

Vikings in the East: A Report on a Workshop held in Veliky Novgorod, Russia in May 10-13 2006

Joonas Ahola, Licentiate of Philosophy, PhD.lic
University of Helsinki, Department of Cultural Studies, Folkloristics
Finland

Veliky Novgorod, one of main scenes of North-West Russian Viking Age, hosted a two-day workshop "Vikings in the East" in May 2006. Specialists from different fields of research presented papers about different aspects of the North-West Russian Viking Age with an emphasis on Scandinavian influence in the region. The eleven speakers represented Nordic countries as well as Russia.

Background

The 2nd Northern Research Forum in Veliky Novgorod in October 2002, "Northern Veche", included the project session "Novgorod as part of Northern Europe – History and Political Culture". Discussion in the session dealt with history from the Viking Age up to the present day but the earliest history gained main interest among the participants as well as the audience. Several addresses and suggestions indicated a will and even a need for the discussion to continue in the future, and one of the initiatives was to return to the topic in a workshop, in Novgorod.¹

The workshop "Finnish Viking Age", funded by Svenska Kulturfonden, was held in August 2003 in Rosala, a Viking Age trade place and a present day open-air museum in Southwest Finland. Ten specialists of the Finnish Viking Age who represented different scientific fields such as archaeology, history, linguistics, folkloristic and even medical sciences were invited. The two-day discussion touched upon regional and cultural differences in the Viking Age Finland, upon different research sources, and upon the significance of the Viking Age for the present day. Already problems that have followed unspecific use of fundamental terms such as "viking" or "Viking Age" raised vivid discussion. Participants found the workshop successful and inspiring.

Even though the first attempt to arrange the workshop

"Vikings in the East" in Veliky Novgorod had been made already in 2003, it took a few more years before the plans materialized. The suggested theme, and contents of the workshop, "1) discussion on features and significance of the Viking Age in the area of present day Western Russia and areas nearby; and 2) discussing possibilities and approaches for an exhibition about Vikings in the East presented in Russia, produced in international cooperation" stimulated a considerably high interest among significant researchers world wide.

The workshop "Vikings in the East" was finally funded by Svenska Kulturfonden ("Swedish Culture Fund" in Finland) and hosted by the Novgorod State University.

The need and will for the international workshop is well grounded in the preliminary planning papers of the workshop as follows:

"Vikings have played a major role in the shaping of national and local identities in Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and North America. They are prominent in our contemporary culture and are the source of unlimited inspiration because of their skills, exploration and constant quest for new knowledge by expanding the boundaries of their known world.

At the same time as we acknowledge that the Vikings lived in violent times, when raiding, plundering and pillaging was a common and heroic pastime, we also want to emphasise their artistic achievements in handicraft, fine arts, story telling and poetry, their economic achievements in the building up of a trading network and trading centres deep into Russia as well as in the British Isles, and intellectual expansion as exemplified in the finding and settling of a previously unknown world to man: The North Atlantic.

We find that the achievements of the Viking age in East-

ern Europe deserve to be memorised in a similar manner as the westward expansions. Now after this part of the world has again opened up to cultural and economic exchange with Scandinavia we find that the exemplum of the Vikings can be a good reminder for us all in what can be achieved through peaceful trade — and what can go wrong when violence gets the upper hand. The Vikings built routes for cultural communications that are now being reopened.

For decades diligent scholars in Eastern Europe have studied the Viking age as it appears in their home countries. Their work has been isolated and it has not received the publicity it deserves. Archaeologists have unearthed many important findings that need to be brought to the attention of the international scholarly community and historians have ploughed through documents not accessible to others, thus building up knowledge about the Vikings that we need to open up and distribute. This is a unique opportunity to bring these intellectual forces together in order to create a historical moment in Viking age studies at the same time as our economic and political interests suggest that reopening the channels for communication and commerce used by the Vikings could be of vital importance for Scandinavia and economic development in Eastern Europe.”

