



Villages in the forest

– Outland economy and cultural identity of the human groups in Vologda region, Northern Russia, 950–1300 AD

The northern peripheral regions of Medieval Rus' are well known for their cultural originality. This is evidenced by the excavations of dwelling sites and cemeteries all over the vast territories bordered in the west by the south-eastern part of the Lake Ladoga basin, and in the east by the River Volga in Kostroma region. The majority of investigators consider conservation of the Finnish traditions, strong survivals of pagan beliefs, and the relatively late spread of Christianity as the basic phenomena that typified the specific cultural history of the North during the period from the tenth up to the thirteenth centuries (Golubeva 1973, Sedov 1982, Ryabinin 1997). This thesis can hardly be questioned. Nevertheless, recent investigations show that cultural peculiarities typical of the local groups settling the northern outlands of ancient Rus' were the consequence of a combination of much more diverse factors. Additionally, the formation of a cultural identity of medieval settlers on the northern frontier was a more complicated process than previously held. Important aspects of this process can be delimited from the archaeological data, recently obtained by the excavations in Minino local area, situated not far from Vologda.

Preliminary results of the field project, relating to the history of colonisation and economic development of the Minino local area in the late first, early second millennia AD have already been published (Makarov 2000, Kubenskoe ozero 2001). The basic pattern of this history included formation of new dwelling sites in the forest territories rich in outland resources, followed by rapid progress of a complex economy. The latter was based on the combination of the fur trade, with its products set aside for exchange, and agriculture, animal-breeding and fishing, their products were assigned for life support. The first medieval settlers occupied the local area of Minino and started clearing forest for ploughed fields around their dwelling sites on the Lake Kubenskoe in the second part of and toward the end of the tenth century. These settlers established a system of fur bearing animal trapping and fur trade,

