

# ELITE CULTURE OF OLD RUS': NEW PUBLICATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS (A REVIEW OF IHMC RAS STUDIES IN 2015-2016)

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## Abstract

Old Rus' culture has long been perceived as a given fact, beyond dispute. Its successive connection with authentically Slavic cultures dating back to 700-1000 AD could be clearly traced retrospectively. But archaeological data accumulated over recent decades shows that material from Initial Rus' (ninth to eleventh centuries) looks more like a heterogeneous conglomerate of different traditions and cultural elements than a stable structure. The key to understanding the process of innovations observed over this period, as well as their cultural and anthropological mechanisms, should be the study of the 'elite', a socially superior group of the population. Such a project is now being developed in the Department of Slavic-Finnish Archaeology at IHMC RAS. This review gives the most important results obtained to date, including a modern formulation of the problem in its various aspects, and the latest important publications.

Key words: Old Rus' culture, 800-1100 AD, Early Medieval archaeology, elite funeral rites, chamber-graves, Ryurikovo Gorodishche, Lyubsha hill-fort.

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## Introduction

Studies relating to the project 'Elite Culture of Northern Rus' in 800-1100 AD: A Clash of Traditions on the Path to Unity' (headed by Professor Evgeniy N. Nosov) were initiated in 2015 in the Department of Slavic-Finnish Archaeology at IHMC RAS (St.- Petersburg). This review gives the most important results obtained so far, including a modern formulation of various aspects of the question and the latest publications.

Since the beginning of the project, the organisation of a broad discussion on the question of elite culture, along with wider scientific study, has been accepted as the main task. At the same time, the wider subject of closely related cultural transformations in Early Medieval Europe was considered very important. As the optimum form for a fruitful discussion of previous works, a small scientific-practical conference was adopted. Such conferences were arranged by the Institute for the History of Material Culture RAS, St Petersburg. Two conferences within the framework of the project were held<sup>1</sup> in 2015 and 2016. A collection of papers presented at them is now being prepared for publication. The conferences were attended by colleagues from the State Hermitage, St Petersburg State Univer-

sity, the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography RAS (St Petersburg), and the Institute of Archaeology RAS (Moscow). The publication is planned in electronic form, with an extensive summary in English.

## Old Rus' culture: a definition of the concept

Old Rus' culture has long been perceived as a given fact, beyond dispute. Its belonging to the inhabitants of the Old Rus' State (Slavic or ethnically mixed, but in any case, substantially Slavicised) was not in any doubt. A successive connection with authentically Slavic cultures of the eighth to the tenth centuries (Romensko-Borshevskaya, Luka Raykovetskaya) could be clearly traced retrospectively. The period of existence of the culture is well covered by written sources, which help to decipher the historical meaning of phenomena reflected in archaeological data. It would seem that everything is clear, and we just need to clarify some details.

The material accumulated over the last decades has made us doubt the simplicity and clarity of this picture. This was first raised sharply by Nadezhda I. Platonova in the report 'Fixation of the Rising Tradition in Material Culture: The Formulation of the Problem', which was made at the first theoretical and practical conference organised as part of the project. It was developed

<sup>1</sup> Elite Culture of Countries of Eastern Europe from 500 to 1100 AD' (St Petersburg, 4-5.6.2015, IHMC RAS) and 'Socio-Cultural Transformations in Eastern Europe in the Mid-First to Early Second Millennium AD' (St Petersburg, 30-31.5.2016, IHMC RAS).

