

Historical Ties between the Population of the Novgorod Land Centre and the Baltic Countries in the 9th–10th Centuries

The upper reaches of the Volkhov where Novgorod, the capital of North Russia, sprang up and the adjacent areas of the North-West Ilmen Region are the historical nucleus of the ancient Novgorod Land, the centre of Slav settlement in the territory. These areas were extensively colonized by Slavs as early as the end of the first millenium A.D. On the hills, amidst the Volkhov flood plain crossed by channels and tributaries, were ancient settlements (Gorodishche, often referred to in the literature as Ryurikovo Gorodishche, Kholopii Gorodok, Khutyn, Derevyanitsy, Slutka, Prost), huge barrows, their largest cluster being near the village of Volotovo, and the heathen Slav sanctuary in the Peryn area.

The settlements in the upper reaches of the Volkhov formed the northern part of the notable group of hamlets in Ilmen Poozerye, one of the most populated and agriculturally developed areas of the Novgorod Land which stretched in a narrow strip along the north-western shore of the lake. Among the territories adjacent to Lake Ilmen that area is most suitable for initial agricultural development, and it is primarily that area that was implied by the ancient Russian chronicler when he said »the Slavs settled near Lake Ilmen and called themselves by their own name . . .» A large group of settlements is known in Poozerye (Rakomo, Beregovye Moriny, Erunovo, Goroshkovo, Lyuboezha, Vasilievskoe, Georgii) and several mounds. Some of the settlements are situated quite near the lake, but most of them are on the banks of the Veryazha River. It should be noted that, proceeding via the Veryazha, which flows parallel to the north-western shore of the lake a few kilometres from it, one could reach Novgorod, bypassing a large part of stormy Lake Ilmen. The way from the Veryazha to the source of the Volkhov lay along the Prost River which discharges into the lake at Peryn.

It was not by chance that Poozerye and the source of the Volkhov became the centre of settlement for the colonists of the northern group of Slavs. This was due to the highly fertile soils of the north-west Ilmen Region and, indeed in the first place, to the extremely advantageous position of the area. The vast systems of rivers of the Ilmen basin – the Msta, the Lovat, the Pola and the Shelon – met at the source of the Volkhov, and the Volkhov was the northward route leading to the Baltic Sea. It was an important key point on the waterways of the forest zone of Eastern Europe.

During the ninth century the settlement area at the source of the Volkhov and in the adjacent territory was gaining in economic and political importance, two historical processes being responsible for its steadily growing role. Firstly, with the formation of the Novgorod State the settlement nucleus at the source of the Volkhov and in Poozerye was beginning to play more and more the role of the political, economic and cultural centre. It was there that the upper strata of the Slav community of the neighbouring territories were concentrated as well as the men at arms, merchants and artisans. It was there that the town of Novgorod was founded.

Secondly, at the end of the first millennium A.D. the Volkhov held a special position among the principal waterways of Eastern Europe. It had been used as a most important waterway since the last decades of the eighth century when trade relations were first established between the countries of the Baltic Region and the Islamic Orient. In the tenth century the Volkhov was part of the two largest routes of Eastern Europe – the Baltic–Volga route and, since the ninth century, the way »from the Varangians to the Greeks» – both originating in the Baltic, running together and parting in Lake Ilmen. In the ninth century, consolidation of the Baltic–Volga route was under way which stimulated considerably the social and economic development of the adjacent territories. This was reflected in the location of settlements and burial monuments at the most difficult key stretches of the waterway (the mouth and the source of the Volkhov, points of braiding, rapids, etc.), in the concentration of hoards of Cufic coins in the lower and upper reaches of the Volkhov, and in the finds on settlement sites of objects of international trade from distant places. It is noteworthy that 11 hoards of oriental coins of the ninth-tenth centuries (including 5 hoards of the ninth century) have been found on the upper reaches of the Volkhov, 4 hoards (including 1 hoard of the late eighth century and 2 hoards of the ninth century) on the lower reaches, and 8 hoards (of which 3 hoards of the ninth century) in the whole Ilmen basin (Nosov, 1980, pp. 49–62).

Newcomers from Scandinavia were active on the trade and war routes of medieval Europe. Excavations of the ancient town of Ladoga, a large trading and handicraft centre in the lower reaches of the Volkhov, have shown that Scandinavians appeared there in the initial period of the existence of the settlement. The recent discovery in Ladoga of a Scandinavian handicraft complex dated to the 760s is further conclusive proof of that fact (Ryabinin, 1980, pp. 161–177).

At the same time Scandinavians also penetrated the upper reaches of the Volkhov. It is noteworthy that for a long time. They called the capital of North Russia not by its Slav name – Novgorod –, but by the toponym Holmgardr which, in the opinion of experts, goes back to the initial period of Russo-Scandinavian contacts. Where did that name come from and what did it mean?