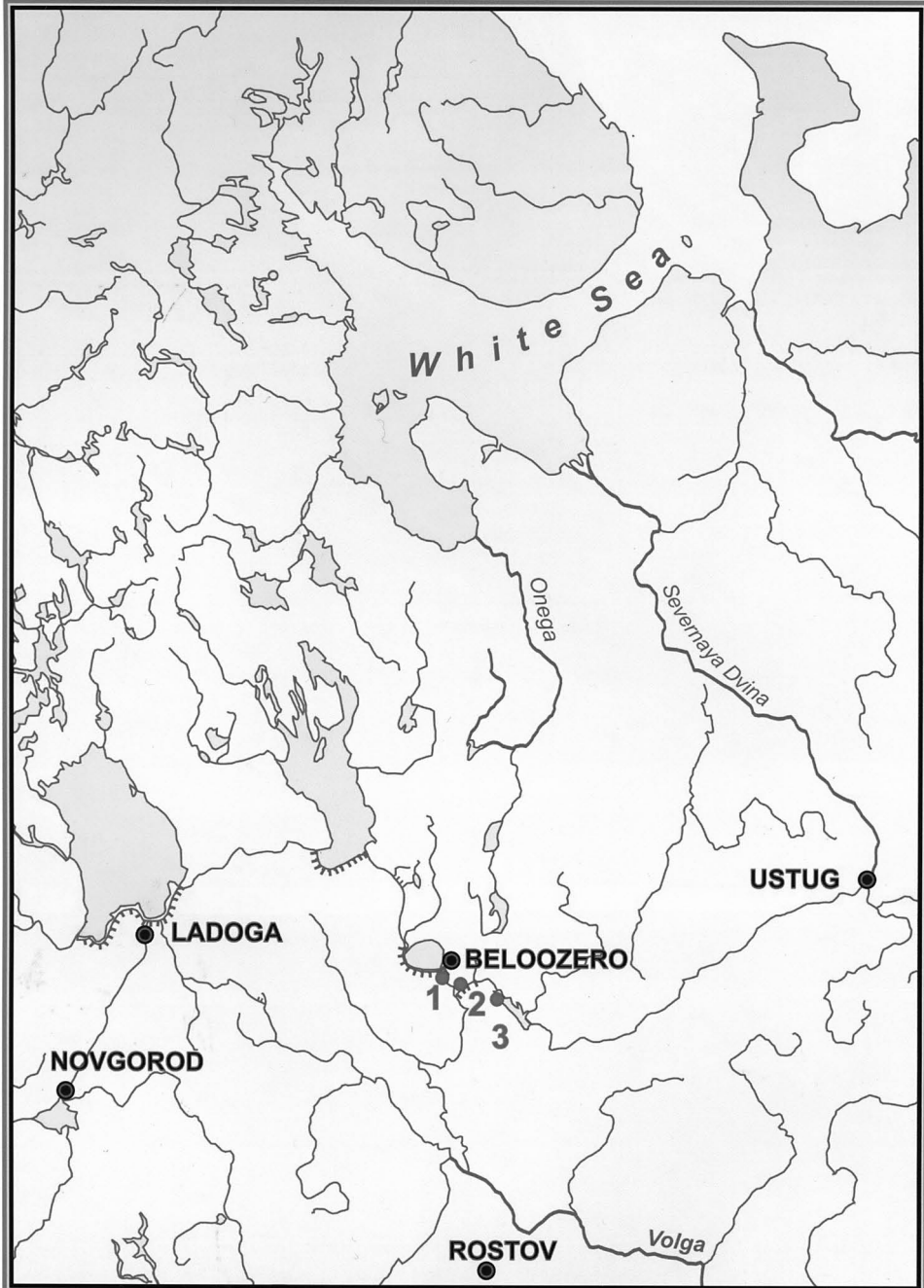


Figure 1. Northern Rus' with the main towns, mentioned in the written sources, 950–1200 AD. Black points mark the most important medieval sites, excavated in the 1980s and 1990s in Beloozero-Vologda region. 1. Beloozero, Krokhinskie Peski 2. Nefedievo 3. Minino.

which stimulated the influx of various imported goods to the Kubenskoe region. The marketing of furs had become the basis of the villagers' high living standards. Their prosperity is evidenced by the impressive collection of artefacts produced from non-ferrous metals and glass, discovered in cultural deposits and burial sites. For two centuries, Minino played a role at the extremity of the complicated network of trade contacts, the towns of Northern Rus' and the Baltic zone being its key crossroads. The cluster of medieval dwelling sites at Minino existed until the early thirteenth century; it probably fell into decay after fur resources were exhausted and the climatic changes forced the local population to abandon the low lake terraces. A similar model of development is characteristic of many medieval dwelling sites in the north, but in Minino, specific features of a complex economic system and the dynamics of its progress are manifested in a much more comprehensive and detailed way than in the material finds of other sites.

The archaeological material which referred to the colonists' cultural identity is also of importance. The medieval burial site Minino II is of special interest in this connection. Over 80 burials have been investigated here, their chronology ranging from the second part of the tenth to the turn of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries (Makarov and Zaitseva 2003). Burial traditions, woman's ceremonial apparel and Christian ritual objects have been chosen for consideration: these cultural elements are most distinct and informative, as far as the studies of identity are concerned.



Figure 2. *Minino II burial site. Cremations and East- and West-oriented inhumation graves in the excavation area. Late tenth–twelfth centuries.*

The Minino II cemetery (figure 2) was the common necropolis for the dwelling sites in the Minino local cluster. It occupies a small height of the River Dmitrovka terrace near one of the sites. There were no topographical traces indicating the burials, but judging from the bones discovered in the outcrops, the cemetery covered a 200 metre long area stretched along the river. The earliest burials were cremations; the burnt remains were deposited in ground pits, or just strewn over the soil surface. At least 23 cremations have been investigated in the graveyard. They have yielded numerous finds discovered in the pits, mixed with the burnt bones, or scattered over the site area directly beneath the turf layer: glass beads, bronze woman's ornaments, fragments of single-sided antler combs, belt fittings, metal bag settings, and some other objects. Many artefacts were burnt or even partially melted. The artefacts date the earliest cremations back to the second part of the tenth century, the latest to the first part of the eleventh century. The remains from the burials, which were performed according to inhumation rites, were disposed in ground pits, mostly of insignificant depth. Some graves were arranged in rows over the cemetery area. 46 burials, containing human skeletons entirely or partly anatomically preserved, were gathered within the excavation trench. Some of these graves had cut across and disturbed those containing cremations. Six skeletons had their heads pointing west, the rest were oriented towards the east. Around 80 % of the graves contained funerary gifts. The earliest inhumations in Minino were apparently performed at the turn of the tenth and the eleventh centuries. All the burials which dated from the eleventh century contained grave goods; the deceased being oriented towards the east. The tradition of burying women in their ceremonial apparel with metal dress decorations and the depositing of everyday utensils in the graves had survived in Minino until at least the last third of the twelfth century. The latest group of burials comprises those with western orientation and without funerary gifts. They most probably date from the turn of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, or the early decades of the thirteenth century.

