

The "homes of the dead" in the South-Eastern Ladoga region

In 1986 in the middle reaches of the river Pasha near the Gorka village two ancient monuments were unearthed, the significance of which for studying the sources and features of the burial rites of the Ladoga region in the Middle Ages, can not be overestimated. The connection between the burial structures and the set of problems, outlined earlier, is obvious for a researcher acquainted with the antiquities of the Ladoga region burial mounds, as it is obvious that their consideration and especially their solving requires further specialized fieldwork. First steps in this direction were taken last year and gave interesting but unexpected results, which have — not yet been fully comprehended. Taking these circumstances into consideration, the results of our excavations will be discussed to the extent necessary for a primary but sufficiently definite characterisation of the new type of the Ladoga region burial structures. In connection with the research by us, we shall be able to give a more precise definition to some historical aspects of the archaeological study of the Medieval Ladoga region burial monuments.

Both structures were discovered in the mound burial ground, which was previously known and excavated by V.I. Ravdonikas in the late 1920's, and which is situated near the south-eastern outskirts of the Gorka village.¹ Before the excavations they were small features; one of them was mound-shaped and of considerable size — about 15 m in diameter and less than 1 m high, while the other was hardly noticeable — 10—12 m in diameter and a maximum of 0.2—0.3 m high. In both cases in the excavations a plot of oval, almost square shape was found surrounded by a wide ditch. The plot and partially the ditch were overlapped by sand, speckled with white podzol, greyish, sometimes brownish and turning more and more yellow to the edges of the plot and in the nearest parts of the filling of the ditch. After its removal and the cleaning of the plot, greyish and brownish stripes and spots could be distinctly seen on the yellow background of the soil. The latter formed several definite lengthwise and crosswise rows in one of the structures.

In the central parts of both plots hearths were found. In one of the cases there were even two of them. All of the hearths were different in arrangement. Two of them, of charcoal and charred slabs on a gravel setting, with traces of calcination of the soil below, have numerous analogies with those in the mounds of the Ladoga region. The third one of burnt cracked stone in a layer of charcoal, has not been known among the monuments of the Ladoga region mound culture. Hearth tools, usually found in the Ladoga region mounds were missing in the hearths of the structures in question.

Absolutely all of the finds of burnt bone and artefacts were made during the opening of the ditches and the cleaning of the walls or, more precisely, the sloping edges of the plots. Throughout the excavation numerous pieces of charred and wood were constantly found. These varied in size from separate pieces of charcoal to 1 metre logs and longer specimens. It should be noted that charred or burnt wooden remains were mainly found in the filling and on the bottom of the ditches, while decayed ones almost exclusively at the base of the walls or vertical slopes of the plots and definitely increasing in number to their corners. Among the wooden remains found during the opening of one of

the structure's ditch fillings, middle-sized pieces of slabs attract attention. These lie 30 cm from each other at an angle to the surface of the plot and perpendicular to its eastern and western sides and are probably the remains of the fallen roof. The intactness of the south-eastern corner of the structure in question is worth special attention. Its decayed logs could be followed up to the height of 5 timber layers. In this south-eastern part of the structure's plot two layers of wood were found, slightly overlapping each other and separated by a thin layer of yellow sand. When they were disassembled it was found that the upper layer was part of the southern wall of the structure that had fallen on the plot. Judging by the size of the disassembled structure its height in its original vertical position was up to 1.5 m. Slightly sharpened to the center of the plot, and with its very extended shape and segmented cross-section the lower layer could be comprehended only after the discovery of a cutting in the original soil of the outer edge of the ditch, corresponding to the former in position, size and section. Both are possibly the remains of a log, of large diameter, originally put across the ditch. Other more or less significant traces and remains were examined besides those already mentioned, the description of which is omitted because of lack of space.

The characteristic features of the archaeological remains described leave no doubt that the examined monuments belong to wooden and earthen burial structures — the "homes of dead"²² — which have been discovered in recent years. The variety, multiplicity and expressiveness of these remains not only allow us to comprehend the structure of the constructions in question, but make it possible to reconstruct their inner and outer arrangement with sufficient precision.

Each of the structures was of a slightly extended N-S oriented log house 3.5—4.0 × 4.0—4.5 m in size, erected on a foundation dug in the soil which, in turn, was strengthened with a log structure 4.5—5.0 × 5.5—6.0 m in size and up to five timber sets high. The smaller log house standing on the base was covered with a double pitched earthen roof supported by 4 or 5 rows of poles inside. In the central part of the smaller log house, slightly nearer to its northern wall was a hearth above which in the roof was an opening to let out the smoke. There was a door in the southern wall of the log house, near its south-eastern corner. A strong log, the upper half of which was possibly cut off, was put over the surrounding ditch to provide access to the burial structure. Its butt-end was put into the pit dug outside the ditch perpendicularly to its outer edge, and the other end was put into the log house under the door opening and sunk into the earthen floor. The burials — the remains of cremations, which were carried out somewhere else together with other objects and, possibly in clay urns, were deposited on sand benches along the walls supported by wood.

