

The emergence and development of Russian towns: some outline ideas

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The early history of Russia determined some special features in the formation of the first towns. In southern Russia the rise of the earliest towns was preceded by a period of stability within Slavic society. In the North towns emerged in the regions without a greater concentration of the rural population. The town in northern Russia was founded for its own needs. It existed autonomously and began to create a hinterland itself. It was connected with the stabilization of the state structures, with the spread of Christianity, and with the formation of new economical regions based on the progress of the internal economy of state.

KEY-WORDS: towns, Early Middle Ages, Russia

The first millennium AD Europe experienced three major changes in social and cultural practices. The first was the disappearance of classical antiquity, the second one was the rise of the West in the last part of the millennium, and the third was the integration of the barbarian parts of the continent into the main line of development (Randsborg 1989:11).

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century AD and the end of the Migration period, there came a period of the active formation of early medieval nations and a new ethnic map of Europe appeared. In different regions many nation—states were founded, and Christianity spread. It was the time of the origins and growth of early feudal towns. The development of the economy reached such a stage, that society could no longer exist without market and craft centres with administrative, military and cult functions. But the town, once it appeared, influenced greatly the life of society, promoted the stability of structures, stimulated the development of culture, architecture, written language and spiritual life.

Urbanization in different regions of Europe had its own features. It is possible to speak about two zones, the border between them being approximately the frontier of the Roman Empire. On the Continent, to the south of the Danube and to the West of the Rhine, and in parts of the British Isles the rebirth of towns was

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on the foundation of previous Roman centres and traditions, though there were local differences (as in Gaul and Britain for example). To the east of the Rhine, on the Baltic, in Scandinavia and in Russia there were no such preserved traditions. Here among the agrarian settlements of Germanic, Slavic, Baltic and Finnish tribes appeared sites with central, market and craft functions. Their emergence was due to the internal social and economic processes, that were brought about due to the appearance of surplus products suitable for exchange, and also due to the new social stratification of the society.

The history of every town is unique; the functions are different and interlaced. That is why efforts to elaborate one common definition of the medieval town are usually a matter of discussion only. I will not examine here different points of view. I want only to underline two general aspects. Firstly, the town — from the economic point of view — stands opposite to the village as a centre of trade and crafts. Secondly, only those sites in which economic functions were combined with the functions of administration and the regulation of the life of society, became towns. All other features are derivative from those mentioned above.

This problem has been examined many times from different positions in a variety of European symposia at, for instance, Rheinhausen near Göttingen (1972), Oxford (1975), Dublin (1978) and the international conference “*Rebirth of towns in the West AD 700–1050*” held at the Museum of London (1986). I would like to stress another side of the problem, namely, the common character of the urbanization process in Europe in the second half of the first millennium AD. At the conference in London, David Hill convincingly showed that

“there was a general European resurgence of urban life in the period c. 600–1000, and that when dealing with any regional survey it must always be seen against this Continent-wide trend.”

One of the most important results of this common process was the

“spread of European culture and economy from a narrow and beleaguered band of states ruled by Christian rulers to a ‘Christendom’ in 1050 running from Damascus to Greenland and from Kiev to Santiago de Compostella. ... In the three and a half centuries from 717 to 1066 the foundation of medieval and modern Europe was laid down. It was a process that depended on and involved the eastern Roman Empire, and was to be seen not simply in the spread of Christianity and therefore of monks, bishops and churches, but also a process that relied heavily on a money economy, towns, trade, Latin (and Greek) as languages of record and diplomacy, the unity of Europe through its diplomatic marriage ties and so on” (Hill 1988:11–4).

The recognition of the common character of the urbanization process in Europe in the second half of the first millennium AD allows me to examine some problems of the urbanization in Russia in its connection with the urbanization of Europe, first of all in the region around the Baltic. Russia in the second half of the first millennium AD was on the remote outskirts of Europe, located thousands of kilometres away from the borders of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless the formation of the first towns here is of common interest. On the vast territories of

Russia it is possible to see more clearly some elements of the earliest towns and the process of their creation as a whole. In addition, I suppose that these common features are interesting to European scholars because only a few articles and books about Russian towns have been published in the West and new evidence is not widely known. In 1972 in Göttingen such Russian towns as Ladoga, Novgorod and Kiev were not even mentioned though their early history is connected with the urbanization process in Europe and with many other problems that were discussed (*Vor- und Frühformen der europäischen Stadt...* 1974).