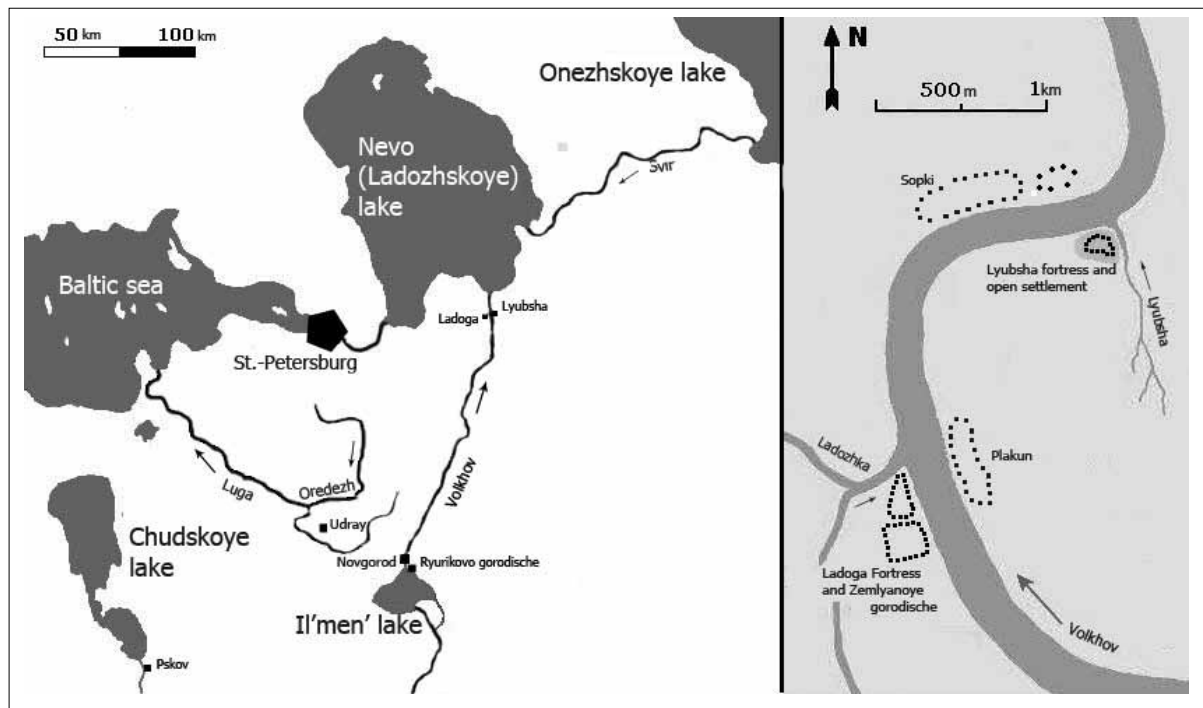


Fig. 1. Map: A Northwest Russia: some important archaeological sites with elements of elite culture. B The locations of the fortified settlements at Ladoga and Lyubsha.

further by the same author's report 'Old Rus' Culture: To the Definition of the Concept', which was presented at the fourth international theoretical and practical seminar 'Problems of Archaeology of Lithuania and Northwest Russia' (St Petersburg, IHMC RAS, 17 November 2016).

According to the author, Old Rus' culture in its current form was consolidated across broad territories of Eastern Europe no earlier than the beginning of the twelfth century. The fact that it is clearly recognisable everywhere, with some regional differences, is evidence of already implemented innovations in cultural and socio-political spheres. But it is worth paying attention to archaeological data relating to the previous period of the ninth to eleventh centuries, as it opens the door not to a stable structure, but to a heterogeneous, not established conglomerate of different traditions and cultural elements. The distinct continuity with the era of 'mature' Rus' of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can be traced only in the cultural layers of Old Rus' towns. At the same time, the system of rural settlements of 800 to 1100 AD is markedly different from the later one. Funerary rites give an exceptionally colourful picture (Fig. 1). We can observe not only obvious regional differences, but also a diversity of traditions in the regions. A number of cultural phenomena have quite a unique character: they have existed for a short period of time, and find practically no analogies in synchronous or later antiquities.

To perceive all this cultural mosaic as something unified is possible only thanks to written sources (annals, diplomatic documents, etc), which indicate the beginning of the political unification of Rus' in the late ninth century and the active interaction between the north (Novgorod region) and the south (Kiev region) in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In the absence of these adjustments, the picture would be different. Therefore, it is necessary to ask the question: how have the established, and most importantly emerging, traditions been fixed in archaeological data? It is a question of a peculiar trial-and-error method on the path to cultural formation, as well as of the existence of a number of diverse cultural phenomena, of which the development has already begun within the framework of the Old Rus' social organism, but was then aborted. Examples of the latter are widely known cultural phenomena, such as *sopki* and Old Rus' 'big kurgans', as well as different versions of inhumations without-a-mound from the ninth to eleventh centuries, which present some unique combinations of funeral ritual elements.

