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Medieval Russia (Rus'), Archaeology of



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Introduction

The Slavic colonization of Northwest Russia occurred in two waves coming from the territory of the western Slavs. The first, identified with the tribe known as the Krivichi and distinguished by their use of long barrows, took place in the sixth to seventh centuries. The second wave, identified with the Sloveni and their use of *sopki* (high, conical burial mounds), took place in the eighth to ninth centuries (Yanin 2007: 205).

Medieval Russia from the ninth to twelfth century is often referred to by the term Rus'. The origin of this name, and the populations and lands to which it refers, has been the subject of much debate that has affected both archaeologists and historians over many years. It is usually associated with Scandinavian settlers and tribal leaders, as the early chronicles describe Swedish Vikings coming from the Baltic area to settle and rule over a disparate group of Slavic tribes around the emerging town of Novgorod and its territory, which included the important hill fort known as Ryurik Gorodishche that controlled the waterways on the northern edge of Lake Ilmen.

According to one possible theory, the name Rus', like the Finnish name for Sweden (*Ruotsi*), might be derived from an Old Norse term for “the men who row” as rowing was the main method of navigating the rivers of Eastern Europe. The name Rus' would then have the same origin as the Finnish and Estonian names for Sweden, namely, *Ruotsi* and *Rootsi*, respectively.

Scandinavians are sometimes referred to in medieval Russian chronicles as Varangians, another name accepted as meaning Vikings with a Swedish origin. According to the *Primary Russian Chronicle* compiled in Kiev around CE 1113, the Rus' had relocated from the Baltic area to northeastern Russia, creating an early polity under the leadership of Ryurik. The descendants of Ryurik were the ruling dynasty of Rus' centered on Novgorod (from 862) and Kiev and the successor principalities of Chernigov, Vladimir-Suzdal, Galicia-Volhynia (after 1199), and eventually Moscow (which did not become a significant urban settlement and power base until the fourteenth century). Their dynasty is referred to as the Riurikid.

Historical Background

Primary Historical Sources

According to the earliest East Slavic record, known as the *Primary Russian Chronicle*, the Varangians were first expelled and then invited

to rule over the feuding Slavic and Finno-Ugric tribes around Novgorod.

The part of the Chronicle that refers to this states that:

The four tribes who had been forced to pay tribute to the Varangians (the Chuds, Slavs, Merians, and Krivichs) drove the Varangians back beyond the sea, refused to pay them further tribute, and set out to govern themselves. But there was no law amongst them, and tribe rose against tribe. Discord thus ensued among them, and they began to war one with another. They said to themselves, 'Let us seek a prince who may rule over us, and judge us according to custom.' Thus they went overseas to the Varangians, to the Rus'. These particular Varangians were known as Rus', just as some are called Swedes, and others Normans and Angles, and still others Gutes, for they were thus named. The Chuds, the Slavs, the Krivichs and the Veps then said to the Rus', 'Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come reign as princes, rule over us.' Three brothers, with their kinfolk, were selected. They brought with them all the Rus' and migrated (the *Primary Russian Chronicle* entry for either CE 859 or 862 depending on which version of the chronicle is used).

Development of the Subject

In the nineteenth century, the study of Russian medieval archaeology began with a period of anti-quarianism, but by the late nineteenth century, the subject had become inextricably linked to nationalistic approaches that were becoming widespread across Europe. After World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, this approach combined with a growing preoccupation with the ethnic origins of early medieval peoples, their settlements, and burial rites. Examples of this include the early fieldwork at Staraya Ladoga, where investigations, particularly of burial mounds, searched for evidence of Viking incomers to either support accounts from the chronicles or to demonstrate a Slavic national/ethnic tradition (often referred to as "the Normanist controversy") as views polarized about the extent and influence of Scandinavian migrants into Kievan Rus' in the ninth and tenth centuries. Under Stalin, nationalism was also used to legitimize political regimes using ethno-genetic studies.

The domination of ethnic origins and the role of typologies in supporting or countering various

arguments about Vikings, Slavs, and indigenous tribes continued throughout much of the twentieth century. During the Soviet postwar period, this approach took on new significance, as it was seen as a relatively safe area of archaeological and historical research, whereas new approaches and the discussion of western ideas could place individuals into a position of conflict with the state with sometimes dire consequences. As recently as the 1980s, leading Soviet archaeologists found themselves in difficulties with the authorities due to their questioning of accepted Soviet interpretations of history. For instance, theoretical archaeologist Leo Klejn faced charges and a prison sentence partly for his questioning of the prevailing view of the Normanist question and for contradicting the orthodox Marxist theory of historical materialism. He was also persecuted for showing interest in Western ideas, such as the New Archaeology, for publishing extensively in Western journals, and for having too many international contacts (Klejn 1991).

