

The Inscribed Medieval Sword from Excavations in Vyborg (With Reference to the Arms of Ancient Karelians)

Since 1980, through excavations on Zamkovyi Ostrov (Castle Island) in Vyborg, artefacts of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries have been constantly coming to light which show that a Karelian settlement had existed on the site prior to the foundation of the Swedish castle. Generally, the collection of finds characterizes the household aspect of the life of the population. Among the objects of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, weapons form a separate category.

They consist mainly of tanged and socheted arrowheads, some of which were undoubtedly used in the assault and witnessed or, to be more precise, were instrumental in ravaging the settlement.

A distinctive feature of the other, so far not numerous specimens of arms is that all of them were broken, either as a result of direct use in action or during the destruction of buildings. Conspicuous among them is a sword blade found in 1982 on the platform of the upper plateau north of St. Olaf's tower. An important point is that the stratigraphic situation on the site characterizes most clearly the sequence in which the platform was built up. At that place the defensive stone wall, built according to archaeological evidence not later than the mid-fourteenth century, was erected on the remains of a burnt building that had crashed to the ground. A Karelian knife in a sheath was found on its floor.

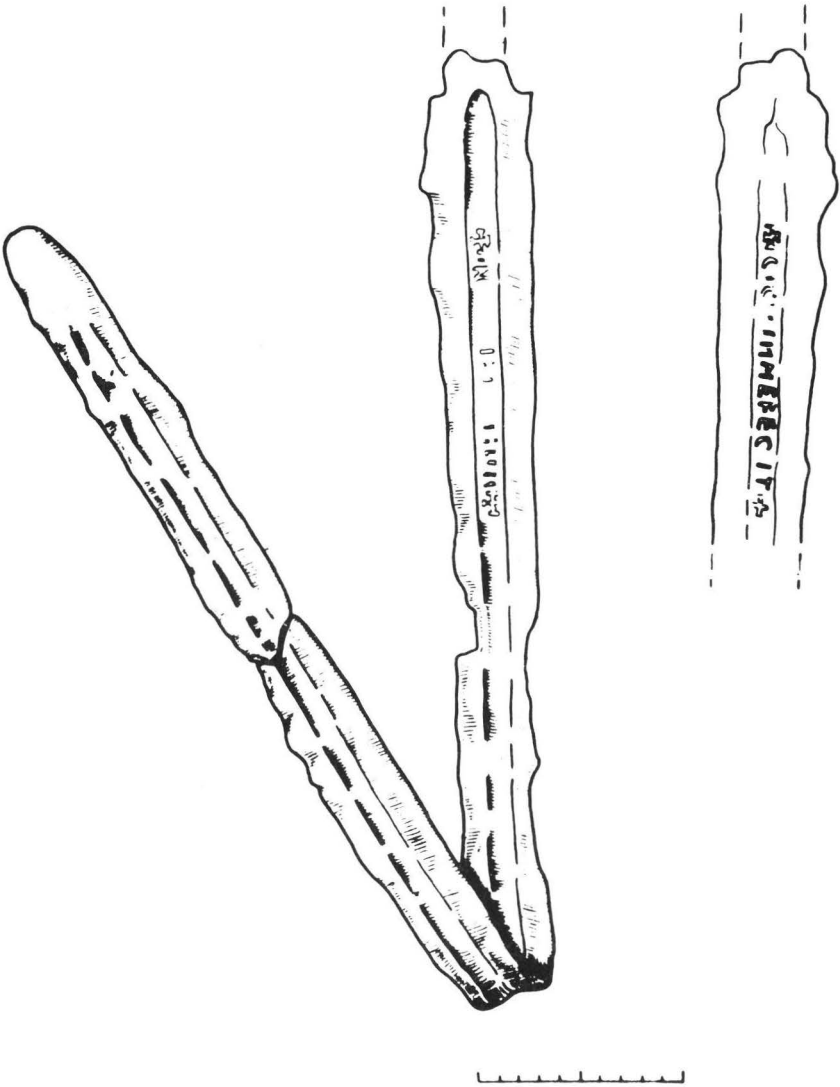
Next to the remains of the building, closer to the centre of the island, large sharp boulders protruded from the subsoil with a thick layer in between containing traces of burnt wood. There can be no doubt that the layer was formed as a result of levelling the surface before the construction by the Swedes of the defensive stone wall. In so doing the space between the rocks was filled up with the remains of the older burnt structures. Together with these remains, a sword blade, arrowheads and some iron artefacts got into the cleft between the boulders.

