

# **Cultural interaction between east and west**

Archaeology, artefacts and human contacts in northern Europe



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# An Interesting Find from Staraja Ladoga: A Representation of Freyja?

Alexei V. Plochov, *Researcher, Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, Russia.*  
a\_plokhov@mail.ru

The cultural layer of the settlement-site at Staraja Ladoga conceals much important information for studies of the history of ancient Rus'. Every year, thanks to archaeological excavations in Staraja Ladoga, collections are supplemented by substantial finds and researchers obtain unique data on various aspects of the material and spiritual culture of ancient inhabitants of the Lower Volchov. However, examination of some collections of the objects excavated earlier has also proved fruitful, resulting in new and surprising discoveries.

## A unique casting Mould from Staraja Ladoga

Among the material from Staraja Ladoga preserved in the State Hermitage, I found two fragments of a clay casting mould.<sup>1</sup> They join each other, revealing most of their representation (fig. 1). Originally, the mould was probably a plate of nearly rectangular shape. The largest parts preserved are 30 mm x 16 mm x 9 mm. The depth of the negative does not exceed 1 mm. No traces of a sprue are evident, but it was probably located in the part of the mould that is not preserved. The mould was made from clay containing no visually discernible tempers, and its outer surface is light grey. The mould was intended for casting female figurines shown in profile. The woman figured was clad in a long garment reaching her ankles. Some kind of adornment, probably a necklace, is clearly discernible on the neck. The hand of the woman is pressed to her bosom, touching this adornment. This appears to emphasize its importance and acts as a signal for recognising the image imprinted in the mould.

The fragments of this mould were found during the 1940 excavation at Zemljanoe Gorodišče (Earthen Hillfort) in Staraja Ladoga. The director of the excavation, Vladislav I. Ravdonikas, identified the wooden planking (above which the mould was found) and adjoining building remains as 'horizon D' of the cultural deposits at the site, and he dated most of this horizon to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Ravdonikas 1949:24f, 40f, fig. 5, 6). The finds from the cultural layer above the planking included predominantly fragments of hand-made pottery. Since it is recognized that by the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century the ceramic complex from Staraja Ladoga was dominated by wheel-made pots (Rjabinin 1985:37), we should probably date our mould to an earlier period.

Excavations have revealed that the 10<sup>th</sup>-century layers contained the most plentiful and diverse examples of the jeweller's art (Davidan 1980:65). Found amongst and near the remains of dwellings were fragments of casting moulds, a spoon for melted metal, crucibles and ingots of non-ferrous metals. Mapping the finds related to various workshops and an analysis of the complex of objects from horizon D, conducted by Olga I. Davidan, indicated that in the north-eastern section of the excavated area of Zemljanoe Gorodišče there were a number of buildings where multi-talented artisans lived and worked (Davidan 1977). They manufactured various objects from bone, horn and amber, and also worked with iron and created jewellery. Davidan suggested that the dwellings excavated within

this area were at some time part of a special craft block where various adornments and objects for grooming were manufactured (Davidan 1977:104).