Event

Scholars arrived at Novgorod on May 10 not by Viking ships but by their contemporary equivalent, bus. Opening of the workshop took place on May 11 in the distinguished surroundings of the Novgorod Fine Arts Museum. Docent Gennadi Kovalenko (University of Novgorod) gave a welcome address in which he described briefly the breadth of the field of research in Viking Age studies, and his early suggestion of such a seminar to be held every other year reflected the high hopes placed in the workshop. Mikhail Pevzner, the vice president of the International Relations of Novgorod State University, drew attention to the fact that Nordic and Baltic Countries bear significance to Novgorod nowadays just as in the Viking Age and that therefore Viking Age seems topical to Novgorod still today. Dr Lassi Heininen replied to the addresses and stressed the multiple nature of the era: “But who were the Vikings? ... By a definition, they were Nordic raiders who roamed mainly in West Europe. These warriors gave their name and label to the whole period. However, in spite of the label, the Viking Age was a period of economic, technical and cultural exchange for, and interrelations in, the whole of North Europe.” Nikolaj Grinev, the head of the Novgorod State Museum, pointed out that new information about the Viking Age appear all the time and therefore regular seminars are important.

The sessions themselves represented five rather loose themes that were all concerned with connections and contacts between Northwest Russia and North Europe in the Viking Age: Peoples, Routes, Trade, Narratives and Modern reflections.

Peoples

The Viking Age meant migration to new territories, not only in the North Atlantic context by the Scandinavians but also East of the Baltic Sea. Slavic people migrated there from the South along the Volkhov River, Scandinavians established trade and governing centres south of Lake Ladoga, and West-Finnish people moved to the northern shore of the great lake. One must also bear in mind that the areas were not uninhabited before, but that there lived also aboriginal Finnic peoples alongside the newcomers. The area turned into a boiling pot of different languages, habits, stories and interests marked by a diverse and colourful material culture.

Dr Aleksander Saksa illuminated the people that lived on the north side of the great Lake Ladoga, whose culture and way of life were intensely involved with waterways, the Karelians. According to evidence of burial sites from the 9th – 10th centuries they emerge as emigrants from western Finland. Most of the graves in the first phase are those of men and contain a large number of weapons, their types being common Nordic ones, which indicate that the first settlers were warrior-tradesmen. Only later, in the 11th century, there appear traces of farming and in the 12th century, larger settlements. The graves and later settlements are located by the waterways that connect northern Finland and Gulf of Bothnia to Lake Ladoga. The involvement of these people was tightly connected to the activities of the Vikings in the East.

Dr. Konetsky pointed out that Staraya Ladoga, a Viking Age settlement on the south side of lake Ladoga, was not only the first Scandinavian post in the East but that it was also the first trade centre in north-west Russia, a meeting point of Slavic, Baltic, Finno-Ugric and Scandinavian peoples. According to previous understanding, the Scandinavians who founded Staraya Ladoga (in Scandinavian sources named Aldeigjuborg) in the 8th century met mainly Finno-Ugrians and Balts in the area, but latest archaeological evidence according to dr. Konetsky indicates to a more significant Slavic influence. However, the development of Staraya Ladoga into a significant trade centre had its background in Viking expansion of the 9th century. Findings from the grave site in Staraya Ladoga show that the material culture was homogenous by the 10th century, and the successor of Staraya Ladoga, Veliky Novgorod, represented

a similarly homogenous culture by the 11th century. Among different ethnic groups in northwest Russia, the Novgorodians represented a distinct culture that was Finno-Ugric by its roots, Slavic by its main features and which bore also Scandinavian characteristics.

Routes

The Scandinavian vikings are famous, or notorious, for their fast, seaworthy and well manoeuvrable ships which they used effectively both for crossing the Atlantic Ocean and for raiding on the shores of West Europe. These ships were well suited to large waters such as seas and the Ocean and were invincible when it came to quick attacks on seashores and quick retreats, but on rivers, where the shore is always near and one faces obstacles such as rapids or watersheds, other kinds of vessels were more convenient. Trade along the river systems of the Eastern Way between Scandinavia and the Caspian Sea or Byzantium meant that the goods were transported in several phases, which required local knowledge, cooperation and relatively secured environment.

