

Medieval Karelia on European Trade Routes

The aim of the present paper is to review the trade relations of the Karelians and the formation of their material culture, or, more specifically one of its components which lends itself to archaeological determination, viz. metal objects (weapons and ornaments). It was precisely on this aspect of medieval Karelian material culture that decisive influence was exerted by trade and the close links of the population of the Karelian Isthmus with the neighbouring territories. This was due to a combination of favourable natural and historical factors. The Karelian Isthmus occupies an extremely advantageous position, important trade routes have long crossed it or its immediate vicinity. The Karelian Isthmus was at the crossroads of different ethnic zones and, later, state boundaries. To the south of it lay the areas of the Slavs and territories subordinate to them, to the north-west – those of Sum' and Em', to the south-east – of Lake Ladoga Chud', and beyond the sea were the lands inhabited by Baltic and Scandinavian tribes. All these regions were in active interaction at the time medieval Karelian culture was beginning to take shape (9th–11th centuries). The northern section of the Volga–Baltic waterway was already in operation, the town of Ladoga was exerting its powerful influence on the neighbouring districts, Novgorod, which in the Middle Ages played vital role in the life of Northern Russia and Europe, had come into being and was gathering strength.

Important social and economic changes were also taking place at that time among the local Baltic–Finnish tribes. Tribal relations were disintegrating and an early class society was arising, new social groups were forming, including the commercial and military stratum, men-at-arms who played a significant role in the international trade of the Viking period.

It was in such environment and against this background that the Karelians' own material culture was forming, as well as the ethnic community which was inevitably involved in the already existing system of international trade.

Let us now consider some concrete material. We shall adapt as the starting point the period of the Vikings whose prehistoric remains occupy essentially the same territory as the later reliably Karelian burial grounds and settlements and in whose material the commencement of medieval Karelian material culture proper can be traced archaeologically. Dating to that time are burial grounds and individual finds of objects, hoards of coins and artefacts, possibly the earlier layers of some ancient Karelian sites. As for the imported articles of that period mention should be first of all made of arms and of various ornaments.

Being articles of foreign make, arms in the local graves always formed a stable combination consisting of a sword, a spear and an axe. Characteristic of the earlier burials (tenth century) are swords of Petersen's types H, E and X, type C axes and lancet-shaped spearheads. This stable set of arms indicates that already in the tenth century a stratum of men-at-arms, who undertook the functions of warriors and merchants, was arising among the Karelians. It was they who, together with tribal notables, were the main users of imported arms and luxury items.

This period is adequately illustrated by material from the burial complex at Lopotti in the north-west of the Lake Ladoga area, as well as by a number of men's tombs and separate finds on the Karelian Isthmus.

The male burial at Lopotti was accompanied by a type H sword, three lance-shaped spear-heads, one of which had a incised »Gothic« ornament, a type C axe, a metal whip-handle, an annulate bit and other objects.

Arms of the same types were also found in other burials of the time, the types of swords and spears in question being very common in Europe in the ninth-tenth centuries. They were made in workshops on the Rhine and were widely popular due to their plain and handy form.

Type C axes of North European origin were widely distributed in the tenth-eleventh centuries throughout Eastern Europe.

In the second half of the tenth and in the early eleventh centuries the set of arms was renewed; Kirpichnikov's type V swords came into use, as well as spear-heads of types III and IV, and pole-axes of type VII (Kirpichnikov, 1966, 1, pp. 31–32; 2, pp. 12–14, 39). The warrior's outfit was in use in the eleventh century and partly into the twelfth century, the Karelian finds matching the best West European specimens.

In comparing the arms of the Viking period found on the Karelian Isthmus with corresponding material from the neighbouring territories, it becomes obvious that the population of the isthmus was supplied with arms from the territory of old Russia, as such combinations (swords of types H, E, X and V, and spear-heads of types I and III) are characteristic of the barrows of south-east Ladoga areas and the Russian warriors' barrows (cf. Kirpichnikov, 1966, 1, pp. 27, 30–33; 2, pp. 9–14). In the remains of the neighbouring areas of Western Finland there is a much wider assortment of different types of swords and spears, which may be accounted for by direct connections with Scandinavia (cf. Kivikoski, 1937, S. 229–250; 1973, S. 112–116, Abb. 827–843, 852–867).

