

**Alexander Utkin**

**GRAVES OF THE VOLOSOVO CULTURE AT THE VASHUTINO SITE IN CENTRAL RUSSIA**

*Abstract*

This article describes and discusses graves of the Volosovo Culture excavated in the 1980s at the Vashutino site, on Lake Vashutino in the Pereslavl-Zalesky region of the Yaroslavl district in Central Russia. Also presented are remains of semi-underground dwellings discovered at the site.

*Alexander Utkin*, Ivanovo Department of Culture, Zharova d.8 kv. 126, 15300 Ivanova, Russia.

The Vashutino site is situated on the north-east bank of Lake Vashutino in the Pereslavl-Zalesky region of the Yaroslavl district. The lake is shallow and small in area, and connects with the Oka River via the Vashka, Malaya Nerl and Klyazma Rivers. The site is on the remains of the ancient lake shore, and at present is no more than 1.5 metres above the level of the lake.

Vashutino was discovered in 1927 by M.I. Smirnov, and in 1959 I.K. Tsvetkova (1960) conducted excavations there at two locations, one of which (60 square metres in area) revealed pots, sherds, flakes of flint, and several tools of flint and slate. Found in the other area, measuring 96 square metres, was a more numerous and varied collec-

tion of artefacts. Also excavated here were the remains of a semi-underground dwelling of the Volosovo Culture.

In 1983–85 the Upper-Volga Archaeological Expedition, headed by Dr. D.A. Krainov, conducted further excavations at Vashutino (Gadzyatskaya & Utkin 1989). This field work focused on areas north-east and south-east of the second area excavated in 1959 (Fig. 1). Working during three field seasons, Krainov's expedition excavated a total area of 548 square metres. The remains of two semi-underground dwellings of the Volosovo Culture were investigated, and three graves were discovered. The finds include some 4,500 artefacts (potsherds, lithic tools, flakes etc.). These finds

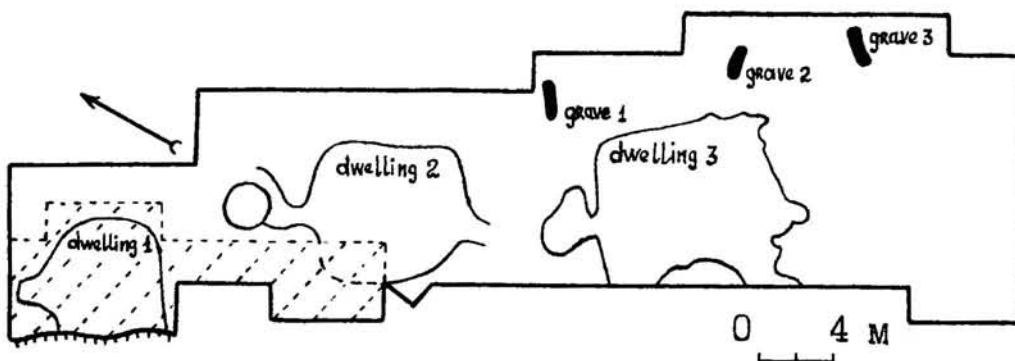


Fig. 1. Dwellings and graves in the second excavated area of the Vashutino site.

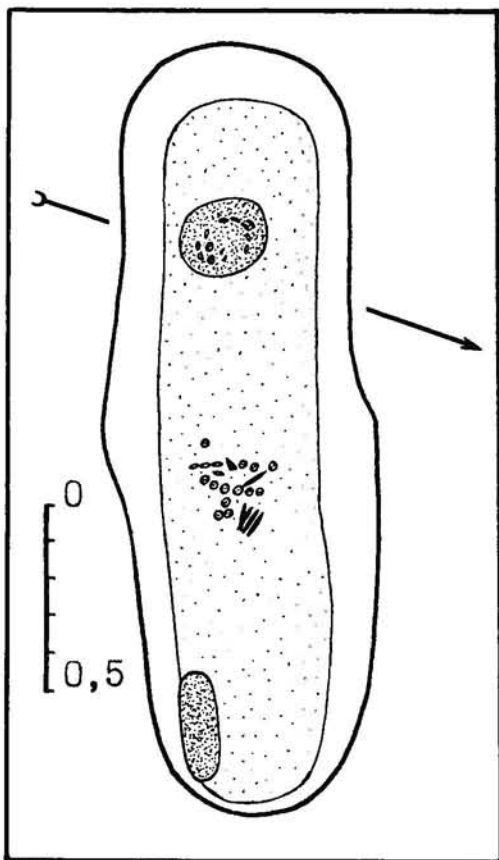


Fig. 2. Grave 1.

