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ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE VALAMO (VALAAM) MONASTERY

Abstract

This article presents the first results of archaeological field work carried out in Valamo in 1987 and 1990. A total area of 220 m² was excavated at the central seat of the monastery. A medieval occupation layer was found within the outer quadrangle of the present building and constructions. This shows that the monastery was restored in the 18th century at the site where it had been located prior to destruction in 1611. A number of individual finds and pot sherds date this layer to the 15th–16th centuries. In the author's opinion, this date does not permit any final conclusions regarding the founding of the original hermitage on the island of Valamo. The material shows, however, that Valamo did not become a monastery centre of any considerable proportions before the year 1400.

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The early history of the Valamo monastery – as far as the early 17th century – is difficult to elucidate due to the small number of written sources and their scarce and contradictory information. This material is poor even in comparison with other monasteries of Northern Russia, which were much smaller and played a much lesser role in the history of the Orthodox church. The monastery's period of prosperity is poorly documented, but the misfortunes of the monks in the late 16th and early 17th centuries are quite exhaustively recorded in available documents. This is a tragic irony in the history of the monastery. Its archives were lost in the Russo-Swedish wars of the late 16th century and the early 17th century. The monastery was completely destroyed twice by Swedish troops (in 1581 and 1611), and was not rebuilt until 1716–1719. Local tradition, recorded in the 19th century, confirms that Valamo had been destroyed several times previously.

Reliable information on the extent and level of the monastery's wealth are from the period following the annexation of the Novgorod Lands by the State of Moscow. In 1500 Valamo possessed more than 150 peasant holdings in the north-west Ladoga region of Karelia.¹ The mo-

nastery clearly acquired these vast possession before 1478, i.e. in the period of the independent Republic of Novgorod. Valamo was in this respect among the dozen richest monasteries of the Novgorod region, albeit ranking twelfth.²

The early history of the monastery is not only of local importance. In the ecclesiastical tradition of Karelia and the Olonets region, Valamo is regarded as its oldest monastery. Its monks played an active role in the monastic colonization of areas north of Lake Ladoga, i.e. the Lake Onega region and the western White Sea region. The hagiography (*zchitiya*) of local saints and other sources mention several monasteries founded by monks from Valamo between the 14th and the 16th centuries: Konevski on Lake Ladoga, the Aleksandro-Svirski monastery on the Svir' River, the hermitages of Andrusov and Syandem in the area of Olonets, the Paleostrovski monastery on Lake Onega, and the famous Solovetski monastery on the White Sea. In view of church tradition, the early history of Valamo is of key importance for the overall history of the Orthodox faith in Karelia.

Valamo was since its foundation an institution of the Russian Orthodox Church, and under the jurisdiction of the Novgorod archbishopate. Its

history is also inseparably linked with Karelia and the fates of the Karelian people. Hagiographic sources show that, already in the Middle Ages, the monastic community included Russians (Arsenii Konovetski, Savvatii Solovetski) and Karelian and Vepsian monks (Alexander Svirski and his disciples). This is reflected in the later legends of the founders of Valamo, according to which St. Sergei was Russian (or Greek) and St. Herman was Karelian.³

According to hagiography, St. Savvatii while still at Valamo in the 1420s heard about the beauty and riches of the far-off Solovetskii islands in the White Sea. He most probably of Solovetskii from Karelians who had extensive contacts with the White Sea region via the rivers and lakes of present-day Eastern Finland and Northern Karelia. The western shores of the White Sea were at that time being actively colonized by Karelians, and this activity, in fact, brought Savvatii to the northern regions. Finally, the tragic events of the early 17th century, when the monks left the island in conjunction with a mass migration of Karelians to Russia, clearly demonstrate the links between the historical fates of the Valamo monastery and the Karelians of the north-western Ladoga region.

