

The Culture of the Population of the Volga-Oka Area 1000 B.C. — 1000 A.D.

Studying the evolution of culture and revealing the features typical of its different stages constitute one of the main goals facing archaeology. Of great interest are the sites and remains of the Volga-Oka area where the culture of the early Iron Age, known as the Dyakovian Culture, had formed early in 1000 B.C.

In the present periodization it existed to 1000 A.D., i.e. for over 1500 years.¹ Of course this culture could not remain unchanged. But the identification of its individual stages with respect to the remains of the Volga-Oka area in the period under discussion was difficult owing to the lack of burial grounds in the area. It is the burial grounds that permit the construction of a detailed periodization schedule and form a basis for describing the culture and its stages. But the burial structures of the population with some monuments of the early Iron Age in the Volga-Oka area have been found in only two cases. Therefore, only the materials of dwelling sites may be used to describe the culture. Identifying the stages is difficult on the basis of these materials in view of the fact that people occupied one and the same site repeatedly. Therefore at one site, frequently with a fairly thin cultural layer, can be found objects of different epochs. However some of the sites of ancient towns had a thick cultural layer with a clear stratigraphy. Due to this it became possible to identify the levels and define the different stages. For 1000 B.C. an attempt was made to connect the periodization of the Dyakovian sites with the cultures in the areas to the south, for example with those of Scythians and Sarmatians, defining thereby the place of the population of the Volga-Oka area in the historical process concerned.² The findings are indicative of the ties the inhabitants of forests maintained with those of the steppes as well as of the aptness of such a comparison.³ No doubt the periodization of the sites and remains of the Volga-Oka area should be compared with other cultures of the steppe area, above all with the Ananyino and Pyanoborian cultures. The existence of fortified settlements located, as a rule, on high river banks is one of the signs distinguishing the Dyakovian culture from the preceding one. Prior to that, settlements were located nearer to water, on dunes. Transferring the settlements to new places was necessitated by the changes in economy, the development of productive husbandry, cattle breeding and possibly — to a lesser extent — agriculture.

The emergence of settlements on high river banks had been taking place since the 8th—7th centuries B.C. This period has for a long time provoked disputes among researchers. I.G. Rosenfeldt, by analysing the materials of the Tsherbinskian site of an ancient settlement acquired data suggesting that the above process had started in the 8th century B.C.⁴ Similar materials have been found by her at the Older Kashirian and the Mamonovian sites. Obviously, the period of the emergence of settlements on high river banks should be singled out as a separate stage. It should be dated from the late 8th to the early 7th centuries B.C. It should be associated with chequered ceramics with comb-shaped ornaments and ivory tools — arrowheads and harpoons. Living quarters were the same as in the later period — round huts with deepened floors, the houses

were long. It is difficult to say for certain whether the settlements had fortifications from the outset. The materials found under the embankments on certain ancient sites permit to speak of a period when there had been no fortifications. Metal objects are unknown from that period.

The next stage covers the period from the late 7th to the 3rd centuries B.C. It is synchronous with the Scythian period in the south of Eastern Europe and the Ananyino culture west of the Urals. Three and a half centuries is quite a long span of time. But so far it is impossible to divide it in a more detailed manner though there is material belonging to the beginning of the stage and to its end. This period is characterized by chequered ceramics ornamented throughout. Typical of the Upper Volga and the upper reaches of the Moscow River is "chequer-work" imprinted with a stamp and in the ancient towns of the Middle Oka and the lower reaches of the Moscow River similar technique imprinted with fabrics.⁵