## Female figurines in the context of antiquities of the Viking Age

Amongst antiquities from Northern and Eastern Europe there are eleven cast relief female figurines known that are more or less similar to those that would have been manufactured using the mould from Staraja Ladoga (fig. 2). Most of these (eight items) were found in Sweden; in the boat burial in Gamla Uppsala, Uppland (Nordahl 1984, 2001:46-61, fig. 44); in a disturbed burial in Tuna, Alsike parish, Uppland (Arne 1934:26ff, 56, 70f, Taf. VII:11; Holmqvist 1960:113, fig. 23); in chamber-graves 825 and 968 in Birka, Adelsö, Uppland (Arbman 1940: Taf. 92:8, 10; Arbman 1943:298ff, 394ff, abb. 248, 346:9; Holmqvist 1960:113, fig. 21; Arwidsson 1989:58f, abb. 9:1); in a barrow with a cremation in Sibble, Grödinge parish, Södermanland (*Archeological* 1935:271f; Holmqvist 1960:113, fig. 24); in a cremation burial in Hjorthamar, Frökärle parish, Blekinge (Holmqvist 1960:113f, fig. 25; Zeiten 1997:55); in a silver hoard from Klinta, Köping parish, Öland (Holmqvist 1960:113, fig. 22; *From Viking...* 1992:277, no. 186; Graham-Campbell 1980:154, no. 518; Stenberger 1958:abb. 41); and in an unknown place on the island of Öland (Graham-Campbell 1980:154, no. 517). Two miniatures were found at settlements in Denmark: Nygård, Klemensker parish on Bornholm (Zeiten 1997: 10, 55, fig. 9) and Tissø in Zealand (*Vikings...* 2000: 84f., 419, fig. 4.19; Jørgensen 1999:62).

One of the figurines comes from Russia: the settlement site of Rjurikovo Gorodišče near Novgorod (Nosov 1992:52, fig. II.25 3, 2001:65, abb. 46:1; *From Viking...* 1992:302, no. 281).

Until recently, the only site where evidence of manufacture of female figurines has been recorded was Birka. In the first half of 1990s during excavations of the 'Black Earth' – the cultural layer of this settlement – fragments of two bi-valve moulds for casting female figurines were found (Ambrosiani & Erikson 1994:25f, 1996:26f). Björn Ambrosiani suggested that these two finds were related to a workshop that functioned in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century (Ambrosiani & Erikson 1994:25, 1996:27).

All of the miniatures available are relief representations of women in profile. In terms of their artistic composition these figurines can be divided into four groups. The first and the earliest group includes the finds from Tuna and Sibble. The distinguishing feature of these pendants is the

<sup>1</sup> The State Hermitage, St. Petersburg. The Department of the Archaeology of Eastern Europe and Siberia. Inventory list 17, no. 1543.

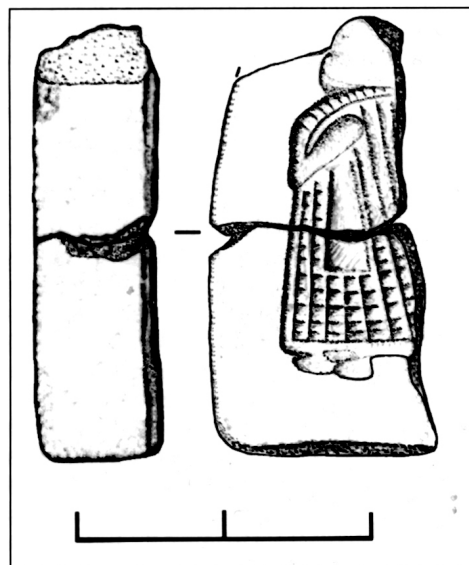


Fig.1. The clay mould from Zemljanoe Gorodišče in Staraja Ladoga. The scale is in cm (drawing by Galina A. Kuznecova).