Thus, the territory of the cemetery was used for performing burials for at least two and a half centuries, that is, since the appearance of the first medieval colonists in the River Dmitrovka estuary until the time when the central dwelling site of the Minino cluster fell into neglect at the turn of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. The fact that cremation and inhumation rites coexist in Minino in the early eleventh century, as well as some characteristic features of twelfth-century inhumation ritual (coffin boards not attached with nails, long-lasting custom of furnishing burials with the grave goods), indicates that a commonly accepted Christian ritual was introduced in the Minino local area somewhat later and spread more slowly than in the adjacent territories situated westward. Nevertheless, the burials investigated at the cemetery provide successive evidence of all the stages of burial rite transformation in Northern Rus' in the late first and the early second millennia AD; from the pagan cremation of the second part of the tenth century to the inhumations of the turn of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, which were not accompanied by any grave goods and corresponded completely to a Christian standard.

The Minino II burial site presents a vivid example of the continuity in the local spatial organisation: the same necropolis still functioned after the population had been converted to Christianity and abandoned the cremation rites. Evidently, the common identity of the local group and group unity demanded interment of the Christians at the same graveyard as their pagan ancestors. Belonging to one local community was more important for the Minino inhabitants than their religious identity. The preservation of a rich burial rite, implied by the presence of accompanying funerary gifts and personal ornaments in the grave, was also essential. The tradition established by the first colonists may be considered to be significant for the members of the Minino community as a way to express their group identity and symbolise high status and the material welfare of the people.

The women's costume worn in Minino in the earliest period, during the second part of the tenth and the turn of the tenth and the eleventh centuries, is rather difficult to reconstruct, since the cremation rite gives us no opportunity to illustrate complete sets of ornaments, or to establish their arrangement in the costumes. It is known that, at the time relevant to this discussion, women's attire included large wire temporal rings, necklaces of glass and metal beads, and composite pendants like those of the Volga Finns; supplied with jingling bell-shaped sub-pendants. Neck-rings and finger-rings are more rare finds. The sets of ornaments which have been discovered in the burials of women of the eleventh century who were buried according to inhumation rites, strongly differ from those of the earlier period. They comprise the series of wire bracelet-shaped temporal rings, necklaces of glass beads with pendants, breast brooches, sometimes the apparel also included neck-rings, bracelets, and finger-rings (figure 3.1). Jingling pendants were not present in the burials of the chronological group under discussion. This type of woman's attire has its origin in the central regions of Novgorod land and ancient Russian territories on the Upper Volga (Konetskij, Nosov and Khvoschinskaja 1984:161–167). Judging from the inventories of eleventh century hoards in North-western Rus', silver horseshoe-shaped brooches and neck-rings represented important elements of the aristocratic costumes during this period. Therefore, the Minino apparel of the eleventh century, though manufactured of less expensive materials, to a certain extent imitated the dress decorations worn by ancient Russian nobility. At the turn of the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, the costume underwent changes: waistband pendants were added; usually they were worn on a special lace attached to the waistband at its side and with metal spiral beads threaded on (figure 3.2, figure 5). In the mid twelfth century, neck-rings and horseshoe-shaped brooches fell out of use, and together with the appearance of numerous heavy pendants this marked significant changes in the general composition of the costume. Due to the breast and waistband pendants, it looked richer and smarter, but was marked with specific 'regional' features, clearly different from the costume typical of the metropolis.

