

THE UNCANNY PRESERVATION OF CURSE-LADEN MUMMIES



archaeological archetypes

Daily Telegraph | News | Ice Maiden triggers mother of all disputes in Siberia

[This story has it all.](#)

High in the Altai mountains of southern Siberia, where Shamans still practise their ancient rites and most people are descended from Asiatic nomads, there is a whiff of revolt in the air.

Local officials, urged on by the increasingly militant electorate, are collecting signatures, writing petitions and demanding audiences with regional political leaders.

Their demands are simple and have nothing to do with the inept rule, poverty, corruption and ecological disasters dogging the region.

They want a 2,500-year-old mummy, found by Russian archaeologists 11 years ago and being studied in the Siberian capital of Novosibirsk, to be reinterred without delay.

Egged on by powerful shamans who local people believe act as go-betweens with the heavenly spirits, they say only the mummy's reburial will put an end to a rash of earthquakes and other problems assailing the region.

The mummy in question is an archaeological jewel. When her ornately tattooed body was found entombed in ice in an ancient burial chamber, the find was acclaimed as one of the most important in Russia's recent history.

The Ice Maiden, as she was dubbed, had survived almost intact in the permafrost of the southern Siberian mountains, surrounded by a burial sacrifice of six horses in gilt harnesses.

Now the battle lines over her future are being drawn

up. The fight pits modern Russian science against the ancient beliefs of the Altai people who lived in the region for centuries before Russian colonisers arrived 300 years ago.

It is also at the heart of strained relations between Moscow, often seen as high-handed and out of touch, and the many indigenous peoples of Russia, growing in self-confidence and demanding ever-greater autonomy even as President Vladimir Putin seeks to rein them in.



The archaeological archetypes – mummies uncannily preserved, primitivist pitted against rationalist attitudes, shamen and ancient curses, intimate past-present relationships, a politically charged material past, senses of contemporary identity – components that give a local dispute global reach. Add to this the issue of ethnographic analogy in academic archaeology – the comparison of cultures past with the contemporary ethnographic record – my colleague Chris Tilley got into Siberian shamen when dealing with nordic bronze age rock art.

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