

# Archaeological Studies of St Petersburg by the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences

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## Abstract

During recent years, researchers from the Institute for the History of Material Culture (IHMC) RAS conducted a series of large-scale archaeological investigations in St Petersburg, Russia. The volume and character of these investigations varied from archaeological supervision of earthworks to large excavations. They have yielded valuable information on the presence, situation, and type of cultural layers within the area of the city and Leningrad oblast, as well as on the tragic fate of the first builders of St Petersburg. These studies, in addition, provided more exact historical data on town planning in the city. The archaeological investigations were conducted at about 100 points within the territory of St Petersburg and its surroundings. This short paper presents an account of some of the most important investigations.

## 1 Research

Founded in 1703, St Petersburg is not an ancient town. Up until recently, 1700 was considered as the arbitrary boundary limiting archaeological studies. During recent years, interest in the archaeology of recent centuries has increased everywhere in the world. Methods specific to this branch of our science rely on the possibility of employing a vast number of graphic materials and other documentary sources, although the significance of traditional archaeological methods of excavation and find analysis should not be disparaged in any way.

The archaeological heritage of St Petersburg is variegated in terms of chronology and typology. Two chronological blocks are distinguishable – an earlier period from the Neolithic to

1703 and the Petersburgian period (1703–1917). Sites of the first block allow us to investigate the prehistory and early history of the town, that is, archaeological traces and cultural landscapes of the pre-Peter time from the Neolithic to the Swedish period. Archaeological sources are of key importance and sometimes the only sources available for this subject. Studies of objects of the second block provide us with an archaeological overview of the question of historical topography, the history of the construction and architecture of St Petersburg from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological evidence provides essential gains in precision and particulars for the dynamics of the town-building evolution that is partly known through cartographical and iconographical materials and numerous written sources.



Figure 1. The most important sites investigated archaeologically in St Petersburg during recent years by the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences: 1 – Okhta Promontory; 2 – cemetery in Bol'shaya Posadskaya Street; 3 – cemetery in Sytninskaya Street; 4 – a block in the yards of the General Headquarters in Dvortsovaya Square (Palace Square); 5 – interments of victims of the 'Red Terror' in the Peter and Paul Fortress; 6 – ensemble of houses in Tul'skaya Street; 7 – foundation of the belfry of the Smol'ny Convent; 8 – foundation of the Church of Dormition in Sennaya Square; 9 – the base of the walls of the 'Lithuanian Castle' (city prison). The background map of St Petersburg dates from 1834.

During recent years, scholars from the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IHMC RAS) succeeded in realising a series of large-scale archaeological investigations. These studies have yielded precious information on the presence, distribution, and character of the prehistoric layer within the city area and on the tragic and heroic fate of the first builders of St Petersburg. These investigations have also resulted in more precise historical evidence of urban planning. The archaeological investigations were carried out at about 100 sites in the territory of St Petersburg and its environs. This short paper discusses some of the most

important among them (Fig. 1). As this paper is a preliminary summary of the topic, no references to literature are included.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Okhta Promontory (2010)

Archaeological rescue studies on a very large scale in terms of financing, numbers of participants from different regions of Russia, excavated area, and excavation results were carried out on the Okhta Promontory. In 45 separate ex-

<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: Some of the archaeological investigations described in this paper are continuation of previous research conducted by other parties, even if these studies are not referred to in the text.

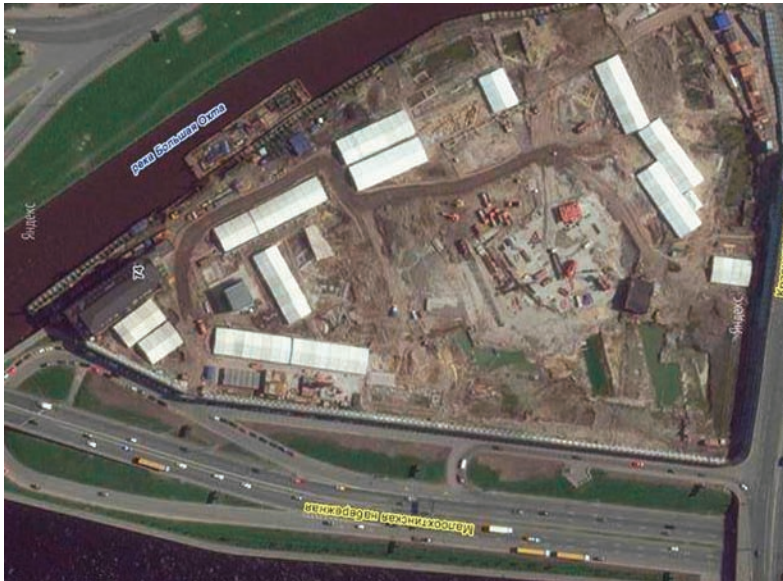


Figure 2. Okhta Promontory. General view of excavations in 2010. Photo: Yandex Maps 2010.