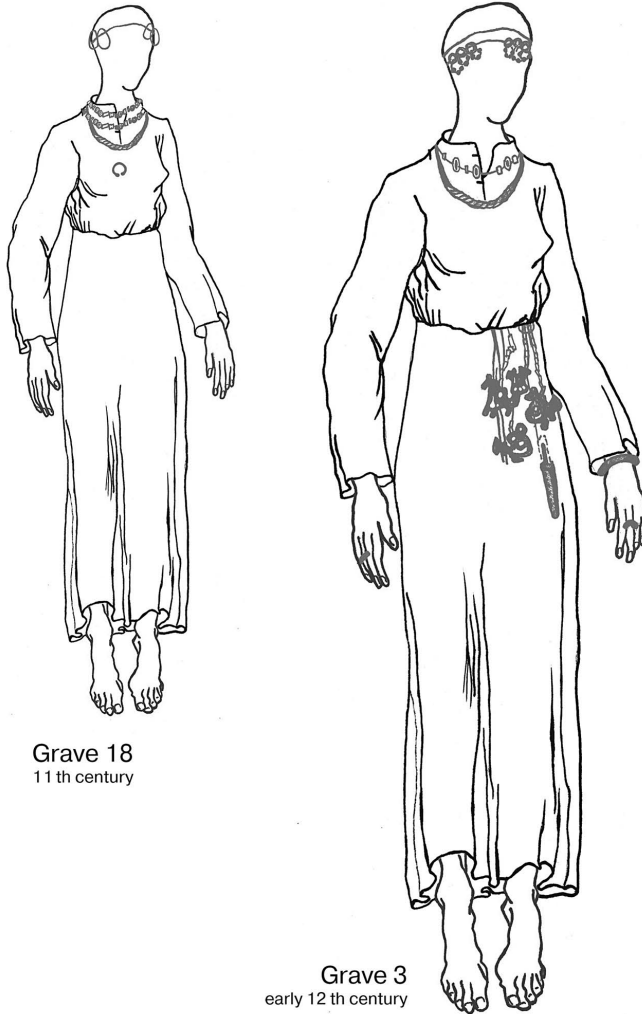


Figure 3. Women's dress decoration of the eleventh and the early twelfth century in Minino local area, Northern Russia.

One of the most impressive elements of the costume in Minino was zoomorphic pendants (figure 4.5). This kind of woman's dress ornament, worn on the waistband or on the breast, mirrors cultural peculiarities of the northern peripheral groups of ancient Russian populations. The decorations in question had their origin in the Finno-Ugrian cultures (Golubeva 1979, Ryabinin 1981). In total, 29 zoomorphic pendants have been discovered on the sites of the Minino local cluster. They display practically the entire repertoire of zoomorphic images in ancient Russian plastic art of the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. Zoomorphic pendants both from the dwelling sites and the cemetery form a significant series, though the finds from the graves form the majority.



Figure 4. Zoomorphic pendants from Minino the cultural deposits of the Minino dwelling sites. 1–7 metal; 1–6 Minino I dwelling site; 7 Minino VI dwelling site. 1–2 eleventh century. 3–7 twelfth/ early thirteenth centuries

The character of the chronological distribution of the discussed pendants turned out to be somewhat unexpected. The earliest originated from the cultural deposits and the burials of the second part of the tenth and the eleventh centuries (figure 4.1 and 2, figure 5.1), whilst the majority of the finds date from the twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries. Two composite horse-pendants of type XVII (figure 4.1) should be attributed to the group of the earliest ornaments. One of them was discovered in the cremation burial from the second half or the end of the tenth century, the second

