

The earliest burials in Volok Slavensky and the initial stages of the water route from the Beloe Lake to the Dvina Basin

Until recent times, the history of developing the water routes which connected the Ladoga and Volga basins with the Northern Dvina river system has been poorly studied. Accordingly, archaeological sites along the route have remained undiscovered. Meanwhile, the regular use of portages made Lake Onega and the Northern Dvina accessible. On the whole, it was a signal event in the colonisation of the Russian North. In the last decade, the Onega-Sukhona Expedition of the Institute of Archaeology, of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, performed wide-scale surveys in the portages between the Sheksna, Onega and Northern Dvina Rivers. As a result, a large series of settlements and burials dated to between the 11th and the 13th centuries came to light. Research in Volok Slavensky holds good promise.

This portage connected the upper Slavyanka River (the left tributary of the Sheksna) with the Porozovitsa River which flows into Lake Kubenskoe (Fig. 1). Being the shortest and most convenient way from the upper Volga to the Dvina basin and the White Sea coast in the 14th—16th centuries, this portage held a special place in the network of river transportation. The Volochek (short portage) administrative unit was first mentioned in 1389 in Prince Dmitry Donskoi's will: together with other Beloe Lake holdings he bequeathed it to his wife.¹ Deeds of the 15th century kept in the Kirillo-Belozersk monastery (which held landed possessions in the locality) give a detailed description of the portage.² Cadasters of the 16th century give us an idea how ships and goods were transported along the portage: "they are driven by horse across the dry land for three versts".

Archaeological studies in 1982—1986 of the area adjacent to Volok Slavensky recreated a fairly detailed picture of its settlement in the Middle Ages. It has been established that up to the late first millennium A.D. the region remained sparsely populated. Three greatly damaged sites have been found from this period with stroke-ornamented or textile ware. The situation had changed by the early second millennium A.D.: 10 settlements and 4 cemeteries date to the early 11th—13th centuries. Seven settlements and 3 cemeteries are found slightly to the west of the portage (as it was located in the late Middle Ages), close to the villages of Nefedyevo and Shuigino. The Nefedyevo I cemetery was the centre of this cluster. It was situated on the upper reaches of the Porozovitsa River, on its left bank, virtually in the Northern Dvina basin. Between 1983 and 1987 an area of about 1600 m² with 76 burials was investigated. All of them were inhumations with no burial mounds above and practically all were east or north-east oriented. Women's burials yielded a great number of Old Russian and Finno-Ugrian ornaments which date the majority of the burials to the 12th century.

Five earlier burials (11th century) were discovered in the same cemetery. They were outside the main topographical structure formed by the 12th-century burials: the latter were placed side by side in rows. Four of the five 11th-century burials were found in the eastern part of the cemetery, the fifth in its south-western part. All of them were

