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Trade Routes and their Significance in the Christianization of Karelia

Ever since the second half of the 8th century, the Vikings have traveled south along the Russian rivers. Archaeological findings suggest that Karelians also took part in the trade between the Russian lands and the Baltic Sea region. Karelia is favorably situated in the middle of the river trade route from Scandinavia and Central Europe to Russia. This trade route was first used by the Vikings on their way to Constantinople and the Arabic lands, and later by Gotlandic traders and the Hanseatic League in their trade with Novgorod. The aim of this paper is to show how trade routes played an important role in introducing the Christian faith in Karelia.

Regarding Christianity, the most significant period occurs between the 12th and 14th centuries, also called the Crusade period. During this period, we can see a change towards Christian burial rites, and Christian objects are found in the archaeological material. As there are very few direct written sources on the Christianization of Karelia, we have to rely on other sources to investigate the matter. The most important of these sources is the archaeological material both from Karelia and from areas close by. Written sources from other areas will also be used to some extent.

Most of the Karelian inhumation graves that indicate the Christian faith have been excavated by Theodor Schvindt in the late 19th century. The documentation of these graves is poor, especially when compared to what we are used to today. For this reason, it is hard to extract all the information out of the excavations that we would want to. Nevertheless, the material of these excavations is very rich and interesting. This material has been the basis for the romantic thought about an Ancient Karelia with a unique and independent iron-age culture. One, however, has to be careful with the dating of the inhumations, as there are

almost no radiocarbon dates available. As a result, the dating is almost entirely based on typology of the objects found in the graves.

The area of Karelia that is under investigation in this paper is the area of the former Finnish Karelia which remained on the eastern side of the border after the treaty of Pähkinäsaari (Orexovec) in 1323. This area mainly concerns the western shores of lake Ladoga. Nowadays this region is part of Russia, after being invaded by the Soviet Union during the Second World War.

Traders in Karelia

Since the Vikings had traveled to Russia since the 8th century, a trade system had already been well established along the Russian rivers when the Crusades began. It is during this period, sometime around the beginning of the 12th century AD, that burial customs started to change in Karelia. After the custom of burning their dead, people began burying them in inhumation cemeteries. At first, grave goods were placed with the buried, but by the end of the 14th century, few goods were found in the archaeological material. The orientation of the graves also changed from a pagan northward orientation to a Christian westward orientation, with the head of the body lying towards the west (Uino 1997: 67–68). All these factors have been seen as indicators of the Christian faith arriving in Karelia.

However, there are no signs of organized missionary activities in Karelia during the Crusade period, which would probably have needed a church of some sort as a base (see also Hiekkänen 2003: 26). As there are no signs of churches in Karelia prior to the late 14th century when the Valamo monastery was founded (Lind 1986), it is likely that the earliest Christian influences came to Karelia in some other way. Before the 14th century, Christianity could have been introduced to the Karelians partly by traveling merchants who sometimes had missionary priests with them as mentioned in *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (*Povest' vremennyx let*), (see PVL: 175–178; also Makarov 1998: 271). Local traders could also have come in contact with Christianity during their travels.

To obtain a better picture of the possible routes that Christianity could have come to Karelia, we have to examine what kind of contacts the Karelian people had to the world around them. This is most easily done by looking at the trade routes that went through Karelia. We can divide the trade via the Russian river systems into three different time periods: the trade with the Vikings, the Gotlanders and the Germans.

I. The Viking trade c. 800 AD – c. 1000 AD

By the end of the 9th century, the Vikings had already established a route to the southern lands through the Russian river system (Noonan 1998: 346–347). According to the PVL, the Christianization of Rus' began in 986 when Prince Vladimir sent his representatives to learn more about the different world religions. He then decided that the Greek Orthodox religion was the best and ordered his people to be baptized in 989 (PVL: 83–121). It is likely, however, that the Christian faith had already been present in Rus' for a longer period of time before 989 (Korpela 1996: 86–87).

In the 10th century, the presence of the Christian faith can also be noted in the archaeological material of Rus' and Sweden. The same kinds of cross pendants have been found in Kiev, Gnëzdovo and Birka. At the same time, the custom of burying the dead in a westward orientation also became more common (Petruškin & Puškina 1998: 247–256). Christianity was a fairly commonly known phenomenon for the Vikings traveling from Scandinavia to the south through the river systems of Russia as early as in the 10th century. But although there are many signs of Scandinavian presence in Karelia during the Viking age (Uino 2003: 356), there is nothing in the archaeological material indicating early Christianity prior to the Crusade period in the 12th century.

The period of Viking trade marks the beginning of the Christian faith in the areas near Karelia. In Karelia, however, Christianity can only be noticed in the material culture several hundreds of years later, when merchants from Gotland took over the trade with Russia.