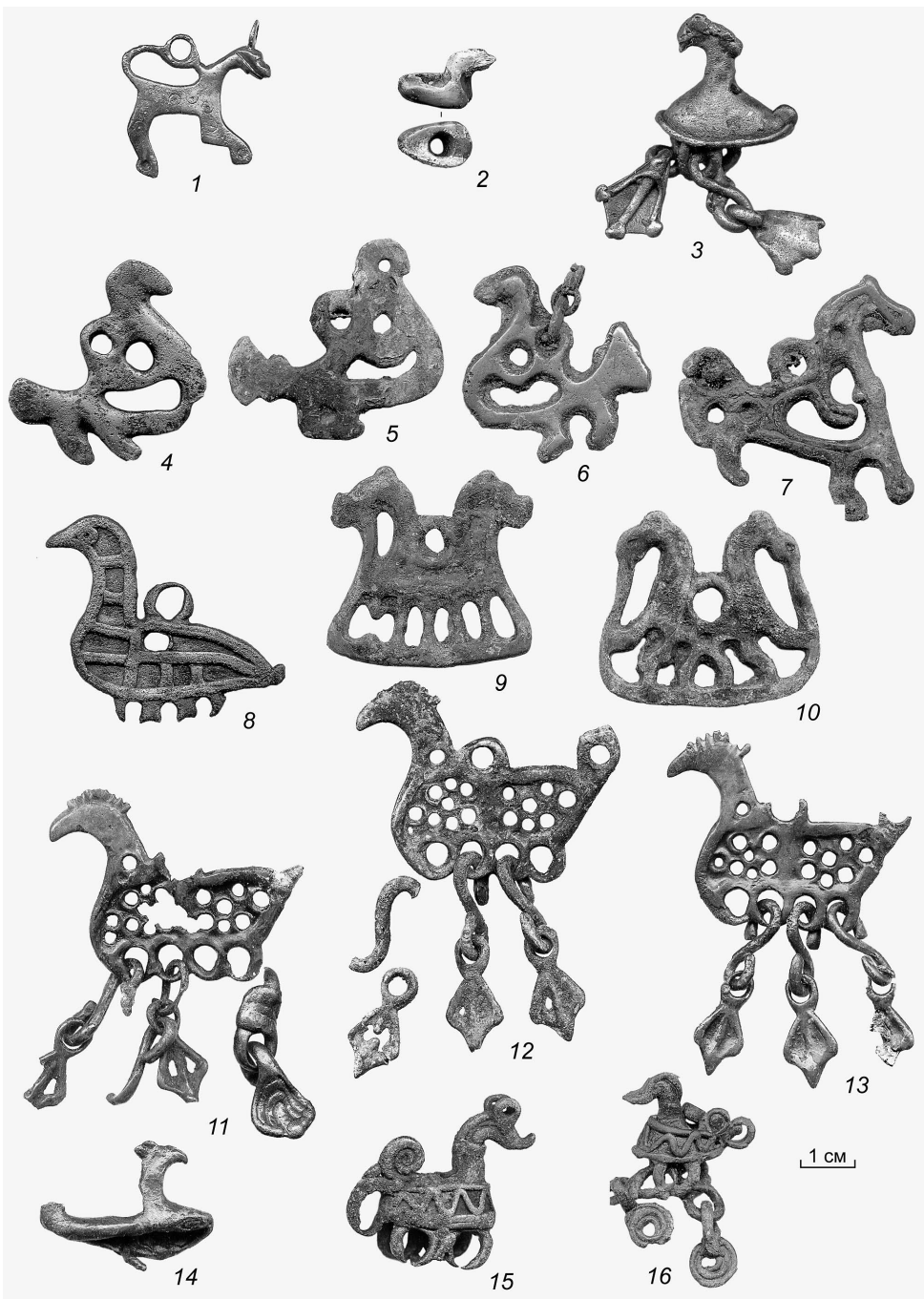


Figure 5. Zoomorphic pendants from the graves of the Minino II burial site.
1 eleventh century; 2–3, 5, 6, 9 late eleventh/early twelfth century; 4–16 twelfth/early thirteenth century.

originated from the dwelling site, from the cultural layer dated to the first part of the eleventh century. The main area of the composite horse-pendants of type XVII is limited to the central part of Rostov-Suzdal land and the vicinities of Murom. The fact that the ornaments which are typical of the Merya and Muroma tribes occur at the Lake Kubenskoe evidently points to the presence of the Volga Finns among the earliest settlers who founded the medieval settlement in the River Dmitrovka estuary. The horse pendant of Smolensk type (figure 5.1), from burial No. 20, dates to the mid eleventh century. Five more ornaments (flat, open-work duck-pendants of type I (figure 5.5 and 6), hollow duck-pendant of type XVIII, variant 5 (figure 5.3), flat, open-work pendants of type VII shaped as doubled horse-headed animals (figure 5.9) and the antler duck-pendant carved in the round (figure 5.2) were recovered from the remains dating from the last quarter of the eleventh and the first part of the twelfth centuries. The date can be narrowed down to the above-mentioned chronological interval. As for the majority of the zoomorphic ornaments, *terminus post quem* for the associations and the cultural deposits they originate from are limited to the early twelfth century. At least five burial associations that contained zoomorphic pendants are dated to before the mid twelfth century.