Figure 3. Scheme of sites excavated on the Okhta Promontory: 1 – cultural levels of the Neolithic and Early Metal Ages; 2 – medieval promontory fort; 3 – areas of 15<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup>-century cemeteries and individual burials; 4 – Landskrona fortress dating to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century; 5 – Nyenskans fortress dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century; 6 – Okhta shipyard dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

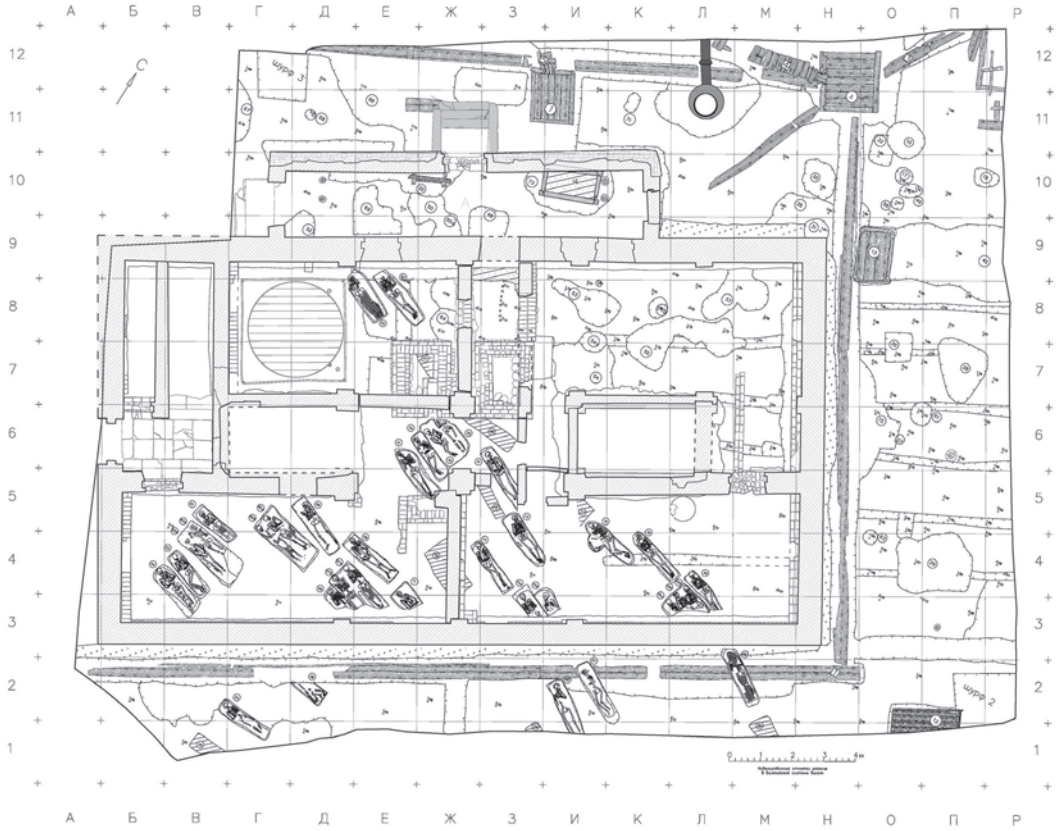


Figure 4. Bol'shaya Posadskaya Street. Excavations of 2011–2012. Cemetery of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century beneath 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings. Drawing: A. Yu. Gorodilov.

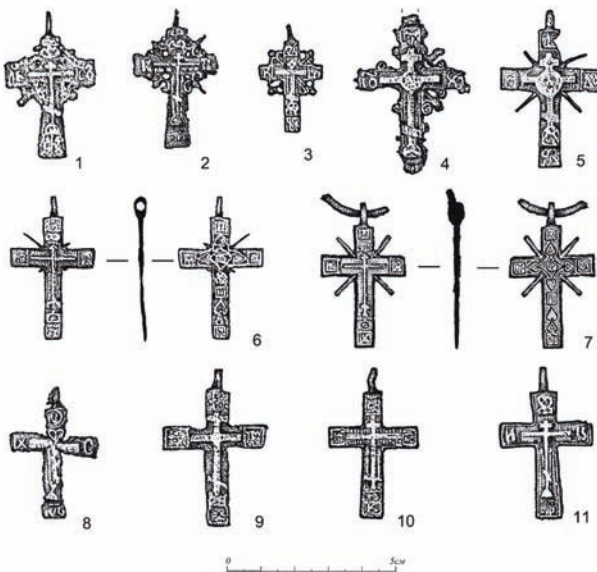


Figure 5. Bol'shaya Posadskaya Street. Excavations of 2011–2012. Crosses from burials of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century: 1 – burial 20; 2 – burial 19B; 3 – burial 13; 4 – burial 156; 5 – burial 15a; 6 – burial 2a; 7 – burial 5a; 8 – burial 56; 9 – burial 4; 10 – burial 23; 11 – burial 24. Drawing: I. V. Zabolotina.