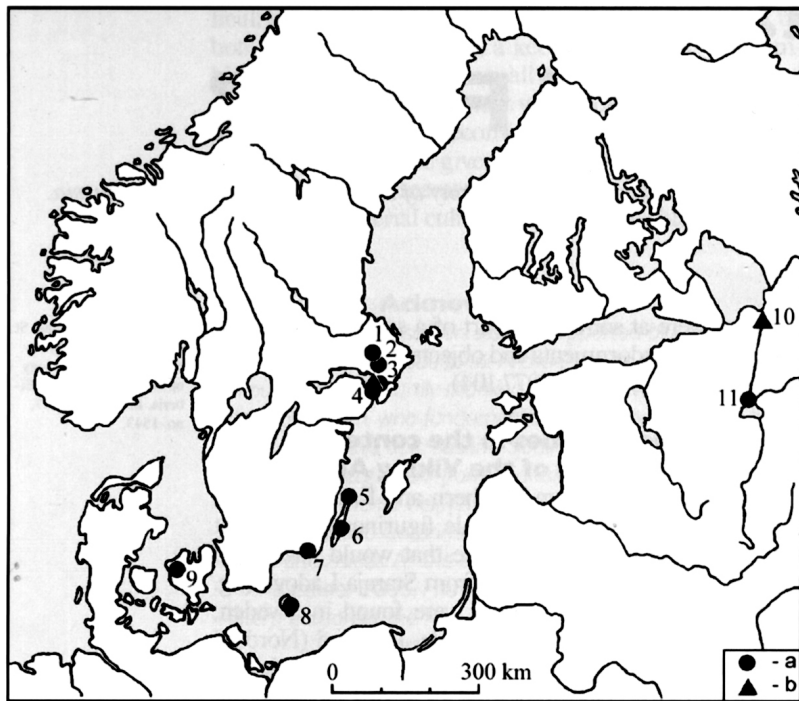


Fig. 2. Distribution of pendants in the form of female figurines. a) Sites where pendants have been found. b) Sites where moulds for casting figurines have been found.

1 – Gamla Uppsala, 2 – Tuna, 3 – Birka, 4 – Sibble, 5 – Klinta, 6 – Island of Öland, 7 – Hjorthammar, 8 – Nygård, 9 – Tissø, 10 – Staraja Ladoga, 11 – Rjurikovo Gorodišče (drawing by Alexei V. Plochov).

absence of hands, evidently hidden by the garment. The heads of the figurines are zoomorphic and shown without any detail. Only an eye in the centre of the face is rendered in relief. The hair of the women is gathered in a knot at the back of her head. The perceptible details of clothing include an apron, a strapped gown, a train and a cape or coat (Bau 1982:15f, 31, fig. 3, 4). The capes are fastened near the neck with brooches (Arrhenius 1962:80f; Nordahl 1984:112f, 2001:53). A necklace is depicted on the figurine from Tuna, and it is possible that similar adornments are rendered like ribbons on the bosom of the female figurine from Sibble.

The second group includes objects in the form of females holding a beaker or a drinking horn, found in Gamla Uppsala, Hjorthammar, Nygård, and on the island of Öland. These are the most varied in terms of the manner of modelling the details of the figure, clothing and coiffure, as well as the metal used for casting these pendants and their quality. There are similarities with a representation on a silver ear-spoon from grave 505 in Birka (Arbman 1940: Taf. 173:1, 1943:147ff; Holmqvist 1960:112, fig. 19; Graham-Campbell 1980:50, no. 176; Gräslund 1984b:177).

The figurines from burials in Birka and the cultural layer of Rjurikovo Gorodišče constitute the third group. These are very similar to each other, differing only in small details of dress and coiffure. On all of the miniatures we see women clothed in broad long garments reaching their ankles. Their clothing includes an apron, a strapped gown and a train (Holmqvist 1960:112, fig. 20; Bau 1982:15f, 31, fig. 3). The faces are rendered only roughly. The hair is gathered into a knot fixed with a loop. On the neck there are fillets, which the women hold with their arms folded at the elbows.

The pendant from Tissø makes up the fourth group. In contrast to other miniatures, here both hands are represented. They are rendered in the manner typical of northern applied art. The hands are clasping the tips of a shawl

thrown over the shoulders. The hair, like most other figurines, is tied in a knot.

Examination of the available evidence revealed that the closest parallels to the figurines that would have been cast in the mould from Staraja Ladoga are the pendants of the third group, especially the miniatures found in grave 968 in Birka and at Rjurikovo Gorodišče.