In the period of *perestroika* and the post-Soviet era (i.e., after 1991), Russian medieval archaeologists were able to contribute to academic debate within a wider, more open international forum. However, the economic crisis of the mid-1990s brought about its own problems of diminished resources in university departments and academic institutes, many of which had high numbers of staff but little money with which to pay them (Chernykh 1995).

Throughout all these twentieth-century upheavals, the Soviet and subsequently the Russian Academy of Sciences have supported archaeology in general and medieval archaeology in particular through the funding of fieldwork, research staff, and laboratories. The Institute of Archaeology in Moscow and the Institute for the History of Material Culture in St. Petersburg are the two main organizations for field archaeology throughout all of Russia. Both institutes have long pedigrees in high-quality archaeological work (the latter organization being established by Lenin himself). At the present time (2017), both institutes are run by medieval archaeologists (N.A. Makarov in Moscow and V.A. Lapshin in St. Petersburg).

University departments also play an important role in both national and regional archaeological research projects. For instance, the long-standing program of systematic excavations in Novgorod has been directed by the Department of Archaeology of Moscow State (Lomonosov) University every year since they were first begun by Professor Artemiy Artsikhovskiy in 1932 with the exception of the war years in the 1940s. This connection has continued throughout the postwar and post-Soviet periods, first under the direction of Boris A. Kolchin, followed by Valentin L. Yanin and Alexander S. Khoroshev.

Key Issues/Current Debates

Key Sites

In keeping with the debate about the role and significance of Viking traders and settlers, the site of Staraya Ladoga, investigated since 1972 under the direction of A.N. Kirpichnikov, has been the subject of much interest to scholars of early medieval Europe. It was an important trading center (emporium) of the type well known throughout the Baltic and North Sea at this time, similar to Birka, Hedeby, and Ribe. According to dendrochronological evidence, the settlement of Ladoga emerged no later than CE 753 and quickly became an important trading place on the routes from the Baltic Sea along the River Volkhov, then via the Dnieper or Volga to the south or east. The generally well-preserved remains of timber buildings cover approximately 18 ha and represent continuous habitation from the mid-eighth century onward. It was a center for craft, administration, trade, and transportation, where Slavic, Finnish, Scandinavian, and other ethnic groups lived and traded. Much of the Arabic silver coinage that reached the shores of the Baltic Sea probably passed through it (Kirpichnikov 2004: 183).

Another site related to the question of Viking penetration into early medieval Russia is Gnezdovo, near Smolensk. This site has also been the subject of extensive investigation, producing a large range of artifacts, mostly from burials, that indicate extensive Viking

connections. This has led archaeologists to address the formidable question of how extensive was the role of Scandinavians in the origins and development of the Kievan State. For an overview of Norse settlements in Eastern Europe between the eighth and tenth centuries, see Duczko 2004.

An important aspect of medieval archaeology in Russia has been the excavation of urban sites, the primary ones being Novgorod, Pskov, Suzdal, Vladimir, Rostov, and more recently Moscow. These investigations have had a tradition of focusing on the material culture, notably jewelry and other metalwork, and also on technological questions to do with the manufacture of iron and copper alloy objects. Another area of intensive study has been the organic remains of objects of wood and leather, particularly as many of the more extensively occupied towns, such as Novgorod, have very deep anaerobic deposits where artifact preservation is exceptionally good. It was in this context that the first birch-bark documents were discovered at the Nerevsky excavations in Novgorod in 1951. Dating from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, these documents now number over 1,000 from Novgorod alone, but with further examples found at other towns including Stara Russa, Pskov, Smolensk, Torzhok, Tver, Moscow, and Ryazan in Russia, Zvenigorod in Ukraine, and Vitebsk and Mstislavl in Belarus. These precious remains of largely domestic, sometimes mercantile, writing have been avidly studied by linguists and historians, as well as archaeologists, the leading experts being the historian V.L. Yanin and the linguist A.A. Zalizniak.

Another aspect of medieval urban archaeology that has been much studied is town morphology: notably the layout of streets, properties, and open spaces. A great deal has been made of the so-called Republic of Novgorod dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth century where the *boyars* had a voice to equal, and occasionally veto, that of the Prince. They also elected their own mayor (*posadnik*). As a topographic feature, the outdoor space provided for the town *veche* (a popular assembly similar to the Norse *Thing*) should be recognizable archaeologically, and various ideas about its location have been put forward. In this way, medieval archaeology has been instrumental

in the debate about notions of the state and statehood, as well as the organization of “democratic” or “republican” city life.

Recognizing and documenting the evidence for the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and their impact on urban places, such as Suzdal and Vladimir, is another recent theme, as is the investigation of the rise of Moscow in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For example, recent work on rescue sites in Moscow, including the town’s late medieval mint, has been carried out and recently published by the Institute of Archaeology (Krenke 2009).