Figure 6. Sytninskaya Street. Excavations of 2013. Interment in a common grave of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Photo: S. L. Solovyov.

cavations with a total area of more than 17 000 m<sup>2</sup>, cultural deposits dating from the Middle Ages to the modern period were investigated. In nine excavation areas measuring about 4000 m<sup>2</sup>, cultural layers of the Neolithic Age were studied. Altogether, these works have resulted in the investigation of the following archaeological objects: 1) cultural levels of the Neolithic and Early Metal Ages (4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BC); 2) areas of the internal and external ditches of the Swedish fortress of Landskrona (AD 1300–1301); 3) fortifications of the two periods of the Swedish fortress of Nyenskans in the form of the preserved remains of moats and bases of the wood-and-earth bastions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; 4) a late medieval cemetery; 5) remains of the constructions of the Okhta shipyard of the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Figs. 2 & 3).

The modern period is represented by foundations and remains of underground structures of the Okhta shipyard and the Petrozavod plant, as well as a few burials in the northern, north-western, and eastern sections of the promontory. Of special interest among the investigated structures is a pond for small boats. Underneath the structures of the Petrozavod plant and the Okhta shipyard, moats and remains of the first (1611–1656) and second (1656–1703) building periods of the Swedish fortress of Nyenskans are preserved. Fragments of the ‘Stariy’ (the Old), the ‘Mertviy’ (the Dead), and the ‘Karlovy’ (Karl’s) bastions were excavated, as well as some areas of the moats encircling them. In the fills of the moats, human remains from a late medieval cemetery and artefacts of the Neolithic and Eneolithic

Ages were found. Of special interest are the excavation results of the preserved areas of the northern external and internal moats of the Swedish fortress of Landskrona (1300–1301). Archaeological investigation of the oldest layers containing traces of the occupation of the Okhta Promontory by prehistoric humans was conducted. The discoveries included places of considerable concentration of archaeological finds and structures concerned with fishing activities here. The levels of the Neolithic Period are so specific here that the exact attribution of the site is possible only when geological data is also taken into account. Over the predominant area of the Okhta Promontory, the deposition of artefacts took place under the conditions of a shallow sea gulf enabling the early inhabitants to use this territory intensively for fishing. The discovery and studies of principally new sites of the Neolithic Period on the Okhta Promontory enables us (1) to reconstruct, on the basis of archaeological and palaeogeographical data, the topography of the locality surrounding the people of the late Stone Age, (2) to identify the ecological communities attached to that era not only concerning this local region, but also the entire north-western region, (3) to define the cultural specifics of its population and the direction and variety of its cultural links. In the course of the expedition, the methods of recording of archaeological objects had been improved so that afterwards they were successfully employed in other protective and rescue works of the IHMC RAS.

### 1.2 Bol'shaya Posadskaya Street (2011–2012)

In Bol'shaya Posadskaya Street, which is in Petrogradskaya Storona – the oldest district of St Petersburg at the intersection between Bol'shaya Posadskaya and Malaya Monetnaya Streets – two excavations with a total area of 1600 m<sup>2</sup> were started. The total thickness of the cultural deposits exceeds 2 metres and reflects almost the entire story of the foundation and evolution of the city. A cemetery of the first builders of the city was discovered here. The

people buried seem to have been peasants from the neighbouring villages in Izhora and Karelia (Figs. 4 & 5). The cemetery was situated 700 metres from Zayachiy Island, where the earthen bastions of the Peter and Paul Fortress were under construction at that time. This cemetery had been in use for a brief period – in the first years of the foundation of St Petersburg. In the 1710s, Bol'shaya Posadskaya Street was laid out and the surrounding area became involved in economic activities. Of note is the concentration, unique for that period, of Peter I coins minted in 1705–1720 – a total of 30 specimens. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this area was abandoned and evidently used for agricultural purposes. Thus, the first regression in the formation of one of the central regions of St Petersburg in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was first discovered.