Most serious [church and secular] historians of the Russian Orthodox Church have dated the founding of Valamo to the 14th century. In the 1960s this question came under debate. Professor Heikki Kirkinen's fundamental work *Karjala idän kulttuuripiirissä* ('Karelia in the Eastern Cultural Sphere') presented a new, critical investigation of the sources on early Valamo. Kirkinen's conclusion was that reliable information indicated the existence of the monastery already in the 12th century.⁴ The Danish historian John H. Lind has recently criticized the arguments and conclusions of his Finnish colleague, and suggests 1329 as the date of founding.⁵ In my opinion, Lind's view is more realistic, but his system of evidence is in places over-extended. In fact, discussion on the date of founding is in a deadlock, and the scarce and insufficient sources make it impossible to draw any firm conclusions.⁶

The available sources on the early history of Valamo were already noted by 19th-century historians, and we cannot expect to find new material in archives. Historians have made considerable efforts in searching for documents,⁷ but with no appreciable success so far.⁸ Along with the available written sources, we also have access to archaeological material, which is potentially very informative and should provide new

light on the early history of the Valamo monastery.

The first archaeological investigations of Valamo were carried out in 1984, when Grigorii A. Pankrushev conducted a complete survey of the island. No Stone Age or Metal Period sites were found, and Pankrushev explains their absence by a long transgressive period of the lake, during which the island was uninhabitable. Of later periods, only traces of a single medieval village were found on Kukonlahti Bay. Small excavations at this site show that it dates back to the 16th–17th centuries and was the location of the monastery's workshops.

The survey showed that the central seat of the monastery is the archaeologically most interesting site on the island. In 1987 the expeditions of the Institute of Linguistics, Literature and History of the Karelian Research Centre of the former Soviet Academy of Sciences focused on this area.

The central seat of the Valamo monastery is in the north-west part of the island. It occupies the crest of a rock plateau rising over 25 metres above the lake. The initial task in 1987 was to obtain a general idea of the character of the monastery layer, and the main result was the discovery of medieval materials. In 1990, the excavations had a more specific aim, viz. to determine the exact extent of the medieval layer predating the destruction of the monastery in 1611, and to obtain archaeological data on early Valamo. Five excavation areas, totalling 220 square metres, were laid out near the central seat (Fig. 1). Areas II and V contained some material of the 19th and 20th centuries. In area III the remains of an 18th-century dwelling were investigated, and we were able to find information on the owner of this house in documents from the 1720s.⁹ The most interesting material was from areas I and IV.

Area IV (48 sq.m.) was located between the wall of the monastery and the cliff of the plateau (Fig. 1). The occupation layer of this location had been disturbed in the second half of the 19th century. Medieval finds were discovered together with 19th and 20th-century materials. Parts of burnt logs and the stone wall, which levelled a rough rocky surface were observed; these could be interpreted as the remains of the monastery's wooden fence. This fence was 8 metres closer to the cliff than the modern one. Unfortunately, it was not possible to give the wall remains any precise date. They may be from the medieval monastery, or a later fence destroyed in a fire in 1754.

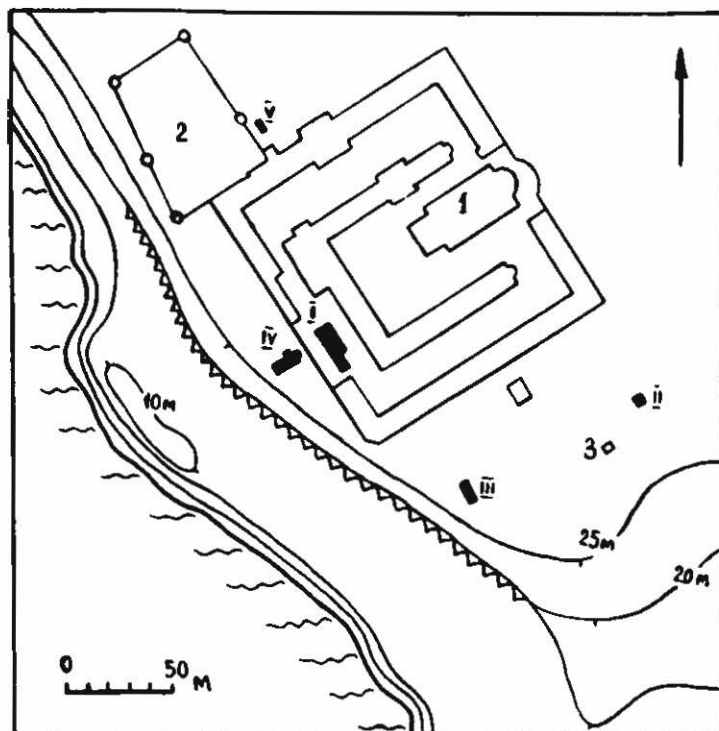


Fig. 1. The central seat of the Valamo monastery with excavation areas I-V.