Various opinions have been offered on this point. At present the most plausible explanation of the territorial meaning of the toponym Holmgardr appears to be that suggested by the Norwegian researcher B. Kleiber. Proceeding from the meaning of the word »holm» – a »small island» (particularly in a gulf or on a river), a »hill», a »knoll» on a swamp or a flooded meadow – and the word »gardr» – a »fence», an »enclosure», a »farmslead», a »yard» – he interprets the name Holmgardr as meaning »an insular locality» or »settlements in an insular locality». B. Kleiber has given much consideration to the topography of Novgorod and its environs, as well as to the high spring floods of the Volkhov. In his opinion, Scandinavians who used to reach that region in spring, the time when distant expeditions were undertaken, saw a flooded territory where the hill tops with settlements looked like small islands (Kleiber, 1957, s. 215 ff).

Quite recently B. Kleiber's view has been supported by the Soviet historian E. A. Melnikova who has advanced some further arguments. Her general conclusion is: Hólmgardr is the most ancient East-European toponym created by Scandinavians». This was the designation for the territory »where terminated the direct (portageless) waterway (Gulf of Finland–Neva–Lake Ladoga–Volkhov) which played a particularly important role in the epoch of initial Russo–Scandinavian contacts» and where there was a »cluster of settlements on elevations in moorland overflowed during floods». »With the town being built on the territory called Holmgardr by the

Scandinavians, the toponym was transferred to the town» (Melnikova, 1977, pp. 202–203).

The location of the known settlements and burial monuments of the end of the first millennium A.D. at the source of the Volkhov and in Poozerye, on low hillocks along the Volkhov and the Veryazha river arms and flooded meadows, corroborates the interpretation of the name *Hólmgardr* as »settlements in an insular locality».

In the ninth century the key position at the source of the Volkhov was occupied by the »Ryurikovo» Gorodishche, the residence of the Novgorod princes in the Middle Ages, lying 2 kilometres from Novgorod. The very site of Gorodishche determined its leading role among the other settlements in the area, including those which might have been located on the elevations which would be afterwards occupied by Novgorod. It was a trading and handicraft settlement, and the possibility of controlling a most important waterway accounted for its acquiring military-administrative functions. Gorodishche appears to have been Novgorod's predecessor as a stronghold. The fortress, built on the hill now occupied by the Novgorod Kremlin, was named »novaya» (new) and this gave origin to the name of the whole settlement. The significance of Gorodishche in the early period of its history is emphasized by the fact that the site was the seat of the Novgorod princes in the Middle Ages.

The material culture of Gorodishche comprises different objects which testify to the extensive international contacts of its inhabitants in the second half of the ninth and in the tenth centuries. Among them are separate Cufic coins and three hoards of dirhams (two of them dating from the ninth century), two Byzantine coins including one of Emperor Theophilus (829–842), beads of rock crystal and cornelian, walnuts and articles of amber.

There is a complex of articles which found their way to the Ilmen Region from the countries of Northern Europe. It includes three iron torques of a tetrahedral rod twisted in several places of which one is with a Thor's hammer. An interesting item is a miniature iron torque-amulet (5 cm in diameter), also with Thor's hammer (Fig. 1: 3). During excavations a bronze equalarmed brooch of Petersen type 58 dated to the ninth century was discovered, a fairly rare find in Russia (Fig. 1: 1). There are fragments of two other equal-armed brooches in the collection of finds from the settlement. Exact analogues to the bronze plate (Fig. 1: 2) decorated with a pattern in Borre style with a stylized image of the muzzle of a beast have been found in a barrow at Borre in Vestfold, Norway (Wilson, Klindt-Jensen, 1966, pl. XXVII-i). A noteworthy find is that of a clay draught. In Russia a clay draught has also been found at the Shestovitskoe settlement site near Chernigov; similar draughts are quite numerous in Norway. The game of draughts was brought to Russia from the North, and G. F. Korzukhina maintains that the game disappeared with the disappearance of Varangian mercenaries from ancient Russia (Korzukhina, 1963, pp. 89, 93, 100). The Gorodishche collection also contains lancet-shaped arrowheads, large horn combs with circular ornamental patterns, different plates decorated with braided patterns, large clay discweights for vertical looms and, finally, numerous glass beads which found their way to the Volkhov region from the countries of the Mediterranean via the trade routes of Western Europe and Gotland.

The Slav population of the Ilmen and Volhov regions also maintained extensive contacts with the Finnish population of the north of Eastern Europe. Such contacts were not confined to economic and trade relations, they also embraced mutual cultural influences. Let us consider one example.