outlined different periods of prehistoric occupation in the area of the site. Sherds of Russian medieval pottery and clay plummets were found in the turf and grey sand layer (thickness c. 10 cm). The underlying deposit of loose light-brown sand (10–20 cm thick) revealed finds from the Early Iron Age and the Bronze Age. This was followed by a layer of more compact sand (15–20 cm) dating back to the Eneolithic. The larger Volosovo artefacts were found in this context (and in the dwelling pits). Also found were a small number of sherds belonging to the pottery of the Neolithic Upper Volga Culture and to late Pit and Comb Ware. There were no finds from lower layers.

Stratigraphic observations, plots, and statistic calculations of the finds (mainly sherds) show that the site was seasonally occupied for short durations by fishers during the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and the Middle Ages. During the Eneolithic there was a long-term and stationary dwelling-site of the Volosovo Culture at Vashutino.

Over 51% (1,722 specimens) of all recovered sherds are of Volosovo pottery. This material is of a monotonous morphological character. It was made of poorly fired paste with organic inclusions, which accounts for its present poor condition. Judging from the largest fragments, the pottery was dominated by relatively large vessels of standard shape (round base, thick straight walls, and an open mouth, sometimes alternating with a slightly swollen body and a partly restricted mouth). All the pottery is decorated on the outside surface. The most common motifs were imprints of various frame punches; much rarer were shallow pits and narrow shot-thread impressions. The ornamental compositions were either zonal-horizontal or of a primitive geometric character.

Over 250 artefacts of the Volosovo Culture were found. These were mostly flint arrowheads and spearheads, scrapers, knives, borers, cutting implements, and various chopping tools of polished slate. All of them were carefully made and perfectly shaped. A unique find was a flint miniature of a wood grouse in profile, made with a technique of fine retouch.

The remains of semi-underground dwellings, excavated at Vashutino in 1959 and 1983–84 (Fig. 1) were almost square in plan and ranged in area from 40 to 60 square metres. These dwelling pits were sunk to a level of 40–50 cm below the original surface. The second and third of these dwellings were adjoined by small storage pits to the north-west. The doorways were towards the south, facing the lake. The exit of the first dwelling faced north-west. Since there were no clear details of the construction of the dwellings, it is difficult to present any reconstruction. In the floor area within the dwelling pits were several patches of charcoal and humus in different configurations, size and thickness. There were the remains of hearths, fires, base pillars etc. These features often overlapped, suggesting a relatively long period of use.

In general, the Vashutino dwellings are similar to the dwellings excavated at numerous Volosovo sites in the Volga-Oka interfluvial area, and also in the Middle Volga region (Buzin 1990). They also have many features in common with the hut-floors of so-called Madeneva type in Finland (Hiekkänen 1984). The second and third dwellings could already be observed prior to excavation as small depressions along the present lake shore.

The most interesting Volosovo components of the Vashutino site are three graves, excavated in the area north-east of the third dwelling.

Grave 1 was excavated in 1984 (Fig. 2). It was first observed as a few small patches of sand coloured with red ochre 20 to 25 cm below present