These traditions could last from a decade to 150 years. Formerly, archaeologists tried to consider each of them either as an independent 'proper' archaeological culture, or as the result of the infiltration of an alien ethnic component. Some examples of this are the interpretations of the early Medieval 'Kurgan cultures' of northwest Russia (*sopki* and long kurgans). Many

researchers are still trying to present them as ‘tribal units’, which formed somewhere outside and then came to the region. However, no reliable signs of the predecessors of these cultures could be found in adjacent territories. Both phenomena undoubtedly formed on site. Note also that while the tradition of long kurgans is indeed traced to the Great Migration Period, the peak of the creation of *sopki* falls in the tenth century (only a few complexes belong to an earlier time). Their functioning as burial places and/or sanctuaries continued at least until the end of the eleventh century (see Platonova 2000, 2002, 2017). That is, we have monuments not of ‘pre-Rus’, but of Old Rus’ time, synchronous with Ladoga and early Novgorod. Their creators were the core of the population of the Principality of Novgorod in the period from the first Rurikids till the time of descendants of Yaroslav the Wise.

#### The study of ‘elite’ groups: the key to the process of innovation

A key to understanding the beginnings of innovation observed over the ninth to the eleventh centuries, as well as their cultural and anthropological mechanisms, should be the study of the ‘elite’, socially superior groups in a population. According to some recent theories, the ‘elite’ is defined as a key element structuring the social space. Its main feature is not economic superiority, but the possession of power (Dashkovskiy 2015). It is reasonable to assume that it was within elite groups that new socially prestigious and non-prestigious concepts were introduced and developed. They also filtered and changed foreign ideological, religious and other influences in their own way. All this served as the basis for future systemic transformations of the culture.

The question of the Old Rus’ elite is discussed in works by Russian historians (Petrukhin 1995, 2005; Danilevskiy 1998; Stefanovich 2012). But this concept still remains blurred, with vague characteristics. It is often equated (following the example of researchers in the late 19th and mid-20th centuries) to an even more indistinct notion: ‘retinue’ or ‘bodyguards’ (*druzhinniks*), ‘bodyguard’ culture. Therefore, it is now crucially important to have actual, substantial studies aimed at identifying and studying categories of ‘elite’ antiquities that can serve as ‘social markers’, that is, indicators of a higher status in Old Rus’ communities.

#### Old Rus’ chamber-graves: a synthesis study by K.A. Mikhaylov

An important milestone was the publication of a monograph by Kyrill A. Mikhaylov (2016). His research focused on the chamber burial rite (chamber graves, *kammergräber*), a cultural phenomenon which flourished from the late ninth to the eleventh centuries (i.e. simultaneously with *sopki*). At that time, in barrow cemeteries located near many early urban centres of Rus’, burials in spacious wooden constructions resembling underground houses appeared. Similar types of burials appear almost simultaneously in Denmark, Sweden and northern Germany.

K.A. Mikhaylov has examined various versions of the origin, dating, ethno-cultural and socio-historical interpretations of Old Rus’ burial chambers, in the broad European context. A detailed review of East European and Scandinavian and German studies on this problem is presented in his book. The criteria for marking out burials of this type, their chronology and funeral inventory are analysed in detail. A reconstruction of the funeral rite and a typology of its individual elements are also suggested. The book contains a complete catalogue of chamber burials excavated all over Old Rus’.

On the basis of abundant factual material, Mikhaylov demonstrated the fundamental unity of the rite and clothing set of Old Rus’ chambers over a vast territory, from Ladoga and Pskov in the north, to Kiev in the south, as well as a close kinship with the chambers of northern Europe. The socio-cultural group that practised this ritual in Rus’ was closely associated with urban communities; the group is characterised by high mobility and close intra-group relationships. The Scandinavian ‘veil’ in the set of grave goods implies that the origins of the chamber rite must have been connected with northern Europe. However, from the review by Mikhaylov, it is clear that at the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries, in Scandinavian countries *per se*, the appearance of the ceremony of inhumation in the burial chambers looks like an innovation or borrowing against the previous dominance of the cremation rite. Attempts to identify significantly earlier burial chambers among north European ones in comparison with the Old Rus’ ones cannot be considered successful. It can be assumed that the emergence of these antiquities in vast territories is due to both socio-political and cultural processes of the Viking Age, which took place in northern and Eastern Europe at an identical pace.

