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A NEW TYPE OF CHUD BURIAL CONSTRUCTION

Abstract

The authors present a brief report on the discovery and investigations of a hitherto unexcavated type of medieval Finno-Ugrian burial construction.

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In 1990–1991 the authors discovered four medieval cemeteries with burial constructions of unknown type (Fig. 1). The sites are on the Pinega River of the Arkhangelsk district in a pine forest location near Verkola and neighbouring villages. The constructions now appear as very low mounds (height 0.05–0.25 metres) of rectangular plan (4x4 – 8x9 m), often with a pit-like depression in the centre (depth 0.4 m) and small ditches (depth 0.05–0.4 m) along the sides of the mound. The number of ditches varies between one and four. There are also completely level burial structures without pits and ditches, as also structures with pits and no ditches, and vice versa. The excavations showed that the external features of the structures indicate differences in their internal construction. The corners of

the structures are oriented towards the four cardinal points, although in the present case this seems to have resulted from their sides being aligned along the direction of the river, or the terrace on the river bank.

A total of 25 structures of this description have been discovered. Except for two near the village of Letopola, all are on the second terrace along the left bank of the Pinega River, approximately 9 metres above water-level as measured in August. The cemetery near Letopola consists of two burial constructions on the third terrace of the river, c. 18 metres above water-level.

Six structures were excavated during the 1990–1991 field seasons: four at the Verkola-I site and two at Verkola-II. On the basis of the types of discovered artefact sets they can be confidently dated to the period from the late eleventh to the middle of the twelfth century AD. The present article is on the excavation of structure 2 at Verkola-I in 1990.

Structure 2 at the Verkola-I burial site

Description. Verkola-I is located 1.3 kilometres east of the village of Verkola, 0.4 km NNE of the monastery of St. Artemy, and 0.4 km to the east of the Pinega River. It consists of eight burial structures situated apart along the brink of the second terrace of the river with a gully on the south side.

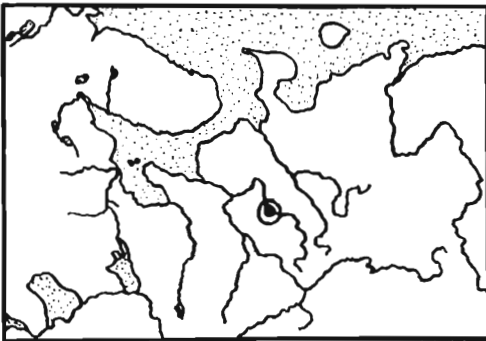


Fig. 1. Map

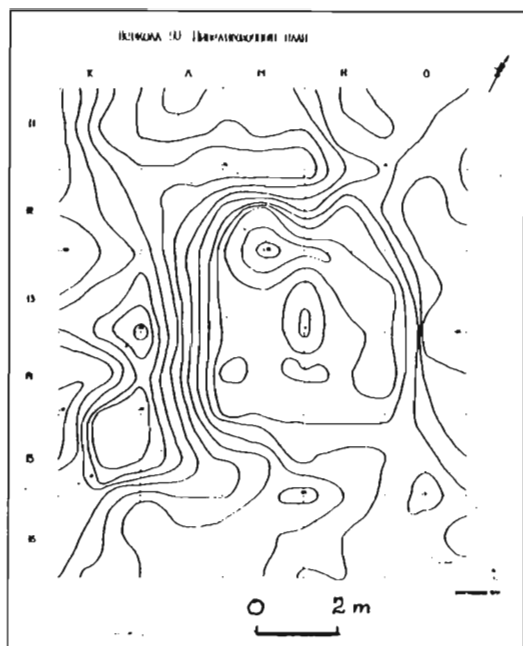


Fig. 2. Plan of structure 2, Verkola-I (5 cm contour intervals)

Prior to excavation, structure 2 (Fig. 2) had the appearance of a mound of almost rectangular plan. It was 0.2–0.3 metres above the surrounding surface, and its corners were oriented towards the four cardinal points. In the central part was pit-like depression (depth 0.2 m below the surface of the construction). Along the sides of the "mound" were four small ditches varying in depth from 0.05 to 0.3 metres. The SW ditch belonged to both structures 2 and 3. The upper level of the structure measured 4 x 5 metres.

Structure 2 was excavated in thin horizontal sections leaving two profiles crossing the centre, which remained in place until the excavation was completed. All finds were drawn *in situ*.

