

Old Ladoga dirhems

The role of Ladoga in the system of international money circulation in the early Middle Ages has not yet been determined adequately. Nor has its role in the receipt and further distribution of oriental silver been appraised in the proper way. The archaeological finds of Cufic coins are of importance both in studying international trade and the social topography of Ladoga as well as in determining its economical potential and foreign relations.¹

Presented below is a brief and more exactly defined list of hoards and separate coins found in the town of Old Ladoga.

I. The bank of the river Volkhov near Old Ladoga. A hoard of 28 undamaged coins and 3 fragments, minted in 749—786 A.D., was found in 1892.

II. The village of Knjashchina, 1.5 km to the south of Old Ladoga. The find of 1884. Preserved 8 dirhems, dating back to 769—804 A.D.

III. Between the village of Knjashchina and the Old Ladoga stone fortress. The coins have been picked up in the field, beginning from 1874. Of 300 dirhems only 82, dating back to 769—804 A.D. have become available for study.

IV. The site of the ancient earthworks. Excavations by V.I. Ravdonikas in 1938. Five undamaged coins and eighteen fragments dating to 760/761—846/847 A.D. have been found near the entrance to a large estate building of the middle of the 9th century.

V. The same site, 1940 excavation. In the remains of a dwelling — a jeweller's workshop — fifteen coins dating to the second half of the 8th century — the first half of the 9th century have been found and an Abbasid dirhem has been identified as dating to 775—812 A.D. All were cached approximately in 890—920 A.D.

VI. The Ladoga settlement, to the southwest of the stone fortress. The hoard found in 1920 contained eleven undamaged and forty-five fragments of Cufic coins (the latest dates back to 976/977 A.D.) and other finds of the middle of the 9th century.

VII. The shore of Lake Ladoga. In 1809—1810 more than 112 kg of Oriental coins were found of not later than the 11th century.

Further separate finds are to be mentioned.

At the site of the ancient earthworks in different years twenty four coins have been found in excavations and as stray finds dating to 699/700, 768, 783, 788, 808/809 (three coins), 812/813, 867 A.D., the rest date from the 9th—10th centuries. The oldest dirhem comes from the layer of 770—810 A.D. with the remains of a smithy, the latest are from the 10th century stratification.²

In the area of the above-mentioned stone fortress two coins have been found dating to 738/739 A.D. and to the 9th—10th centuries.

In other places of Old Ladoga, in the settlement and the cemeteries as well as in the environs archaeologists have come across eight coins dating to 591—628, 738/739, 746/747, 773/774, 786/787, 770—780, 928/929, 944/945 A.D., the rest are from the 9th—10th centuries.

In all, in Old Ladoga and its neighbourhood not less than 467 strictly considered Cufic coins have been found in 7 hoards and separately (34 dirhems), together they date from the 7th—11th centuries. Their location is limited and includes the central parts of the settlement (earthworks, fortress), the site of the ancient estate — Knjashchina, as well as new Dubovici, a fortified settlement on the river Volkhov — a satellite town of Ladoga. As to the frequency and concentration of the coin finds, corresponding to the first three centuries of its existence, Ladoga, has no equal among Russian and Baltic towns.

Part of the discovered coins were accidentally dropped, forgotten or hidden owing to extraordinary circumstances. The presence, however, of coins in certain complexes needs to be appraised quite differently. In this respect the following discoveries are not without interest, viz: the hoard of of 846/847 (IV) near the large estate building of the middle of the 9th century; the hoard dating before 850 A.D. (V) in the craftsman's dwelling (the end of the 9th — beginning of the 10th centuries); separate coins (768 and 783 A.D.) in the buildings with dendrodates of 765 — the beginning of 770 A.D. and 770—780's³, in the dwelling of a rich citizen (a dirhem of 812/813 A.D.)⁴ dating to the 10th century, and in two buildings of the 10th century (an attempt to identify the dirhems has failed).⁵ The presence of dirhems in the dwellings of rich citizens and craftsmen is noteworthy. Apparently in all listed cases we are dealing with domestic valuables, kept in secluded places as though in a domestic bank.

The correct observation that hoards were cached because of military danger does not exhaust all explanations of concealment. Several of the above-mentioned hoards (II, III, IV, VII) were outside Ladoga, in buildings which were not burnt and are not likely to have gone through any catastrophe. It follows from this that in a number of cases the treasures were kept in houses as family property and could be used by their owners as a means of circulation and exchange. Some of the hoards seemed to have been hidden without regard for any threat of war but with the purpose of preserving silver in a hiding place during its owner's absence or for the time being. Treasures are likely to have been hidden by strangers before their departure to their native land or to some other place so that later they might have capital on their arrival back (cf. hoard VII).

The dating qualities of Cufic coins are known to be estimated variously. This also applies to Old Ladoga. Separate coins occurred in a cultural layer of the settlement, as far as it was possible to determine, fifty and more years later than the time of their production.

The point in question are the dirhems of the 8th—9th centuries found in the 9th—10th century stratification.

But to what degree Cufic coins may be a trustworthy source for the precise dating of archaeological strata?

On the basis of finds from Old Ladoga finds it becomes clear that the period of time between the year of minting and its appearance in some of Ladoga's buildings is very short. Thus, in the proximity of the estate house of the middle of the 9th century a hoard was found with the earliest coin, dating to 846/847 A.D. (IV). In the above mentioned buildings of 765 — the beginning of the 770's and 770—780's were dirhems correspondingly of 768 and 783 A.D. Taking into account the age of these buildings, the dirhems appeared there not later than 4—7 years after their production.