Ornamental articles of the Karelians of the period were either imported or copied from foreign specimens. Typical Scandinavian articles were either imported or copied from foreign specimens. Typical Scandinavian articles were discovered only in a female grave of the above-mentioned complex on the Lopotti site, where tortoise-shaped brooches of the type shown in Petersen's Fig. 27 and canoe-shaped cast bracelets were found. Other finds in the same burial included Baltic–Finnish ornaments: an arbalest-shaped brooch, a torque with twisted ends, a spiral bracelet and West Finnish round open-work brooches also unknown in other monuments of the Viking period on the Karelian Isthmus.

The accidental character of these finds and their mixed »ethnically non-uniform« composition make it difficult to interpret the remains. In all probability the ornaments were from Western Finland where such objects including Scandinavian articles, were widespread at that time.

In any event, the artefacts from the burial complex at Lopotti characterize the period in the history of Karelia when the local types of ornaments had not yet come into existence, and the population used imported articles.

The period of the tenth-eleventh centuries is distinguished by a selective approach, i.e. preference was shown for artefacts suiting taste, which afterwards served as models for imitation. It is in this period that, in our opinion, Karelian medieval material culture began to take shape.

The period in question is documented by ample material. At that time the ornaments most popular with the ancient Karelians were cast bronze bracelets with transversal undulating relief lines imitating Scandinavian silver bracelets (11

specimens), penannular brooches with arcs hexahedral in cross section and knobs on the ends (6 specimens) or with knob-shaped ends faceted below (9 specimens), as well as equal-armed brooches (8 pieces).

Such ornaments were most widely distributed in Western Finland, a notable number of them (excluding equal-armed brooches) have also been found in the south-east Ladoga area. The finds in the Ladoga area (the Karelian Isthmus included) not only point to links with Western Finland but also reflect the tastes of local Finnish tribes, the incipient formation of their own complex of feminine ornaments.

Such tastes were developing under the influence of the popularity of these ornaments in the territories on the Baltic Sea, similar articles have been found in the Baltic lands, in Scandinavia and in Novgorod. The selectivity among the ornaments common in neighbouring districts, characteristic of the period under review, can be seen most vividly in the case of equal-armed brooches. All of the eight specimens found on the Karelian Isthmus represent the form which was the most common and popular in Western Finland (Kivikoski group 7) (Kivikoski, 1938, S. 27). It should also be noted that local production of popular ornaments was established as well, e.g. local variants of canoe-shaped bracelets and horseshoe-shaped brooches with strip-connected heads.

Thus, even the rare finds on the Karelian Isthmus dating to the Viking period bear witness to the active participation of the population in the trade and exchange of the countries of the Baltic region. Particularly brisk contacts were maintained within the triangle formed by the Baltic lands-Western Finland- the Lake Ladoga area and North Russia. Contacts were effected both between different sides of the triangle and via international routes (see: Shaskolski, 1954, pp. 146–159). In this case the principal »distributing» role was played by North Russia and her economic centres. This assumption is supported by the material of eleventh-century hoards. Thus, the hoards of coins of the Karelian Isthmus and North Finland are close in composition to the old Russian hoards, reflecting the infiltration of Russian influence into those territories (cf. Potin, 1968, pp. 16, 140–141, 149, 167).

Established relations were preserved and strengthened in the subsequent period (the twelfth-fourteenth centuries). The grave goods, the finds from the sites and the hoards of articles evidence the improved well-being of the population and provide information not only on the directions of trade relations, but also on the composition of imported goods.

According to written sources, the twelfth-thirteenth centuries were the heyday of the Karelians' international trade, a period of their relative independence. The Swedish chronicle of Eric mentions the fact that the Karelians had a good knowledge of the Baltic Sea and of the Swedish skerries, which is a proof of their frequent trade voyages to that part of the Baltic (Rydzevskaya, 1978, pp. 109, 111). Their West European partners were interested in trading with the Karelians. Direct reference to foreign (German and Goth) merchants' trips to them is to be found in Novgorod's treaty of 1262–1263 on peace and trade with the Gothic Coast, Lübeck and German towns and in the draft treaty of 1269 by which Novgorod denied all responsibility for the fate of foreign merchants »in Korela» (Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova, pp. 18, 56). As a result of economic development, in which a significant role was played by the trade relations of the Karelians and their relative independence, Karelian material culture flourished in the period of the second half of the twelfth-early fourteenth centuries. Abundant finds dating to that time form a picture of fairly brisk trade relations with Western Europe, with Gotland and the Hanseatic