In the Minino collection of zoomorphic ornaments dated from the twelfth to the early thirteenth centuries, the majority of the finds have a widespread dispersal pattern; from an area covering the basins of the Lakes Ladoga and Beloe, the River Vaga basin, and the part of the Volga basin near Kostroma. These are flat, open-work duck-pendants of type I (figure 5.4–6), flat duck-pendants with relief ornament of type V (figure 4.5), flat, open-work horse-headed pendants of type VII shaped as doubled animals (figure 4.6–7, figure 5.9–10), and flat, open-work horse-headed of type XIII with one head (figure 5.7). Widespread among Northern Rus' decorations are the hollow duck-pendants of type XVIII, variant 2 (figure 4.4) and the hollow ram-pendants of type XIX (figure 5.15). The most numerous group of artefacts of a similar shape includes open-work cock-pendants of Vladimir type (type IV, figure 5.11–13), discovered in three burials. Geographically, they are ostensibly recognised from Rostov-Suzdal land, and it is worth mentioning that they were popular both in the largest urban centres, like Suzdal, Rostov and Vladimir, and in the outlands, including Beloozero land (the sites Nikolskoe XVIII and Voilakhta). The appearance of the cock-pendants of the type under discussion on the Lake Kubenskoe should be regarded as evidence of the close cultural connections maintained by the region with the centre of Rostov-Suzdal land. Finally, among the zoomorphic pendants from Minino there is a miniature dog-pendant (figure 4.3) – a rare variant of zoomorphic ornament; the only known analogy is from the cemetery Nefed'yevo in Volok Slavensky, 35 km to the northwest of Minino. It is probably strictly a local type of ornament, the invention of the Beloozero jewellers' imagination.

Circulation of zoomorphic pendants in the Minino micro-region in the twelfth century should not be viewed as a phenomenon of traditionalism; on the contrary, this kind of ornaments illustrated the formation of a new fashion. The style of dress

