

## Finno-Ugrians and Slavs of the Yaroslavl Area on the Volga. Exchange of Cultural Traditions

Until the ninth century the Yaroslavl area on the Volga was inhabited by a group of the Finno-Ugrian tribe of Merya, successors to the Dyakovo culture of the Early Iron Age. At that stage commenced the long and complex process of the formation of the old Russian nationality which, even at the initial stage, incorporated as its main components the Slav immigrants from the north-west and the aboriginal Merya.

The isolated Finno-Ugrian tribes and separate groups gradually became part of the old Russian state, a new spiritual and material culture developed, which absorbed diverse traditions of the local and immigrant populations.

In the nineteenth century and in the 1920–1930s there were discussions on where the Merya had vanished and on whether they had taken part in the processes of the formation of the new ethnic unity, the old Russian nationality. This subject was considered at length in a paper by the prominent ethnographer D. K. Zelenin (1929). It is quite apparent to us now, and not disputed by any of the researchers, that the ethnic group under study formed part of the old Russian population and contributed to its material and spiritual culture. In the foreground nowadays are problems relating to the chronology, details and peculiarities of this process. It also appears important to determine and weigh the contributions made by the Slavs and the Merya to the old Russian culture and to reconstruct the historical pattern of the cultural exchange and of the fusion of diverse traditions of the material and spiritual life of these different peoples.

The archaeological remains of the Merya can be divided into two chronological strata, the first, embracing the 6th–9th centuries and the second, covering the 10th–11th centuries. At the final stage of the first period, in the ninth century, the Merya groups gradually established contacts with the Slavs, and in the tenth–eleventh centuries the Merya forfeited their tribal features and became part of the old Russian nationality.

In the ninth century, the local burial rite underwent a change, the graves dug in the ground were replaced by burial mounds, a custom borrowed from the Slavs. Changes also took place in housebuilding traditions, occupations, types of implements, household articles, fortifications, etc.

The first region between the Volga and the Oka Rivers which witnessed the initial formation of the old Russian nationality in the Zalesk land was the Yaroslavl area on the Volga. This process has been reflected in all its complexity and diversity in burial monuments and finds at settlement sites. At the present stage of historico-archaeological study the most satisfactory material available is that obtained by studying the Mikhailovsky, Timerevsky and Petrovsky site complexes in the vicinity of the city of Yaroslavl (Yaroslavskoe Povolzhie X–XI vv. M., 1963; Dubov, 1982).

Due to the investigations of the Yaroslavl burial grounds an important advance has been made in studying such a topical scientific problem as the role of local

Finno-Ugrian population in the formation of the old Russian nationality in the Upper Volga region, and the contribution of the Finno-Ugrians to the material and spiritual culture of the north-east Russians. I. A. Tikhomirov who carried out the most extensive excavations of the Timerevsky burial ground in pre-revolutionary times pointed out that it had some Finno-Ugrian characteristic features, believing, at the same time, that the custom of burying the dead in mounds had been brought to the Upper Volga by the Scandinavians and soon adopted by the local population of the Novgorod Slavs and Merya (1914, pp. 117–120). V. A. Gorodtsov, who also investigated the Yaroslavl burial grounds, noted the presence of Finno-Ugrian elements in them (*Severnyy krai*, 22 May, 1903, No. 132; 1903, pp. 85–87).

For a long time the predominant view was that the Finno-Ugrian population had played but an insignificant role in the processes of the consolidation of the old Russian state organization and of the formation of the old Russian nationality, which were taking place in the north–east in the Early Middle Ages (Spitsyn, 1905, pp. 165–166).

Ya. V. Stankevich, who was engaged in the excavations of the Timerevsky and Mikhailovsky burial grounds in the 1930s, maintained that there had been no more than the »fact of some mixing of the Slav and Finnish populations« (1941, pp. 82–83). The great majority of the Yaroslavl burial mounds were attributed by Ya. V. Stankevich to Novgorod Slavs who, in her opinion, had made their appearance in the Yaroslavl area on the Volga in the eighth century. Different views, reviving at a new level A. S. Uvarov's conception of the Merya origin of the Vladimir mounds (Uvarov, 1871), were developed in the early sixties when E. I. Goryunova published her monograph (1961, pp. 194–198). E. I. Goryunova distinguished a whole set of characteristic Merya elements in the Yaroslavl necropolises as well.

At the new stage of the investigations of the Yaroslavl burial grounds most of them were classified as Finno-Ugrian, although not of Merya but of Ves origin (Fekhner, 1963, p. 17).

Since the mid-tenth century there appeared in the burial mounds on a mass scale, and in some instances in the ninth century as well, imitations of the »houses of the dead«, baked clay paws and rings, as well as some other elements of dress and ornament. There was also peculiar earthenware of Merya origin: »bomb-shaped« vessels with rounded bottoms and modelled pots with a notching around the edge. Both types of pottery go back to the material of the earlier times, viz the Dyak period. The presence on the sites and in the mounds between the Volga and the Oka Rivers of amulets of bear and other animal teeth, pendants, and, occasionally, whole necklaces of beaver astragalus, numerous bone articles, tools, weapons of bone and horn, etc. also reflects Merya contribution to the old Russian culture.

In the ninth–eleventh centuries there appeared a certain revival of the old traditions in the culture of the Russian population of north–east, archaeologically revealed through the material from the sites and burial grounds: implements, household articles, amulets and ornaments. This is accounted for by the transition from the isolation of various groups of ethnically different populations, which characterized the first stage of the Slav-Russian colonization of the region, to active contacts and interpenetration of cultures. The Merya elements merged organically into the newly forming community and are to be regarded as an integral part of the fusion of ethnically different traditions in the old Russian culture with its leading Slav component. In other words, there was an active assimilation of the Merya by the Slavs, which meant the amalgamation of one people with another, with the loss by one of them of its language and culture.

