the whole millennium of the antique era allows us, Russians [*rossiyanim*], to consider ourselves part of European civilisation. (*Taman: A Cradle of Russian Civilisation* 2011)

If in Sudarev's speech the idea of the link between ancient Greek heritage and contemporary Russia takes an implicit form, Tabashnikov claims it explicitly, and the narrative of the Russian nation-state begins with the Greek Bosporan Kingdom.

The film narrates the Fanagoria expedition organised by the Moscow Institute of Archaeology of Russian Academy of Sciences, Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska's Volnoe Delo Foundation and the Russian Geographical Society. In addition, Tabashnikov pays attention to Sudarev's excavations, with whom he collaborates in the context of the Archaeology foundation, and to another Greek city, Germonassa, which is considered the place where first Christian communities appeared on the territory of the contemporary Russian Federation. In the middle of the film Vladimir Putin, (prime minister at that time and also the head of the RGS's board of trustees), and Sergey Shoygu (minister of emergency situations and president of RGS), key figures in Russian political life, show themselves in Fanagoria, excavating the part of ancient city under water and discovering Greeks pottery. Special attention is drawn to the interview of Tabashkinov with Vladimir Putin, who articulates the idea of the film's and the state's view on the commemoration of archaeological sites:

There was an ancient state here, on the territory of our country. Not Russian, but a state, and an ancient one. Ancient Greeks came here in the sixth century BC. Can you imagine? Greeks, then Khazars, then Circassians and... [...] Alans. Then Turks, and again, before them, there was [...] a capital of the Russian principality. And each people left part of their culture here. It couldn't help but remain in people's minds living here today. It is transmitted from generation to generation. And when you realise it, then you have the right to say that our people [*narod*] in general is the people of the inmost and very rich culture. [...] If we organise [a commemoration] rationally, we can save archaeological, cultural heritage, and introduce people to what we have. It seems to me that it is vital in terms of patriotic education [*vospitatniye patrioticheskikh chuvstv*]. And besides, it is not jingoism [*kvasnoy patriotizm*], but a spiritual part, spiritual part of our people, with which, unfortunately, we are not sufficiently familiar with. (*Taman: A Cradle of Russian Civilisation* 2011)

It is interesting to see how Putin's view of cultural heritage is expressed through the projects of the Russian Geographical Society and the My Planet state channel, combined in this context with ideas translated by followers of New Age spirituality. Alternative archaeologists and their nationalistic narratives turn out to be demanded and placed in the same discursive field with various state actors, including participants of the political elite. While one state actor, specifically the academic institutions, rejects the right of New Age experts to interpret history and to acquire the status of legitimate science, other state-affiliated organisations introduce those who are often considered of marginal religiosity into the public and media space.

CONCLUSION

In the case of the pilgrimage to the dolmens, we can observe how proponents of New Age spirituality in Russia are reinterpreting crucial concepts of social praxis – religion, science, and cultural heritage. This discursive activity has been driven by a local community of experts which has emerged as a result of strong demand for spiritual engagement with the sacred sites. The main outcome of this expert community is that most of the excursions to the dolmens in Krasnodar Krai contain esoteric interpretations of

history, while the official academic versions are not presented directly by scholars or their supporters, but through the New Age spirituality perspective. This allows New Age spirituality followers to redefine themselves as not a marginal religiosity, but as a project that goes beyond the opposition between the religious and the secular.

Sometimes these efforts gain support in the public space more broadly. The case of the media products described in this paper reveals that some state institutions can easily incorporate New Age interpretations into the mainstream state narrative of history and national heritage. It can be assumed that this attention to alternative archaeology may stem in part from the relative popularity of New Age beliefs, as well as from the similar understanding of the cultural heritage function among state ideologists and alternative archaeologists.

Of course, my research materials are insufficient to speak with complete certainty about the extent of the public influence that New Age traditionalism and alternative archaeology have in Russia. In the future, it would be interesting to examine as many cases as possible in which the production of New Age experts affects public opinion. In this paper, I wanted to stress the importance of combining the analysis of media materials with an ethnographic study of the context in which they are manufactured.

SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials from 2015 to 2018.

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