It is worth noting that the Soviet era brought in some far-reaching and, for their day, innovative heritage protection laws in the 1960s. The most significant of these for medieval archaeology was “the protection of the cultural layer” first brought into effect in Novgorod and which ensured that archaeological deposits were either protected or excavated by approved archaeologists from the Academy of Sciences. However, changes to heritage protection in recent years have led to a more western approach to rescue archaeology as the involvement of private developers has brought about a more commercial approach to both urban and rural development. This has reduced the amount of research investigation but has increased the number of smaller investigations and extensive field surveys.

One of the positive outcomes of recent changes has been the emergence of landscape studies looking at rural settlement patterns through time, settlement shift, nucleation, and dispersal. A notable example of this approach has been the work of Nikolai Makarov, whose work in the Byeloozero region has been examining the evidence for the colonization of the northern region of medieval Russia as the principalities of Novgorod and Rostov-Suzdal vied for control of the rich fur-gathering lands that lay between Lake Byeloe and the White Sea. In particular, this survey work has been investigating the formation of a loose but stable settlement pattern in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, which covered a vast area populated by Finno-Ugric groups who paid tribute in fur and other forest products to the dominant principalities, especially Novgorod. The

importance of river systems and portages to the movement of goods and people has been well demonstrated in this research (Makarov 1997). Makarov has built upon these surveys carried out in the 1990s by intensive investigation around Lake Kubenskoye, recently producing three volumes of results that have used a multidisciplinary approach to address wider landscape and ecological themes (Makarov 2007, 2008, 2009). More recently, he and his team from the Institute of Archaeology in Moscow have turned their attention to the hinterland of Suzdal (Suzdalia) where they have been examining the social elite at rural sites in the area (Makarov 2013).

Turning to ecology, while the study of the animal economy of medieval Russia has lagged behind that in the West, it has had some notable successes in recent years with studies of both domestic and wild species used to understand the role and type of settlements (e.g., settled agricultural communities versus fur-trapping stations). This work has also provided datable evidence for the decline in the population of certain hunted species such as beaver (Savinetsky and Krylovich 2009). Other zooarchaeological studies have included analyses of the contrast between animal assemblages found at urban and urban-hinterland sites in the Novgorod and Byeloozero regions (Maltby 2012; Brisbane et al. 2015).

Another ecological approach has been to develop models to provide a more detailed understanding of the changes in the composition of the medieval forest brought about by anthropogenic factors and the consequences this had for wildlife (Hamilton-Dyer et al. 2016).

The study of the arrival of Christianity in Russia in CE 989 and the impact of the Church on settlement and social stratification has also gone through various phases of development. In Soviet times, these topics were dealt with, as many topics were during this period, from a largely technological point of view. For instance, studies by archaeologist and architectural historian Pavel Rappoport (1913–1988) on the building of churches within medieval Russia concentrated on the investigation of how people went about constructing them, including topics

such as brickmaking, lime firing, roofing, and decoration, as well as how churches were laid out and how much brickwork was required per day (see, e.g., his work on churches in Kievan Russia published in English in 1995) (Rappoport 1995).

More recent studies on the introduction of Christianity into Russia have focused on the material culture of the Church itself in terms of art history and artisan production. The importance of Christianity on settlement and churchyard location is increasingly being recognized as highly significant to settlement patterns of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, for example, in regional surveys of the Byeloozero region and more recently of Suzdal Opolie (Suzdalia).

Future Directions

Building upon studies of landscape and settlement patterns, the work program established by the Institute of Archaeology, and supported by the Russian Academy of Sciences, has set the agenda for the foreseeable future for medieval archaeology in Russia. Topics include center/periphery relations, settlement patterns, shifting settlements within a landscape (Brisbane et al. 2012), as well as issues of social stratification and the rise of elites. The last of these raises interesting and much-debated questions of where the elites actually reside – in the town or the country – with some archaeologists now challenging the long-held view that towns such as Novgorod were where the *boyars* resided and had their power base. As mentioned above, undefended sites around Suzdal are now being mapped and studied with a view to testing this hypothesis (Makarov 2013).

Another example of one of the Institute's long-term projects that will help to bring new ideas forward is the work being undertaken in the region of Kaliningrad, where a German and Russian team of archaeologists have been undertaking joint surveys and excavations in an attempt to locate the Viking settlement of Wiskiauten (Ibsen and Frenzel 2010). In addition, A.N. Khokhlov is leading a team undertaking

large, urban excavations within the city of Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg), some of the first investigations to be carried out in the city since WWII. These projects are part of a wider initiative for a collaborative study of what was formerly East Prussia, supported by Polish, German, and Lithuanian organizations.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Burial Archaeology and the Soviet Era](#)
- ▶ [Klejn, Leo](#)
- ▶ [Russia: Management of Archaeological Heritage](#)

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Further Readings

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