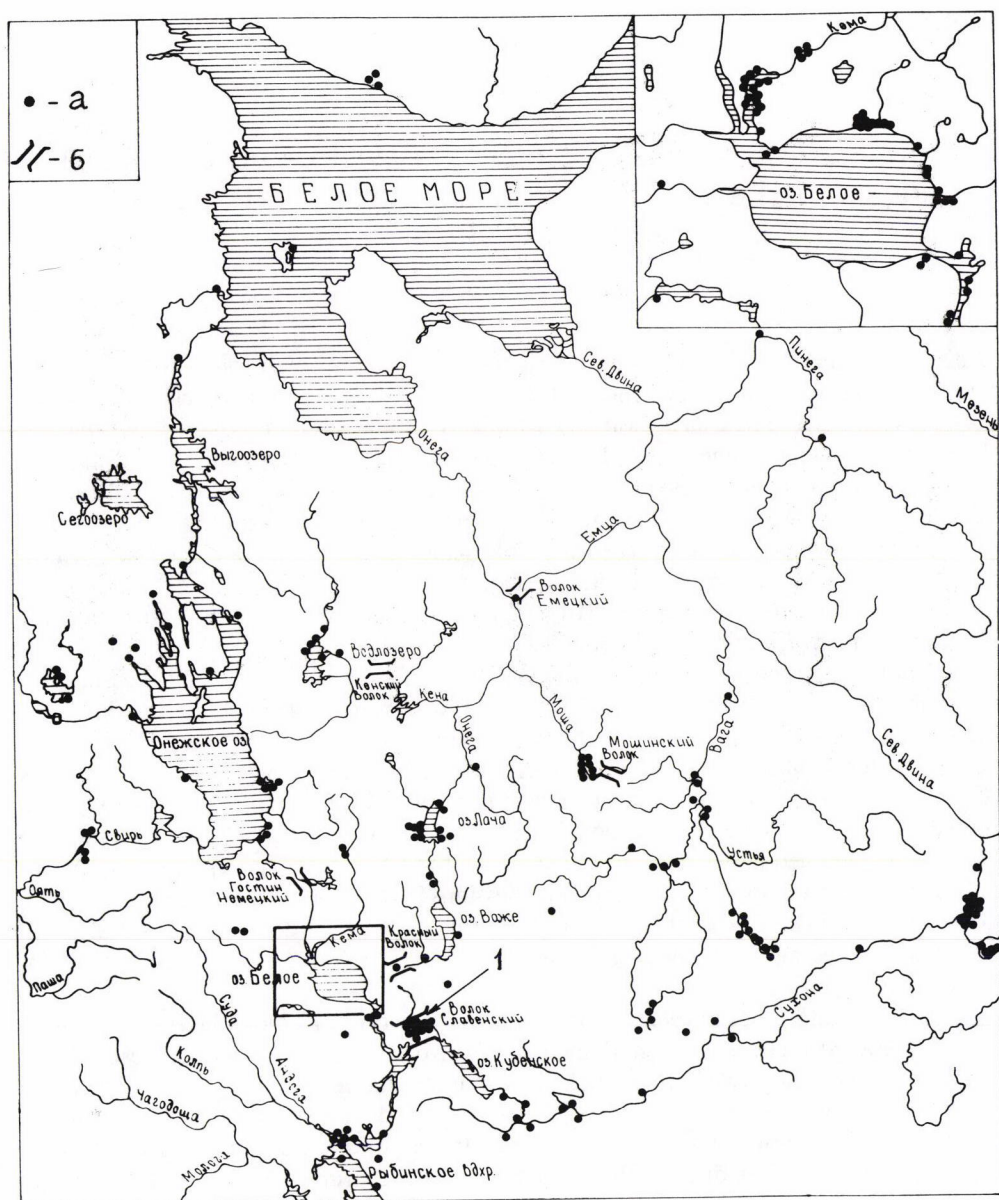


Fig. 1. Archaeological sites of the 11th—13th c c. in the Russian North and the major portages
 a. archaeological sites; b. portages. 1— the Nefedyevo burial ground in Volok Slavensky.

placed at considerable distances from each other and were oriented to the south-east. Remnants of unidentifiable wooden constructions in which the dead had been laid were found in all graves. In three burials remains of birch-bark were found under a layer of decayed wood. No iron nails which might have been used were found. The dead were laid in an extended supine position with their hands at the hips or the pelvis. The arms were slightly spread and bent at the elbows which shows that the burial constructions were spacious enough.