First of all I would like to examine the region in question. In the first half of the first millennium AD the territories of the forest zone of Eastern Europe were settled by different East Baltic and Finnish tribes. The area was sparsely populated and the settlements were very scattered. Isolated society and underdeveloped forms of agriculture and social forms of life, are typical features of the history of this area in the beginning of the first millennium AD.

The second half of the millennium differs greatly. We see clearly the movement of peoples in the forest zone of Eastern Europe. There appeared new archaeological cultures and new types of archaeological monuments, the first craft and administrative centres, long-distance trade and inter-regional forms of material culture.

Two main historical lines determined these changes. Firstly, in the middle of the first millennium AD the wide movement of the Slavic tribes to the forest zone of Eastern Europe began. It reached the Dniepr basin and then went further to the north. This movement was from more south-western areas of Europe. As Central European agricultural tribes, the Slavs brought more developed forms of economy and social organization than those of the local tribes.

Secondly, in the second half of the 8th century, the territories of future Northern Russia were crossed by the great trading route between the Baltic and the Islamic East (Fig. 1). Along this route Kufic silver coins reached Russia and a part of them was taken to the Baltic. The formation of the route influenced greatly the economy of the nearby regions and stimulated their development. The main settlements on the route began to play an important role as administrative, military, trading and craft centres of the territories. In the second half of the 8th century the first groups of Vikings appeared along the route. At that time their main aim was to be nearer to the sources of silver and to dominate the market places of Eastern Europe.

At the end of the first millennium AD these two historical lines met — the penetration of the Slavic tribes and the formation of the great water-route, along which the first Scandinavian groups appeared. These two lines determined the historical process and the formation of the Russian state and the first towns.

One of the characteristic features of early Russian history is its close connection with the process of colonization. It is possible to say that Russian