League in particular. Among the items believed to have come from Gotland are round silver neck brooches, filigree beads, a neck-chain with hollow snake-shaped heads and pendant crosses. Classified as items of the Hanseatic League trade are silver ring-shaped brooches (Nordman, 1924, S. 176–179; Sarvas, 1971, s. 60). Part of the articles found in the Karelian remains were widely distributed in Northern Europe, the Baltic lands and North Russia, therefore it does not seem possible to define any specific routes of penetration. These articles include round silver coin-like pendants, twisted torques, various finger-rings, arms and woollen cloth.

Contacts with the south coast of the Baltic Sea are documented with the find of a bronze bowl from a burial site in Pomor'ie (Darkevich, 1966, p. 34). The finds of typically Karelian artefacts in Estonia are evidence of continuing relations with the Baltic lands (Tõnisson, 1962, s. 257).

An important role in the economy of Karelia in the period under review was played by the links with the Novgorod lands. Written sources attest that from the second half of the twelfth century Karelia was in the sphere of influence of the Novgorod state. Archaeologically it can be traced by the finds of articles made by Novgorod craftsmen, primarily, Christian symbols: crucifixes, folding crosses, small icons, pendants with images of the Virgin Mary, as well as zoomorphic ornaments with pendants, beads, and East European types of arms. Moreover, Novgorod exerted a considerable influence on the entire culture of the Karelians. It has been ascertained that the Karelian floral ornament developed under the influence of Novgorodian culture. The obvious effect of Novgorod handicraft on Karelian manual art manifests itself, among other things, in the distribution in Karelia of old Russian ceramics. It is likely that part of the handicraft articles came directly from the Novgorod lands.

The economic influence of Novgorod can best be traced by Karelian hoards of artefacts. The finds of a Novgorod silver ingot and three blocks in the Tiversk hoard indicate directly the source of silver supply to the Karelian Isthmus. In the Kilpola hoard there was a coin-like pendant with the «blooming cross» pattern. The hoard in Rautu contained, among other things, a silver temple ring with lozenge plates characteristic of the Novgorodian remains and a *kalatch*-shaped ear-ring which had been brought to Karelia from the East via the Novgorod territory. A silver multi-bead ring was discovered near the town of Sortavala. Plate and braided bracelets typical of Novgorod and the Novgorod lands have been found in some hoards of Northern and even Central and South-Western Finland.

The period of the late twelfth-fourteenth centuries was marked by the incorporation of the Karelian territory into the Novgorod lands. It is characterized by the appearance of towns and a rapid loss of the national features of the material elements of culture. In the fourteenth century they can be but scarcely traced archaeologically due to the disappearance of Karelian ground graves.

The trade relations were preserved and further developed, the leading role being played by medieval towns. Contacts with towns in the Novgorod lands accounted for a considerable part of the commerce and the local population was gradually involved in trade encompassing all of Russia.

Written sources mention merchants from the Lake Onega area. An entry from 1337 records the visit of «Ladoga traders» to the town of Korela (NPL, 1950, p. 348). These contacts furthered more and more the transformation of the local material elements of the culture of Novgorod Karelia into components of Russian culture.

In the second half of the fourteenth century most of the artefacts in Korela were associated with Russian urban handicraft (Kirpichnikov, 1979, pp. 68–73).

Thus, the trade relations and external contacts of the Karelians at all stages in their medieval history were playing a very important role. At an earlier stage they promoted the formation of a Karelian 'national' material culture, at a later stage they contributed to the flourishing of the culture, and at the final stage to its gradual transformation into Russian culture. A period of great changes was setting in, of an economic upsurge of the Karelian lands and the development of feudal relations.

The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed account of all the aspects of Karelian trade in the period under review. Emphasis was therefore laid on its principal directions. Deliberately left out were Karelian-Saami contacts, links with eastern areas and the items of Karelian commerce associated not with handicraft but with various subsidiary trades.

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