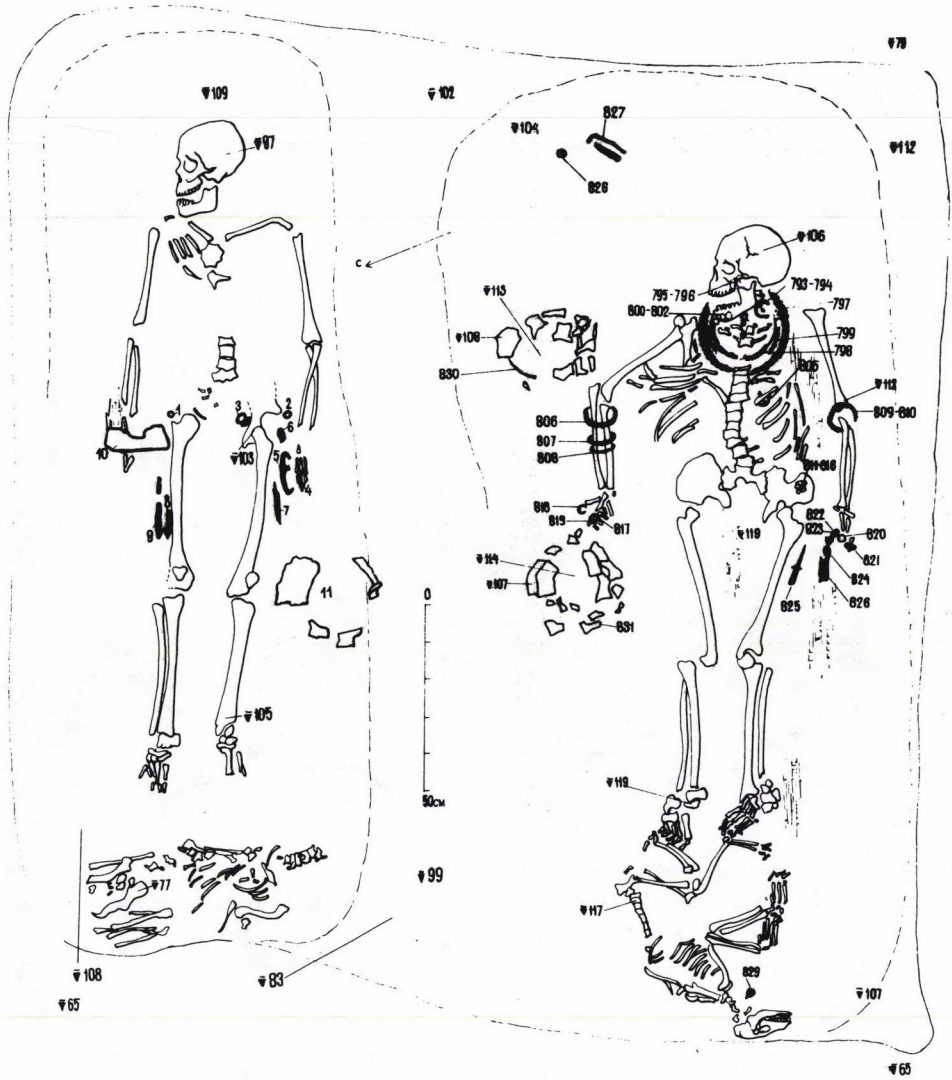


Fig. 2. An outline of burials 19 and 20 from the Nefedyevo burial ground.

The double burial of a man and a woman seems to be the most interesting feature among the 11th-century burials (Burials 19 and 20, Figs. 2, 3, 4). This was in the central part of the hill and was separated from the rest of the burials. Both were east-oriented with a slight (20°) southward deviation. Burial 20 (the southern one) contained the remains of a woman of 25—35 years. Four bangle-shaped ear-rings made of silver wire were placed at her skull. On her neck, archaeologists found three torques: a twisted iron one and two twisted torques of bronze. About 740 glass beads came from the same grave. They were mainly large incusted beads, segmented and lemon-shaped beads and small beads. The string also contained several cornelian and crystal beads and two silver enamelled beads. Three dirhems served as pendants. A penannular brooch fibula was on the right side of the breast and 6 pear-shaped little bells joined by a ring were attached to the right side of the belt. Five bracelets were found on the hands: 4 twisted