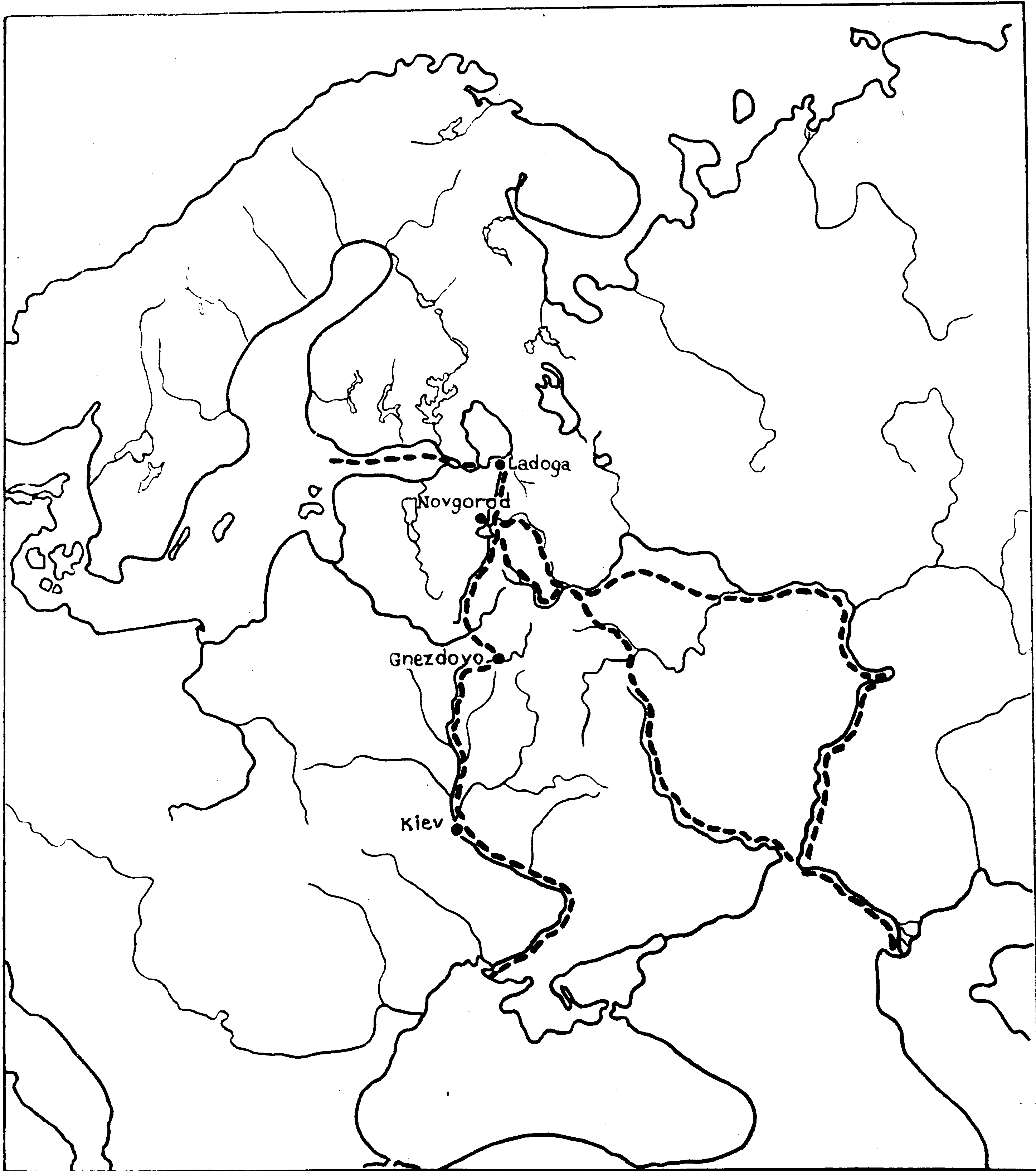


Fig. 1. Main water routes, which crossed Eastern Europe in the 9th/10th centuries AD.

history is the history of colonization (Klyuchevsky 1919:18–32, 1956:127–50). During the Slavic settlement of the East European plain the territory that they occupied increased. The constant movement of the population was due to the natural conditions of the region: infertile soils, small plots of land along the river–valleys convenient for agriculture in its early stages, and vast unsettled territories. This constant widening of the territory provoked extensive forms of the

economy. The economy was hypertrophically broadened. This process is the most typical for North and North—Eastern Russia.

The characteristics of the early history of Russia determined some special features in the formation of the first towns. The town in Northern Russia grew during this period of colonization and it is a very important feature.

Traditionally, it is considered impossible to speak about a town without keeping in mind its hinterland, and furthermore to consider the towns emergence in the regions without the greater concentration of the rural population (for a review of the main ideas about the emergence of Slavic towns in Soviet and Russian historical and archaeological literature see Nosov 1993:236—56). These considerations are logical and we know many examples where the process in the Middle Ages developed in this way. The picture was just the same in Southern Russia, in the middle Dniepr basin. Here, the rise of the first towns was preceded by a period of stability within Slavic society. This period began in the middle of the first millennium AD, and maybe even earlier, after the Slavic tribes came to the Dniepr. In this society the crafts and trade were developing, the process of social differentiation was proceeding, and new social structures were appearing. In the 6th—7th centuries some settlements with central functions appeared. They were, first of all, administrative and political centres for the tribes. Part of such centres later became towns, but the widespread process of the formation of towns began later, in the 8th—9th centuries. The towns grew in densely settled rural regions as centres of the hinterland and they acquired administrative, craft and trading functions (Kuza 1983, 1984; Tolochko 1989).

In the north of Russia we see quite another picture. In its central region, the lake Ilmen basin and the banks of the Volkhov river, there were no settlements with central functions in the 6th—7th centuries. Densely settled agrarian regions which could give life to the town as the central site, did not exist here until the 8th century. Only in the 8th century did the Slavs reach these lands and began to develop them. The town as a new type of settlement grew during the colonization or just after it. There was no hinterland structure at that time. The picture, as we see, is quite opposite to the traditional one. The town in the north of Russia was founded, first of all, for itself, and for its own needs. It existed autonomously and began to create a hinterland itself, by giving economic importance to the region. In this way in the 8th century the history of Ladoga began; in the 9th century emerged Gorodischche (Ryurik's Gorodischche), the predecessor of Novgorod near the source of the Volkhov river, and Timerevo, and similar nearby settlements on the upper Volga; in the 10th century — Gnezdovo on the upper Dniepr, and Gorodok on the river Lovat, and so on.