The percentage of chequered ceramics at the sites of the Upper Volga is high compared with the whole material available. Thus, in the lower layers of the ancient town of "Grafskaya Gora" ("Count's Mountain") it is 80 %⁶ and in the town of "Dyakov Lob" (Deacon's Forehead) — 84 %.⁷ The percentage of chequered ceramics at the sites of the Middle Oka is considerably lower. In studying the Older Kashirian town V.A. Gorodtsov pointed out that chequered ceramics was only a fraction of the entire material. In his diary he wrote: "Fragments of the ancient pottery often lack any ornaments at all. Chequered imprints of coarse fabrics can be found".⁸ In Mutenkovian, which in its forms of ivory tools is very close to the Older Kashirian town chequered ceramics amounted to 17 %.⁹ Arms and tools were made of bone. They are varied in shape and of skilled manufacture. Among them are objects whose forms had been developed in the preceding epoch, during the 2nd millennium B.C. In the first instance, these are single-pin arrowheads and harpoons. Ivory arrowheads imitating the shapes of the Scythians' bronze arrowheads constitute a particular group. But of course, arrowheads of local forms prevail. At that time Dyakovo-type plummets seem to have emerged. Metal objects are scarce and some of them were imported. The latter are iron arrowheads from the town of Troitsk. Judging by their forms and metal composition, they had been brought from the Middle Don and pertain to the 4th—3rd centuries B.C.¹⁰ During that period towns became stronger. Around a town, situated on a cape, a paling was set up and in front, facing a field, a small ditch was dug out and a small embankment raised. "Dwelling walls" is another form of fortifications. These are structures that surrounded the towns and served both as fortifications and dwellings. Other types of living quarters are also known: long houses, round houses with deepened floors, right-angled houses of frame or pillar construction. Such fortifications were chiefly designed to protect cattle from beasts of prey and, to a lesser extent, to fend off attacks by enemies.

It should be noted that most of the ancient towns on the Upper-Volga and on the upper reaches of the Moscow River were located on high banks above the rivers in such a way that they could be easily seen from the water. The towns on the Middle Oka and the lower reaches of the Moscow River were, as a rule, far away from the rivers and situated on minor tributaries among ravines. So far it is difficult to say what had necessitated such diversity in their locations. Settled cattle breeding and agriculture formed the basis of economy at that stage. Horses were used for riding as evidenced by the finds of horny psalias (curb-bit) of the earlier type in the Older Kashirian, Grafskaya Gora and Korchevian ancient towns. Hunting, as can be judged by the bones found in the ancient towns, played a major role — particularly the hunting of furry animals.¹¹

The next stage covers the period from the 3rd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D.

It may be compared to the Sarmatian period in the south and to the Pyanobor culture west of the Urals. This is the period of the Dyakovo culture's highest flourishing. A successful development of productive husbandry seems to have resulted in an increased number of work collectives and in accumulating some wealth in their hands. This led to a situation where the lay-out of the towns, including extending their sites and the building of new fortifications was changed in a number of the towns notably in those on the Upper Volga and the upper reaches of the Moscow River. Formerly a settlement was an enclosure for cattle, and fortification served to protect cattle from beasts of prey. In the period mentioned a fortress was built to repulse attacks by men. New fortifications consisted of two or three embankments that separated a settlement site from fields. One of the embankments surrounded the settlement at the foot of the hill, the second one was in the form of a terrace on the hill slope. Ditches were dug on the side facing fields. There were wooden fortifications on the top of the embankments. As excavations have shown, the embankments were originally not high but during their use they were built four to five times in order to reach their present height. At most of the sites of the Middle Oka reinforcing the fortifications was carried out by repeated additions to one of the embankments.

Therefore, proceeding from the system of the fortifications two groups of sites could be singled out.

A right-angled frame or pillar construction was the dominant form of dwelling at that time. Chequered ceramics continued to exist but their percentage declined and by the end of the stage went out of use. Plain pottery that existed along with chequered ware became dominant towards the end of the stage. As a rule, its shucds were ornamented round the upper edges and upper parts of the walls. There is a great number of "Dyakovo-type plummets", most of which are ornamented. Bone, as weapon material, mainly arrow-heads, and tools, retained their significance. But after the Birth of Christ the number of bone objects decreased. Apparently at that time the inhabitants of the ancient towns acquired iron in the amounts needed to meet all their requirements. The number of iron objects had been rapidly increasing, and toward the end of the stage they outnumbered the ivory objects. There emerged a large number of iron tools, first and foremost knives and sickles. Around the birth of Christ there appeared two-pin arrow-heads which became widespread. A lot of bronze artefacts, decorations and pieces of cloth have been found. Most of them have parallels in the finds of the Ural and Baltic areas. One more feature should be mentioned. Around the Birth of Christ there appeared numerous metal parts of costumes. These are mostly pins, buckles and *sulgums*. In the neighbouring areas they were usually made of bronze and in the Volga-Oka area of iron.