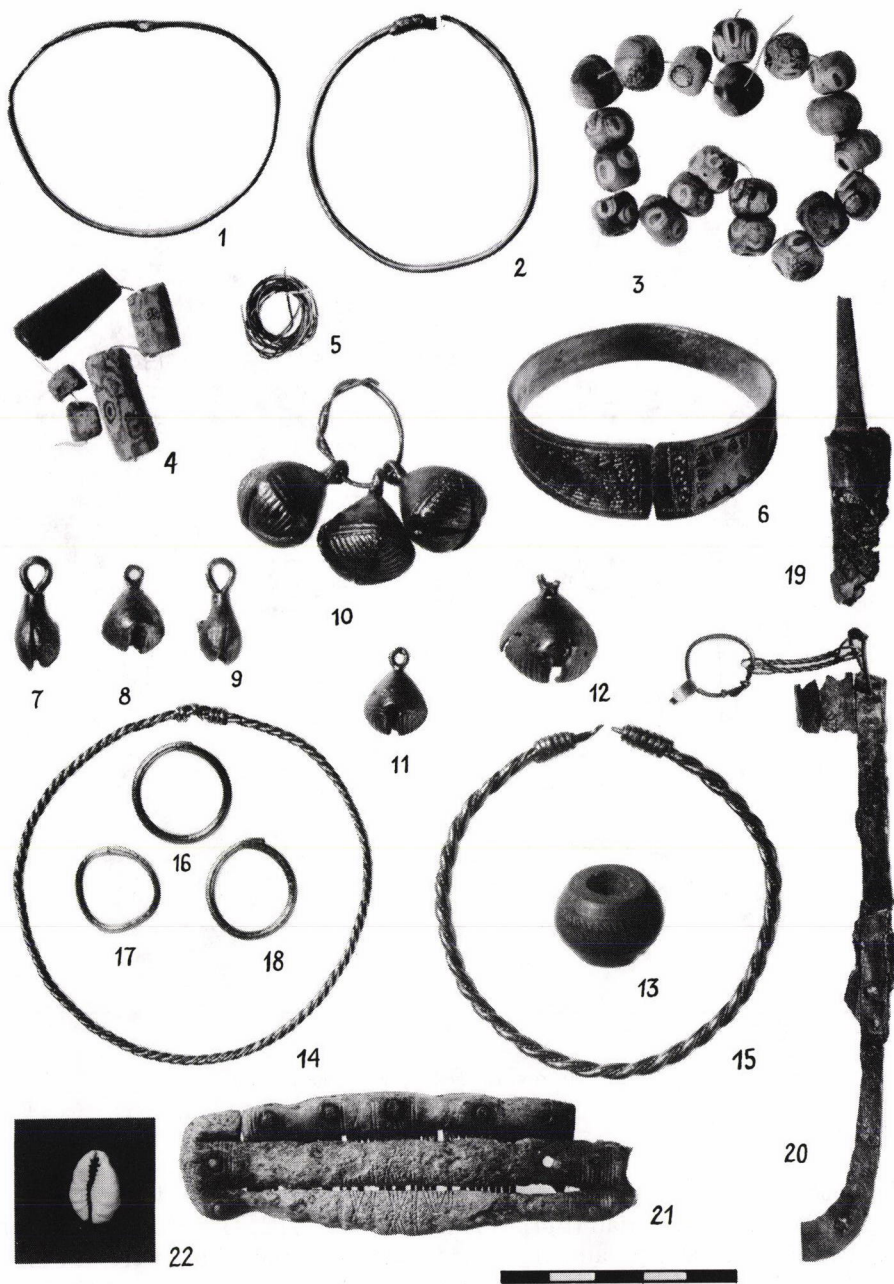


Fig. 3. Ornaments and everyday objects from burial 20. 1, 2 — ear-rings; 3, 4 — beads; 5 — wire; 6, 14, 15 — bangles; 7—12 — small bells; 13 — whorl; 16—18 — finger rings; 19 — knife; 20 — sheath; 21 — comb in a case; 22 — cowrie shell; 1—2 — silver; 3—4 — glass; 5—12, 14—18, 20 — bronze; 13 — stone; 19 — iron; 21 — bone.