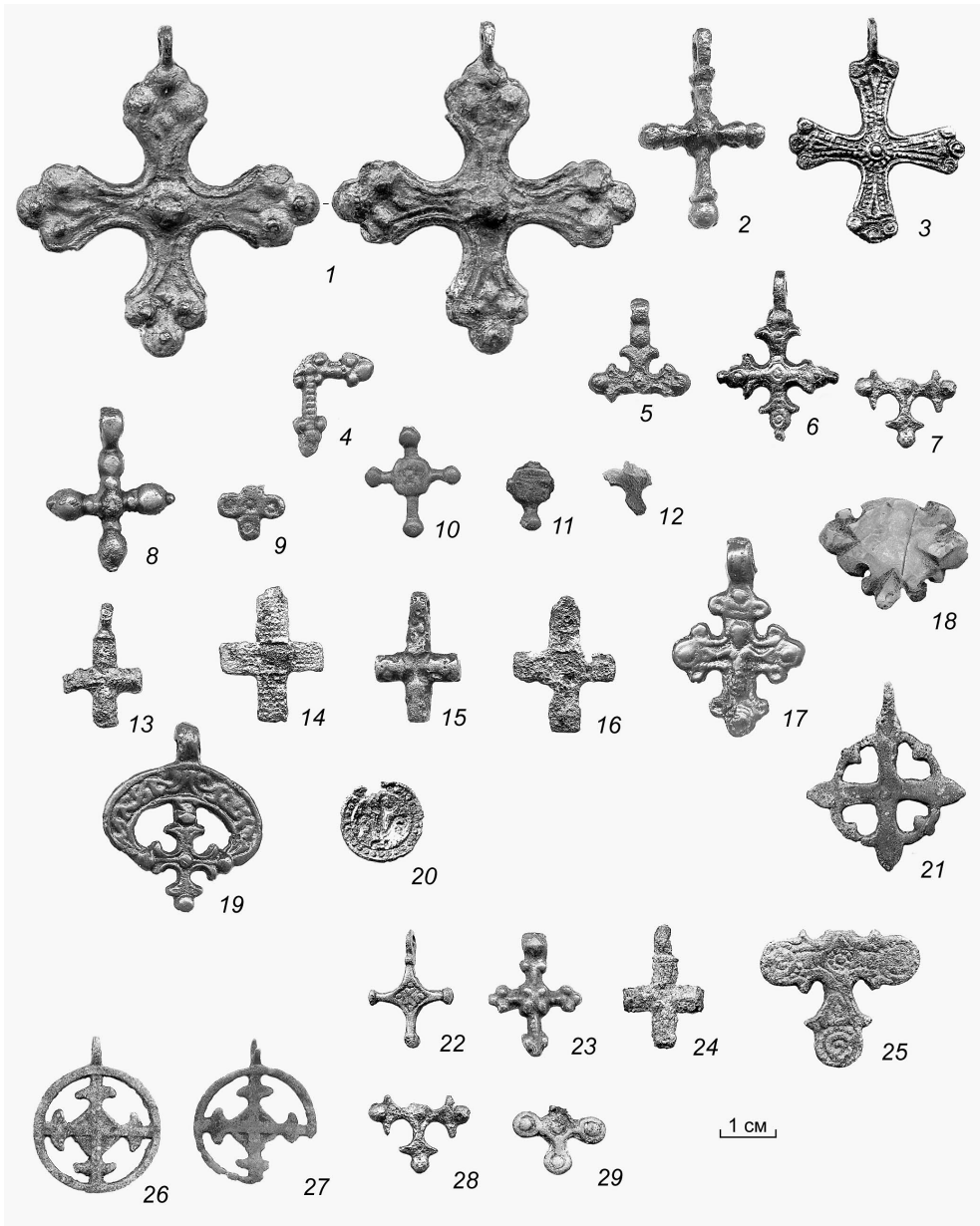


Figure 6. Cross-pendants and pendants with the image of the cross from the cultural deposits and burials of the Minino sites. 1–11, 13–17, 19–29 metal 12 horn; 18 amber. 1–21 Minino I dwelling site; 22–25 Minino VI dwelling site; 26–29 Minino II burial site. 1–3 eleventh century; 4–28 twelfth, early thirteenth century; 29 late eleventh, early twelfth century.

decoration that emerged in the eleventh century and which imitated the costume of the aristocracy or the urban population of North-western Rus', had been rejected. Large zoomorphic and jingling pendants made their costume lavish and impressive, with a strong element of specific regionality, and, at the same time, they destroyed the stylistic unity of the dress decoration worn in the central and peripheral areas of Northern Rus'. New ceremonial attires differed from their aristocratic prototype not only in the materials used for manufacturing dress ornaments, but also in the composition of its basic integral elements. Zoomorphic pendants constituted in the twelfth century the most characteristic decorative details of the Minino women's costume and vividly demonstrated genetic links with the old traditions once developed in metal pieces of the Finnish plastic art. Moreover, no features directly inherited from the Minino plastic art of the preceding period can be detected.

One of the most important classes of finds referring to the Minino inhabitants' cultural identity is undoubtedly the Christian ritual objects: cross pendants, pendant icons, and pendants bearing the image of a cross. The finds of this class originate from both dwelling sites and the necropolis (figure 6). The collection comprises 30 pendant crosses, 4 pendants with the image of a cross, and 3 pendant icons. Among the metal pendant crosses, those of cast metal prevail (totally 27 items), those made of amber and antler are represented by single finds. The cultural deposit of the dwelling site Minino I yielded the majority of the crosses (fig. 6.1–18). Coeval burial assemblages have produced far more modest series of the discussed finds (figure 6.26–29). The earliest crosses were discovered in the cultural layer of the eleventh century (figure 6.1–3) and in an infant grave dated to the second part of the eleventh, the early twelfth centuries (figure 6.29). These finds are three crosses of so-called "Scandinavian type" (figure 6.1 and 3), and the cross with rounded arm ends (figure 6.2). Still, the bulk of personal Christian objects date back to the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

Cross-pendants found in Minino comprise different types, widely represented at the ancient Russian sites of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries (figure 6.4–18, 21–29). The areas of origin of some of these types are limited to the territory of ancient Rus', while others (for instance, the crosses of 'Scandinavian type') are known from vast areas including a large portion of the Baltic zone. It seems impossible to reconstruct the routes by which Christian ritual objects permeated to the Lake Kubenskoe. The Minino collection includes standard productions of ancient Russian jewellers' workshops of quite high quality, as well as primitive castings of lead-tin alloy. The latter are represented by four straight-arm crosses imitating crosses of the so-called 'Chersonese type'; of stone with metal granulated settings on the ends of the arms (figure 6.13–16, 24). Taking into account the remains of bronze-casting production excavated at the Minino open dwelling sites; it may well be supposed that the crosses under discussion had been manufactured at Lake Kubenskoe. From the jeweller's craft point-of-view the attempt to imitate stone crosses in metal can hardly be considered successful: straight-arm crosses are not attractive as pieces of

decorative art. They could have been valued only in the context of religious practice, as imitations of the inherent but not widely available objects of Christian religious practice.