The formation of a new funeral rite in early towns located on trans-European river routes was synchronous with the process of the rise and formation of the Old Rus’ identity, expressed in the formula of the Rus’-

Byzantine Treaty of 911: 'We are of the Russian kin.' According to Mikhaylov, a community that practised chamber burials included people from different tribal and clan collectives, primarily highly professional warriors, grouped around the first Russian princes. Initially, it was a social construct, but ultimately 'the rising ethnos and its elite identified with the accustomed frame of the ethnic law and tribal organisation' (Mikhaylov 2016, 184). If so, the chamber burial rite can be considered a ritual that elaborated as a marker of belonging to the social environment, which is called All Rus' in Constantine's Treatise (people around the princes who accompanied them in the *poliudie*).

At the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the development of the elitist pagan rite came to a halt. As Mikhaylov has noted, chamber burials quickly disappeared during this period. Findings of objects with Christian symbols are, in general, not typical of them, and are associated with the latest complexes. It may be pointed out that the author's argument for severely limiting the period of the existence of Old Rus' burial chambers to a period no later than the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries can be challenged in a number of cases. But the supposition that the adoption of Christianity at the state level marked the appearance of a new universal religious and ideological platform for the unification of All Rus' seems to be true. Generally speaking, the analysis of the chamber burial rite by Mikhaylov is an important contribution to European archaeology.

The author's view of 'burials in large pits' or 'quasi-chambers' can be considered biased to some extent. This funeral rite spread in Eastern Europe from the late tenth to the early twelfth century. It is undoubtedly a phenomenon of a different category compared with ordinary chamber burials. This is justly noted by Mikhaylov, who meanwhile is inclined to completely negate the continuity of the tradition. The latter acquired a new interpretation with the inclusion of elements of the old elite rite into the new ideological context.

#### 'Quasi-chambers' and the elite funeral rite of the eleventh and twelfth centuries

Regrettably, Mikhaylov omitted the materials from the 'quasi-chambers' excavated during recent decades at the flat-grave burial ground of Bodzia in central Poland (Buko 2014). However, 'quasi-chambers' present an independent problem which, inter alia, is mentioned in a book dedicated to chamber burials themselves. Meanwhile, for an understanding of the process of the

formation of elite culture of the later period (eleventh and twelfth centuries) in Eastern Europe, a comparative analysis of the material published by Polish colleagues is of great interest. An extensive review of the collective monograph published recently by Alexander E. Musin is an important contribution to this problem (Musin 2016).

In the opinion of the author of the review, the scientific publication of the unique material from Bodzia sheds new light on two problems of a supra-regional character. One is concerned with the genesis and evolution of the chamber burial rite itself; the other deals with the participation of Scandinavians in the development of Central and Eastern Europe (*ibid.* 260). Musin supports the idea of the authors of the monograph that the 'chamber-like' burials 'present us with a more complicated phenomenon as compared with the mere imitation of a chronological or ethnic model. It seems that in burials resembling chambers in Rus' from the eleventh century, i.e. in conditions of chronological and cultural continuity, we should view the development of the rite of the previous century, which was typologically close to them in a number of principally important characteristics ... Where it is possible to identify semantic and chronological gaps between different phases in the imitation of "chambers" (Western Europe, Pomerania), the renewal of this rite may be considered as a stage phenomenon which in the state of "social stress" demands a special demonstration of the social and religious status of a person during the burial ritual ...' (*ibid.* 261).

When answering the question whether the 'Scandinavian-like' elements of East European culture are really Scandinavian, the author of the review notes that the concept of Varangian Rus' directly related to Scandinavian culture is incorrect and obsolete. In his opinion, this concept is connected with the 'peculiar clichés of Anglo-Saxon historiography, with its inherent notions of the invariability of the Scandinavian identity in the East' (*ibid.* 262). In reality, 'the links and interrelations under consideration are more complicated; they are influenced by the process of acculturation of the Scandinavians in the East European medium (about this process see: Bauduin, Musin 2014) (*ibid.*). The process mentioned resulted in the appearance of the Old Rus' identity proper in the tenth century.