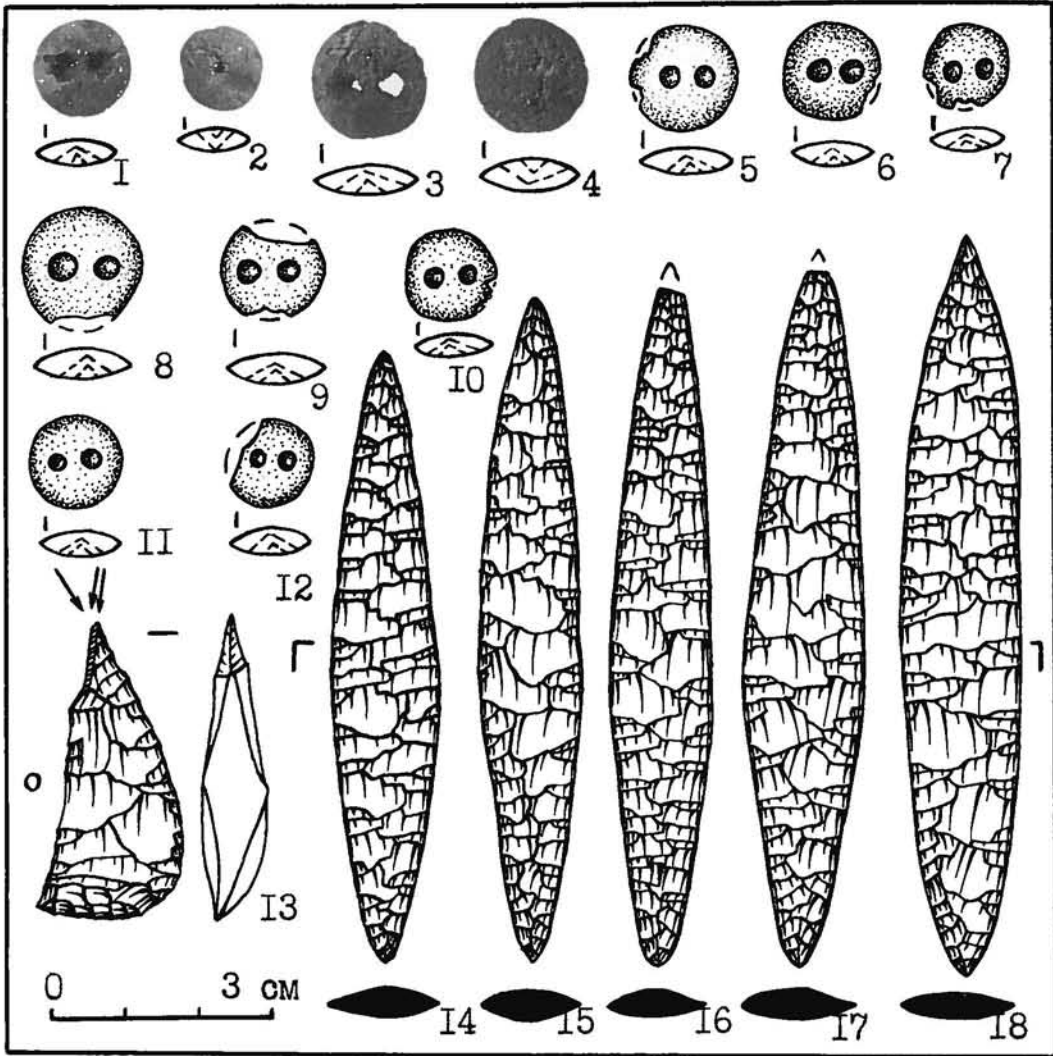


Fig. 3. Amber ornaments (1-12), flint borer (13) and arrowheads (14-18) from grave 1.

ground level. At a depth of c. 35 cm (approximately the original ground level of the Eneolithic occupation) the patches of red sand merged into a uniform area measuring 215 x 50 cm. This feature was in turn inside a grave pit. Against the background of the uniform yellow sand, the outline of the pit could clearly be observed because of its mixed fill. The grave pit was of rectangular plan with rounded corners, the longer axis running SW-NW. This feature measured 240 x 90 cm, and was at a depth of 15-17 cm below the original ground level.

There were no preserved skeletal remains. At the bottom of the pit, in the south-west corner of the red-ochre feature was a bright red patch of red

ochre, 30 cm in diameter and c. 5 cm thick. Within this feature were remains of human tooth enamel and eleven amber buttons with bored V-shaped holes (Fig. 3:1-5). The buttons are round (8 - 15 mm in diameter). They were in extremely weathered condition, and had been dyed dark red by the thick deposit of red ochre. Almost all the buttons lay vertically around the edge of the red-ochre feature. They were located in an arc-shaped pattern with the holes towards the centre of the circle. This indicates that there was a human skull in the south-west corner of the grave pit. It had been thickly covered (possibly coated) with bright red ochre, and had worn hat-like headgear with a fringe of amber buttons.