Construction (Fig. 3). The structure was a rectangular burial level (5.8 x 4.6 m) delimited by the four separate ditches. In the central part were the remains of a wooden framework measuring 2.4 x 1.8 metres at the corners. The framework had been sunk into a rectangular pit (2.9 x 2.2 x 0.2 m) that was beneath the original surface of the ground. The bottom of the pit and the framework were 0.5 metres beneath the present surface of the structure. Three of the lower courses of logs placed into the pit were partly preserved. Unfortunately, their state of preservation does not permit the use dendrochronological methods, nor does it reveal how the logs were joined at the corners. Despite this, the

ends of the logs projecting from the walls of the wooden structure show that such a frame construction actually existed. There is also a section of a fourth course of logs on the south-west side. The corners of the framework were oriented towards the four cardinal points, as also the construction as a whole. The long axis of the framework pointed north-west.

Traces of the destruction of the part of the framework originally above the pit could be seen in the horizontal sections and profiles during the excavation. They appear as c. 0.1 m thick brown lines of varying colour beginning immediately at the preserved log fragments and terminating at the original surface, the recent surface, or within the strata of the structure as a whole. The length and pattern of these lines show that the framework had been at least 1 metre high, and had sunk and fallen down on the west side. As a result, all the remains and traces of the framework were buried in a layer of grey-yellow sand mixed with ash and small pieces of charcoal. This layer lies between recent white podzol beneath the turf and natural, undisturbed red sand. It terminates near the outer sides of the ditches, clearly indicating the remains of the burial construction. The pattern of disintegration suggests that the framework was not filled and/or covered with earth in ancient times. Consequently, the grey-yellow layer of sand can be attributed to an original earth roof on the construction.

Outside the framework, near the south-east wall, was a lens of charred wood measuring 1 x 0.3 metres. The bottom edge was inclined towards the framework, and the feature appears to have been the remains of a door.

The burial level was arranged on the original surface of the ground. Only in the parts towards the north and the north-west had the original turf and podzol been removed. The surface of the burial level appears to have been burnt. This is indicated by the fact that the original turf within the construction had turned into a charcoal layer no more than 0.02 m thick which was immediately underlain by undisturbed white podzol 0.1–0.2 metres thick. This podzol is the same as in the recent forest soil layers outside the burial structures.

The four ditches running along the sides of the structure measured 3–4 x 1–1.8 metres in the natural sand layer, and were at a depth of 0.4 metres beneath the original surface. Except for the north-west ditch, all have a double fill. More or less homogeneous grey-yellow sand containing ash and small pieces of charcoal is divided into two layers by a thin (0.02 m) black streak underlined by a thin (0.02–0.04 m; exceptionally 0.08 m) layer of white-grey podzol. This was evidently a soil forma-