Russian archaeological evidence clearly shows the lack of a hinterland structure around many of the earliest towns, which were founded during the

colonization. Certainly it would be naive to think that there was an impenetrable wall between the town and its surroundings (the population of the town needed food supplies, *etc.*), but we must keep in mind the priority of functions. The foundation of the town before the formation of the structure of its rural surroundings, stresses the character of the town as a special phenomenon.

The towns in Northern Russia grew in new places in a society without any previous “models of towns”. They appeared during the colonization. The urbanization was of internal nature. In this way the picture differs principally from the process of the appearance of Greek colonies on the Black Sea, though outwardly they are comparable.

What were the factors that determined the emergence of the first towns in Northern Russia? The analysis of the geographical and topographical location of the earliest of them shows that they grew at key—points of the vast river systems, where it was possible to control the communication routes of large territories. In Russia the rivers were the only way through the forests at the end of the first millennium AD. Such a location made it possible for a town to collect tributes from the population of large regions and to control trade routes. The first towns were military—administrative, trade and craft centres which were not connected directly with tribal structures. The long—distance trade, the military—administrative control of the river systems, and the crafts, maintained the trade routes and the highest social strata of the towns. The existence of rural settlements near such towns was not obligatory for their emergence (the classical example is Ladoga), but later this fact influenced the fate of towns. The population and the material culture of the towns on trade routes were more polyethnic than those of the towns which were centres of agrarian regions.

Ladoga is the earliest trade and craft centre in the northern part of Eastern Europe. It was founded not far from the mouth of the river Volkhov in the middle of the 8th century. In the early stage of its history (8th—9th centuries) Ladoga was a large settlement without any fortifications. At the end of the 10th century the area of Ladoga was up to 10—12 hectares. Orientation to long—distance trade, developed craftsmanship, absence of any significant agricultural area around it, and a polyethnic population, were characteristic features for Ladoga in 8th—10th centuries. Ladoga ranked with other early urban, trade and artisan centres in the Baltic, first of all with Birka. Ladoga played a role as a bridge between the Baltic and the internal regions of Russia. From Ladoga started the slow movement up the rivers, over long portages and through dangerous rapids.

From the middle of the 9th century (or maybe earlier) near the source of the river Volkhov was situated a well known military—administrative, trade and craft centre — Gorodishche (Ryurik’s Gorodishche). Typologically it repeated the development of Ladoga but in a later variant (Nosov 1990; Yanin *et al.* 1992:5—66).

In the middle of the 10th century on the upper reaches of the river Lovat on the main water—way to the south and in the region where there were no clusters of rural settlements, the site Gorodok was founded; another administrative, craft and trade centre on the water route. In the same way began the history of the town Novy Torg (“New Marketplace”) on the Tvertsa on the route to Volga. It is possible to add more examples of such centres, which were connected with water routes and stood aside from the clusters of rural settlements, but the general picture is clear enough.

I would like to underline that in Russia there were two main ways in which the first towns formed. One of them was typical for the south of the country, that is the zone of early Slavic colonization, and quite another for the northern part of Russia.

I would like to discuss one more aspect concerning early towns. It is the problem of the existence of “pairs of towns” and different systems of them beyond the border of the Roman Empire. This problem has been discussed in the case of Scandinavia but has implications for a much wider area.

The discussion about the location of some towns close to each other started in Russian archaeology at the beginning of this century. It began with the analysis of Gnezdovo and Smolensk (*cf.* Dubov 1983 with a full bibliography about so—called “pair” towns). Gnezdovo is a unique archaeological complex which is situated on the upper Dniepr, on the border between the water systems that were locked by Kiev on one side and by Novgorod on the other. From the area of Gnezdovo water—ways opened not only to the south and to the north but also to the east towards the Volga and to the west along the Dvina. Gnezdovo flourished mainly in the 10th century and had a polyethnic material culture. It consisted of a cluster of settlements, including two fortified parts (the area of the settlements is about 17 ha), groups of mounds, and rich hoards of objects including Kufic coins. Here there are more than three thousand mounds (some scholars believe the original number was about five thousand). In any case it is the largest cemetery of the 10th century in Eastern Europe. After its intensive development in the 10th century, Gnezdovo was replaced in the 11th century by Smolensk, which stands at a distance of 12 km from it. Smolensk was one of the largest towns in Russia, the centre of a principality and a bishopric.

