A VIKING CENTURY
CHERNIHIV AREA FROM 900 TO 1000 AD

edited by Stepan Stepanenko

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Preface

Stepan Stepanenko

It is slowly becoming apparent to Eastern European archaeologists that the traditional dating of Rus in the ninth—eleventh-century period is lagging behind advances in philology and other associated disciplines (Shakhmatov 1908; Tvorogov 1992; Zuckerman 1995; 2007; Gippius 2001). With the northern and southern regions of the Rus presently politically separated, the rate of re-evaluation of archaeological dogmas and publication of existing but unknown archaeological material is no longer a unified effort. This lack of unity is particularly detrimental to periods of early Rus expansion, when written sources and their narrative leave a lot to be desired.

The Rus appeared on the medieval scene in the northern regions of Russia but, lured by riches of the Black and Caspian Seas, moved south to eventually set up base in Kyiv. Arguably, this created two centres of power, the old powerhouse—Novgorod (Rurikovo Gorodishche) and the new capital—Kyiv, the Northern and Southern Rus. At the core of the Southern Rus easterly expansion is the Chernihiv region. Located on the eastern doorstep of Kyiv, the area provided an access point to the silver rich markets of the Caliphate though the Bulgars and the Khazars. It can be viewed as the natural area of expansion for the early Rus arrivals in the south, with Chernihiv donning the mantle of the second most important settlement of the Rus through its mention in the Rus-Byzantine treaties and proximity to Kyiv.

Chernihiv area archaeology suffers from a rate of excavations that significantly outpace the rate of processing, publication and comprehension of archaeological material, although it is not alone in this. The main objective of this volume is to present new and existing archaeological material in the context of the newly established interpretations of early Rus history. Inadvertently, it also became a unifying platform of ideas for contributors who may not always be able to share a podium under current circumstances.

A Viking Century: Chernihiv area from 900 to 1000 AD, ed. by Stepan Stepanenko,
(Occasional Monographs. Hlib Ivakin memorial series 6),
Paris: ACHCByz 2022, pp. 7–16.

It also transpired that the issue is not a lack of publications per-se but the identification of archaeology as a separate discipline, as it suffers from an overreliance on interpretations form other disciplines. This approach, taking into account the nodal position of the Chernihiv region between the Rus capital, Slavic tribes to the east and in the context of trade goods expected to flow through the region, has held it behind in respect to other areas of Rus in adopting new lines of thought.

A history of interpretations

Archaeological tradition in the Chernihiv region began with the "early archaeologists" of the nineteenth century. Samokvasov, Dobrovolskiy, Antonovich… all notable names that identified the region with the Sever tribe of the Rus chronicles and, thus, all archaeological material that dated before the chronicled conquest of the tribe as Sever antiquities.

Nineteenth century history and philology were yet to develop the critical approach that will be made popular by A. Shakhmatov. Instead, the area was understood to have been populated by the Sever tribe that lived along the rivers Desna, Seym and Sula.

"сѣдоша по Деснѣ. И по Сѣли по Сулѣ и нарекоша Сѣверѣ" (PSRL: 6).

The ever present context of archaeological debate on the origin of the Rus is Normanism versus anti-Normanism. Originating in the depths of the Imperial Academy of Sciences and disagreements between Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov and Gerhard Friedrich Müller, it presents the autochthonous composition of the Rus elites as opposed to their Norman (Scandinavian or Germanic) origins. The two positions epitomise the standoff between the beleaguered Russian identity and a forced subservience to a foreign aggressor that is familiar to historians and current commentators alike. The anti-Normanist position, traditionally favoured among Russian Imperial and, later, Soviet establishment may be seen as the domineering factor in the most widespread, more literal, readings of the Rus chronicles that favours autochthonous origins.

Rus expansion into the region, in the literal reading of the chronicles, began with the mythical Askold and Dir ruling in Kyiv before being overpowered by Oleg's influence in the 880s. The culmination of the Rus state formation occurred, as was important to highlight in the ever-inseparable world of Russian state and church, with the christening of the Rus by Volodimir, subsequent abandonment of pagan rituals, including barrow and cremation burials, and marriage to the daughter of the ruler of the civilized world, Anna Porphyrogenita.