The sword blade with the hilt haft broken and without a hand-guard or pommel was found in a bent state. The metal had indeed been in a fire, it was severely corroded and some of it had oxidized. The upper fourth of the blade was broken off but lay next to the main part from which it had separated, most probably, while in the ground. Nevertheless, the total length of the cutting edge of the weapon can be reconstructed with a high degree of reliability. It measures 89.5 cm. The double-edged blade, 5.5 cm wide at the hand-guard, smoothly narrows to 3 cm at the end and terminates in an almost semicircular point. The maximum thickness of the steel band is 0.6–0.7 cm. Along its longitudinal axis runs a rather slightly shaped flute 1.0–0.6 cm wide. The blade with two rectangular shoulders passes into the hilt haft 3 cm wide at the base. The length of the surviving part of the haft does not exceed 2.5 cm.

Of great importance for dating the weapon is its mark cleaned and deciphered at the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Archaeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences by A. N. Kirpichnikov and V. A. Nazarenko¹. After cleaning and fixation, the inscriptions showed distinctly on the two sides of the blade's upper third part

made in the technique of inlaying iron wire. In both cases the Latin lettering occupying the total width of the flute is bounded on both sides by crosses.

The inscription which is in a better state of preservation indicates the name of the master-armourer or, as it is assumed, of the armoury (Kirpichnikov, 1973, p. 337). The initial third of the inscription has lost many letters. Only the final combination of letters . . . NMEFECIT is fully legible. In the halfeffaced beginning only the first (C), or (G), third (C) and sixth (I) letters can be reconstructed with sufficient reliability. Despite this the inscription on the Vyborg specimen can be fully deciphered owing to a wide range of analogues. According to them the blade belongs to the group of weapons produced by the workshop of GICELIN or ETCELIN (Drboglav, 1978, pp. 222–227). Swords with that mark have been dealt with in many studies². Moreover, there is a special publication devoted to different versions of deciphering the armourer's name on the basis of linguistic analysis, its author



being of opinion that the name on the whole group of the swords should be deciphered as ETCELIN (Drboglav, 1978, pp. 222–226). Without pursuing the aim of offering my own interpretation of the inscription, I would note that, in discussing the swords of the GICELIN-ETCELIN group, all researchers have taken it for granted that there was a single centre of manufacture, i.e. the district of the Middle Rhine in Germany (Shelyapina, 1978, p. 197).

As for the Vyborg blade, there is one unquestionable point: no matter how great the losses of letters in the armourer's name, the reconstruction of the missing and half-effaced characters places it in the same group with the already known specimens. The inscription on the other side of the blade, which is in a much poorer state of preservation, is not at variance with this assumption. It is also bounded by two crosses and, judging by the position of the surviving letters or their elements, is close to one of the variants of the appeal »IN NOMINE DOMINI« (in the name of the Lord). Judging by the descriptions of the other swords, this appeal or brief prayer-invocation is a characteristic feature of the swords of the GICELIN-ETCELIN group (Drboglav, 1978, p. 226).

Swords from this armoury were quite common in Europe, having been found in Britain, Germany, Finland, the Soviet Baltic lands and the Kiev district (Shelyapina, 1978, pp. 199, 202; Tomanterä, 1964, s. 59, Taf. 27). The most recent specimen with a similar mark was found in 1975 in the Moscow Kremlin during earth-moving (Shelyapina, 1978, p. 196). The Vyborg sword, the twelfth in the series of such weapons, can be referred to type II of A. N. Kirpichnikov's classification, but it has a somewhat wider flute and a point hardly adequate for thrusting (Kirpichnikov, 1966, pp. 50, 53–54).