Gorodishche near the source of the Volkhov at the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century gave a way to the New Town — Novgorod, which was situated 2 km downstream from it. Novgorod became the economic, political and administrative centre of a vast territory. In it were located a Christian ecclesiastical complex (the bishop’s yard, the bishop’s church, and the town’s cathedral), a market place, the prince’s yard and the new town fortress (Yanin *et al.* 1992:5—66).

Sarskoe Gorodishche, was an early administrative and trade centre of the 9–10th century on the Baltic–Volga route in North–East Russia. In the beginning of the 11th century it was replaced by the town of Rostov, which became the centre of a bishopric and the strongest point of the prince's power.

At the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century, desertion took place on three trade and craft settlements on the upper Volga: Timerevo, Mikhailovskoe, Petrovskoe, and at a distance of 10–12 km from them a new town appeared — Yaroslavl. In the beginning of the 11th century the trade and craft centre of Gorodok on the Lovat river was deserted and nearby a town was founded — Luki.

We can conclude that at the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century on a large territory of Northern Russia the system of towns changed. Some examples we know from Southern Russia too. Near the early urban centres new towns were erected. For a long period it was widely believed that this shift of towns had different reasons, *e.g.*, a change of trade routes, lack of territory for the growth of a town, a change in the ethnic structure, *etc.* Now it is clear that the shift of towns in Russia reflects general processes, and thus a general explanation is needed.

Trying to find it we must keep in mind three principal moments. Firstly, among the pairs of towns, one was founded in the 8–9th century and had no close ties with its hinterland. Secondly, the new town was situated not far from the previous one, so on one hand, the pair town in pairs were incompatible, but on the other hand, the urban tradition was not interrupted. And thirdly, the system of towns changed in the 10th and beginning of the 11th century.

The towns in question of the 8–10th centuries were orientated towards external ties, trade and craft, and did not depend upon the local hinterland for their main activity. The new towns, based on the economy of their local regions, became regional centres. After the end of the 10th century, when Russia was converted to Christianity, the new state and administrative power was concentrated in the new towns. The foundation of the new towns was connected with the stabilization of the state structures, with the spread of Christianity, and with the formation of new economical regions, based not on external ties, but on the progress of the internal economy of state.

The towns shifted because their functions and social structure changed and they became the strongholds of Christian states. The main reason is that the new towns were Christian centres, where the bishop's yard, the bishop's church and the town cathedral were located. It was impossible to combine the new ideology and the pagan beliefs of the previous period. This topographical situation is very interesting in Novgorod. The pagan sanctuary Peryn was situated in front of the ancient centre Gorodishche, and the new Christian centre was founded in another place — 3 km down from Peryn and it became the centre of Novgorod.

There were some exceptions. Ladoga, for example, in the period of its existence played the role of a gate between the Baltic and Russia and, being situated on the outskirts of the Slavic world, was never the administrative centre of a region. Later in the 11th century, Ladoga did not acquire such a role and had the same functions as previous — as the gate to the Baltic. This stability in its functions determined the stability in its location.

The change of the town system in the north of Russia can be compared with the change of towns in Scandinavia. Here also there were two systems of towns in the period from the beginning of the 8th century to the middle of the 12th century: the early system up to 1000 AD, and the later system, from the end of the 10th to the beginning of the 11th century. Among the early towns there were small ones of up to 1.5 ha, periodically used settlements such as Paviken, somewhat larger ones up to 4 ha such as Kaupang or Åhus, and major sites such as Birka, Hedeby and, perhaps, Ribe. The economy of these towns grew from their location on the cross-roads, where tributes from external exploitation were gathered. Anders Andrén has stressed the connection between urbanization and external exploitation. The new towns reflected the rise of a new political order and a new central system. The formation of Christian states dates to the end of the 10th century in Denmark, to around 1000 AD in Norway. There were signs of a state in Sweden about the year 1000 (Andrén 1989:173–7). The same social process was active at the same time in Scandinavia and in Northern Russia. It is interesting that there exists also in Scandinavia pairs of towns: Birka and Sigtuna, Hedeby and Schleswig, Kaupang and Tønsberg or Skien, and the shift of Åhus in Scania to a new place.