In the Soviet period, the continuer of this tradition for the Chernihiv region was P. Smolichev (1926). A seminarian and a pedagogue who took charge of the local museum in the 1920s, and excavated Shestovytsya—the most researched early Rus period site in the Chernihiv area. His fate in the infamous purges led the next generation that worked in the region and at Shestovytsya, notably David Blifeld (1977), to pursue a different path. In the post war years, and for a brief period, Shestovytsya was presented as the domain of the chronicled Polyane tribe that made up a Rus princely retinue. This change was likely governed by the relatively misunderstood nature of the tribe that had no separately defined visible material identity. Placing them on the left bank of the Dnieper, near Chernihiv, dealt with the issue of continuity from "enemies of the people" and identity of the population around Chernihiv, at the same time resolving the problem of anti-Normanist continuity in interpretation for the area. Such misidentification lingered, with the 1962 H. Zinevych publication on the human remains of Shestovytsya still operating on the Polyane identifications of D. Blifeld.

At the same time, in the mid-twentieth century, a different power dominated the Chernihiv archaeology scene, Boris Rybakov. Archaeological prowess notwithstanding, in 1949, Rybakov comfortably adopted a literal approach to the Rus chronicles. His archaeological work allowed for a picture of the region that was beautiful in its simplicity, yet surprisingly reminiscent of the historical materialism, so in vogue at the time. Rybakov described a path by which the Sever and other Slavic tribes developed into a Christian feudal state of the Rus from 860 to 988. This was comfortably supported by presented Sever tribe antiquities in the early strata of Chernihiv that were succeeded, in turn, by Rus defensive fortifications and structures, the creation of which would require serious social organisation. Importantly, it was all in keeping with anti-Normanism.

This approach remained largely unquestioned by most who contribute in the history of the region but gradually evolved to meet new demands. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the need to reassert independent identities of nation states, it became necessary to highlight the acculturation, or Slavicisation, of newcomers by an autochthonous population. Decades of publications on the Shestovytsya site, the most excavated tenth-century site in the region, identified it as a Rus retinue stronghold of the Kyivan princes that oversaw the loyalty of the Chernihiv princedom, showing complex feudal structures (Kovalenko 2009). Coincidently, or not, this interpretation also elevated the status of Chernihiv to a settlement that posed a constant and viable threat to Kyiv. However, modern political change spurred a u-turn towards Normanism and acceptance of Scandinavian elements at Shestovytsya, only to convert them to a Slavicised population that eventually forgot its pagan roots.

This seemingly drastic change had little effect on the overall established model of transition from tribal to feudal organisation, only adding an ethnic flavour to the tribal structure that would influence the converts and make them indiscernible from the autochthons.

Christianity, symbolising a break with the Soviet past and strong centralised social structure, was seen as the natural culmination to possible foreign encroachment on national identity. Chernihiv's burials were identified as Christian, and thus exclusively Rus, on the basis of being inhumations without visible burial goods (Sytyi 2013), while cremations continue to be seen as a sign of the early pagan Rus history, a ritual that was phased out with the arrival of Christianity.

The resultant picture is that of a highly politicised historical field to which archaeology is a mere side-show that provides supporting evidence irrespective of the material representation at hand.

A different situation develops if we critically consider the chronicles, one that makes the theoretical struggles of Normanism, anti-Normanism and Slavicisation defunct. In the early twentieth century A. Shakhmatov published his reworked chronology of the Rus chronicles. He identified the original text that lay at the base of the Novgorod first Chronicle and Povest Vremennyh Let of the Kyivan Chronicle. The later, Novgorodian, copy of the chronicle contained a more original text, that was added to by later compilers in the Kyivan version. Several subsequent works supported the spirit of Shakhmatov's findings. The number and date of Constantinople raids by Askold and Dir (Tvorogov 1992), the quantity and dates of Rus-Byzantine treaties and dates for the Oleg's and Igor's rule (Zuckerman 1995; 2007) were among the aspects of early Rus history that were challenged. The reader is welcome to acquaint one-self with the extensive and complex issue through the bibliographies of the cited works. It will be apparent that many reasonable textual observations do not translate to historical theories. However, with the current uncommunicative historical discourse, archaeology has a chance to re-establish itself as the dominant reporter of the past's narrative.