It seems appropriate to accept these views. Here, I want only to add: the pit-grave and 'chamber-like' burials in Bodzia must be considered primarily within the context of such cultural phenomena of Old Rus' as: a) 'quasi-chamber' burials; b) flat-grave cemeteries (with and without stone fences) containing inhumations from the eleventh and early twelfth century. These finds are



Fig. 2. A view (from the west) of the central part of Rurikovo Gorodishche during the spring flooding of the Volkhov. In the foreground are the ruins of the Church of the Annunciation on Gorodishche (twelfth century). In the background is the Church of the Saviour on Nereditskiy Hill (photograph from E.N. Nosov's collection).

a special group of burial monuments in Eastern Europe from the final Early Middle Ages, which, as little as 30 years ago, were practically unknown. The first discoveries (e.g. excavations of the Udray-2 cemetery in the Novgorod Oblast in 1981–1983) (Platonova-Zalevskaya 1983; Platonova 1998) seem to be unique, with no parallels. Now evidence of this kind has already been accumulated, as is shown by the review of the problem of Old-Rus' 'quasi-chambers' in the book by Mikhaylov. The task of Russian archaeologists is to summarise and to publish these materials, so that they become available for competent comparative analysis.

#### 'Ryurikovo Gorodishche': a new publication of sources

An essential contribution to studies of the Old Rus' elite will be made by the publication of the archaeological data from the excavations at Ryurikovo Gorodishche (Ryurik's hill-fort). This site was a princely centre of northern Rus' in the ninth and tenth centuries which preceded Medieval Novgorod. The concentration of elements of elite culture in its cultural layer exceeds corresponding figures for any other excavated settlement of this type in northern Europe without exception. The systematic excavation of Gorodishche by

an expedition from the Institute for Material Culture History, RAS, has been conducted since 1975 (see: Nosov 1990; Nosov et al. 2005). In a recent monograph (Nosov et al. 2017), the complete material from the excavations of the central area of Gorodishche Hill is published (2005-2010), as well as finds from the area of the 'Prince's Stone' (2011-2012) and the excavations from 1993-1996 along the Sivers Channel. The history of the study of Ryurikovo Gorodishche is considered in separate sections, as well as the 'Large' Gorodishche buildings and their place in house construction in Old Rus'. Finally, the role of the princely residence in the formation of Novgorod is analysed. The appendices present exact descriptions of particular finds, as well as Mikhail V. Sablin's descriptions of skeletal remains of animals and birds from different chronological layers of the settlement.

#### The question of Lyubsha hill-fort

Finally, it is important to mention the work by Pavel A. Milyaev presenting materials from the Lyubsha hill-fort on the Lower Volkhov, at 1.5 kilometres from Ladoga (Fig. 2). This site has been identified by different researchers as a predecessor or as a 'suburb' of the earliest settlement at Ladoga. Preliminary publications

stress the archaic nature of the early Medieval complex at Lyubsha, its structural differences from Ladoga, and the presence of fortifications similar to those in south-west Slavic territories (Ryabinin, Dubashinskiy 2002). According to this information, numerous amateur history web-pages now consider this site as a fortress of West Baltic Slavs on the River Volkhov. The presence or absence here of a Scandinavian component is now being widely discussed.

Regrettably, the excavation data from Lyubsha could not be systematised for a long time, because of the prolonged serious illness of the leading researcher Evgeniy A. Ryabinin (1948-2010). The field records turned out to be disorganised, and for a long time were inaccessible. Ol'ga A. Shcheglova, Zlata A. L'vova, Tat'yana B. Senichenkova, Lyudmila S. Rozanova *et al.* studied particular categories of artefacts and pottery from Lyubsha. These researchers finally identified that the site was one in a long sequence of occupation. In particular, cultural remains from the Early Metal Period and the Iron Age were discovered there. The supposition about structural differences between its early Medieval complex and the earliest Ladoga one was partly confirmed. Nevertheless, all these studies were conducted using actually undocumented collections, and without the undoubted correspondence of the finds with a particular layer (L'vova 2010; Senichenkova 2012; Shcheglova 2003; Rozanova *et al.* 2008).