All the figurines enumerated above were probably pendants, for on the rear side of each of them is an eye. Possibly, as some scholars have suggested, some of the miniatures were sewn onto clothing (Zeiten 1997:10, 55). Virtually all of the burials with these figurines were female graves as may be judged by the accompanying grave goods. In the burials of Birka and Gamla Uppsala they were found in the area of the thorax or neck. In Birka, the graves contained a number of 'ritual' objects. Noteworthy in this respect is grave 968. In Neil Price's opinion, some of the finds from this grave were 'the symbolic equipment of the *volur* and their kind' (Price 2002:167).

The arrangement of these miniatures in graves, as well as their small number, suggest that they were not adornments, but rather amulets intended for some symbolic and magical purpose. The presence of these objects in a hoard and at various settlements indicates that they were used not only during funerary rituals, but were also worn in everyday life.

#### 'Odin's maiden' or 'Ódr's wife'?

Traditionally, researchers from different countries have treated the miniature female figurines, especially the pendants with a drinking horn or a beaker, as representations of Valkyries (Davidson 1967:130, pl. 63; *From Viking...* 1982:190, no. 186, 281; Ambrosiani & Erikson 1994:26; Gräslund 1984a:117; Graham-Campbell 2001:183; Price 2002:336f.; *Vikings...* 2000:57; Zeiten 1997:10; Nosov 1992:52, 2001:65; Petruchin 1999:44; Puškina 2001:315).

The Valkyries in the ancient Scandinavian epic literature were warlike maidens – the companions of Odin, who sent them to the battlefield (*The Poetic Edda* 1936:14, 255ff, 282f, 295f, 307, 319; *The Prose Edda* 1916:48). Valkyries determined the fate of those who entered a battle, chose who was destined to be slain in it and helped heroes in various struggles against their enemies or with the elements. Valkyries also met the slain warriors in the other world, waiting upon them in Valhalla, where they offered them drinks and filled their dishes and cups (*The Poetic Edda* 1936:99; *The Prose Edda* 1916:48, 102).

The treatment of the female figures as Valkyries is based on studies of figurative evidence, first and foremost, the scenes depicted on Gotlandic picture stones. Comparison of female representations on the stones with certain subjects of the North-German myths led to the interpretation of the figures with drinking horns as 'the maidens of Odin' (Lindqvist 1941:96). Thus, the images on the stones became the basis for the interpretation of female-figurine pendants as Valkyries (Price 2002:336).

The interpretation of the miniature female figurines as the warlike 'maidens of Odin' is, however, somewhat doubtful. It is unclear why these amulets are found in female burials but are absent in male ones, where their presence would have been explicable in view of the role of Valkyries in myths and heroic songs. Moreover, the mentioned graves were generally not those of ordinary Scandinavians, but rather women of a high social status – rich house-owners<sup>2</sup> committed to the earth according to the ritual 'of prestige', such as through burial in a chamber or boat (Gräslund 1980:79ff, 86; Nordahl 1984:114, 2001:65f). The researchers who compare the figurines with Valkyries usually do not propose any explanation of the role of these amulets in the everyday life of medie-

<sup>2</sup> In nearly every grave with female figurines keys also are present. The keys are thought to be a sign of the power of the housewife of a farm (Vikings... 2000:84).

val women, nor of their significance in funerary rites. An exception is the work of Danish scholar Miriam Zeiten, who has studied amulets of the Viking Age from Denmark (Zeiten 1997). She writes that '...as valkyries are associated with death – both the journey to the land of the dead and life after death – the little female – ... may have been amulets leading the women who wore them to a land of the dead more cheerful than the dark Hel. They may also have been apotropaic amulets placing women under strong female beings' protection in life as in death' (Zeiten 1997:10).

Undoubtedly, the image of warlike maidens was popular among inhabitants of Scandinavia. Also without a doubt is the relation of the female-figurine amulets to the concepts of ancient Scandinavians about the other world. However, in Scandinavian mythology Valkyries are servants of the 'God of Slain' and his warriors, therefore Zeiten's supposition that these creatures protected the women does not seem to me to be justified.