Clarke and Ambrosiani in their book *“Towns in the Viking Age”* (1991:138) suppose that the reasons for these shifts of sites during the Early Middle Ages are complex and that there cannot only be one simple explanation for this obvious discontinuity. Changing methods of transport and routes of communication must be one explanation. The development of bigger ships demanded more elaborate harbours with deeper-water access and this could account for some of the changes. The movement of towns would not have entailed much capital loss to their founders.

Andrén (1989), concerned with the two systems of Scandinavian towns, connects the foundation of the early towns with the external exploitation, and the later towns with the formation of central states. He underlines the role of power in the changing system of towns. The existences of trade and crafts is not denied but it is pointed out that the conditions of these activities must be regarded in a perspective of power. The different systems of such centres, as Andrén supposes, can be regarded as expressions of gradually changing structures of power.

The Russian material shows the synstadial process of urbanization on vast territories of Northern and Eastern Europe. Scandinavian and Slavic societies had

no urban traditions and the first towns appeared here at the same time, on the basis of the exploitation of new territories and new sources for the economy. The similarities in social structures show why Scandinavians so easily integrated into the local Slavic society and its ruling elite.

At the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th centuries the systems of towns changed in Scandinavia and Northern Russia. It confirms once more that the shifts of the towns should not be explained by many definite reasons, but by general explanations which look beyond the borders of states. This general reason must be the change from the early system of towns, based on external ties, international trade collecting tributes from distant lands, to a system of internal exploitation based on the personal duties of peasants. A new political order was formed and it was based on the new towns.

Due to the geographical position of Russia the towns in its northern part were scattered over large distances. It is impossible to speak about one network of towns, covering this part of the country. This picture differs greatly from the distribution of the towns in Western Europe. On the territory of the Novgorod land, which in the 12th century covered approximately 350,000 sq. km, there were only seven towns (Fig. 2). Ladoga was situated 200 km from Novgorod which was the centre of the region, Rusa — 55 km, Pskov — 200 km, Izborsk — 230 km, Novy Torg — 300 km. The towns were as small islands in a forest sea, connected to each other by threads of rivers.

Novgorod, the main town of the land, was distinguished from all the others. In the 12th—13th centuries it covered 150 ha. The next after it, Ladoga and Pskov, covered 16 and 15 ha respectively. In the 11th century the population of Novgorod was 10 — 15 thousand people; at the beginning of the 13th century 27 — 30 thousand. Compared to its region, Novgorod had a very high concentration of population, administrative institutions, stone churches, trading, and other activities. By the middle of the 13th century, at the time of the Tartars invasion, there were 39 stone churches in Novgorod and numerous wooden ones. In Ladoga, there were seven stone churches, in Pskov — four, in Rusa — one. At the same time in the rural territories the first stone churches were built only in the 15th century. In Novgorod all the people who belonged to the upper strata of society, lived within the region, among them the rural landowners. The town, the capital of the region, embodied the state. It contained the yards of feudals, merchants, craftsmen, market places, administrative institutions, bishop's and prince's yards, churches and monasteries. The town, in such a situation, was the only conveyor of economic and cultural contacts, of new trends, influences and interaction.

The evidence from early medieval Russia compels us to re-examine the problem of the connection between the town and its hinterland. The tendency, which seems rather attractive, to pay more attention to the economic development