A long-term cycle connected with dirhem movement, usage and accumulation, judging by Old Ladoga examples, does not exclude a rather concise period of time of up to several years for their circulation in Eastern Europe. The latter is particularly characteristic of the periods of mass coin production in the Caliphate which took place during the 770's, 800's and 820's and the following decades up to the crisis of the Eastern coin system at the end of the 10th century. During such periods the coins oversaturated the

inner Caliphate market and were exported to nearby and distant countries. The conditions were created for a rather quick movement of oriental silver along the roads of not only Eastern but also Central and Northern Europe.

As is reported by Ibn Hordadbeh (in the year 885, referring to the 40—50's of the 9th century) "the Rustraders, one of the Slavs divisions" down the Volga and the Don reached the Khazar capital Ittil and sometimes Reja and Bagdad across the Caspian Sea. Arab and Khazar merchants did not usually go farther than Bulgara but sometimes (according to Ibn Fadlan) they found themselves in lands where the Slavs lived and in Scandinavia. Thus, in the region including Ladoga European traders predominated over eastern ones. However, irrespective of the fact who was at the head of trade caravans, the latter were sure to go through Ladoga, where international transit routes met and undoubtedly interacted with that of local and mediatory trade between Ladoga and the Chudians and Izhora.⁸

The considerable economic significance of Ladoga lay in the fact that northern furs were brought there. Ibn Hordadbeh and Ibn Haucale (ante 965 A.C) reported that furs had been brought to the east from extreme Slav regions, and the best of them in their turn had fallen into the hands of Rus traders from the peoples of the north.⁹ In the early period of dirhem trade, i.e. in the last quarter of the 8th — the first third of the 9th centuries — Ladoga in the north of Eastern Europe was almost a single large centre undoubtedly accumulating for sale furs which had been brought from forest regions as a desired equivalent to Arab silver. Having been generally recognized as an international fur supplier, Ladoga, to all appearances, preserved this role later on.

On the basis of the oldest Ladoga hoard of 786 A.D. (I), V.L. Janin has suggested that the 70—80's of the 8th century should be referred to as the time of dirhem penetration into Europe and the period of establishing trade relations between the Caliphate and Eastern Europe.¹⁰

Accordingly the early period of dirhem circulation embraces 770/780—833 A.D.

The data of Ladoga archaeology corroborate this early conclusion by V.L. Janin. It is to this period that the three Ladoga hoards date (I—III) and probably several separate coin finds as well.

In fact, in 750—850 A.D. the part of the water route of the Neva, Lake Ladoga, the Volkhov and Lake Ilmen, where two great routes met (the Volga and the Dnieper), was, if not under the control of Ladoga at least bound up with it. Further to the south this route divided. Its Volga branch down the rivers Pola or Msta and further to the Upper Volga is fixed by a chain of successively disposed hoards dating to the early period of dirhem circulation in Europe.¹¹ These hoards recreate the way leading to or from Ladoga. It is no wonder that in Ladoga, crowning the most significant part of the Eurasian East-West route, dirhems appeared as soon as they reached the north of Eastern Europe. In this respect the settlement on the Lower Volkhov even surpassed other trading sites of its time.

To date from Eastern Europe have been discovered no less than 37 hoards of 780—833.¹² Corresponding to them are no less than 18 hoards in Baltic countries. More exactly, there are no hoards of the 8th century there except one found in Sweden (Tunne 784/785 A.D.), and the earliest of them date to the beginning of the 9th century.¹³ In the light of these comparisons, the Ladoga hoard of 786 seems rather rare and has for the time being chronological priority. However, the fact that the silver trade began in this period should hardly be disputed. The conditions for such trade, including political ones, were created in the third quarter of the 7th century.

It is possible to forecast a sporadic appearance of dirhems in Eastern Europe, including Ladoga, even before 770 A.D. However, there are no grounds for this at present.

Finds of single coins of the 8th century are known from Podonje (The Don Land), Niznee Povolzie (the Lower Volga Land), Priuralje (The Urals), Zacaucasje (The Caucasus Land) Rus (Ladoga) and Sweden.¹⁴ Most of these coins reached these regions with later currents of money. However, one should take account of a surprising simultaneity with which separate dirhem lots were moving to different regions of the world (this in particular was revealed by the Ladoga archaeological complexes), urged forward by an acute shortage of valuable metals in Europe.

Whether the dirhems, brought to Europe in 760 A.D. will be found, future investigations will show. I think such a possibility cannot be completely excluded.

Much has been said about the leadership of the Vikings in opening up and using commercial routes in the East of Europe during the 9th and 10th centuries. Coin finds in Baltic countries do not completely corroborate such an assertion.

Let us consider such a calculation. Of the hoards of 770/780—833 A.D. two were found in Sweden, four on Gotland, eight in Poland, three in the GDR and one in Estonia.¹⁵ Thus two thirds of the accumulated valuables belong to the land where the Western Slavs lived and partly the Western Finns. Here, the dominating mediatory role of the Vikings is not obvious. We must thus assume that the commercial activity of the Slavs in that period was at least equal to that of Northern Germany. The seasonal appearance of Vikings at Ladoga is possible, but their permanent presence there could hardly have taken place until 830—840 A.D.

The cronicle legend about the calling of Vikings notes that until 862 A.D. the Slavs and the Finns paid a tribute (it took place apparently in Ladoga) to the Scandinavians from "overseas". This fact wouldn't have been reported if any sizable groups of Scandinavians had lived permanently in the town on the Lower Volkhov.

In the 10th century Ladoga formed a structural part of Kiovan State. Its commercial activity was supplemented with that of other centres. Nearby Novgorod rose to political and economic significance. However, even in this period the town on the Lower Volkhov still remained "a window" to Europe and a focus of broad international contacts.

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References

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