Fig. 4. Ornaments worn around the neck (1) and clay vessels (2, 3) from burial 20.

double bracelets and 1 made of wide plates as well as 6 rings on the finger phalanges (5 wire ones and 1 made of an oval plate). A knife, a slate whorl, a small bell with a cowrie shell inside, a bone comb in a case and a skein of bronze wire were also found. Another skein was found behind the head side-by-side with an iron knife in a sheath bound in bronze. Two hand-modelled vessels stood at the hip.

Burial 19 (the northern one) belonged to a man of 40 or 50 years. A bronze buckle and 2 belt rings were found on the belt and a round bronze ring on a finger. An axe with a broad blade and a semi-circular depression at the base, a knife, a piece of flint, fire-steel, a bone arrowhead and a comb in a case were found near the hips. A modelled pot stood at one knee. Canine skeletons were found at the feet of the dead; the skeleton in the female burial had a little bronze bell on the neck.

Though close to one another, burials 19 and 20 are not synchronous. The skeletons lie at different levels, each in its pit isolated from the other by a bedrock wall up to 20 cm wide. The pits, however, were made side-by-side to allow the dead to be placed symmetrically. Evidently, one burial followed another after a short lapse of time.

The three other burials of the earliest group were of women. The ornament sets from them are basically similar to that from burial 20. They contain wire ear-rings, torques, bead strings with pendants, penannular breast brooches, bangles, signet rings and small bells attached to belts.

The set from burial 27 of a woman 35—45 years old contained a forehead ornament made of a silver plate, 6 temple rings: two of them shaped like bangles, two others were shaped like signet-rings and one was composed of beads; a bronze twisted torque, 59 glass beads (dark-red segments, golden glass cylinder-cut beads, lemon-shaped beads and double trapezoid beads), a punched plate pendant, 3 bell-shaped pendants and 3 pear-shaped small bells, 2 braided bracelets and 4 finger rings: a round cast one, a wire spiral and 2 made of oval plates on strings. A massive cast penannular brooch tipped with dragons deserves special attention. It was found on the breast and, in all probability, held the garment together. The grave also contained a knife, a bone comb in a case and a broken modelled pot.

A woman of 20—25 years was interred in burial 31. A silver plate forehead ornament was found on the skull, together with 5 bangle-shaped ear-rings and 1 ear-ring shaped like a signet ring. Three torques were found around the neck: a twisted iron one with two bronze spirals, a bronze twisted one and a bronze one made of a rod triangular in section. Five hundred and six glass beads were found in the grave. Some of them were encrusted; there were several lemon-shaped beads, segmented and double-trapezoid beads. The rest were small beads. The pendants were two crude imitations of dirhems, a wide moon-shaped pendant, a round umbon-shaped pendant and 5 coin-like pendants with bull's heads on them. On the breast was a large penannular brooch with twisted tips. On the left side of the pelvis were 2 pear-shaped little bells with cross-shaped openings and a flat duck-pendant. Two bracelets were found around the wrists: a twisted tied-on one and one with animal heads. There was a finger ring on the right hand. A bone comb in a case, a knife in what was formerly a bronze-bound sheath and a modelled vessel at the feet.

Burial 41 belonged to a woman of 45—55 years. Seven bangle-like ear-rings were found at the skull, 3 torques were around the neck: an iron twisted one, an iron one with bronze spirals hanging on it and a twisted bronze one. The bead-string contained 609 glass beads (blue trapezoid, cylinder silver-glass fluted beads, lemon-shaped beads, drawn glass tubes, and small beads). Two dirhem pendants came from the same burial. A penannular brooch with spiral tips was found on the breast as well as a bone comb in a case and 3 triangular pendants on the left side of the abdomen and 13 pear-shaped little bells with cross-

shaped openings on the left side of the pelvis. There were 2 bracelets on the wrists of each hand with animal heads and massive bangles made of plates with wide tips. The fingers of each hand had 3 signet-rings each. They were made of wire and of oval plates tied on the finger. At the pelvis were a knife in a bronze-bound sheath and an iron needle. Two modelled vessels stood nearby.