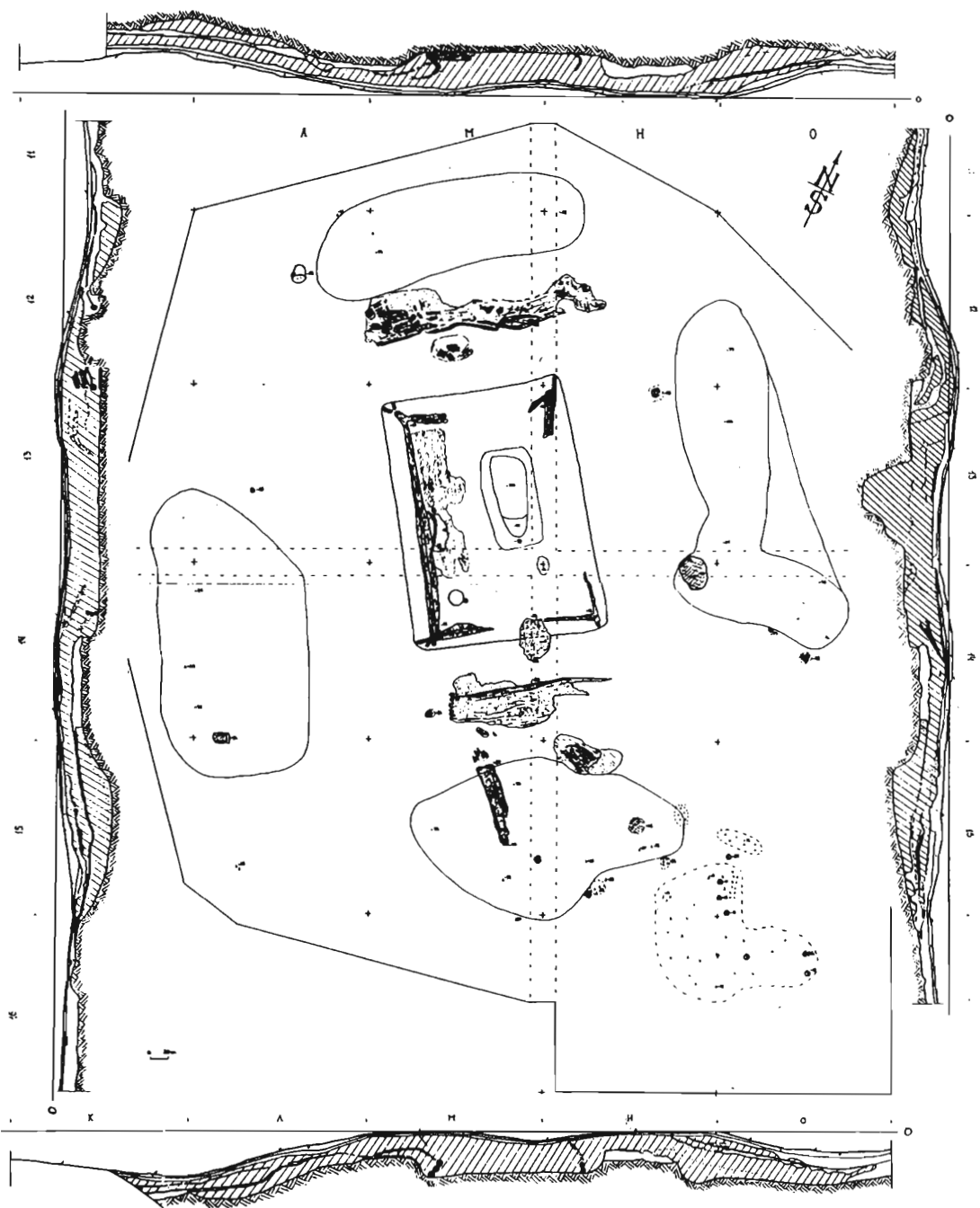


Fig. 3. Plan and profiles of excavated structure 2

tion layer which had been covered by the ruins of the construction. Its conjunction with the surface of the burial level shows that the wooden framework was not covered with earth.

The fact that the fill of the ditches was situated

under this layer suggests that the burial level was used twice. The earlier construction had been destroyed or dismantled, after which the present wooden framework was erected on its burial level. Further evidence for this suggestion is a three-part