The medieval layer was much better preserved in area I (116 sq.m.), laid out to the west of the Spaso-Preobrazhshenski Cathedral between the outer and inner courses of monastery buildings (Fig. 1). Depending on the proximity of the bedrock, the occupation layer varied in thickness from 60 to 130 cm. Most of it consisted of layers formed during an intensive period of construction in stone in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and during later reorganization of the area (Fig. 2). Within the excavated area were two drainage trenches disturbing earlier layers.

The medieval horizon, 10–45 cm thick, was adjacent to the bedrock or the layer of gabbro-diabase chips covering the latter. The unevenness of the layer resulted from the uneven rock profile, whereby accumulations formed more quickly in natural depressions. An uneven deposition process of this kind is characteristic of sites and settlements on outcrops of bedrock. It has been observed at fortified settlements in Finland, and – nearest to Valamo – at Karelian hillforts in the north-west Ladoga region. For example, the occupation layer at Paasonvuori in Sortavala, excavated by S.I. Kochkurkina, varied from 10 to 80 cm.¹⁰ However, the layer at Valamo has a characteristic feature resulting

from the rock depressions. The deepest part of area I was wet, preserving the remains of wooden constructions, logs and planks. With the exception of the urban settlement or town of Korela (Fi. Käkisalmi) this is the first observation of its kind in a medieval layer in the north-west Ladoga region.

Simple structures, connected with the medieval layer, were found solely in area I, viz. the corner of a house foundation of rough stone slabs, and the remains of a stone structure including logs, planks, and masonry of burnt stone reddened with clay. As only small parts were uncovered, the precise function of these structures cannot be determined. The finds assemblage, permitting a dating of the deposition of the oldest layer, provides more information on medieval Valamo. Over 2,000 finds, most of which (c. 1,800) are sherds, were discovered in the lower layer of area I.

Individual medieval objects, however, are not numerous. Ornaments are represented by a piece of a blue glass bead (Fig. 3:1), similar to ones found in 16th to 19th-century layers at Novgorod. A bronze pin with a head in the shape of a tiny spoon (Fig. 3:2) was also found in the oldest layer. This may also have been a so-called ear spoon. It is most probably a parallel of the *pus*