Cross-pendants are not rare finds at the rural dwelling sites of ancient Rus' (Makarov 1999). Having analysed the collections of finds originating from 50 rural sites of the tenth and the thirteenth centuries, situated in the central and northern regions of ancient Rus', it appeared that Christian ritual objects could be registered from 23 sites, around 40 % of the dwelling sites where wide-scale excavations were carried out. The most striking fact is that it was Minino, the site situated in the distant outland of ancient Rus', that had produced the series of crosses which has turned out to be the most numerous collection of Christian ritual objects ever excavated from an ancient Russian rural site. The finds evidence the circulation of a large number of Christian symbols in the everyday life of the people who lived in the villages around Lake Kubenskoe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These artefacts are nearly as frequent here as brooches and zoomorphic pendants. Judging from the concentration of pendant crosses in excavation trench No. 3 at the dwelling site Minino I, which yielded the most comprehensive material for the analysis of the cultural situation of the second part of the twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries, nearly every villager had a pendant cross in his or her possession. Much less frequently these crosses were deposited in the graves; they were excavated from two burials only. This distribution is not surprising, keeping in mind that the custom of placing cross-pendants into graves was not generally accepted in ancient Rus', even in the Christian communities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Thus, the excavations at Minino have revealed the complex mosaic of heterogeneous elements which formed the cultural pattern of North Rus' periphery in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The discussed culture displays elements of Slavic origin, as well as those related to the Baltic zone and the Volga areas settled by the Finnish population. Like many other human groups on the Northern Rus' periphery, the Minino settlers were dependant on the metropolis for their supply of various goods and imported artefacts widely used in their dress decoration and everyday life. However, the sets of artefacts in the burials and in the occupational deposits at the dwelling site located near the cemetery, prove that the peripheral human groups had a selective attitude towards the goods which circulated by the water-routes, and accepted only those which were especially valuable in creating regional cultural patterns.

Specific conditions of development of the economic pattern, based on exchange and trade, led to the accumulation of considerable material resources in the northern outlands of ancient Rus' and had important consequences. On the one hand, the settlers maintained and conserved their close connections with the metropolis, so much so that the cultural progress achieved by the central areas was of special importance. On the other hand, the same conditions resulted in the establishment of specific forms of a regional representative culture which was clearly manifested, particularly in ceremonial woman's apparel and burial rites. Here, we can see that different materials

were used in different periods to demonstrate high social status and prosperity. In the eleventh century, the regional features inherited from the Volga Finns had been almost entirely replaced by the introduction of the Baltic and North Russian fashion. The Minino inhabitants had adopted this style in the period of stable development of the fur trade and especially favourable state of the market, therefore it was not caused by the difficulties in manufacturing and use of the dress ornaments from the Volga Finns. On the contrary, they deliberately and strictly followed the cultural traditions of the metropolis. Probably, the imitation of the aristocratic apparel in the eleventh century should be interpreted as an indication of certain social claims expressed by the medieval groups settling the outland territories. New tastes and priorities exhibited in ceremonial woman's apparel at the turn of the eleventh and the twelfth centuries evidenced consolidation of new, regional population groups, who were aware of their specific position among the other ethnic and territorial groupings.

The cultural peculiarity of the Minino inhabitants and other medieval regional groups who settled the frontier of ancient Russian territory was generally not determined by the proportion of Finnish and the Slavic elements, but, it was, however, to a great extent, determined by their regional identity which developed as a result of adaptation and comprehension of their position within the geographical boundaries, the ethno-political structures and the system of economic connections. It seems that the groups discussed identified themselves with the ancient Russian civilisation and this created involvement in the general network of cultural and material exchange, since it made various benefits of the metropolis available to them. On the other hand, the northern villagers had aspirations toward the promotion of the local community's interests and to underline their differences from other regional groups, to demonstrate welfare and full social value of the outlands' settlers, despite the fact that they occupied a subordinate position in the hierarchy of ancient Russian territorial units. These contradictory trends have been clearly revealed by the archaeological materials from the Minino necropolis.

Summary

In Russian archaeology, the history of colonisation of the northern outlands of Rus', the economic development of the forest zone of Eastern Europe, and the cultural situation in the North are traditionally viewed as separate problems having little in common. This can partly be explained through the customary investigational approaches, and partly from the state of the sources: we do not have the selection of archaeological materials that could have permitted due comprehensive and detailed reconstructions of economic and cultural history of separate local communes at our disposal. Archaeological materials yielded by the investigations of the Minino association of sites on the Lake Kubenskoe near Vologda are of special value in this context. They provide a unique possibility for insight into the interrelations of the economic expansion to the periphery with its specific patterns of subsistence and exploitation of natural resources, and the cultural development of separate groups of the medieval population.

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