### 1.3 Sytninskaya Street (2013)

Near the Peter and Paul Fortress, another cemetery was discovered, dating from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The burials were evidently a result of an epidemic. Typically, the deceased were buried wrapped in coarse cloth without coffins. Coffins have been found only in rare instances. Altogether 255 skeletons have been uncovered (Fig. 6). As investigated by anthropologists, people brought from all of European Russia were buried here, in contrast with Posadskaya Street. Thus the popular expression that 'St Petersburg was built upon bones' has been confirmed by archaeological facts.

### 1.4 The eastern wing of the General Headquarters (2010–2011)

Excavations with a total area of 1000 m<sup>2</sup> in the area of the General Headquarters, in the Palace Square, resulted in the discovery of buildings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These finds yield a more precise plan of this part of St Petersburg, beginning with the wooden construction in the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The archaeological investigations allowed the researchers to identify an entire series of parts



Figure 7. Peter and Paul Fortress. Excavations of 2012. Burial of victims of the 'Red Terror' of 1918–1919. Photo: V. I. Kil'dyushevskiy.

and structures left by Carlo Rossi. These remains were buried in earth through numerous renovations and reconstructions in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### 1.5 Peter and Paul Fortress (2012)

Excavations in St Petersburg have changed the traditional views on the chronological boundaries of archaeology. An example is the excavation of the interments of victims of the 'Red Terror' of 1918–1919 in the Peter and Paul Fortress. The prisoners were kept in the fortress and shot and buried near the defensive wall (Fig. 7). In one case, the name of one of the victims could be established through DNA profiling.

#### 1.6 Tul'skaya Street (2012)

Large-scale excavations were conducted throughout an area of 2000 m<sup>2</sup> in the block between Tul'skaya Street and Smol'ny Avenue. This district is situated far from the outlines of the initial urban area. It was therefore quite unexpected to discover here a horizon of timber structures of the middle to second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (the dendrodates of the wood are 1750, 1767, 1778, and 1783). As early as in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, stone construction was started here, and a 'public drinking house' appeared, which was first mentioned in archival documents only in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This assemblage is peculiar in its abundance of coin finds (over 1600 specimens) dating from the second quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Such an early foundation of a city block far from the



Figure 8. Belfry of the Smol'ny Convent. Excavations of 2010. Fundamental platform under the belfry. Photo: I. A. Garbuz.

18<sup>th</sup>-century town was evidently due to the river crossing that connected the mouth of the Okhta and the left bank of the Neva. This crossing existed in this place even before the foundation of St Petersburg – at least during the period when the Swedish town of Nyen was located here.

Comparing the dendrodates with the minting years of coins allows us to define the period of their circulation. For this comparison, the coins from the levels contemporary to the functioning of the building complexes were selected. It has been identified that the coins of the first half and middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been circulating for a long period and cannot be used for dating the buildings. The youngest coins connected with the structures of the lowest horizon give us a *terminus post quem* date for the structures of the upper horizon. Thus, stone building no. 2, covering wooden structure no. 6, cannot have been built earlier than 1798. It seems that houses no. 1 and no. 3 over wooden structures nos. 5, 7a, 8, and 9 were also built at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is of note that in the fills of all the stone houses that were still in use in the

19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, coins of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were found. Thus it follows that the petty copper coin of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been circulating for a long period, at least 70 years. It is therefore problematic to use the coins for dating anything else.

### 1.7 The belfry of the Smol'ny Convent (2010)

The investigation of the foundation of the belfry of the Smol'ny Convent is an example of archaeological studies concerned with the discovery of a new object of cultural heritage. These excavations allowed us to obtain a more detailed knowledge of mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century building technology that is not described in written sources. The ensemble of the Smol'ny Convent is one of the masterpieces of Russian architecture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it has a complicated history. Its construction was completed only after the death of the author of the building project, Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli. The dominant building of the ensemble, which would feature a five-floor bell tower, had never been completed. No drawings





Figure 9. Foundation of the cathedral of the Martyr St Catherine in the town of Pushkin. Excavations of 2006–2007. Photo: N. F. Solovyova.

of the foundations are preserved. After the uncompleted belfry was destroyed in 1833, information on its architecture could be obtained only through excavations. The archaeological investigations yielded more exact details of its building technology. Of importance is the fact that the edge of the foundation pit was soaked with lime mortar. The foundation platform, which measures  $34 \times 34$  m and is constructed from limestone slabs in seven courses (Fig. 8), has been discovered together with architectural fragments of stone and gypsum and stucco with preserved colouring. The excavated layer was rich in finds of the 18<sup>th</sup> century including fragmentary faience ware with manufacture stamps dating from 1771, 1773, and 1774.