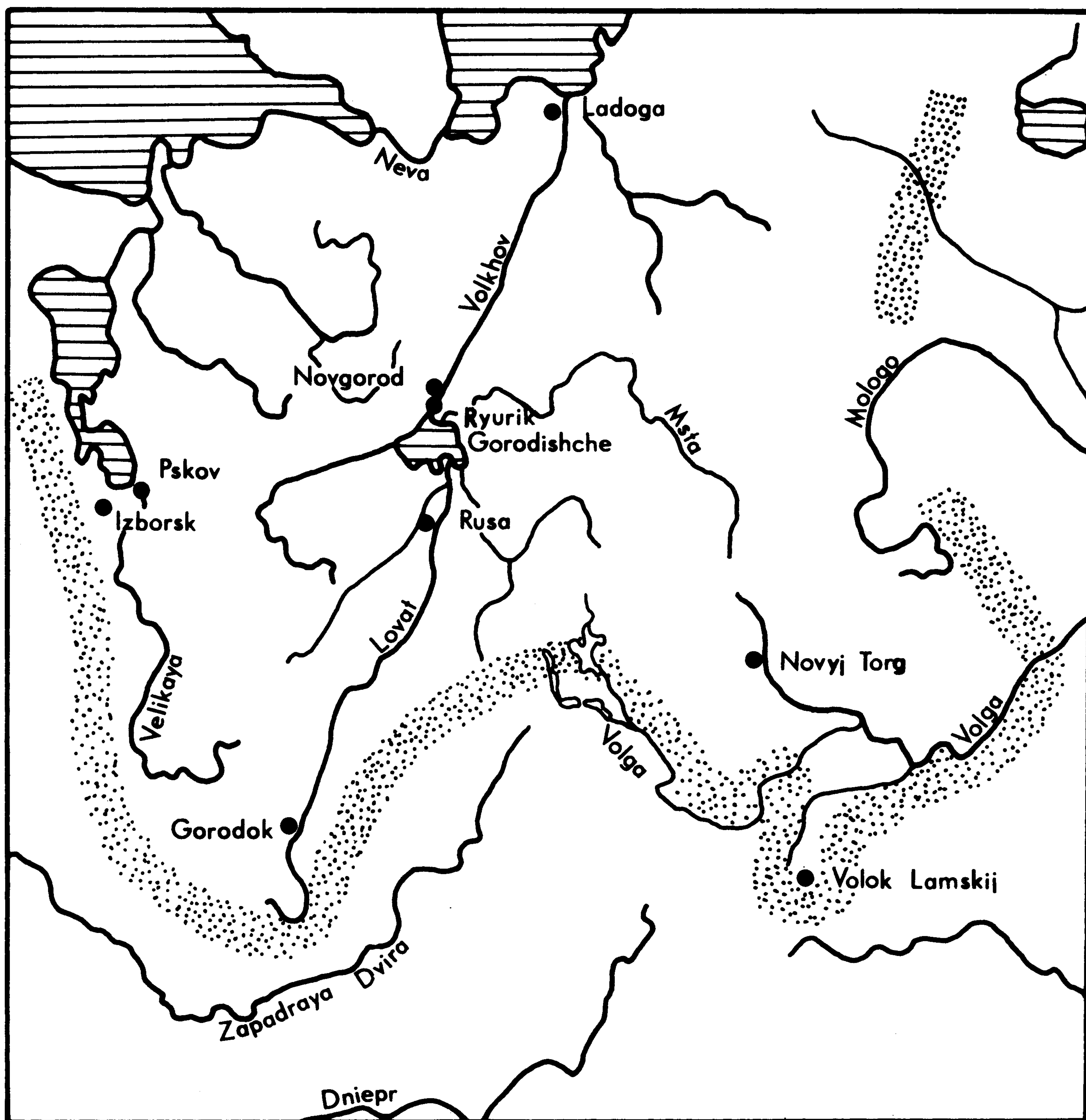


Fig. 2. Novgorod Land and its towns in the beginning of the 12th century.

of the town together with the village, involuntarily very often underlines the agrarian component of town life. Scholars give attention to finds of agricultural implements in the towns, quote written sources about fields and cattle which belonged to the inhabitants of the towns, and so on. In Soviet and Russian historical and archaeological literature of the last years there has been a strong tendency to examine the town mainly as a centre of redistribution of the surplus products from the hinterland. The town was thus seen simply as a development, albeit complex, from the simple village. I think that this is a simplification. Even in agrarian Russia, where the rural elements dominated so completely, the towns

are anything but agrarian in character. Here we see more boldly than anywhere else in Europe the civilizing tendency of towns. When towns appeared, they immediately began to function in their own manner, as economical and social units.

In this paper my main aim was not to summarise all we know about towns in Russia. I only wanted to focus on some general questions concerning the development of Russian towns which, I hope, are of general interest.

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