An analysis of the female burials of this series points to the stability of many burial rites and the grave-goods set. This similarity is not limited to the fact that the woman's set in all of the four burials consists of the same components or to the fact that some rare objects occur in all graves (such as narrow forehead ornaments made of plates, iron torques and bronze-bound sheaths). What is more important is the recurrence of ornamental details and elements of the burial rite evidently disconnected from any large ethnical entity or social group (such as bronze spirals strung on iron torques, coexistence of wire and tied-on oval plate finger rings, the arms of the buried being slightly spread and bent at the elbows and the rite of placing two pots in the grave). These rites could have emerged in and be inherited by a small group inside which there existed close contacts. There is no doubt that the burials described belonged to a single ancient group of people, most probably close relatives. It is equally clear that there were no large time gaps between the burials.

The period over which the objects from the graves coexisted was limited by the 11th century. The beads dated according to the Novgorodian chronological scale⁴ are of especial importance for making the chronology more precise. The same can be said about the coins identified by A.V. Fomin. Burial 20 yielded 3 dirhems: Samanid, Mansur ben Nukh, Bukhara, 960; the Abbasid, al-Muktafa, 903/4; Mervanid, Mumakhid ad-Daulya, 1004/5. Since the set of beads from the same burial contained 2 fluted ellipsoids, a blue lemon-shaped bead and two striped lemon-shaped beads the complex can be dated to the period not later than the mid-11th century. It seems that burial 41 was practically of the same period. It contained the following dirhems: Samanid, Nasr ben Ahmed, 921/2; Abbasid, al-Mahdi, 775/6. Burial 31 contained several multicoloured lemon-shaped beads dated to the period not later than the third quarter of the 11th century. Crude imitations of dirhems made locally out of a lead-tin alloy were used as pendants for the bead string. Obviously at the time of the burial the local people had no genuine dirhems. Burial 27 is the latest in the series: the fluted cylinder beads found in it began to be used in the mid-11th century. Roughly speaking, burials 19, 20 and 41 can be related to the first half of the 11th century, while burials 31 and 27 are of the latter half of the same century. Clearly, two generations of those who lived in Volok Slavensky were buried there.

These complexes are so far the earliest Medieval burials known in the entire vast territory of the Northern Dvina basin. Only a few sites there can be reliably dated to the 11th century. This can be explained by the fact that Zavolochie (part of the Northern Dvina and Onega basins) and the entire Dvina basin were sparsely populated at that time. One should also bear in mind that up to the early second millennium A.D. the autochthonous population of the Northern Dvina basin retained its own culture, which was probably archaic. This makes the identification of the 10th—11th-century complexes of the Iron Age and Medieval period still more difficult.

The ornament set from the 11th-century burials shows that the culture of the people from Volok Slavensky was fairly complex. The collection includes Slavic, Baltic and East Finnish types. This combination which is in general typical of the Beloe Lake region and Zavolochie as a whole, is especially evident in Volok Slavensky. The artefacts of Slavic and West Finnish origin predominate. Many West Finnish objects belong to the category of rarities not frequently found in the area in question. They are, first

of all, the penannular brooch with dragons' heads with close analogies from Gotland, massive bangles with wide tips, bangles with animal heads, a flat duck pendant of the earlier variant, and a bronze-plated sheath. The Slavic ornaments included both frequent and rare types. Among the latter are moon-shaped wide pendants, hollow silver enamel beads and coin-shaped pendants with bull's heads. East Finnish ornaments are few. The absence of spirals strung on a cord and tied up to the belt and a small number of bell-shaped and conic pendants (found solely in burial 27) are especially conspicuous. Meanwhile, in the 11th century these types of Volga-Finnish ornaments were in the Beloe Lake area the most important elements of dress. It is clear that the culture of the people which in the 11th century came to Volok Slavensky had been formed by powerful western influences.