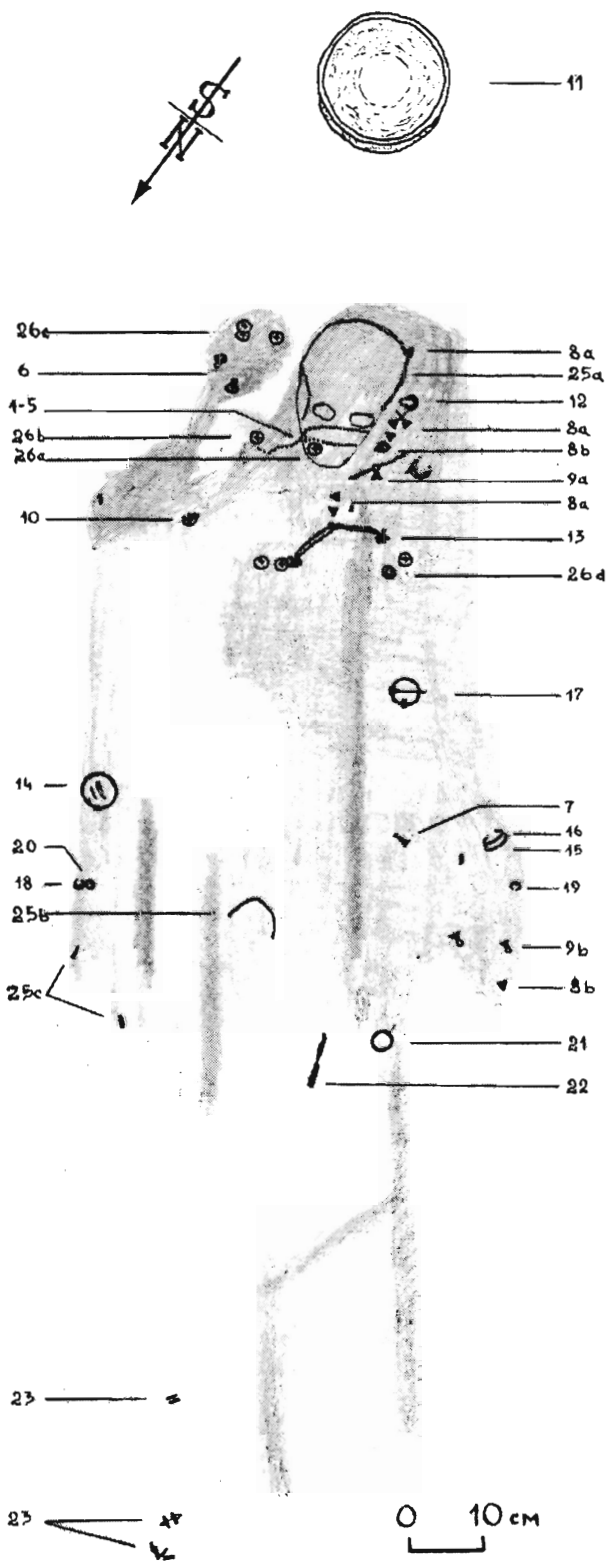


Fig. 4. Plan of the burial

pit in the centre, lying 0.5 metres below the pit with the wooden framework. Its fill was completely similar to that of the whole structure. This pit cannot be placed in the context of the construction with the wooden framework. Rather, it can be attributed to the previous burial construction of different type with a massive pole in the centre. A distinct construction of this type was discovered in the excavation of adjacent structure 1 in 1991.

Above the south-east ditch and the soil formation layer in the profile were traces of a slightly inclined row of 6–7 split beams situated close to each other with the planed surface upwards. In the profile these appeared as a row of semicircular downward-pointing lenses of charcoal with brown fill within the semicircles (they could not be distinguished in the horizontal sections). It can be assumed that these were the traces of a ritual bridge or trestle leading to the front of the entrance to the wooden framework from the south-east side where the remains of the assumed door were found.

On the south-east and north-west sides, between the walls of the wooden framework and the ditches were the remains of wooden platforms placed directly on the surface of the burial level.

The burial (Fig. 4). A body had been laid within the wooden framework and along its south-west wall on the layer of natural red sand. The head pointed to the south-east. The body had been poorly preserved except for the cranium and the phalanges of the fingers. An examination of the cranium and teeth indicated that the body was of a female, aged 30–35 and measuring c. 160 cm in height (identification By Serafima Sankina, MAE, St. Petersburg). Under the metal details of the costume were textile remains, woollen threads and cords. There were also leather straps attached to small bells and a fur dress. Pieces of fur lay on the finger-rings. Remains of wood were found under the body, and under the cranium were textile remains, fur, and a lichen “pillow” on a piece of wood. The whole cranium was encased in brown decayed matter. A pieces of textiles, fur and wood were also found on the upper part of the cranium.

At the head, 0.2 metres from the cranium in the south-west part of the wooden framework was an intact hand-shaped pottery vessel 12 cm in height. The diameters of the bottom, body and rim are 11.5, 17, and 16 cm respectively (Fig. 4:11; Fig. 5:11). The rim, which is turned back slightly, was decorated on the horizontal edge with a denticulated stamp. The neck was decorated with two zig-zag rows of similar impressions separated by a row of vertical impressions made with the same stamp.

In the nose area of the cranium was a silver coin

pendant, with a piece of woollen cord threaded through its hole (Fig. 4: 26a). Eight centimetres to the east of the pendant was another silver coin on the decayed matter (Fig. 4: 26b). Under the cranium was a head ornament consisting of two sets of bronze spirals on leather straps with woollen cord between them (Fig. 4:25a). The spirals enveloped the rear part of a head-dress for a distance of 10 cm and continued to the neck where they were held by bell-shaped pendants (Fig. 4: 8a; Fig. 5: 8). At the points where the spirals were suspended they were reinforced with three bell-shaped pendants on the left side of the head (Fig. 4: 8b; Fig. 5: 8) and a large cylindrical silver-glass bead on the right (Fig. 5: 3). In addition, a string of 6 gold-glass cylindrical beads (Fig. 5: 3) was suspended with a kegs-shaped gold-glass bead on the end. A piece of textile ribbon lay on the forehead. In the area of the left temple was a silver lunate ring with granulation (Fig. 4: 12; Fig. 5: 12). A conical pendant with a tab was found on the west side of the lower jaw (Fig. 4: 9a; Fig. 5: 9). Three silver coins (Fig. 2: 26 c) and two small bells with cruciform slits and incisions on the sides (Fig. 4: 6; Fig. 5: 6) were located on the east side of the cranium in a feature of decayed matter (possible a plait of hair).