II. The Gotlandic trade c. 1000 AD – c. 1150 AD

By the end of the 11th century, the trade with Constantinople and the Arabs had ended almost completely. This is seen in the many coin finds both in Russia and in Sweden. These finds are almost completely lacking in Arabic and Byzantine coins, while western European coins now take a dominant position (Jansson 1983: 218–227). This demonstrates that the weight of the trade was moving from the southern lands to the Baltic Sea region and Western Europe.

As the trade became more directed towards Central and Western Europe, the Mälars district in Sweden also lost its position as the main distribution channel (Martin 1986: 40–41). The trade center then transferred to the two big islands in the Baltic Sea, Gotland and Öland. At the same time, the demand for furs and wax in Europe was constantly growing. As Novgorod was the main supplier of

those products, the importance of the trade with Russia and Western Europe also grew. It was mainly the traders from the Gotlandic countryside, peasant merchants, who distributed products from Novgorod to Western Europe (Harrison 2002: 536–538).

At the turn of the 11th to the 12th century, a Gotlandic trade station, *Gotenhof*, with a church sacred to Olaf the Holy, was founded in Novgorod (Rybina 2002: 124). The same church is also mentioned on a rune stone from Uppland in Sweden from the late 11th century (Trotzig 1983: 384). Gotland itself probably had been Christianized at the latest by the middle of the 11th century when churches started to occur on the island (Trotzig 1983: 388).

Throughout the 11th and 12th centuries, Novgorod's Baltic commerce expanded. By the end of this period, Novgorod was exchanging goods with both its traditional Scandinavian and newer German trading partners. In exchange for their silver and fine woollens, the German traders were in search of luxury furs. To obtain the luxury fur necessary to meet the demand, Novgorod's traders and explorers extended the domain of Novgorod northward and eastward. The Scandinavians, who had looked to Novgorod as a source of oriental luxury goods and silver and who were interested in fur only as a secondary product, were displaced by German merchants. Under these circumstances Novgorod increasingly focused on the Baltic market (Martin 1986: 51–60).

When Viking trade with the Arabs and the Russians had ended, the Gotlanders became the most important merchants in the Baltic Sea region and founded a trade station in Novgorod. However, the tradesmen from Gotland soon had competition, as the Germans started to colonize the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea.

III. The German trade c. 1150 AD –1478 AD

During the 11th century and certainly by the 12th, German merchants replaced the Scandinavians as Novgorod's most prominent Baltic trading partners. By the beginning of the 12th century, they had formed outposts at Schleswig, the western endpoint of the Baltic Sea route, and at Visby, on the island of Gotland (Martin 1986: 49). The great German colonization of the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, beginning in the 12th century, meant that German merchants established a steady foothold in the region and no longer had to use the intermediary services of the Gotlanders (Harrison 2002: 538–539).

The German merchants consequently became rivals of the Gotlandic traders. As the Germans started using the city of Visby on Gotland as a center for their

trade with Novgorod during the 12th century, a strong conflict of interests broke out between the peasant merchants of the countryside and the German merchants in Visby. Soon, however, the Germans took over the trade with Novgorod completely and established their own trading depot, Peterhof, in the late 12th century. As a result, the Russian commerce brought great profits to the German merchants and Visby became one of the greatest cities in the Baltic Sea region in the 12th century (Martin 1986: 49–50; Harrison 2002: 536–539).

Although the role of the German merchants started to increase in importance, Gotlanders continued to be active in Novgorod's Baltic trade through most of the 12th century. The merchants from Novgorod also transported their goods to many places around the Baltic Sea, including Gotland, Sweden, Denmark and northwest Germany (Martin 1986: 50). Conflicts between Novgorod and Sweden had become more frequent during the 12th century. By 1188, when the Novgorod merchants were arrested on Gotland and in mainland Sweden, the two parties had already grown very much apart from each other. This is also evident in the Russian chronicles after 1188, where the different people of Sweden are all referred to by the Russian term *němcy* ('mute') instead of by their ethnic name. The same term is also used for all German people (Lind 2001: 141).

By the end of the 12th century, the Germans and the Hanseatic League completely controlled the Russian trade in the Baltic Sea region. The only way to Novgorod before the 14th century was by the river routes. The main route went via the Neva to Lake Ladoga and Volxov. Karelia is situated in the middle of this trade route, on the north side of the Neva and according to Russian chronicles, Karelia was Novgorod's ally. Even so, a trade agreement between German and Gotlandic traders and Novgorod in 1268–1269 shows that Novgorod was not willing to guarantee the safety of the traders in Karelia (Kirkinen 1963: 85–87).

Nevertheless, the Swedes also became interested in controlling the trade route to the Russian lands. The constant wars between Sweden and Novgorod over the mouth of the Neva created instability in Karelia during the 13th century. Because of this instability, the Hanseatic League established an alternative route via the newly founded Reval to Novgorod during the 14th century. This caused the Hanseatic traders to begin using land routes more and more. Halfway into the 14th century, almost all trade with Novgorod was being done through Reval, and the river routes had lost much of their former importance (Attman 1973: 14–15; Weczerka 2002). Direct trade with Novgorod definitely ended in 1478 when the Muscovites invaded the city. By that time both the Orthodox and the Catholic churches were well established in Karelia. The time periods before 1478, and

especially before the treaty of Pähkinäsaari in 1323, have to be studied archaeologically in order to learn more about the introduction of Christianity in Karelia.