The reassessments of archaeological materials presented in this volume are not a pioneering set of revelations because archaeology has already moved on ahead of history in some areas. It challenged the existence of the "from the Varyangians to the Greeks" trade route in the tenth century along its entire documented extent (Lebedev 2005; Eniosova, Pushkina 2012), something that was also supported by analysis of imported ceramics (Koval 2010). A recent addition to the debate has been the wider use of numismatic evidence, providing more detailed information and dates of economic traffic through the Rus, visibly separating some Northern and Southern Rus trade streams (Fomin 1988; Leont'ev, Nosov 2012; Jankowiak 2020).

Setting preconceptions aside

Sadly, these revelations have not filtered into all aspects of the field as old habits die hard, language barriers remain an ever-present issue and political ramifications of recognising a later period date for the establishment of towns and cities is a heavy burden. In this regard, archaeology follows in the footsteps of history, constantly referencing the outdated dates and ignoring analogous material that allows for a new chronology.

The question of the ninth century is persistently appearing in publications on the Chernihiv region. Vypovziv, Shestovytsya and Chernihiv are the central, but not only settlements that were given this early date in twenty-first century publications. With modern philological arguments proving the impossibility of this interpretation, Southern Rus archaeology remains a firm supporter of history that refuses to undergo a painful but necessary removal of early dating. Ever the handmaiden and never the master, archaeological materials seemingly appear fudged to adhere to existing theories.

The example of Chernihiv, where all hand-made ceramics were identified as ninth century material (Kovalenko 1988: 24–25), reported in this work by O. Chernenko, speaks volumes but is in no way exclusive. In the hunt for large scale tenth century features and in hope to show complex constructions that can be seen to necessitate complex social organisation for their creation, the fortifications of Chernihiv grew ever larger, incorporating four defensive lines and a thirty-metre wide and eight metres deep moat, that was already identified as a geological step in the terrain (Rybakov 1949: 60; Bondar 2014: 153).

These adaptations of the archaeological record beg the question of why bother with archaeological research in an area which favours pre-existing theories from another discipline? The onus on archaeology must be to establish itself as an independent authority in the region without necessity of correlation with historical readings. In this volume, the interpretations of Shestovytsya offered by F. Androshchuk and Chernihiv by O. Chernenko approach the sites archaeological record in phases, events in themselves, that need to be documented, presented and understood in respect of each other before a correlation with another discipline can be attempted. An approach that is harder to adapt to pre-existing chronologies.

Differing standards to archaeological work over the past hundred years have also proved a hindrance to the efforts of this volume to present archaeological data in a re-envisioned format. With swathes of material still behind lock and key under the peculiar system of archaeological ownership, when excavation heads reserve a life-long rite for exclusive use of what they found, and an even more hindering system of archaeological inheritance by students of the former, readers of this volume will find a lot of material that is simply missing from

the archaeological record. At the same time, the current forward thinking and good will of the V. V. Tarnovsky Chernihiv Regional Historical Museum and its director S. L. Laievskyi, and the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, its late deputy director H. Yu. Ivakin and current head of the Rus department, O. P. Motsya, together with owners of private archives and other Ukrainian institutions, have facilitated the publication of some material that has previously been unavailable to the wider archaeological community. This is particularly the case with the excavations of the smaller fortified settlements of the Chernihiv area.

One additional notable issue faced by this volume has been the nature of the available materials. Readers will find that much of the data for the mid-twentieth century is of varying quality, with some field reports and texts openly criticising a particular outdated methodology only to turn to it later. This was one of the driving factors in the extraordinary number of cenotaph burials recorded in the area, and examined in this volume. Issues with excavation methods and records have also created a difficulty with reconstruction of excavated features and verification of dating that led to much of the osteological and other organic material analysis relying on broad dates of "early Rus," or "pre-Mongol Rus." In this respect, it is the sincere desire of the authors that the presented material is critiqued and tested further, inviting new contributions that utilise the primary sources.

Volume layout

It would be an impossibility to consider the Chernihiv area without the titled city itself. The vision of the tenth century Chernihiv, somewhat introduced above, is the subject of historiographic discussions so expertly covered by Dr Olena Chernenko. With decades of field experience and academic focus on the settlement, she is the unquestionable authority. It is this experience that led to a re-envisioned chronology for the site. Archaeological data for the settlement is supplemented by the catalogue of possible tenth-century burials, presented by Yuri Sytyi. An expert of the Chernihiv region field archaeology, he has first-hand knowledge of many of the burials in question.