Around the neck of the corpse were three strings of beads (Fig. 4: 1–5). These are of bone disks (Fig. 5: 5), carnelian spheres (Fig. 5: 4), cylindrical gold-glass (Fig. 5: 3), double gold and silver glass (Fig. 5:1), and small cut pieces (Fig. 5: 2). A total of 250 pieces were found, of which 158 are intact. In the right shoulder area was a “horse on a serpent” pendant (Fig. 4: 10; Fig. 5: 10). On the breast were five silver coins (Fig. 4: 26d) and two flat bird pendants on double-twisted chains bound together at the ends with a wire ring with tied ends (Fig. 4: 13; Fig. 5: 13). A silver penannular brooch with spiral ends was found face down at the lower part of the breast (Fig. 4: 17; Fig. 5: 17). The ends of the brooch are tied together with copper wire, and the pin has a wide base. The upper side of the brooch is decorated throughout, as well as the spirals and the base of the pin.

On the left side of the waist was a bottle-shaped pendant (Fig. 4: 7; Fig. 5: 7). On the left wrist were two bronze bracelets: a laminar bracelet with “wolf’s tooth” ornament (Fig. 4: 16; Fig. 5: 16) and a plane-concave bracelet with ear-like protrusions (Fig. 4: 15; Fig. 4: 15). On a finger of the left hand was a silver ring with short length of rod extending from a lamellar part and double zig-zag ornament (Fig. 4: 19; Fig. 5: 19). On the right wrist was a laminar bracelet of billon with tied ends (Fig. 4: 14; Fig. 5: 14). On the fingers of the right hand were two silver rings: a spiral one (Fig. 4: 20; Fig. 5: 20)