In addition to Valkyries, there are numerous other female characters in Scandinavian mythology. Most of them are just casually mentioned in various sources, but the others are fairly significant heroes of the myths. Who among these may have been represented in the amulets under consideration?

As noted above, a feature of the third group of pendants is the presence of ribbons on the neck of the figurines. The mould from Staraja Ladoga enables us to be relatively confident in regarding these fillets as necklaces. A similar adornment is on the bosom of the figurines from Tuna and, possibly, on the one from Sibble.

From Scandinavian myths it is known that a necklace, namely 'the necklace *Brisingamen*', was the main attribute of Freyja. It is mentioned both in *The Poetic Edda* and in *The Prose Edda* (*The Poetic Edda* 1936:177ff; *The Prose Edda* 1916:46, 129). Thus in 'The Lay of Thrym' (*Thrymskvida*), which tells us how Thor recovered the hammer of thunder stolen by the giant Thrym, the *Brisingamen* is repeatedly mentioned in descriptions of Freyja's attire.

Wrathful was Freyja, I and fiercely she snorted,  
And the dwelling I of the gods was shaken,  
And burst was the mighty I Brisings' necklace ...  
(*The Poetic Edda* 1936:177)

In order to deceive the giant, Thor disguises himself as the goddess who allegedly was coming to Thrym as a bride. As the lay tells:

Then bound they on Thor I the bridal veil,  
And next the mighty I Brisings' necklace.  
Keys around him I let they rattle,  
And down to his knees I hung woman's dress;  
With gems full broad I upon his breast,  
And a pretty cap I to crown his head.  
(*The Poetic Edda* 1936:179)

*Brisingamen* had been stolen from Freyja by Loki. Loki and Heimdallr fought over this adornment near the Singasteinn stone (*The Prose Edda* 1916:113f).

Judging by the information preserved in Icelandic sources, Freyja on many occasions had to protect and defend her famous treasure. This key fact may be the clue to explaining the position of the hands on figures from Birka and the Volchov region. Probably, the goddess is holding her necklace for fear of losing it.

Freyja is the most vivid female character in the myths that have survived. Along with her father Njördr and brother Freyr, she belonged to the Vanir – the race of gods of fertility in Scandinavian mythology. As her husband

was named Ódr, the name being possibly one of the hypostases of Odin (*The Prose Edda* 1916:46). Freyja is believed to be the goddess of fertility, love and childbearing (*From Viking...* 1992:147). *The Prose Edda* tells about this goddess: 'songs of love are well-pleasing to her; it is good to call on her for furtherance in love' (*The Prose Edda* 1916:38). In the Eddic poetry, the 'Lady of Vanir' is endowed with unusual sexual power (*The Poetic Edda* 1936:161f, 232), and as the most beautiful of goddesses she enjoys the constant attention of giants (*The Poetic Edda* 1936:176; *The Prose Edda* 1916:53ff, 116). She was also connected with witchcraft (*Heimskringla* 2004; Zeiten 1997:43; Price 2002:108, 220). Of all the gods, the 'Goddess of Love' 'is most conformable to man's prayers' (*The Prose Edda* 1916:38). In Scandinavia she was 'the most renowned of the goddesses' (*The Prose Edda* 1916:38).

It would be natural to expect some material embodiment of the cult of Freyja to be found among Scandinavian antiquities. In my opinion, a particular manifestation of that embodiment is the female figurines with necklaces assigned to the first and the third groups. Charlotte Blindheim, in her paper devoted to an amber amulet from Kaupang, also came to the conclusion that it is probably Freyja who is represented in these miniatures (Blindheim 1960). The Norwegian researcher based her hypothesis mainly on an analysis of parallels between pendants in the form of female figurines and representations on gold plaques.