The Scandinavians used two kinds of ships to travel to the East, according to professor Piotr Sorokin. The smaller vessel, which was mainly meant for cargo carriage, was called skipa and there are mentions of the Eastern voyages with such ships for instance in sagas. The Scandinavians used also larger vessels, meant for open sea, which were called knorr. These ships were too clumsy for rivers, however. When sailing south the Eastern Route, or “the route from the Varangians to the Greek”, the large sea vessels were changed into smaller and swifter-moving riverboats. Ship building equipment has been found from the site of Staraya Ladoga and it seems that the fortress served as such a ship-changing site.

Up the river Volkhov and at the watersheds before River Dnepr all extra weight in the ships was very laborious, something of which Fredrik Koivusalo has personal experience from sailing around Europe on a replica of a Finnish Viking Age ship. He believes that the Scandinavians sailing south used very light boats, perhaps carved from a single log and could possibly be dragged or carried across watersheds, and even produced on the way if longer watersheds had to be crossed without the vessels. Byzantine sources name the vessels which the Rus used on the rivers, using the word “monoxyl” that may well indicate such a single log boat.

Trade

Encounters which the Vikings had in the West were often violent or warlike: raiding and trading were closely

connected – products and services were paid for only when it was necessary. Unlike the seashore, it was impossible to disappear after misdeeds in the Eastern river environment, and trade tuned the meetings. Sometimes the Scandinavians even achieved positions of trust among the local people. Trade connections from the Baltic Sea reached really far: there were connections to Perm, to the Silk Road and Byzantium. At the crossing of important trade routes at the North end of Lake Ilmen there developed a trade centre in the 9th century which later developed into Veliky Novgorod.

Sagas mention men called hólmgarðsfari who were tradesmen with trade connections to Hólmgarðr – Novgorod – according to dr Tatjana Jackson. According to coin finds, in the 10th and 11th centuries there was vivid trade between Norway and northwest Russia. Heimskringla, a collection of kings’ sagas, gives accurate descriptions about Novgorod as an international trade centre. Novgorod was a transit trade centre where local merchants bought furs from the Scandinavians and sold them ceramics and valuables from Byzantium.

In the late 10th century the importation of silver from the Islamic world was coming to an end and, as Dr Tuukka Talvio pointed out, coin finds indicate that this was when Novgorod turned to the Baltic region in search for an alternative source of silver. West European silver coins now increased dramatically in the coin hoards of the area. The composition of the finds of Anglo-Saxon coins presents interesting features, which can possibly be connected with the danegeld paid by King Æthelred II to the Scandinavians.

Narratives

When cultures met, there were exchanged not only goods but – when relationships developed somewhat – also stories. People have always used narrative for structuring the world and representing values, hopes, fears, and ideals. When people meet in storytelling, different worldviews meet and may even come closer to each other. Impressive stories often leave their effect on other narrative traditions, and mutual narratives create community. Narrative elements shared by different cultures indicate contacts and the nature of the contacts. Oral tradition has preserved ancient narrative to the threshold of the modern era, and some has survived in medieval manuscripts.

Norwegian saga from the middle of the 13th century, Thidriks saga, represents incidents and characters which can be recognised in Russian epic poetry, bylina, as well. Professor Sergey Asbelev states that the same elements can be found also in Old High German po-

etry and in the writings of the Dane Saxo Grammaticus, both of which may have served as sources of the saga. Several aspects of the High German folklore discussed seem however to point towards incidents of the 5th century, i.e. the Migration Period, and continental Europe in spite of the shared characters. Both the Scandinavian sources and bylinas describe battles with the Huns, which the high German sources for Thidriks saga don't. It seems like the Scandinavian narratives are closer to the Russian ones.