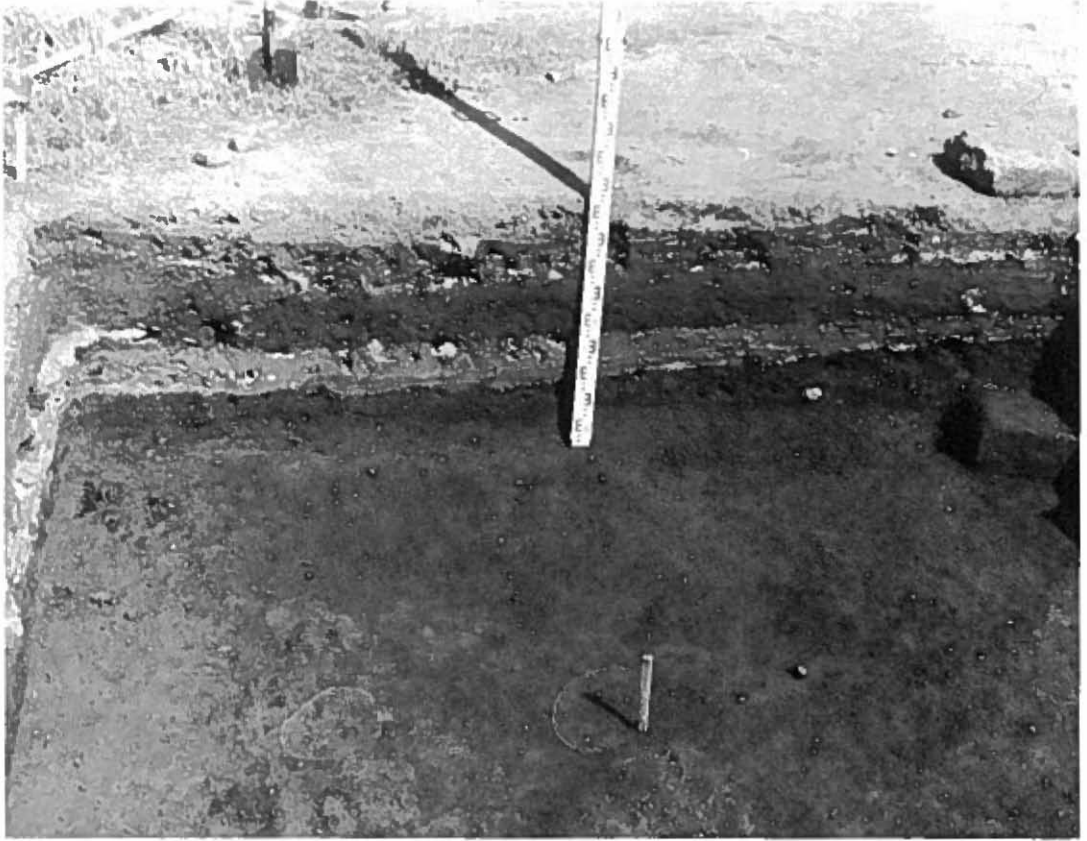


Fig. 2. Stratification of the occupation layer in the central seat area.

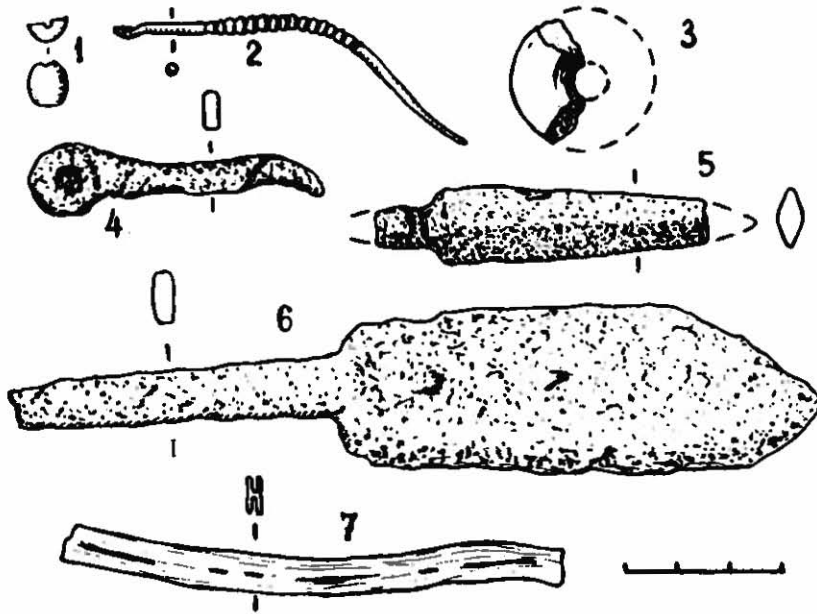


Fig. 3. Medieval finds from excavation areas I and IV.

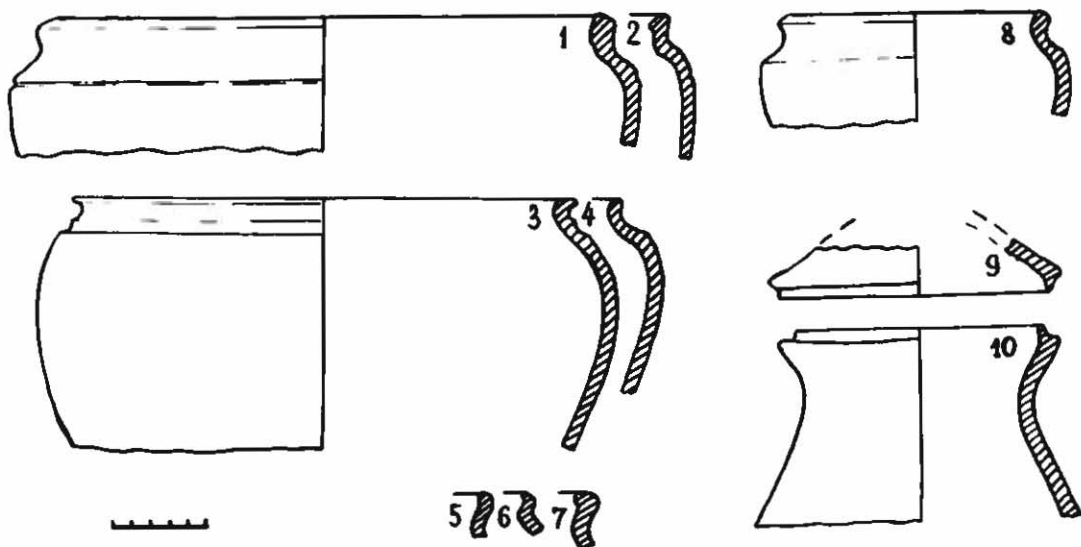


Fig. 4. The main shapes of medieval pottery from excavation areas I and IV.