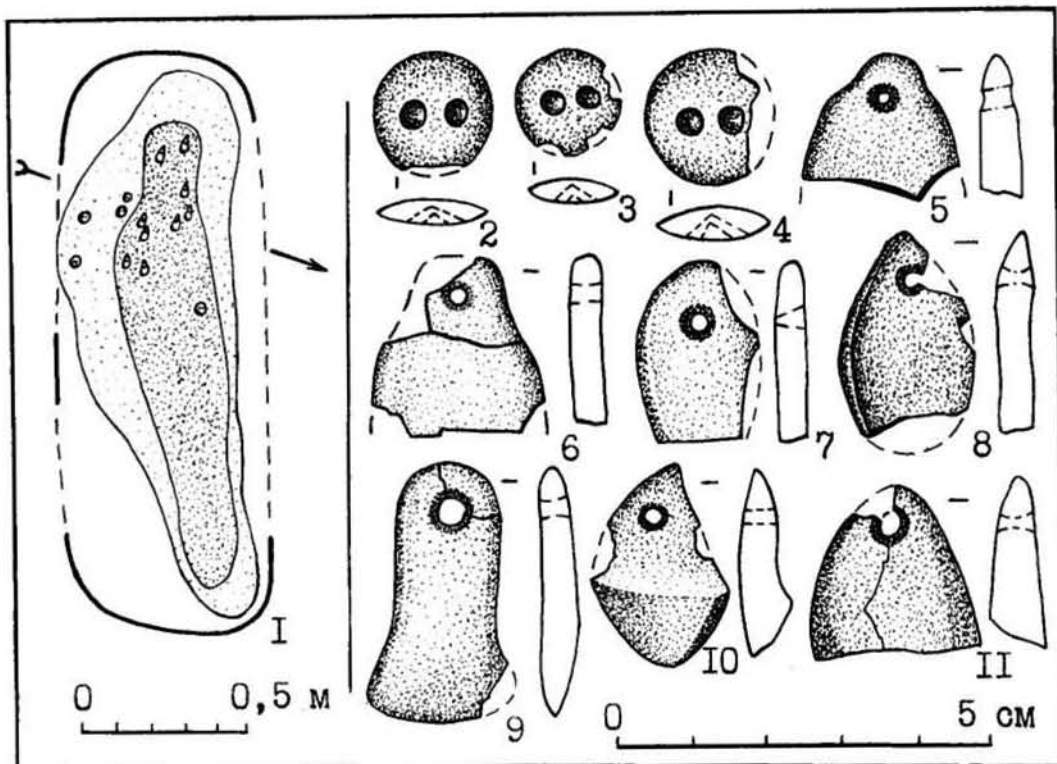


Fig. 4. Grave 2. Amber ornaments (2-11).

In the middle part of the grave pit were five arrowheads, 17 amber buttons and a borer. These buttons, resembling those from the area of the skull, had V-shaped bored holes and were of round form and lenticular section. They were also in highly weathered condition and were coloured by the red ochre (Fig. 3:6-12). Most of the buttons were in two rows running across the area of red sand; one of the rows was 1 - 1.5 cm deeper than the adjacent one. In the upper row, part of the buttons lay vertically on their edges, while others were positioned with the holes facing downwards. In the lower row of buttons the holes faced upwards.

Among the buttons were a borer and an arrowhead, and slightly to the east of them was a compact group of four arrowheads. All of these artefacts are of high-quality yellow-brown flint with both sides worked with a fine retouch. The working end of the borer was formed with two short burin blows (Fig. 3:13). The arrowheads are of elongated leaf shape and they are almost alike in size (Fig. 3: 14-18).

Observed in situ, the position of the amber buttons shows that they were decorative elements on

the belt of the male corpse. The wooden or bone handle of the borer was not preserved, but it appears that this tool was placed under the belt. The arrows were in a quiver, originally hanging from one side of the belt.

In the east corner of the grave was a small patch of bright-coloured red ochre, 33 x 10 cm in area and c. 6 cm thick. There were no finds in this location. It may mark food placed in the grave with the body.

Excavation data, the size of the coloured sand feature, and the composition and location of the finds (Fig. 2) suggest that an adult male was buried in the above grave. The corpse was most probably laid on its back in a stretched position with the head pointing south-west.