### 1.8 Church in Sennaya Square (2013)

In recent years, the restoration of churches destroyed during the Soviet period has begun.

Our goal was to investigate the foundations of the church of the Dormition of Virgin Mary, which was once situated in Sennaya Square. This church was blown up in 1961. Over an area of 1537 m<sup>2</sup>, the preserved architectural constructions of the church, burials inside the church, the levels of the construction and destruction of the church, buried soil, and fragments of the urban cultural layers of the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries have been revealed.

### 1.9 The 'Lithuanian Castle' (2012–2013)

The 'Lithuanian Castle' is an example of a museum established at a discovered archaeological site. The prison of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (the so-called 'Lithuanian Castle') was burned during the revolution and pulled down later. A residential house is planned for this place. The foundations of the building have been investigated through archaeological excavations. It was

decided to make a museum exhibit in the basement of the newly constructed building with the well-preserved foundation of the corner tower.

### 1.10 Cathedral of St Catherine in the town of Pushkin (2006–2007)

The village of Tsarskoye Selo (now the town of Pushkin), which was the Russian Imperial residence near St Petersburg, became a pearl of architecture and park art of the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries due to the ambitions of the ruling dynasty of the Romanovs and the inspired efforts of great architects, excellent artists, and skilful artisans. The formation of the appearance of Tsarskoye Selo, similarly to all Russian large and small towns, was influenced by its churches. Among these, primarily the town's main cathedral of the Martyr St Catherine is noteworthy. This church was built by the prominent Russian architect Konstantin A. Thon by the personal order of Emperor Nicholas I in 1835–1840. The Cathedral of St Catherine was built in the main square of Tsarskoye Selo as a single tall building dominant among the historical buildings in the regularly designed part of the town. The gilded cupolas of the Cathedral of St Catherine were visible to visitors approaching Tsarskoye Selo by train on the railway that was built simultaneously with the church.

In June 1939, the Cathedral of St Catherine was blown up. The magnificent ensemble was annihilated in the square, which lost its name and was transformed into an ordinary public garden. In 1960, in the centre of the garden, a monument of V. I. Lenin was built over the remains of the cathedral.

Based on the decision to reconstruct the Cathedral of St Catherine, in 2006–2007, the Institute for the History of Material Culture RAS carried out archaeological excavations of the preserved foundations of the church. For the first time in the history of St Petersburg and its suburbs, the entire remains of such a grandiose building were uncovered (Fig. 9).

The archaeological investigation of the Cathedral of St Catherine was carried out

without any archival data dated to the time of construction of the church. The field investigations allowed us to attest visually to the complicated building history of the Cathedral of St Catherine, including several repairs and reconstructions that took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A single view of the preserved foundation, after it was cleared, suffices to give an idea of the grandiosity of the cathedral. In the basement rooms, remains of the walls, foundation of the altar, floor pavements, infrastructures, and remains of stoves were preserved. The archaeologists succeeded in finding out in what manner and how often the cathedral was repaired and what problems were encountered by the workers when they changed the communications, ovens, and heating channels.

On the basis of the results of the archaeological excavations, the plan for the restoration of the cathedral was re-evaluated after doubts induced by engineering calculations according to which the original foundation of slab stones might be unable to bear the intended load. The specialists recommended building a new foundation simultaneously with making a museum exhibit out of a part of the original base of the cathedral. In 2010, the Cathedral of St Catherine was reconstructed. It was completely identical to the original one. The historical archive and archaeological explorations constituted the basis for this achievement. The remains of the foundation, historical documents, and archaeological finds discovered in the course of the excavations are exhibited in the basement of the newly constructed church. A museum of the history of the Cathedral of St Catherine was established there.

## 2 Conclusions

The works conducted during recent years by the IHMC RAS in the territory of St Petersburg have demonstrated the significance of archaeological studies of deposits of the modern period. A huge amount of information on the history of the city has been obtained and archaeological objects that seemed to have been irretrievably lost were recovered. Some of them

are now under reconstruction or being exhibited in museums.

For prompt scientific publishing of new archaeological materials, a bulletin series – *Бюллетень ИИМК РАН* (*Bulletin of the IHMC RAS*, [ologiya\) – was started in 2010. It includes collections of papers concerning archaeological projects funded by contracts and fulfilled by the Institute in the territory of St Petersburg. After an organisational stage, the archaeology of St Petersburg now enjoys a period of growing activity.](http://www.archeo.ru/izdaniya-1/seriinye-izdaniya/byulleten-instituta-istorii-materialnoi-kultury-ran.-ohrannaya-arhe-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

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