

New Data on the Ancient Vod Culture

Beginning in 1983 the Izhora expedition of the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR has carried out a program of fieldwork in the region inhabited by the Baltic-Finnish people of Vod (Fi. *Vatjalaiset*). In the area of the old Vod parish of Kattyla (the Kingisepp district of the Leningrad region) a series of burial grounds and settlements of the native Finnish-speaking inhabitants was found. In extensive excavations of three cemeteries, about 200 inhumations in below-ground graves as a rule marked with surface stone frameworks were examined. As a result an original culture of the ancestors of the modern Vod people was revealed which was of Western Finnish character in general, but essentially differed from contemporary cultures of the Baltic region and Finland. Main results of these works were elucidated in the report "The Chud of the "Vodskaya Pyatina" at the 5th Soviet-Finnish symposium (Leningrad, 1986) and in other publications.¹

During the investigation of a group of earlier internment burials some of their details were learned enabling us to assume the character of the preceding burial ritual. This group was marked by the small depths of the graves, sometimes dug in the ground as deep as 0.20—0.25 m. Inhumations made into them were covered with only a small amount of earth and the boulders put onto them were often found at the same level as the skeletons. Excavations of later complexes showed in some cases the following interesting detail: the burial pits dug out to a depth of 0.5 m and more were filled up to the half of the pit with mixed soil and the corpse was laid on this artificial bedding. This indirectly showed that before their conversion to internment inhumations the ancestors of the Vod used to bury their dead on the surface, obviously according to the cremation rite.²

This was later confirmed archaeologically. It should be reminded that the Vod burial grounds are situated in similar topographic conditions occupying large sandy hills near the banks of small rivers and lakes. The sites of ancient cemeteries are visually determined by the large boulders of the grave frameworks standing out of the earth. But the central parts of the burial grounds investigated near the villages of Velikino and Valgovitzky had no outer signs of individual burials. It is at these sites that the most ancient type of burial structures was found, the characteristics of which will be discussed below.

In the burial ground near the village of Velikino directly under the turf a paving of square shape was cleared with its long axis oriented south-west to north-east; its length was 10 m and its average width was about 4.8 m with an area of about 45 m². The paving consisted of small stones put in one or two layers. At the same time rows of big boulders dividing the paving into crosswise sections could be definitely seen. Judging by their positions on the level of the base of the paving such frameworks were formed in the process of constant expansion of the stone burial.

Many of the stones were covered with a thin coating of charcoal and between them

lenses of charcoal and ashes were found. Among the boulders small bones of cremations carried out elsewhere were scattered. The cremation remains either form large accumulations or are represented by single bone fragments scattered over a considerable area. In cases when burnt bones mixed with charcoal and ashes formed a compact mass their localization within the limits of miniature frameworks of several layers of big stones was observed. The average size of such "boxes" is 0.3 to 0.4 m.

The paving near the Valgovitzky village was cleared directly under a thin layer of turf covering. Its configuration is comparatively complex, which is due to the fact that it was constructed in many stages; its shape is almost square, it is oriented to the four cardinal points; it is 6.0×7.3 m in size and its area is about 45 m². Also in this case rows of big boulders enclosing frameworks with smaller stone fillings could be observed.

The typological similarity of this structure to the one described earlier is clear. During its investigation distinct traces of corpse cremations were not found, but this can possibly be explained by the different situational positions of the surface pavings on the microrelief of the place. The structure near Velikino occupies the slope of a ridge and, because of that, was overlapped by a conserving ground layer comparatively early. The structure near Valgovitzky was erected on a levelled upper site of a hill and throughout the period of the functioning of the cemetery remained unturfed (fragments of Medieval earthenware found among the stones are indicative of this). It is more probable, however, that in this case an inhumation rite was performed, during which surface burials merely could not survive.

The discovery of the surface burial structures in this region was not completely unexpected. As far back as 1938 H.A. Moora referring to P.P. Efimenko's data noted the existence of a stone burial ground in the downstream basin of the Luga river. There is no data on the character of the monument; the author dates it to the 5th century AD. Judging by the maps given in the publication, this archaeological site was situated within the boundaries of the Vod parish of Kattyla.³

The monuments in question belong to a type of stone burial grounds with frameworks which developed from the 1st century AD on the basis of the preceding burials with boxes. The area of their distribution comprises almost all of Estonia, Northern Latvia and parts of Finland. The general opinion is that such burial grounds "can rightfully be regarded as a kind of "national" feature of the Western-Baltic Finns"⁴ separating the latter from the eastern group of Baltic-Finnish tribes.⁵ Burial grounds with frameworks are widely spread in the northeastern part of Estonia, mainly along the coast of the Gulf of Finland. The most eastern one — that is, the *tarand* of the 1st century AD in Utrie⁶ — is separated from the burial grounds of the Vod region by a distance of not more than 45—50 km.

The finds from the paving near the Velikino village are represented by a fragment of an arched scythe, an iron pin, which had been subjected to fire with a ring-shaped head and with an iron stem with a fragment of a skull stuck to it — which is presumably a part of a breast-pin as well. Due to their fragmentariness and unexpressiveness, these artefacts are of little use for chronological conclusions. It should be noted only that similar types of objects had been in use during the period of ground inhumations at the same site.