Grave 2 was discovered 9.2 metres south-east of grave 1 (Fig. 4:1) in the 1985 excavation. Amorphous small patches and short, narrow stripes of sand lightly coloured with red ochre were first observed at a depth of 22 cm from the present surface. Ten centimetres below this level the details merged into a single feature measuring 165 x 22-55 cm with a diffused outline. The feature was within a grave pit, whose outline - especially on

the longer sides – was difficult to observe in the sandy soil. On the whole, the pit was of elongated oval form, measuring c. 175 x 65 cm and extending 12–13 cm below the original ground level. The lengthwise axis was oriented WSW-ENE.

There were no preserved remains of a skeleton or other decayed matter. Clearly visible in the centre of a coloured patch of sandy soil at the bottom of the pit was a narrow band filled with grains of red ochre. This feature resembled the form of a swaddled body. It gives the impression that the corpse, covered with red ochre, was tightly wrapped in a shroud, in turn covered with red ochre. The length and form of the strongly coloured stripe of sand (Fig. 4:1) suggest that the corpse had been laid on its back with the head pointing south-west. The deceased was a youth or possibly a woman. The shroud may have been of fur. This assumption may find support in the observed narrow stripes of light-red sand observed in the upper part of the grave pit, which were apparently a kind of negative image of the original folds in the long-since decayed shroud. A similar feature has been observed by M. Miettinen (1990) in the excavation of a red-ochre grave at the Hartikka site in Laukaa, Finland.

In the south-west section of the grave (the area of the head and chest of the body) were five buttons and nine flat pendants of poorly preserved amber. The buttons were round (14–18 mm in diameter) and of lenticular section, and had V-shaped bored holes (Fig. 4:2–4). Four of the pendants were damaged and only their upper parts with holes were preserved (Fig. 4:5–6). Their original shape and size cannot be determined. The remaining five pendants were in a better state of preservation. They varied in length from 25 to 35 mm, the maximum width being 16 to 23 mm. Each of the pendants had a single narrow bored hole and was of different form (triangular, rhomboid, trapezoid, drop-shaped, and oval with a straight base [Fig. 4:7–11]).

Ten of the ornaments were found within a strongly coloured strip of red sand, the others being nearby in a weakly ochre-coloured zone of sand. No system of arrangement could be discerned, and it was clear that the ornaments had moved from their original positions. This may have been due to the process of decomposition and the settling of soil in the grave pit. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether the buttons and pendants had belonged to a necklace worn on the breast, or had been sewn on to articles of clothing.

The third grave was also excavated in 1985 (Fig. 5). It was located 5 metres south-west of grave 2. The distinct outline of the grave pit was observed

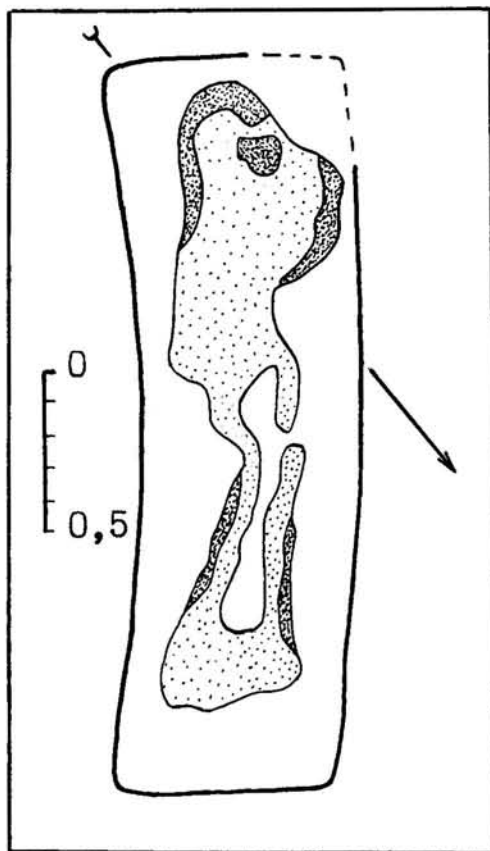


Fig. 5. Grave 3.

at 30 cm below present ground level. The pit was rectangular and curved slightly to the north-west. The lengthwise axis was oriented SW-NE. The dimensions of the pit were 218 x 68 cm, and it was laid 21 cm below the original ground level.