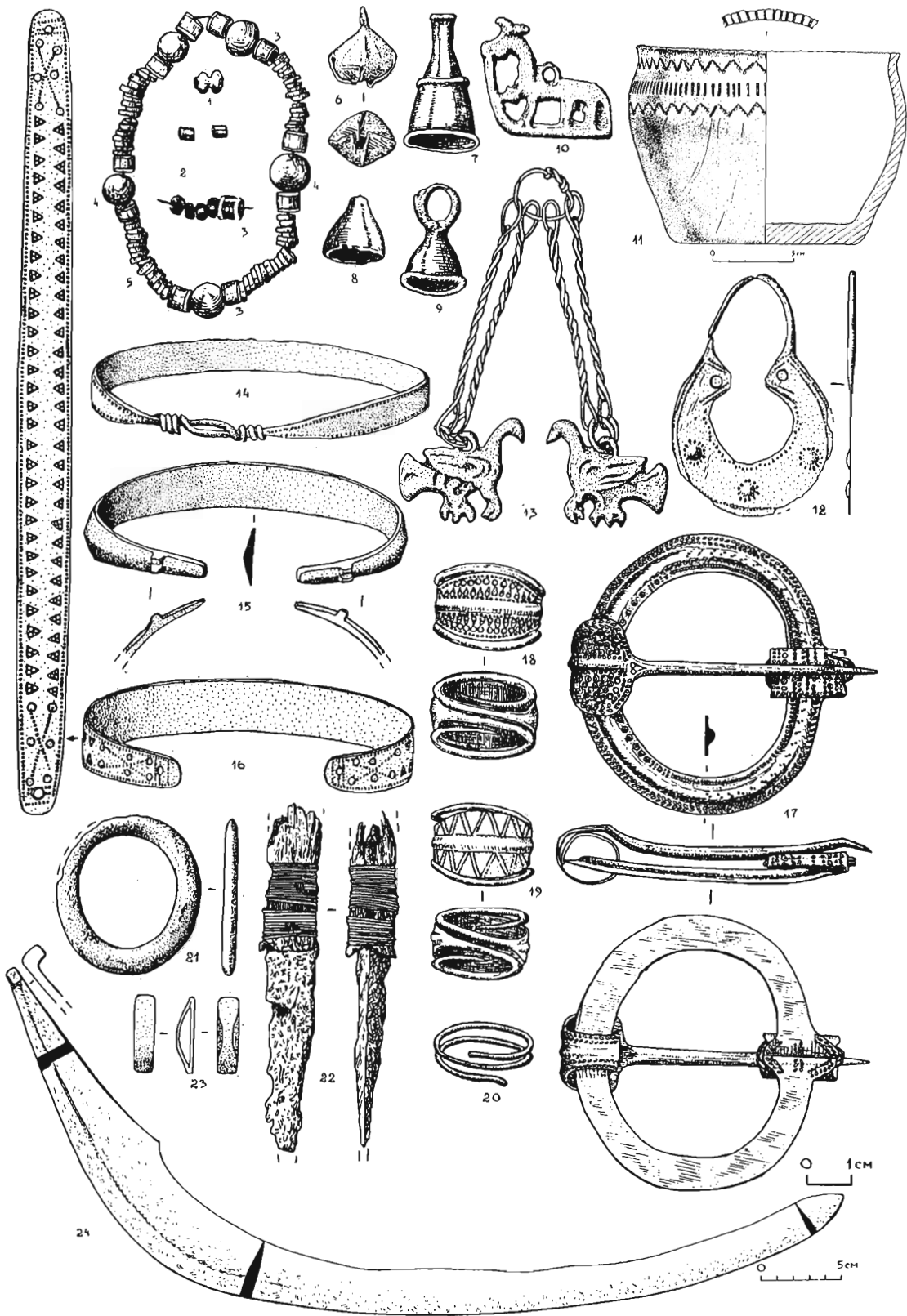


Fig. 5. Finds

and a “wolf’s tooth” decorated specimen with lengths of rod protruding from a central lamellar part (Fig. 4: 18; Fig. 5: 18). Two conical bronze pendants with tabs (Fig. 4: 9b; Fig. 5: 9) and a bell-shaped pendant (Fig. 4: 8b; Fig. 5: 8) were found in the area of the left hand. Two bronze spirals were discovered in the area of the right hand (Fig. 4: 25c), and one on the pelvis (Fig. 4: 25b). A bronze belt ring of oval section with damaged circular ornament (Fig. 4: 21; Fig. 5: 21) and the remains of an iron knife with silver wire wound round its wooden handle (Fig. 4: 21; Fig. 5: 22) were found near the thigh-bones. In the area of the right foot were 8 bronze girdle-mounts (Fig. 4: 23; Fig. 5: 23).

Above the actual inhumation was an iron scythe-blade without observable traces of use that had been lodged into the fourth log of the wooden framework (Fig. 3; Fig. 5: 24). Thin grains of wood were preserved on the lower blade, suggesting that the burial was covered with bast.

Dating

The ages of the artefact types are given in Table 1, and only a few further comments are required. Most of the types can be dated with reference to the dendrochronology established for Novgorod, which begins at AD 989 (Lesman 1988; 1990). Other types are dated through comparisons with assemblages from the Onega River area, the Lake Beloozero area, and the Lake Ladoga area.

Small bells with cruciform slits and incisions on the sides occurred in Novgorod until 1116, and until 1134 in the Novgorod area (Lesman 1988, p. 59). Bracelets with animal heads, which can be used to date the bracelet with ear-like protrusions in the present material, normally occur in Novgorod from 1161 onwards, but a single specimen has also been found in layer 22, dated to 1076–1096 (Lesman 1988, p. 47). Ornaments with tied ends appear until 1171 in Novgorod (Lesman 1988, p. 83), and the bracelet with tied ends can be dated

Table 1
Dates of artifact types (Verkola-1, structure 2)