It is noteworthy that despite certain differences concerning the estimated age of the GICELIN-ETCELIN blades, the supposed time of their manufacture is confined to the twelfth century. To be more exact, the proposed extreme dates define it as the period between 1130 and 1200 (Shelyapina, 1978, p. 196).

The circumstances of the find and its date of manufacture refer the Vyborg blade to the series of artefacts used by the inhabitants of the pre-Swedish settlement. The presence in the substratum of ornaments and arms, i.e. objects of considerable value, and the obvious traces of a fire combined with the arrowheads, all suggest the destruction of the settlement at the time of active and, possibly, sudden hostilities. As a result of the tragedy that befell the settlement, the blade, so far the only one found in the town, was broken, lost its handguard and the hilt with the pommel and, finally, was buried under the ruins.

It is a significant fact that no Karelian or Novgorod artefacts have been found in the layers dating to the Swedish period, i.e. the time after 1293. Some objects of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries have been found only in the layers that were mixed as a result of construction activities by the Swedes. An important item is the pin of an tortoise-shaped oval-convex brooch, found between the foundation stones of the defensive wall of the first half of the fourteenth century, which got there with the earth. Thus, there is every reason to believe that in 1293 the Swedes began the erection of the castle on the site of newly burnt houses after attacking and destroying the small settlement which was protected not so much by fortifications as by its inaccessible location.

The strategic position of the Karelian settlement on the island, the finds of arms and the fragments of fortifications discovered during excavations in 1981, all suggest that proto-Vyborg was more than just a rural settlement. It was a stronghold which,

possibly, had a contingent of warriors armed with such expensive weapons as swords.

It does not seem likely that the blade that has been found was the only specimen of that kind of weapon in the whole settlement. Suffice it to recall that in 1980, on the southern slope of the island hill, in the remains of a house with a wooden floor, investigated further in 1981, an iron disc pommel was found, dated to the twelfth or the first half of the thirteenth century (Kirpichnikov, 1966, pp. 50, 55, 56). As regards the time of its existence, that hilt knob could have been a part of the blade described above. However, it was found next to a fragment of a wooden building located practically on the other side of the island in a ravine-like depression. That building could have been an overgate structure that protected the entrance to the Karelian settlement site. It is significant that in the finds from the remains of the building were three identical arrowheads with fragments of arrows in the sockets, which could have been shot during the siege from the same arbalest.

All archaeological evidence which forms the picture of the destruction of the first insular settlement indicates, at the same time, that the invaders met with active resistance. It is hard to say how long the resistance lasted, but it could have terminated in a hand-to-hand fighting on the territory of the settlement already enveloped in flames, when close-combat weapons – swords and axes – were used, their fragments being afterwards of no interest to the conquerors.

It should be noted, in this connection, that arms, swords included, are among very common items in Karelian male graves (Schwindt, 1893, N13). There is no doubt that not only the rural population who left burial grounds in the environs of Priozersk-Korela but also the inhabitants of proto-Vyborg were armed with expensive, often richly decorated swords.

The original topography of Zamkovyi Ostrov determined in recent excavations admits a considerably greater area of Karelian settlement than that previously estimated. Therefore, one may expect that in the future the stock of pre-Swedish finds will be expanded from excavations in the northern and eastern sectors of the island, and the sword blade described above, a most interesting relic of »blade epigraphy»³, will no longer be unique.

¹ Thanks are due to A. N. Kirpichnikov and V. A. Nazarenko for cleaning and attributing the inscription on the Vyborg sword.

² The most complete bibliography on the subject is given in A. N. Kirpichnikov's work (Kirpichnikov, 1966, p. 292).

³ The term used by a number of authors (Kirpichnikov, 1973, p. 334; Drboglav, 1978, p. 227).

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