There were no objects or skeletal remains in the grave pit. Only a dark red patch of sand was observed in the bottom part, overlaying thin, grey stripes of humus. The latter were apparently the remains of the decayed body. The red-ochre feature was only 1.5 m long, 18–54 cm wide, and 3–5 cm thick. Its configuration resembled the figure of a human body laid in the grave. The outline of the lower extremities and the head, pointing south-west, could be clearly observed (Fig. 5). The size of the feature suggests that this was a male burial.

Despite their small number and the lack of preserved skeletal remains, the excavated graves provide a relatively complete picture of the burial customs of the ancient inhabitants at Vashutino. On the one hand, the graves have a number of standard features in common. The grave pits were of similar form, size and depth; the corpse was laid in a elon-



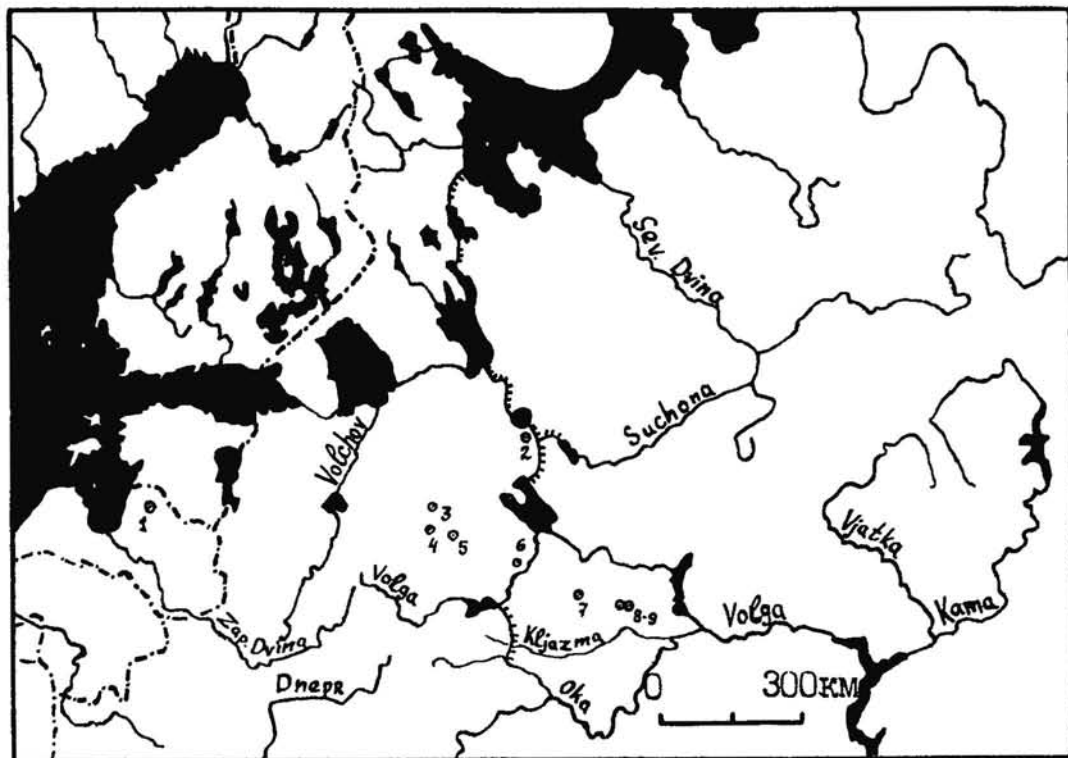


Fig. 6. Cemeteries with red-ochre graves and amber ornaments from the period the development of organic-tempered pottery in Eastern Europe (second half of the third millennium BC): 1 - Zvejnieki, 2 - Kargulino, 3 - Kontchanskoe, 4 - Repishche, 5 - Ilovets 1, 6 - Jazykovo 1, 7 - Vashutino, 8 - Sakhtysh 2-A, 9 - Skahtysh 8.

gated position with the same orientation in all cases; the corpses were abundantly covered with red ochre, and were buried in everyday clothing with sewn ornaments. On the other hand, each burial had its own specific features: flint artefacts and post-mortem food in grave 1; a shrouded corpse in the grave 2; and no ornaments at all in grave 3. These details, however, do not contradict the inner logic of the burial custom, but rather supplement it. On the whole, the burial custom may be described as relatively unified, and devoid of any excesses.