In the past few years we have investigated at Gorodishche a section in the outskirts where several household complexes had been discovered with the same



Fig. 1.

type of clay ovens (ovens in the excavated dwellings were built of stone). The ovens had a carefully laid floor of pebbles plastered with clay and strengthened round the circumference with stakes driven in right against it. In different periods of their existence, from the late ninth to the mid-tenth centuries, the ovens were in the open air walled in on three sides with three rows of logs, inside a yard with wattled walls (Fig. 2) and inside a rough log frame measuring 3×5 metres. Exactly the same oven was discovered in excavations at Staraya Ladoga. Ethnographical analogies reveal that these were outdoor ovens for baking bread. The noted Finnish researcher K. Vilkuna in his paper »The history of the bread oven in Finland» states that it was

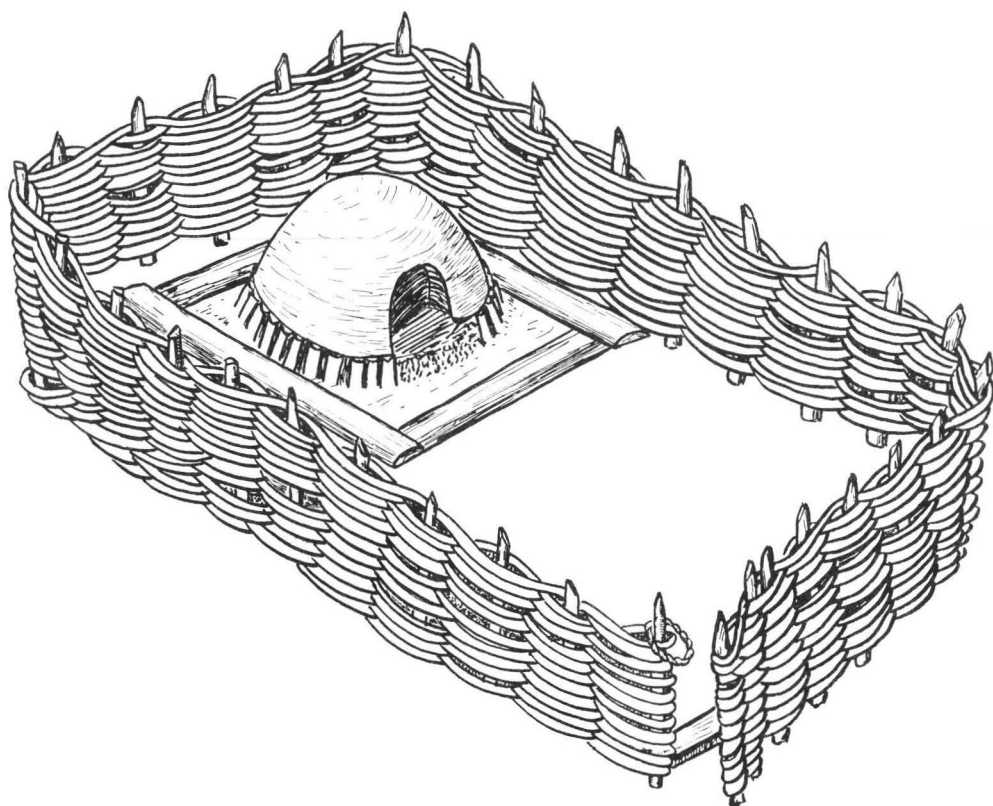


Fig. 2.

already A. Ahlquist who established that the word for bread oven («pätsi») had been borrowed by the Finns from the Slavs, which testifies that «the art of building the board oven thus of baking bread in an oven was learned from the Slavs». K. Viikuna pointed out that in Eastern Europe the bread oven had held a special place in cooking and that the Slav word for oven («pech») had been borrowed by many peoples. K. Viikuna came to the conclusion that outdoor bread ovens had survived in the boundary areas of Russian settlement, preserving there the old practice, whereas with the Russian population proper the bread oven was the first to be moved into the dwelling. In the author's opinion such outlying areas of the occurrence of the bread oven include Finland – (Viikuna, 1945–1946, S. 250–275) Extensive ethnographical material on bread ovens in Finland is given by N. Valonen (Valonen 1963, S. 308–321). In support of his conclusions K. Viikuna pointed to the clay oven at Märttelä, Rusko parish, excavated by A. Tallgren in 1919 and dated by E. Kivikoski to the late tenth-early eleventh centuries. Such an oven concludes K. Viikuna «had come into being on the stoneless territory of the Slavs and, unchanged, was brought to the region of stones (Viikuna, 1945–1946, S. 267–269).

It follows from K. Viikuna's conclusions that the time of that borrowing is at least the end of the first millennium A.D. The northernmost territory of Eastern Europe

inhabited at that time by the Slavs was the Volkhov region. The local Finnish population adopted this particular ethnographic feature of the Slav way of life, incorporating it into their culture. The finds of outdoor bread ovens at Gorodishche near Novgorod and in Ladoga support this conclusion.

In this brief communication I could not, of course, elucidate all the aspects of the relations between the Slav population of the very centre of the Novgorod land and the peoples of Finland and Scandinavia. I have merely attempted to show that those contacts were quite diversified and that the science of archaeology has ample opportunities for their further investigation.

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