Participating in the ethnic consolidation were not only the aboriginals but also the immigrant, ethnically different populations. This was not merely a mechanical process of movement of tribes and groups but a complex economic, social and political phenomenon.

The first Slav immigrants that appeared in the ninth century in the region between the Volga and the Oka Rivers, sparsely populated by the Finno-Ugrians, either established new settlements or made their homes on the already existing sites. The main routes of the Slav migration were the rivers of the Volga waterway system, including the Volga itself.

In the ninth century the Volga system was beginning to turn from the internal waterway of the Finno-Ugrian tribes into a line of communication of the Novgorod Slavs and north-western Finno-Ugrians in their movement to the Zalesk lands (Dubov, 1980, pp. 64–66). At the early stage this waterway system included the Msta, the Mologa and the Volga Rivers. The new population first settled in a small area. At least only there, in the region between the Volga and the Oka, we know of Slav-Russian antiquities of the ninth century. It extended from the confluence of the Kotorosl and the Volga Rivers to Lake Kleschino (Plescheevo). Such historico-archaeological observations are in agreement with conclusions arrived at by some linguists. Thus, on the basis of present-day dialect maps, G. G. Melnichenko concludes that the flow of immigrants from the Novgorod lands was not ethnically uniform. This population was settling down mainly on the left bank of the Volga, »but some of the groups penetrated and colonized areas on the right bank, especially in the territory of the present Yaroslavl and partly, Ivanovo districts» (Melnichenko, 1970, p. 40).

In the tenth century the Slavs, setting out from that region, settled throughout the whole Suzdal *opolie* as far as the Klyazma River. At the same time migration was taking place from the Yaroslavl area on the Volga to the lands around Lake Beloye. Indeed, this pattern does not exclude direct penetration of immigrants from the Novgorod lands into the Lake Beloye area, or from the Upper and Middle Dnieper basin to the southern parts of the territory between the Volga and the Oka Rivers. Having reviewed the area of distribution of the word »peun» and of some others, G. G. Melnichenko, suggested that an ethnically uniform population from the Novgorod lands took part in the colonization of both the Yaroslavl area on the Volga and the region of Lake Beloye (1970, p. 41). The author relates his conclusions to the twelfth–thirteenth centuries. However, archaeological material makes it possible to improve the accuracy of dating, to distinguish chronological stages within the ninth–twelfth centuries and to refine the linguistic observations.

As regards ethnic definitions the most reliable index is the combination of burial custom and grave goods. Ninth-century burial complexes of Slav and Scandinavian origin have been identified as well as some elements belonging to the north-western Finno-Ugrians.

Among the new features was the barrow form of burial. Until the appearance of Slavs in the area between the Volga and the Oka Rivers the Finno-Ugrians had the custom of placing the charred bones of the deceased in the so-called houses of the dead, or to bury the corpses in tombs in the ground. Surface burials were practised too. The appearance of barrows indicates the beginning of the Slav colonization of the region. The problem of identifying Slavic burial grounds dating to the Early Middle Ages is discussed in detail in a number of publications by some leading Soviet archaeologists. As a result, on the territory of the forest zone and directly within the region of the Novgorod lands a series Slav barrows have been identified with the

cremations performed elsewhere (Lyapushkin, 1966, p. 134; 1968, pp. 112–113; Sedov, 1970, pp. 30–31, Table XIX).

The Slavic round barrows for the remains cremated elsewhere, not on the site of the mound, are, as a rule, of small size and extremely poor in finds. The grave goods which accompanied the deceased were very meagre, consisting of earthenware pots modelled by hand without the use of the potter's wheel, articles of non-ferrous metals and glass, iron knives and awls. It is often difficult to find in such barrows traces of burial; apparently, only a small portion of calcined human bones, coal or ashes from the pyre were carried to the mound.

The Slavs brought to the north–east not only a new burial custom, new housebuilding traditions, new household articles, weapons and implements. Their arrival gave rise to gradual changes in the character of the local economy. The Merya economy of stock-rearing, hunting and fishing was replaced by complex farming and stock-rearing, with hunting, fishing and collecting playing only a subsidiary role.

The foregoing may be summarized as follows:

Early in the ninth century a stream of colonists comprising Novgorod Slavs, north–western Finno-Ugrians and isolated small groups of Varangians came from the region of the Novgorod lands via the Msta–Mologa–Volga water system to the Yaroslavl area on the Volga. They settled new areas along the Great Volga Waterway, dwelling initially in the neighbourhood of the Merya population and establishing trade and handicraft settlements. In some instances Slavs appeared at tribal Merya centres (Sarsk site, Kleschin). Gradually, the local population was involved in the processes of the formation of the old Russian nationality and statehood.

The Yaroslavl riverine area from the Volga to Kleschin became the advance region in the colonization by the Slavs of the entire territory between the two rivers. Relics of the ninth–tenth centuries have been identified in the area. From there wave of settlement moved deep into the heart of the Rostov land up to the Oka River in the south, to the Lake Belye regions via the Volga and the Sheksna and, later, down the Volga to the Kostroma riverine area.

In the material and spiritual culture of the population that occupied the territory between the Volga and the Oka Rivers, in the Middle Ages and later, there were obvious elements of Slav-Finno-Ugrian culture which reflected the complex historical processes taking place there in those times. The Slav settlement has played a decisive positive role in the development of the north–east, it accelerated the processes of state organization and of the formation of old Russian material and spiritual culture.

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