Judging by the objects found in the excavations, among which was an H-type upper part decoration of a sword, a belt plate, a spherical bell, several bottle-shaped beads, plastic and curved sherds are to be mentioned. Both "homes of the dead" were used for burying the remains of cremations from the second half of the 9th century to the end of the 10th, and, possibly, to the beginning of the XIth century. Difficulties connected with a more exact dating of the monuments in question are due to the fact that the complexes found in them are considerably mixed and details incomplete. This, in turn, is stipulated by the peculiarities of the process of archaeologization of wooden and earthen burial structures. The fact is that in the process of decay and destruction of the latter, burnt bones and burial objects deposited by the walls of the log house on comparatively high earthen benches turned out in the ditches surrounding the "homes of the dead" where they were not only subject to atmospheric phenomena but were removed by people as well. In connection with this, it is to be noted that among the

over twenty objects found in the excavations there was not a single large iron artefact; only separate small ones were found whole, and even the glass beads were represented only in fusion. Nevertheless, with reference to theories on the tendencies of evolution of separate elements of the Ladoga region burial rites, formed in the process of its study, and differences in construction of the structures in question, together with dating of the objects, their probable chronology can be proposed.

The larger "homes of the dead" examined should be considered as the oldest ones dating back possibly to the 9th century. This is indicated not only by the discovery of the H-type decoration of a sword, found in the filling of a ditch, but also by the arrangement of the hearth of boulders, burnt and split by fire, which has not been observed in the Ladoga region mounds. Later, nearer the middle of the 10th century, another "home of the dead" was erected near this decayed and possibly by that time demolished structure. A comparatively small hearth made of almost completely burnt slabs with traces of strong calcination of the soil below, together with the discovery of a spherical bell and several bottle-shaped beads does not seem to contradict such a relative and absolute dating of the structure. And, finally, in the second half of the 10th century, or at the latest, at the boundary of the 10th and the 11th centuries, the third "home of the dead" was built on the small hill, which rose at the place where the oldest burial structure had been demolished.

The central part of this structure was occupied by a comparatively large hearth of large charred slabs on a sand feature covered with gravel. Its similarity to the hearths of the Ladoga region mounds of the end of the 10th — first half of the 11th century was so great that at first it made us doubt that this monument belonged to the wooden and earthen burial structures. But during the excavations post-hole pit were found on both sides of the hearth. Two of them cut through the hearth of the "home of dead", which definitely pointed to their connection with the later burial structure.

Archaeological characteristics of the latter of the burial monuments in question, i.e., a small 1 m-high mound used, the presence in the upper part of the dislocation at the depth of 0.3—0.35 m of a hearth similar to those found in the Ladoga region mounds, and, finally, the presence of the post-holes near the hearth (at least three on each side) — all refer back to the description of a mound excavated by D. Europeus,³ which has been analysed by this author.

In 1874 during his second archaeological expedition to the Ladoga region near the village of Zalyshnik between Pasha, Syas and Tihvinka Rivers, i.e., only 3 or 4 km from the burial structures examined by us at the south-eastern outskirts of the Gorka village, D. Europeus excavated a mound with a rich set of objects. This fact and the uniqueness of the remains found in the excavations were not only noted by Europeus but were possibly the cause of publication of their description⁴ as well.

Notwithstanding the limitations of fieldwork methods in those early years, it can be definitely stated that the mound unearthed near the Zalyshnik village was more than 17 m in diameter and about 3 m high. In its central part immediately under the turf at the depth of only 0.35—0.4 m a hearth was discovered, made of a layer of large coals "surrounded by a stone framework". On it were remains of two broken pots, a frying-pan and a spade, the long handle of which served as a handle for the frying-pan. On different sides of the hearth at a distance of 4 m, 5 or 6 remains of cremations were buried, the cremation having been performed somewhere outside the area intended for the burial structure. Remains of cremation of a man and one or two horses were discovered on one side of the hearth, and on the other side were remains of the cremations of three women.

Six post-holes with traces of decayed wood inside, situated at a distance of 0.6—0.7

m from the stones of the hearth, mentioned by D. Europeus, are important for determining the character of the burial structure examined by him. Unfortunately, in the published description there is no other data which could somehow enable us to define the position of the posts with respect to the hearth and each other. But even the facts given by D. Europeus, in the light of our excavations, allow the burial structure examined by him to be regarded as a kind of a "home of the dead" erected on the top of a natural or an artificially made hill. According to available data, the only essential difference of the latter from the structures near the Gorka village is that in the Zalynshik "home of the dead" the earthen benches along the walls were missing or were not used for placing the remains on them. Burnt bones and remains were put on the floor and this fact ensured comparatively good preservation and the completeness of the burial complexes.

Thus, the first "home of the dead" in the south-eastern part of the Ladoga region was examined not in 1986, but a hundred years earlier during the first systematic archaeological excavations carried out there.

Three of the 5 burial structures excavated by V.I. Ravdonikas at the burial ground south-east of the Gorka village in the late 1920s seem to be similar.⁵ In one of them, as in the Zalynshik "home of the dead", the cremation remains were placed on the floor of the structure. The square wooden and earthen structures discovered and examined by us in 1975 downstream on the river Oyat and possibly the "Vidlitz mounds" with log houses excavated by V.I. Ravdonikas⁶ should be correlated with monuments of this type. In general, the Ladoga region data should be considered from this point of view. Nevertheless, the very possibility of stating the question in this way should be regarded as one of the results of our research during recent years.

Another important result of the 1986 excavations is that the definite attribution of the examined burial structures to the "homes of the dead" enabled us to use the details of their microtopography and appearance in an archaeologized state for further search concerning remains of this kind. As a result, surveys in 1987 revealed remains of "homes of the dead" at more than fifteen along the banks of almost all of the rivers flowing into Lake Ladoga from the south-east. This enables us to posit the existence of a culture of wooden and earthen burial structures in the Ladoga region along with the mound culture.

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