jeppi type, well-known from excavations of ancient Russian towns and dating back to the 14th–16th centuries. Domestic objects included a ceramic spindle whorl (Fig. 3:3), and a fragment of a ceramic inkpot. The latter corresponds to a find from the town of Mangaseya in Siberia, dating back to the late 16th and 17th centuries. Finds from area I also included an arrowhead of a type widely used in the 12th–14th centuries (Fig. 3:4). A special shoe-knife with a broad blade (Fig. 3:5), found in the mixed layer of area IV, may also be of medieval date. Several dozen knives of this type have been found in Novgorod in layers dating to the 11th–15th centuries. There are also fragments of window-glass with a characteristic thickening of the edge. According to material from Novgorod, sheets of this type of glass did not come into use in north-western Russia until the 16th century. Plates of window mica were also found in the medieval layer of area I. A fragment of glazier's lead was found in area IV (Fig. 3:6).

Almost all the objects mentioned above are from the 16th century, and only the arrowhead is clearly older. The accuracy of the medieval stratigraphic chronology in the central seat area of the monastery, as outlined by individual objects, can be checked with finds of ceramics.

Material from areas I and IV included the fragments of 85 vessels, which can be classed according to type. The vessel shapes and the chronology of most of the ceramics are well known from excavations in the former Novgorod Lands,¹¹ which provide a good basis for analy-

sing the ceramic assemblage from Valamo.

Fragments of coarse pots (Fig. 4:1,2) of white and grey clay, belonging to type 3 of the Novgorod vessels and type 5 of the Korela material, form the largest group (34 vessels, 40%). In Novgorod, this type appeared in the late 13th century, and on the periphery of the Novgorod Lands it remained in use until the 16th century. At Korela, 35% of all ceramics from the layers of 1360–1380 are of this type. Their proportion is close to that observed at Valamo. Fragments of 9 red-clay pots (11%) of Novgorod type 8 date back to the 15th–16th centuries (Fig. 4:3,4). Sherds of five other red-clay pots (Fig. 4:8) are also from this period.

Fragments of 7 vessels (8%) of Novgorod type 2 (type 1 of the Korela material; Fig. 4:5–7) are of more archaic form. Prototypes of this ware appeared already in Old Rus', but in the Novgorod Lands it was produced as late as the 16th century. In Oreshek (Fi. Pähkinäsaari, Sw. Nöteborg, Ger. Schlüsselburg) this type represents 63% of all pots in layers from the second half of the 15th century. The production of this ware died out gradually under the influence of Moscow in the 16th century.

In addition to pots, the Valamo finds include sherds of several jugs, three of which (Fig. 4:10) have parallels in the 16th-century layer at Oreshek. Finally, we must mention a single black polished vessel, typical of Moscow potters of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The ceramic assemblage from Valamo thus lacks indisputable 14th-century shapes, although

the possible existence of such material cannot be completely ruled out. As a whole, the ceramics from excavation areas I and IV must be dated to the 15th–16th centuries. This date for the medieval monastery layer, i.e. as defined by ceramics, roughly corresponds to that obtained by the scarce non-serial finds.

Is it possible to regard this date as final, and use it as the basis for conclusions regarding the early history of the monastery? Only a small part of the central-seat area has been excavated so far, but I would regard the present excavations and the material obtained as basically representative. Accordingly, the finds from areas I and IV reflect the overall composition of the medieval layer at Valamo. Therefore, more extensive excavations would hardly provide any significant corrections to our present dating of this layer to the 15th–16th centuries.