P.A. Milyaev succeeded in finding and restoring the complete set of field records on this site, including drawings which had all been considered irretrievably lost. He has now reconstructed in detail the history of the investigations at Lyubsha (Milyaev 2015). The drawings are saved in electronic form, and the stratigraphic scheme of the site was analysed. Studies of traces of jewellery making obtained from the cultural layer of Lyubsha have been started. In the course of these investigations, a series of north European imports which had not been noted before were identified, and a conclusion was drawn on the possible presence of natives from northern Europe at the site. The results of this research were presented by Milyaev at the conference 'Elite Culture ...' in his paper 'Objects of the North European Tradition in the Material Culture of the Site at Lyubsha from the Late Eighth to the Early Tenth Century'. The materials are now being prepared for publication.

## Conclusions

We can observe a wide variety of traditions in the first stage of the functioning of Old Rus' culture. In addition to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the popula-

tion groups involved in this process, the development of new socio-cultural stereotypes, and markers of belonging to socially prestigious communities, played a significant role. Several new pagan funeral rites from the late ninth to the early eleventh century seem to be versions of such markers. Some were spread across a vast area, from the Varangians to the Greeks (chamber-graves). Others were more typical of certain areas ('big' or 'princely' burial mounds for the Dnieper region, *sopki* exclusively for the Novgorod area). Until now, researchers have not attached much importance to the lack of proper chamber-graves (not 'quasi-chambers') in Novgorod and its immediate surroundings in the tenth century (although they were present in Ladoga and Pskov). Perhaps the lack of chamber-graves and the peak in the distribution of *sopki* in the main part of the Novgorod area were closely related.

All these traditions emerged within the framework of the Initial Rus' social organism. The process of the rise and formation of the Old Rus' identity started no later than the ninth century. It was expressed in the formula of the Rus'-Byzantine Treaty of 911: 'We are of the Russian kin.' This community grouped around the first Russian princes. Initially, it was probably a social construct; but ultimately its members identified as a special tribal group within the usual framework of tribal law and organisation.

The process of forming a new identity included the acculturation of immigrants from other countries, including Scandinavia. However, the Scandinavian elements in the material culture of Initial Rus' should be interpreted as elements of a supranational elite military culture, which merged into a new ethno-cultural context.

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## Abbreviations

IHMC RAS - Institute for the History of Material Culture RAS, St Petersburg.

RAS – Russian Academy of sciences

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**SENOSIOS RUSIOS ELITO  
KULTŪRA:  
NAUJOS DISKUSIJOS IR  
STRAIPSNIAI (ISTORIJOS  
IR MATERIALINĖS KULTŪROS  
INSTITUTO (RUSIJOS MOKSLŲ  
AKADEMIJA) TYRIMŲ  
2015–2016 METAIS APŽVALGA)**

**Nadezhda I. Platonova**

**Santrauka**

Senosios Rusios kultūra yra laikoma nuodugniai iš-  
tirta, o jos sąsajos su autentiškąja slavų kultūra (da-  
tuojama laikotarpiu nuo 700 iki 1000 metų) – lengvai  
ir tiksliai atsekamos istoriškai. Tačiau archeologinė  
medžiaga rodo, kad Senoji Rusia (IX–XI a.) greičiau  
buvo skirtingų tradicijų ir kultūrinių elementų jungi-  
nys nei vientisa struktūra. Pagrindinis būdas suprasti,  
kaip gimė ir vystėsi naujovės ir kaip veikė su jomis  
susiję kultūriniai bei antropologiniai mechanizmai,  
yra „elito“ – socialiai pranašesnės bendruomenės gru-  
pės – tyrinėjimai. Būtent toks projektas šiuo metu yra  
vykdomas Istorijos ir materialinės kultūros instituto  
(Rusijos mokslų akademija, Sankt Peterburgas) Slavų-  
suomių archeologijos skyriaus tyrėjų. Ši apžvalga pri-  
stato svarbiausius iki šiol surinktus duomenis, naujai  
suformuluotą problemą ir įvairius jos aspektus, taip pat  
naujausius straipsnius.