The objects from the paving near the Valgovitzky village are represented by a fragment of a grindstone, two iron bracelets, a bronze bracelet of segmented cross-section and an iron bushed celt. The axe with an eyelet, uniform in width, narrow and with a rounded bushing belongs to type 1 of the first group of bushing axes (according to U. Salo).⁷ The area of their distribution comprises South-Western Finland, Estonia and Northern Latvia and the time of their occurrence is determined by the B-period of the

Roman Iron Age.⁸ Celt axes with eyelets are regarded as features of the stone burials of the Northeastern Estonia of the 1st—2nd centuries AD.⁹ In particular, a specimen dating back to the 2nd century AD, completely analogous in size and proportion comes from the Estonian burial ground of Lehmja-Loo.¹⁰

According to M.H. Schmiedehelm's definition, the massive iron bracelets "are the objects typical of Northern Estonia in the period around the beginning of the 1st century AD", which were in use in the 1st—2nd centuries AD as well; analogous specimens of that time are found in South-Western Finland.¹¹ Narrow bronze bracelets of segmented cross-section, well known in the same areas, date back to the 1st—4th centuries AD.¹²

To what extent does the determined dating of the finds correlate with the period of continuous use of the burial grounds with frameworks on the nearest territories? In North-Eastern Estonia the burial grounds founded in the beginning of the 1st century AD ceased to function in the end of the 4th or in the beginning of the 5th century.¹³ Together with that and the data of the well investigated Pada burial ground a consecutive evolution of the burial rite from the 1st—2nd century inhumations to the birituality of the 2nd—3rd centuries (with light burning of the corpses) to complete cremation of the dead at a high temperature in the 3rd—4th centuries has been ascertained. Eventually, in the 5th—6th centuries inhumation again becomes customary in the north-eastern part of Estonia.¹⁴ Thus, the remains of complete cremation near Velikino are synchronized with the rite of Estonian *tarands* of the 3rd—4th centuries. The finds from the paving near the Valgovitzky village are within the chronological framework of the 1st—2nd centuries in general and provide additional evidence of the fact that at this time inhumation rite burials were in practice which did not survive.

Between the burial structures of the Roman Iron Age and the adjacent Medieval inhumations there is a span of several hundred years preventing their immediate succession to be discussed. Nevertheless some facts show a possible indirect connection between them:

1. Burial grounds with frameworks have been found at two of the three investigated cemeteries occupying the central position in both cases and directly adjoining later ground burials.

2. During the period of building and functioning of the Medieval necropolises the stone pavings were not yet covered by turf. They could be traced visually and were possibly used for ritual purposes. It is quite possible that when choosing places for building ground cemeteries the Chud population of the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD followed the considerations of the presence of ancient stone structures used as a center of the burial grounds.

3. In the immediate surroundings of the pavings early ground inhumations are concentrated, in the rites of which, as it was noted earlier, a continuity with the preceding ground corpse cremations can be observed.

In the interpretation of these facts parallel materials from Estonia are of particular importance. On the basis of the "Danish land book" of the beginning of the 13th century and other later sources it has been ascertained that "all the places where there were burial grounds with frameworks of the first half of the 1st millennium AD continued their existence as settlements or villages at the time when territorial communities finally formed in Estonia".¹⁵ This observation is all the more interesting as in our case, use of the burial grounds ceased by the middle of the 1st millennium AD or recommenced only after many centuries. In other words, the very presence of burial monuments of the Roman Iron Age in a certain locality often means that the locality was continuously populated up to the developed Middle Ages. Archaeological materials give only separate links of such a demographical continuity.

M.H. Schmiedehelm correlates the functioning of the earlier collective burial-vaults — i.e., stone burial grounds with frameworks — coming to an end with a modification of the burial rite caused by the collapse of extended family communities and the advancement of small families. Her opinion is that isolated small families founding new settlements settled not far from old ancestral "nests", keeping in close contact with them.¹⁶

It is difficult to judge whether analogous events took place in the region in question. But attention should be paid to an interesting archaeological feature found by us 2—3 km from both burial grounds. It contains stone structures of different outline scattered on the slope of a large ridge. Among them square masonry structures made of several stone tiers and enclosed with large boulders along the perimeter could be marked. The shape of the structures resembles the sections of the burial grounds with frameworks. This site deserves a special and most thorough investigation and it might possibly give the data necessary to fill the chronological gap between the antiquities of the first half of the 1st millennium and of the 2nd millennium AD.

The discovery of the stone burial grounds in the ethnographical area of Vod throws additional light of the sources of the ethnic history of the people. Archaeological materials are indicative of the fact that in the beginning of the 1st millennium AD the region in question belonged to the Western-Finnish area. The culture of the native population of the Novgorod period presumably goes back to the traditions of the cultural province which comprised ancient Estonian lands as well. Close relationship of the modern Vod with the northern Estonians is corroborated by the linguistic and ethnographical data.¹⁷

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