It is clear that the 1987 and 1990 excavations by no means exhausted the possibilities of obtaining archaeological data on the medieval period of Valamo. Excavations of larger areas will make it possible to define in greater detail the size of the monastery in the 15th-early 17th centuries. They may also reveal remains of cult-related and dwelling structures, and a larger collection of finds will offer a basis for discussing the local monastic way of life. Present archaeological material permit conjectures rather than strict conclusions. Thus, iron slag from the medieval layer indicates metallurgical activities etc. The following conclusions may be drawn from our initial experiences of archaeological research at Valamo.

1) In 1716–1719 the monastery was restored at the same site where it had been located prior to destruction by Swedish troops in 1611. Archaeological finds disprove the claim of certain architects that 'the monastery was not built at Monastery Bay before the 18th century'¹² and that prior to this it had been on Svyatoi (Fi. Pyhä) Island or at some other place in the Valamo archipelago. The pre-1611 layer is present within the outer quadrangle of the monastery buildings (Fig. 1), but its precise boundaries remain unknown.

2) The present material permits us to date the medieval layer to the 15th–16th centuries. It would be premature to use this date for any definite conclusions regarding the actual founding of the monastery. Such conclusions would be open to criticism, since the original monastery founded by Ss. Sergii and Herman may have been very small, with correspondingly low archaeological visibility. However, the excavations suggest

that we will not find any material of the 12th century that might confirm Professor Kirkinen's suggestion. The present material permits the conclusion that it was only after 1400 that the monastery grew to considerable proportions and acquired a relatively high level of prosperity, placing it on an equal standing with the larger monastic centres of the Novgorod state.

NOTES

- ¹ Архим. Сергей (Тихомиров), *Черты церковно-приходского и монастырского быта в писцовой книге Вотской пятины 1500 г.* (в связи с общими условиями жизни), СПб., 1905. С. 308–310.
- ² Хорошев А.С., *Церковь в социально-политической системе Новгородской феодальной республики.* М., 1980. С. 159.
- ³ Брокгауз Ф.А., Ефрон И.А., *Энциклопедический словарь.* СПб., 1893. Т. 16. С. 529, 1900. Т. 58. С. 648.
- ⁴ Kirkinen H., Karjala idän kulttuuripiirissä. *Historiallisia tutkimuksia* 67. Helsinki 1963, pp. 107–139; idem. Finland in Russian Sources up to the year 1323. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 7, No. 4. 1982, pp. 271–275.
- ⁵ Lind J.H., Sources and Pseudo-Sources on the Foundation of the Valamo Monastery. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1986, pp. 115–133.
- ⁶ Спиридонов А.М., Яровой О.А., *Валаам: от апостола Андрея до игумена Иннокентия (очерки истории Валаамского монастыря).* М., 1991. С. 27–42.
- ⁷ Паялин Н.П. Материалы для составления истории Валаамского монастыря. Вып. I. *О розысках древностей честной обители.* Выборг, 1916.
- ⁸ This prediction turned out to be mistaken. When this article was ready for publication, N.A. Okhotina discovered a manuscript (*Skazanye kratkoe.*), which provides new light on the early history of Valamo. The translation of the text into modern Russian and a commentary have recently appeared in *Север*, No. 9, 1991, pp. 11–124. See also Lind, J., Fortællingen om Valamoklosteret. En nyfunden kilde til klosterets ældste historie. *Historisk Tidsskrift för Finland* 1/1992, pp. 1–30.
- ⁹ For more details, see more completely: Спиридонов А.М., Яровой О.А., *Op. Cit.* С. 67–69.
- ¹⁰ Кочкуркина С.И. *Археологические памятники корелы V–XV вв.* Л., 1981. С. 75–76.
- ¹¹ Смирнова Г.П. Опыт классификации керамики древнего Новгорода (по материалам раскопок 1951–1953 гг.). *Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР.* 1956. No 55. С. 228–248; Кирпичников А.Н. Историко-археологические исследования древней Корелы ("Корельский город" XIV в.). *финно-угры и славяне.* Л., 1979. С. 71–73; он же. *Древний Орешек.* Л., 1980. С. 98–99; Кильдошевский В.И. Об одном из типов керамики XIV–XVI вв. крепости Орешек. *Краткие сообщения Института археологии АН СССР.* Вып. 164. 1981. С. 111–116.
- ¹² Рывкин В.Р. *По Валааму.* Петрозаводск, 1990. С. 223–224.