N	Type	Total	Fig.	Date
1	lunate forehead ring	1	12	11th-13th c
2	“horse on serpent” pendant	1	10	11th-12th c
3	flat bird pendant	2	12	11th-12th c
4	double twisted chains	2	13	late 11th - end 12th c
5	penannular brooch with spiral ends, decorated throughout with wide pin base	1	17	1076-1382
6	laminar bracelet with “wolf’s tooth” decoration	1	16	1055-1281
7	plane-concave “eared” bracelet	1	17	1076-1396
8	laminar tied bracelet	1	14	ante 1177
9	“whiskered” ring with double zig-zag design	1	19	10th-end 12th c
10	“whiskered” ring with “wolf’s tooth” decoration	1	18	1055-end 12th c
11	spiral ring	1	20	1006-1281
12	bell-shaped pendant	9	8	11th-12th c
13	bottle-shaped pendant	1	7	11th-end 12th c
14	small bell with cruciform slit and incisions on blades	2	6	ante 1134
15	decorated belt ring	1	21	1025-1313
16	knife with silver wire wound around its wooden handle	1	22	11th-12th c
<i>Beads</i>				
17	carnelian sphere	7	4	ante 1161
18	gold-glass keg-shaped	1		ante 1281
19	gold-glass cylindrical	47	3	ante 1281
20	silver-glass cylindrical	1	3	ante 1281
21	double gold and silverglass	39	1	ante 1134
22	small cutting	7	2	ante 1161
<i>Coins</i>				
23	Jever, Otto or Herman	7		1059-1071
24	Regensburg, Heinrich III	1		1039-1042
25	Groningen, Bishop Bernold	1		1027-1054
26	Ciney, Bishop Dietwin	1		1048-1075

accordingly. Rings with extended rod parts are dated to between the late tenth and early twelfth century according to assemblages in the north-east and north-west of Eastern Europe (Nedoshivina 1967, pp. 257–259). However, a specimen from Verkola, with “wolf’s tooth” decoration has a Novgorod date of 1055–1281 (Lesman 1988, p. 87). This gives a basis for dating the third bracelet in the present assemblage. Bottle-shaped pendants are usually dated to the late eleventh century at the latest, but a specimen of this type has been found at Krokhinskie Peski at Lake Beloozero in an assemblage dated to the late eleventh and early twelfth century (Makarov 1990, pp. 107–108, 164, 206). Double twisted chains connected with tied wire rings, identical to those found at Verkola-I, have been found in a late-eleventh and early-twelfth-century assemblage at the Gaigovo-III mound cemetery on the Oyat’ River in the Lake Ladoga area (Kochkurkina & Linevsky 1985, pp. 123–126). The lunate ring bears a resemblance to Makarov’s type 2, which he dates to the last quarter of the twelfth century and the thirteenth century (Makarov 1989; 1993, pp. 60–63). The present artefact, though, differs from this type with respect to “early” attributes. In view of the fact that artefacts of this type are rare and their typological dating is questionable, we would prefer a broader dating common to all the lunate forehead-rings and/or ear-rings of the eleventh-thirteenth centuries. The “horse on a serpent” pendant is of the second variant of Ryabinin’s type XI (Ryabinin 1981, pp. 24–27), which is dated to the eleventh-twelfth centuries. The coins providing the dating have been identified by Vsevolod Potin (Hermitage, St. Petersburg).

The dates available for the artefact types present in the burial assign it to the late eleventh – early twelfth century.

Cultural context

It is already clear from the above section on the dating that the grave-goods fall within the range of medieval assemblages with Finnish and Novgorodian materials common to the areas west of Verkola. Spatially and typologically closest are the cemeteries of Korbala and Ust’-Puya on the Vaga River (a left tributary of the Northern Dvina) (Nazarenko et al., 1984; 1990) and the grave and mound cemeteries in the East Onega Lake area (Makarov 1990). Coming next in terms of similarity are the mound cemeteries of the Lake Ladoga area (Ravdonikas, 1934; Kochkurkina & Linevsky, 1985; Kochkurkina, 1989). Also to be mentioned are two grave cemeteries near the village of

Kuzomen’ on the south coast of the Kola Peninsula (Gurina et al., 1990), which belong to the same cultural group despite marked differences with respect to the grave-goods from Verkola.

A variety of wooden constructions in grave pits and mounds are well known from burials which are connected with Finno-Ugrians. Today, in the north and north-east of Russia it is easy to find various wooden structures built on the graves. These range from two poles laid alongside the small tumulus to wooden frameworks with courses of logs and a covering part. However, there have been only a few excavations of wooden burial constructions on the surface with interments inside which were not covered with earth.

The remains of 13–15 wooden constructions on the surface, consisting of posts and horizontally laid logs have been discovered at the cemetery of Elder Akhnilovo in the Upper Volga area. This cemetery is of the Anyanyino archaeological culture and is dated to between the late eighth and early sixth century B.C. (Patrushev & Khalikov, 1982). There were interments both under these constructions and within them on the surface.