Among the Nordic material there are also other representations of female figures with necklaces, which possibly depict a goddess of fertility. One of these is a figurine on a small, round gilded-silver pendant found in a barrow with a female cremation at Aska in Hagebyhöög parish, Östergötland, Sweden (Arne 1932; Holmqvist 1960:115, fig. 26; Arrhenius 1962; Jansson 1996). Many researchers have suggested that the figure represented here might be Freyja (Arrhenius 2001:306; Price 2002:158, 220). This interpretation of the figure is based on the presence of a necklace and protruding belly, which according to the scholars may indicate pregnancy. The latter feature is thought to be peculiar to the 'Daughter of Njördr'. Birgit Arrhenius also wrote about a correspondence between the image on the pendant from Aska and the attire of Freyja, described in 'The Lay of Thrym' (Arrhenius 1962:92).

A small hollow gold figurine found near Trøninge, Holbæk, Denmark is probably a representation of the 'Wife of Ódr' (Davidson 1967:95f, 198, pl. 39; Mackeprang 1935:243, abb. 16-18). Evidence in favour of this identification is, in addition to a necklace, a 'cloak of feathers'. From Scandinavian mythology it is known that 'a hawk's plumage' was one of the accessories of Freyja (*The Poetic Edda* 1936:175; *The Prose Edda* 1916:91).

A parallel to the find from Denmark is seen in a partly gilded female figurine uncovered in the 10<sup>th</sup>-century hoard from Gnězdovo near Smolensk, Russia (Guščin 1936:57, fig. 15; *From Viking...* 1992:77, no. 304). The person is depicted from the waist up, and is dressed in a rich garment, an unusual headdress and a necklace. Perhaps this is also an image of the 'Sister of Freyr'.

One more female figure decorated with a necklace is represented on a bronze mount from a cremation burial at Solberga in Askeby parish, Östergötland, Sweden (Holmqvist 1960:115f, fig. 27; Stenberger 1977:402, abb. 267). In addition to the necklace on the woman, Arrhenius pointed out the presence of a fibula similar to that on the pendant from Tuna (Arrhenius 1962:82).

Thus, in addition to miniature female figurines, there are a considerable number of other objects that allegedly depict Freyja amongst Scandinavian antiquities. The interpretation of figurines holding a beaker or drinking horn



<sup>3</sup> Zeiten suggests that the figurines with a horn or those without may have depicted Freyja and also were amulets both of death and fertility (Zeiten 1997:11).

<sup>4</sup> Snorri Sturluson in The Prose Edda wrote that a 'woman should be paraphrased with reference to ... ale or wine or any other drink, or to that which she dispenses or gives ...' (The Prose Edda 1916:142).

as representations of Valkyries is far from certain. Pendants of this group mainly are made from bronze, suggesting a deity of lesser significance than those depicted on other amulets. Nevertheless, it is possible that these female figurines may also be classed as representations of Freyja.<sup>3</sup>

In the Scandinavian society of the early middle ages, as well as in many other traditional cultures, feasting was of great social and religious importance. An vital part of feasting was the consumption of alcoholic drinks. Women played an important role in these ritual ceremonies. They served beverages to both their kinsmen and guests of the house.<sup>4</sup> Thus *The Prose Edda* describes the appearance of the giant Hrungrnir in Valhalla. Freyja is tending to his needs and pouring beer into his cup 'as at a feast of the Æsir' (*The Prose Edda* 1916:116).

It is known from ancient Scandinavian literary sources that in addition to the loving role, the 'Possessor of *Brisingamen*' also had a role connected with war. Freyja, together with Odin, divided the warriors who fell in battle into two equal groups, deciding which of the heroes would settle in her estates (*The Poetic Edda* 1936: 90f; *The Prose Edda* 1916:38). It is quite possible that the women holding drinking vessels are representations of the 'Possessor of the Slain' meeting warriors in her seat.