Just as the region cannot be considered without its eponymous settlement, Chernihiv cannot be considered without its most famous monument—Chorna Mohyla. Debates on the date, number of buried individuals and grave good composition of this barrow have gone on for over a century. Contributions from Dr Veronika Murasheva, Dr Sergey Kainov and Sergey Zozulya from the State History Museum, which houses the collection from the barrow, and Dr Olga Orfinskaya, not only shed light on the barrow, its chronology and contents through novel use of natural sciences and much needed reassessment

of archival material, but stand to influence the chronological interpretations for Chernihiv and the region.

With discussions on the Rus appearance in the area, chronologies and links, the volume would be incomplete without the surrounding context. This is provided by Dr (habil.) Vladimir Enukov. With decades of experience in the field, he is the specialist on the Sever tribe, Romny culture and their connections to Rus, Khazaria, the Byzantine Empire and other contemporary polities. The presented compilation of Romny culture sites and hoards offers an excellent perspective on the economic powers and occupied territory of the Rus's immediate neighbours to the east.

The volume focuses on the most known, yet underrepresented sites in the Chernihiv area. One such place is Lyubech, a town with over a century of research and a chronicled settlement of the Rus, possibly from the early decades of their appearance in the Middle Dnieper. It is presented by Dr Olena Veremeychik, whose first-hand knowledge of the sites' archaeology is unsurpassable. Dr Stepan Stepanenko presents a catalogue of fortified sites and cemeteries in the Chernihiv locality, with revelations on archaeological methodologies, early chronology and Slavic connections of these sites. Information presented by S. Stepanenko on Sedniv, possibly the most easterly Rus site before the realm of the Sever, is complemented by a unique spearhead find, presented by Dr (habil.) Fedir Androshchuk and Tetyana Novyk.

A lengthy, but valuable, addition to the volume is the numismatic analysis of Eric Ollivier and S. Stepanenko that presents material from the region, stored at the V. V. Tarnovsky Chernihiv Regional Historical Museum. The work reassesses known hoards in the region and discovers the Rudki hoard, found in 1928 and currently held at the museum.

The focus of the volume is the presentation of the region and archaeological material that has not been fully and freely available in the past. In this regard, the volume refrains from the discussion on precursors to Chernihiv but does dedicate a considerable section to Shestovytsya—a site that possibly predates Chernihiv. The historiography of the site is presented by S. Stepanenko. This contribution also reconsiders cenotaphs as a phenomenon in the area and looks at the overall picture of the Shestovytsya cemetery, the quantity of barrows, their numbers and continuity of the cemetery. A valuable addition to the volume is F. Androshchuk's account of his excavations of Shestovytsya barrow group IV and their repercussions on the chronological divisions of the site. This series of articles on the Shestovytsya cemetery is rounded off by an insightful piece by Victor Holub on the conservation of finds from Shestovytsya's most famous barrow, a warrior burial from 2006. As well as presenting the most recent images of the finds, the article touches on the difficulties of conservation and proposes ways to ameliorate them.

The volume is proud to present a series of new research articles on Shestovytsya that are aimed at combatting misunderstandings in the topography, chronology, role in economic relations, and domestic life at Shestovytsya. Dr Olga Manigda and Ivan Zotsenko present brilliantly composed visuals on the layout of the site from a topographic survey conducted in 2017. A fresh look at the ceramic imports, amphorae, from Shestovytsya is presented by Sergey Zelenko. This is the first compilation of Shestovytsya amphorae, with conclusions that influence the chronology of the site and tie in with wider Rus findings.

Three contributions to the volume are unfortunate victims of variation in the clarity of field records and thus present material in the context of the wider, pre-Mongol Rus period. Nevertheless, they offer unique and invaluable analysis of the organic material from the site. A collaborative work by Dr (habil.) Oleg Zhuravlev, Tetyana Bitkovskaya, Olena Markova, and Oleh Senyuk looks at the hunting and animal husbandry trends at the site, providing an intriguing glimpse into the numbers of hunted and farmed animals. This work finds continuity in the analysis of worked bone objects from recent excavations by Dr (habil.) Marina Sergeyeva. Her work with the material from Shestovytsya also extended into analysis of charcoal that identified building materials, fuels and tar making habits at Shestovytsya.

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