

Mark Brisbane and David Gaimster (eds.), *Novgorod: the Archaeology of a Russian Medieval City and its Hinterland. The British Museum Occasional Paper Number 141, 2001, 136 pp.*

Novgorod is one of the most intensively studied medieval sites of Northern Europe. Excavations there began in 1932 and have been going on almost continuously since then. Until recently, however, much of the huge amount of work has remained little known to Western archaeologists.

Novgorod: the Archaeology of a Russian Medieval City and its Hinterland is intended as a contribution towards improving this situation, as well as surveying possibilities for future East-West cooperation. The publication records the proceedings of a symposium devoted to latest developments in Novgorod archaeology held during the European Association of Archaeologists' Fifth Annual Meeting in 1999.

The volume is a collection of eighteen articles with a preface by the editors. The publication is a presentation of international cooperation and expertise: roughly half of the articles are written by Russian and half by Western scholars. The latter are mainly from the UK, but there are also contributions by Swedish, German and Irish scholars.

The articles cover a wide range of subjects, and the contents of the book can therefore be seen as somewhat heterogeneous. The main themes include handicrafts, ceramic studies, subsistence strategies and environmental archaeology. The layout and building techniques of the town can also be distinguished as an important topic, as well as applying different methods of natural sciences to archaeological material. Each of the themes is represented by three or four articles.

The papers are quite short. Many of them are simply presentations of themes of research, and not their results. In practice, most of the articles can be regarded as examples of some of the possibilities of researching an overwhelmingly rich material. In a publication of this nature and extent, any other point of view would hardly be possible.

Most of the papers concentrate on the city of Novgorod itself; the hinterland is represented in fewer articles. Hopefully, the extremely interesting surrounding rural area will remain a subject of forthcoming publications.

The first few articles deal with general background: history of research, formation of the town and the position of Novgorod in the field of archaeological research. Mark Brisbane evaluates the progress that has been made in three EU-funded collaborative research projects since they were launched in 1994. Evgenij N. Nosov describes the urbanization process in the basin of the River Volkhov, and Valentin L. Yanin states the indisputable importance of the town in medieval archaeology.

Olga A. Tarabardina's article on dendro-chronology brings to the fore some very important source-critical questions about the method that has made it possible to date very accurately the finds from different cultural layers of Novgorod. The reader is still left somewhat confused whether the precise dates that have been presented in previous publications, should still be completely trusted, or treated with more source criticism than before.

In their article *Behind the pottery*, Torbjörn Brorsson and Hannelore Håkansson present some very interesting new information on different types of ceramics used in the Novgorod area during the Viking Age. The work is based on analyses of thin-sections of different kinds of pottery. Results point towards local production of different types: the so-called Scandinavian and Finno-Ugrian types were also manufactured within the Rurik Gorodishche or in its vicinity. There are interesting results concerning potting technology as well: (a sub-type of) Finno-Ugrian pottery is interpreted to have been made on a slow wheel, in contrast with all the other types, which are purely hand-made, i.e. coiled. The analysis was made of only twenty-one sherds, and will hopefully be tested further on a larger material.

One thing that comes to mind in connection with ceramics is that in Russian archaeological discourse it continuously seems to be considered an essential ethnic indicator. It would be

extremely interesting to read a thorough article on the present situation of research of this subject, and also see the basis of the interpretations concerning *ethnos* in the Viking Age or the Middle Ages. Western archaeologists would probably also be interested in knowing whether there have recently been any changes in the interpretations that were made during the Soviet period concerning different ethnic groups.

The famous and fascinating birch-bark letters that have been found in the cultural layers of Novgorod, constitute a unique source of all aspects of life in a medieval city: society, economics and trade, politics, ideology and even everyday life. In her article, Elena A. Rybina describes this material from the viewpoint of domestic economy. Rybina has included in her study texts that contain information on domestic and fur-bearing animals, fish and fishing, cereal crops and other foodstuffs.

Precisely because birch-bark letters commonly deal with everyday life, it is often possible to compare archaeological evidence with written sources on a very concrete level. Rybina gives some excellent examples of this. References to fish in the 11th–15th-century birch-bark documents can be compared with archaeological artefacts related to fishing, and, for example, fish remains from the cultural layers.

Other articles presenting the results of interesting case-studies are for example Lyuba Smirnova's paper *The Working of Antler, Bone and Ivory*, Almuth Alsleben's *Early Medieval Agriculture in the Hinterland of Novgorod*, Martin C. Comey's *After Nerevsky: Stave-built Wooden Vessels in the Novgorod State Museum* and David Gaimster's article on the archaeology of Hanseatic trade.

A brief description of the more traditional written sources, such as the chronicles, could well have complemented this kind of book – for example from the viewpoint of source criticism, or in comparison with the archaeological material.

Illustrations in the book are mainly informative and of good quality. Many of the black-and-white drawings and photographs have already been published previously, but reproductions of the best ones seem natural in this kind of publication. Unfortunately *Ingria* has been slightly misplaced in several maps showing the Novgorod area in relation to the surrounding areas: the name has been placed too north, roughly to where it should read *Karelia* instead.

In the bibliographies of the articles, the Russian titles of books have been translated into English. This can make understanding the main contents of the books or articles in question relatively easy, but unfortunately it also often makes identifying the original Russian publications unnecessarily difficult; in a scientific publication the original language would seem more reasonable.

As a whole, *Novgorod: the Archaeology of a Russian Medieval City and its Hinterland* raises many interesting scientific questions, and easily leaves its reader curious for more of the fine and fascinating results. Fortunately, already in the preface of this book, further publications are promised to be on the way. The potential is clearly stated by Mark Brisbane in his paper: "Novgorod has the highly achievable potential to make itself the standard by which all European urban archaeology might be judged. With that in mind, this international collaboration can do only one thing: continue to stimulate debate and the scholarly interchange of ideas." We are looking forward to the continuation of this valuable work.

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