In contrast to Valkyries, the presence of amulets related to the worship of Freyja is not surprising in female graves. Freyja was a symbol of wealth, and an assistant in love and in childbirth. Her hall – *Sessrúmnir* – was the single place possible for the posthumous existence of worthy females, just as Odin's Valhalla was destined to warriors (Price 2002:108f). Thus in *Egil's Saga*, Thorgerdr, daughter of the main hero, ready to die together with her father, says: 'No supper have I had, and none will I have till I sup with Freyja' (*Egil's Saga* 2004, Graham-Campbell 2001:182f). Snorri Sturluson stated that it is from the name of the 'Lady of the Vanir' that the title *Frue* is derived. Called so was a noblewoman, a wife or housewife with a right to dispose property (*The Prose Edda* 1916:38; *Heimskringla* 2004).

### Staraja Ladoga and the Scandinavians

In conclusion, the available analogues leave no doubt that female figurines characteristic of Scandinavian artefacts were cast in the mould found in Staraja Ladoga in 1940. These were amulets of magical significance that was obvious to the bearers of the cult, but which made no sense to foreigners. These pendants, along with some other groups of sacral objects, were amulets worn by women to protect their owners against evil influences (Zeiten 1997:39).

Traces of the presence of Scandinavians are recorded from the moment the settlement appears near the mouth of the Ladožka River, i.e. from the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Objects of Scandinavian provenance or executed in the northern style have been found in all of the oldest layers in Staraja Ladoga. Most of them are dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>-century (Ravdonikas 1949:40, fig. 30:1, 3, 4; Ravdonikas & Lauškin 1959:27ff, fig. 5, 7; Davidan 1970:89; Davidan 1992:15f, 27ff, abb. 8:4, 6, 9-12; 9:13, 14, 19; Mel'nikova 2001:189-200). The ritual objects found at this site, such as twisted iron neck-rings with Thor's hammer, iron fire-steel pendants and amulets with runic inscriptions, could not have arrived at the site simply as trade goods. They indicate that there were Scandinavians who had retained their cultural and religious traditions residing at the settlement. Moreover, they indicate that Scandinavian women were an integral part of this settlement.

Along with warriors and tradesmen, various craftsmen also arrived to the Lower Volchov region from beyond the sea. Davidan suggested that the material from horizon D

clearly demonstrates Scandinavian influence upon local handicrafts. In the 10<sup>th</sup>-century, articles of various Scandinavian types were manufactured in Staraja Ladoga, and it is difficult to distinguish these from imports. For example, in a layer of that period was a stone mould for casting massive penannular bracelets (Davidan 1980:59f, pl. 2:18). In Davidan's opinion a die with an anthropomorphic image must also be attributed to layer D. She suggested that the details and artistic composition of this object have close parallels with Scandinavian adornments (Davidan 1980:63, pl. 3:5). A hybrid category of objects has also been identified among products of bone-carvers and jewellers. These include a find made of a tin-lead alloy – possibly a spacer-bead. The object was identified by Gali F. Korzuchina as an unsuccessful cast of a Scandinavian adornment manufactured by a Ladoga artisan (Korzuchina 1973:35ff, fig. 8:1; Davidan 1980:65, pl. 2:9).

The archaeological evidence reveals that 10<sup>th</sup>-century Staraja Ladoga was a manufacturing centre where objects of Scandinavian appearance were produced on a large scale. Therefore, the find of a mould for casting the so-called 'Valkyries' does not seem to be anomalous. This find indicates that, like Birka, the settlement in the mouth of the Ladožka was a site where Scandinavian female-figurine amulets were manufactured. The similarity of the images on pendants from these two sites indicates once again that the Varangians coming to Ladoga were mostly natives of central Sweden. The discovery of the mould is indirect evidence that Scandinavian women also lived at the settlements in the Volchov region. It has been argued here that there are good reasons to treat the miniatures discussed above as representations of Freyja, suggesting that 'the Goddess Beautiful in Tears' was worshiped on the banks of the Volchov River.

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