As demonstrated by a great number of sickles, well-developed and settled cattle breeding and agriculture formed the basis of the economy. At the same time, hunting was also practised. It has been suggested that furs entered the market in large amounts.¹² They were probably sold to the inhabitants of the steppe areas and from them to the cities of the Northern Black Sea — coastal area. Blunt bone arrow-heads point to the hunting of small fur-bearing animals. Horses were used for riding as far back as the preceding epoch. Around the Birth of Christ there appeared iron bits and psalias (curb-bit).

The next stage covers the period from the early 3rd to the 6th centuries A.D. The fortification of settlements remained the same as in the previous period. Small alterations of the fortifications were of a particular nature. It is of interest that fortified settlements built at that time had only one embankment especially the ancient town of Bereznyaki on the Upper Volga.¹³ A right-angled house of pillar or frame construction

was the dominant type of dwelling. There was a tendency toward smaller sizes of houses. In the period under discussion pottery was plain. Chequered pottery disappeared at the very beginning of the 3rd century. Along with the crude pottery containing additions of coarse ingredients there appeared ceramics with smooth surfaces, some of which had black polish. Such ceramics can be found in some collections in small quantities. It was clearly brought from the outside, and it has been suggested that it should be associated with Slav and Baltic influences.

There are numerous Dyakovo-type plummets. Most of them are rich in ornamentation. It is worth noting that some of them have figures apparently related to an agricultural cult.¹⁴ Bone tools in the layers of that period are few and they were made carelessly. The number of iron items increased, some of them massive. Finds of hooked scythes, blacksmith's clamps and large axes may be mentioned.¹⁵ There were numerous iron knives, sickles, awls, arrow-heads as well as fittings to fabrics. There was also an increased number of bronze articles. Many of them are imported, but among them local ones are distinct. These are umbo-shaped pendants and little plates imitating figures found on the plummets.

The economy was based on cattle breeding and agriculture. Hunting, particularly of fur-bearing animals, played no doubt a major role.

The stage covering the period between the 6th and the 9th centuries A.D. has been studied by I.G. Rosenfeldt.¹⁶ For a long time scholars dated ending of the occupation of the ancient towns between the end of the 5th and through the 7th centuries A.D. This is explained by the fact that at that time agriculture developed intensively and the inhabitants left the fortified towns for non-fortified settlements. I.G. Rosenfeldt has analysed the material from the upper layers of the ancient towns and concluded that life in them continued up to the 9th—10th centuries. At the same time fresh materials show that agriculture had existed since ancient times, approximately since the emergence of towns, while settlements existed for a long time along with towns. But it should be kept in mind that this period is represented by a smaller amount of finds compared with the earlier ones, which testifies to the decreased role of towns.

In the middle and the end of the stage a great number of Slavs penetrated the Volga-Oka area and lived side by side with the local population. Anthropological research indicates that the Russian population has a number of features that could have been obtained only as a result of the Slavs mixing with the aboriginal Finno-Ugrian population.¹⁷

The culture of the Volga-Oka inhabitants was characterized at that time by the following features. Houses of pillar or frame construction designed for one family were the dominant form of dwellings. However, at the Popadyinian site the remains of a multichambered long dwelling were found.¹⁸ Most of the tools and weapons were made of iron, and many of them were rather massive. There were also bronze ornaments. Pottery is plain and ornamented. The Dyakovo-type plummets seem to have disappeared at the beginning of the stage. Agriculture at that stage probably played a less important role than cattle-breeding. Hunting remained part of the economy.

This period is known from burial remains in the town of Bereznyaky¹⁹ and the site of the Savvino-Storozhevsky monastery.²⁰ Burial structures consist of small houses containing the remains of cremated corpses. They seem to have been built in the towns when nobody lived there any longer. Burial remains of earlier periods are thus far unknown.

Such were the changes that took place in the culture of the Volga-Oka population between the 7th century B.C. and the 9th century A.D.

THE CULTURE OF THE POPULATION OF THE VOLGA-OKA AREA 1000 B.C. — 1000 A.D.

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