Two “huts of the dead”, dated to the third quarter of the first millennium A.D. or even later have been discovered in the context of the Dyakovo archaeological culture: at fortified settlements at Bereznyaki and near the monastery of Savvino-Storozhevsky on the Upper Volga (Smirnov, 1990). The dimensions of these structures are 2.25 metres square and 2 x 1.2 metres respectively. Within them were the remains of cremations burnt apart. At the second site, the remains of cremations were placed in a vessel, a vessel covered with another vessel, under an upturned vessel, or under pot sherds. The entrance was on the south or east side of the hut.

Near the village of Nikolskoe on the Suda River in the Vologda region a burial construction was found with a sand-filled wooden framework 6.8 x 6.8 metres in area and 1.2 – 1.4 metres high. The remains of cremations burnt in another location were placed in the sand. The corners of the framework were oriented towards the four cardinal points, and there were segmental ditches running along the sides of the framework. The structure was approached from the north-west where the ditch was of two flanking a small bank of earth leading to the burial level. Near the outside entrance was the burial of a horse, and inside the structure was a hearth. The construction is dated to the second half of the ninth century – early tenth century A.D. (Bashenkin, 1985).

Two “huts of the dead” have also been discovered near the village of Gorka on the Pasha River in

the south Ladoga area. These were wooden frameworks measuring 3.5 – 4 x 4 – 4.5 metres with the long axes oriented N-S. They were erected on a cutting from the original sand platforms at the location. The platforms had framework constructions measuring 4.5 – 5 x 5.5 – 6 metres consisting of five rows of logs. The huts on the platforms were covered with a gable earth roof supported from within by 4 to 5 rows of posts. In the centre, slightly closer to the north wall was a hearth with a smoke-hole in the roof above it. The entrance was in the south wall near the south-east corner. Both constructions were surrounded by a ditch 3 metres wide and 0.5 – 0.6 metres deep. In one of the constructions a large beam approximately 0.7 metres thick with a trimmed top bridged the ditch in front of the entrance (Nazarenko, 1988, 55). In this construction ten to fifteen courses of logs could be discerned, which suggests a probable original height of two metres (Kirpichnikov & Nazarenko, 1988). Cremations lay within the frameworks on banks of earth reinforced with timber. These constructions date from between the second half of the ninth century and the early eleventh century.

Near the village of Orekhovo on the Kapsha River (a tributary of the Pasha) a surface construction 8 – 10 metres in diameter with posts and an inhumation has been excavated. The body was oriented towards the south-east in the grave pit in the centre. A hearth of logs was situated in the west part of a surrounding ditch. The construction is dated to the late eleventh century (Nazarenko - report).

The extreme scarcity of such constructions is not surprising, as they are very difficult to observe from the surface. The “huts of the dead” in the fortified settlements and the cemetery of Elder Akhnilovo were discovered during the excavations of these sites. In the other cases, they had the appearance of mounds, 0.5 – 1 metre high. The excavated structure no. 2 was the most visible one in the Verkola cemeteries.

In view of their funeral rites, the Verkola cemeteries are located at a remarkable site, the original setting of a legend of Saint Artemy of Verkola. Artemy is claimed to have died in a thunderstorm in 1544. In one variant of his legend, his corpse was placed on the surface of the ground (Dmitriev, 1973, pp. 249–261), and in another version, in a wooden framework (Ghitie...). After thirty-three years, his sanctity became apparent and his undecayed remains were transported to the Church of Saint Nicholas, where a monastery was later established. The investigated cemetery is 400 metres NNE of the Monastery of Saint Artemy and 1.5 km south of the Chapel of Saint Artemy. The wooden

Church of Saint Nicholas, built in the eighteenth century, is still attached to the monastery. A relic of Saint Artemy was kept in the chapel until 1991, when it was returned to the monastery. An early-twentieth-century wall painting in the Church of the Assumption in the monastery shows Saint Artemy lying in a wooden construction consisting of posts and horizontally laid logs.

Consequently, the assemblage discovered near the village of Verkola can be attributed to the “Zavolochskaya Chud” on the basis of grave-goods. But it also represents a new type of burial construction and observable surface manifestations of it. It is also obvious that several components of the funeral rite as observed at Verkola were common in the ancient Finno-Ugrian cultural context, and fit the concept of the “hut of the dead”, which is well known from written sources, folklore and ethnography.

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