The fact that the burial and the portage were interconnected is supported not only by the location of the former but also by a large number of objects brought from distant lands. On the whole, such objects were quite common in the Russian villages of the 10th and 11th centuries. In Volok Slavensky their number exceeds the average. Included were cornelian and glass beads, enamelled silver ornaments, cowrie shells and slate whorls. It is interesting to note that Volok Slavensky is the north-easternmost Russian settlement where dirhems have been found. It seems as if the imported objects from 11th-century burials in Nefedyevo were not a chance bulk of commodities: a great number of them and their variety testify that the people from Volok Slavensky were engaged in active trade and had stable connections with the towns.

The great number of objects from the burials and the high quality of many of them are an indirect indication that the people who first came to Volok were comparatively rich. Since no synchronous burials in the neighbouring territories have been found so far and there is no so-called standard burial this assumption remains unproven. It seems that the torques which in the 11th and 12th centuries were status objects besides being an ornament in our case point to the high social position of the buried. This is all the more probable since torques were not particularly popular in the North and were, in all likelihood, a privilege of a narrow circle of people.

The modelled vessels from the graves (Figs 4, 2, 3) point with considerable precision to the initial area of colonisation. They were decorated with large comb stamps and triangular and rectangular flat impressed patterns. The patterns on the vessels from burial 19 and 20 were made of a double zigzag, a horizontal line and an ornament belt. They are related to types IV, XI and XIX of the general classification of patterns of the Beloe Lake Ware. In the 10th and 11th centuries such patterns were limited to Beloe Lake and the upper Sheksna.⁵ In the early second millennium this was a densely populated area which, undoubtedly, had enough population to expand north-east. It is very likely that the settlers in Volok Slavensky came from the town of Beloozero (centre of the Beloe Lake area). The cultural layer of the latter yielded practically all ornament types found in the Volok Slavensky burials.

The question of the settlers' ethnical affiliation is much more complicated. Slavic ornaments predominated in the female ornament sets. They included a few jingling pendants and the brooches were not worn in pairs as was the custom among the Western Finns. On the other hand, the shapes and ornaments on modelled vessels were typical of the Beloe Lake Ves.⁶ Dog sacrifices point probably to the Finno-Ugrian population: canine skeletons have been found in barrows at Lake Ladoga⁷ and in the Luistari cemetery in Finland.⁸ We can also suggest that the buried belonged to a mixed population formed by a miscegenation of Slavs and Finno-Ugrians, or the Ves of Beloe Lake who adopted some Slavic cultural elements or, on the contrary, the Slavs who experienced a great impact from their Finno-Ugrian neighbours.

No matter how the question of ethnic affiliation is resolved, the excavations at Volok Slavensky have, to a certain degree, changed the generally accepted views on the role of the Slavs and the Finns in using the water and portage routes of the North. Today the prevailing view is that different ethnic groups on Russia's northern fringes lived in isolated groups and had practically no contacts among themselves, something which was easily attained in these sparsely populated areas.⁹ It has also been suggested that Volok Slavensky, the major channel of Russian advance towards Zavolochie and the Dvina basin, had been a Slavic settlement from the very beginning. There is a growing realisation today that the culture of those who came to the portage in the early 11th century was a blend of Slavic and Finnish elements. This was a result of active contacts of various ethnic groups. Significantly, the Finno-Ugrian element of this culture was connected with the Baltic-Finnish area and not with the local ethnic context. One can even surmise that precisely the close contacts between the Slavs and the Finns at Lake Beloe, Lake Ladoga and other places were a kind of a catalyst that pushed both of them further to the north-east, to Zavolochie and the Dvina basin.

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THE EARLIEST BURIALS IN VOLOK SLAVENSKY AND THE INITIAL STAGES OF THE WATER ROUTE FROM THE BELOE LAKE TO THE DVINA BASIN

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