The grave pits were located parallel to each other at short intervals and constituted a small burial ground or cemetery (Fig. 1). The attribution of the graves to the Volosovo Culture is unquestionable. The cemetery occupied a strictly defined place near Volosovo dwellings, and was contemporaneous with them. The flint arrowheads and the borer found in the first grave are typical of the Volosovo Culture. In Central Russia, round amber buttons with V-shaped bored holes are found exclusively among artefacts of the Volosovo

Culture. The practice of filling the grave completely or partially with red ochre is known only from Volosovo cemeteries. Finally, the main features of the Vashutino graves are similar to many graves of the Volosovo Culture excavated at the large cemeteries of Sakhtysh 2-A and 8 in the Volga-Lyazma interfluvial area (Krainov 1973) and Jazykovo 1 in the Upper Volga region (Sidorov & Urban 1979; Sidorov 1985; see Fig. 6).

There is agreement among most Russian archaeologists that Volosovo burials with an abundant covering of red ochre and large numbers of amber ornaments date back to the second half of the third millennium BC. It is clear that this dating has been extended, but it cannot be made more precise, since there are no radiocarbon samples from the actual graves.

In addition to the Volosovo parallels, the graves at Vashutino are quite similar and in some respects even completely identical to the burials of cultures using organic-tempered pottery of the Piestinuya and Modlon types, which were synchronous with the Volosovo Culture. There are especially distinct

similarities with graves investigated at the cemeteries of Kontchanskoe, Repishch, and Ilovets 1 in North-Western Russia (Zimina 1984; Urban 1973); with the Middle and Late Neolithic graves at Zvejnieki in Latvia (Zagorskis 1987); with the damaged graves at the Kargulino cemetery; and with a grave at the Islin Island site in the eastern part of the Lake Onega region (Oshibkina 1978; Kozyreva 1968; Fig. 6). All these examples testify to the unity of burial customs among the prehistoric population of the forest zone of Eastern Europe during the period when cultures with organic-tempered pottery evolved.

#### REFERENCES

- Buzin, V.S. 1990: Poseleniya i zhilishcha volosovskoi kultury kak istochnik sotsiologicheskoi rekonstruktsii. *SA* 3: 32-43.
- Gadzyatskaya, O.S. & Utkin, A.V. 1989: Noviyе raskopki Vashutinskoi stoyanki. *SA* 1: 125-143.
- Hiekkanen, M. 1984: Otlitchitelnye osobennosti postroek tipa Madeneva, odnosyashchikhsya k kamennomu veku. *Novoe v arkhologii SSSR i Finlyandii*: 46-53. Leningrad.
- Kozyreva, R.V. 1968: O rabote Kargopolskogo otryada. *AO* 1967: 13-14.
- Krainov, D.A. 1973: Stoyanka i mogilnik Sakhtysh 8. *Kavkaz i Vostotchnaya Evropa v drevnosti*: 45-55. Moskva.
- Miettinen, M. A red-ochre grave of the Comb Ware period from Hartikka in Laukaa. *Iskos* 9: 39-47.
- Oshibkina, S.V. 1978: *Neolit Vostotchnogo Prionezhya*. Moskva.
- Sidorov, V.V. 1985: Raboty neoliticheskogo otryada Volgo-Okskoi ekspeditsii. *AO* 1983: 83-84.
- Sidorov, V.V. & Urban, Ju.N. 1979: Raskopki Yazykovskoi stoyanki. *AO* 1978: 89-90.
- Urban, Ju. N. 1973: Poselenie i mogilnik Ilovets 1. *KSIA* 137:107-114.
- Tsvetkova, I.K. 1960: Novyi pamyatnik volosovskoi kultury bliz goroda Pereslavlya-Zalesskogo. *Tr.GIM* 37:48-55.
- Zagorskis, F. 1987: *Zvejnieku akmens laikmeta kauplauks*. Riga.
- Zimina, M.P. 1984: Mogilnik na stoyanke Repishche. *KSIA* 127:64-71.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- AO - Arkheologicheskie otkrytiya. Moskva.
- KSIA - Kratkie soobshcheniya Instituta arkheologii AN SSSR. Moskva.
- SA - Sovetskaya Arkheologiya. Moskva.
- Tr. GIM - Trudy Gosudarstvennogo Istoricheskogo muzeya. Moskva.