Russian byliny, Icelandic sagas of the ancient times (*for-naldarsögur*) and certain cycles of Finnish-Karelian epic poetry have traditionally been dated by their origins to the Viking Age, as I stated in my paper. Grounds have been many but all of these narratives, as distant from each other as they seem to be, share the basic characteristics of their main protagonists, an unprincipled and rebellious warrior. Proportioned to universal characteristics of an epic hero, the characteristics that the Northern heroes bear may not seem that special. However, they have been and still are being used as illustrative examples of the warlike spirit or ethos of the Heroic Age of the North Europe, the Viking Age.

Modern Reflections

The vikings and the lively Viking Age on the edge of an adventurous past and the so familiar present inspire not only romantic dreams but also research. It is a research topic of its own to study the reflections of the Viking Age in later times; new interpretations arise constantly due to new information and answers to new questions. The Viking Age speaks to us still today.

Dr. Jón Thor introduced Sigfús Blöndal's significant study on the varangians, Nordic warriors who served in the Byzantine court. In the 1920's, Sigfús Blöndal, an Icelandic scholar who worked in Copenhagen, started the study that took thirty years to conclude as a posthumously published book in 1954, *Væringja saga* which was first published only in Icelandic. Dr. Blöndal used both eastern and western sources, both original and translated texts. The book describes the role of the varangians in Byzantium and the circumstances that prevailed then, and it also tells the stories of certain varangians. Dr. Thor finds the book very informative but would call it "more a work of compilation than analysis". The book found a second life in 1978 as an English translation, which is anyhow rewritten and revised in such a way that the original work is hard to recognise.

Kristina Veshnjakova has made a recent Russian translation of Jan Petersen's classical book about Nordic Viking Age sword types, "*De norske vikingesverd*". The trans-

lation is important since the book, although from 1919, is often referred to in Russian studies. The beautifully illustrated edition has gained wide interest in Russia.

Vikings created a circle of international connections, which was quite a peaceful one in the north and east but a violent one in west Europe, as dr Lassi Heininen stated in his paper. The regional and transnational contacts, which prevailed in the Viking Age have regained position after the Cold War era; the vikings may even serve as examples of dynamic internationalization. The vikings were strong and active actors in the space available then, the whole of the contemporary known World, largely seeming to have defined their whole identity through their internationalization. Structures that were first created in the Viking Age seem to be recreated now, in the post- Cold War period – e.g., the regional cooperation project New Hansa in the Baltic Region at the turn of the 1990's, similar project of Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) in the northernmost Europe, or the concepts of a New Northern Europe or the Northern Dimension within the European Union.

Excursions

In addition to the workshop sessions, two excursions were made as well. After the first day, under the terrific guidance of dr. Aleksander Saksa, we visited the site of Rurik Gorodishe, the first large settlement and a fortification in the northern Lake Ilmen area established in the 9th century. In the 10th – 11th centuries several functions of the settlement were moved two kilometres down River Volkhov to the site that was named "New Town" or "New Fortress" (Novgorod) after the fortress was built there by the middle of the 11th century. Weather was beautiful and scenery spectacular.

After the final day, on the way back to St. Petersburg we went on an excursion to Staraya Ladoga, an old Viking fortification near the mouth of the river Volkhov in lake Ladoga. Aleksander Saksa did not spare himself trying to make the most of our visit there. Staraya Ladoga fortification has developed during the last few years into an active open-air museum, and besides us there were lots of other visitors. Actually, in our four-wheeled vessel we followed River Volkhov and the south shore of Lake Ladoga, i.e. the Viking Age water route from Novgorod to the Baltic Sea.

Future

There were vivid discussions about the future plans regarding the theme Vikings in the East. The scene of research around the theme is very interesting at the moment and increasing international cooperation is

most welcome. The exhibition project that was one of the aims of the seminar gained great interest in the final discussion; the will for such a project is apparent. Discussion was vivid throughout the whole seminar and the difficulties in maintaining a schedule indicate that another seminar such as this would still be a success. The Viking Age is not so far in the past that it is prevented from being alive today, and the project Vikings in the East should definitely be allowed to evolve in the future.

Notes

1 Northern Veche. Proceedings of the Second NRF Open Meeting. Stefansson Arctic Institute & University of Akureyri: Akureyri 2004. 211-212.