Christianity and Karelia

The archaeological finds both from the Viking Age and the Crusade period suggest that the Karelians maintained good contact with the Baltic Sea region, where Christianity had been present since the Viking age. Furthermore, inland Finland, especially during the Crusade period, had traces of the Karelian culture. The records from historical times indicate how parts of Finland were divided into hunting grounds that would supposedly also be a remainder of older times. At least Savo seems to be a region that was used by the Karelians, but Häme also has many *Karjala*-place names, indicating Karelian activity in that area (Taavitsainen 2004: 46–52). These hunting grounds in inland Finland were probably used by the Karelians to collect furs and other goods to trade with the Vikings and the Hanseatic merchants.

During the first of the three trading periods mentioned earlier, no signs of Christianity emerge in the archaeological material. It is, however, probably during this period that the first Christian words occur in the Finnic languages as Slavic loans, such as *risti* ‘cross’, *pappi* ‘priest’, *pakana* ‘heathen’, *raamattu* ‘Bible’, *kuoma/kummi* ‘godparent’ and *räähkä* ‘sin’. They are loans from the so-called Proto-Russian language and came into Finnic (examples are from Finnish) between 600 and 1050 AD (Kalima 1952: 195; see also Bjørnflaten 2006). During the first two periods, it did not matter to which church one belonged, the Orthodox or the Catholic. Although the Christian church had officially divided into a western and an eastern part in 1054, it lasted until the late 12th or early 13th century until this was noted in Karelia (Pirinen 1991: 17; Musin 1998: 288; Lind 2001).

In Karelia, during what is referred to as the Crusade period, from the beginning of the 12th century until the treaty of Pähkinäsaari in 1323, the first signs of Christianity are seen in the archaeological material. So far, one hundred and eighty six inhumation graves in 40 cemeteries have been found in Karelia. Yet a large amount of these graves have not been dated in any way and therefore it is impossible to say to what period they belong. Among the inhumations, objects with Christian symbols have been found in eleven graves that belong to seven different cemeteries. Almost all the objects were found in graves with a northward orientation, the orientation which is seen to be pagan in origin (Uino 1997: 67–68).

Closer examination of the graves with Christian objects reveals a few important points. A large part of the graves are from only one richly furnished cemetery in Kaukola and all but one of the objects were found in graves with a northward orientation. Among the Christian objects, there are two main groups: cross-pendants and round silver brooches with cross ornaments. The other Christian objects do not form any distinct group. Before labeling an object as Christian, it has to be examined to see if it really can be classified as Christian. We also have to take into consideration that the meaning of the object could be different for the maker and the bearer.

Swedish archaeologist Jörn Staecker has investigated the significance of cross-pendants in historical sources. According to Staecker, the bearer of the cross was well aware of its meaning and symbolism. The cross mainly served as protector from evil and it also worked as a reminder of the Christian faith. The cross became an official part of the church liturgy in the 12th century (Staecker 1999: 43–45). Regarding Russia, the archaeologist Makarov has also reached similar conclusions (Makarov 1989).

Six cross-pendants have been found in Karelia. According to grave finds, the cross-pendants were worn by men only. This differs from the situation both in Sweden and in Russia where cross-pendants are found mainly in the graves of women and children (Makarov 1989: 56–57; Gräslund 1996: 33–34). In Finland, however, cross-pendants have also been found in male graves (Purhonen 1998: 104–105). This suggests that the cross-pendant had a different meaning both in Karelia and Finland. It is also notable that the same types of cross-pendants were worn in Karelia c. 100 years later than in Sweden and Russia. Could it be that the cross-pendants were used by Karelian traders to mark their faith to other Christian traders from Gotland and Novgorod when Christianity already was established in those areas (see also Purhonen 1998: 111–112)? The cross-pendants found in Karelia show that the men wore them on a very visible spot around their necks. The origin of the cross types found in Karelia can be traced to the areas around the Baltic Sea.

The other main group of Christian objects found in Karelia consists of silver brooches. Seven different brooches have been found in six different graves. The contexts of these finds are fairly well known in six cases, while one brooch is from a grave that was destroyed by grave robbers in 1998 (Saksa et al. 2003: 404–406). One of the graves that contained a brooch was a cremation.

Five of the Karelian brooches have cross-ornaments, whereas two have some sort of other decoration. According to Nordman, the brooches can be traced to 12th and 13th century Gotland and have been in use in Karelia between 1150 and

1250 (Nordman 1924: 45–58; Nordman 1945: 232–233). Similar silverwork has also been discovered in other deposit finds in Gotland (Thordeman 1941: 96–103). In inland Finland, brooches similar to those in Karelia have been found in Tuukkala and in Nastola. The Tuukkala brooch has a runic inscription which says something like “Botwi owns me.” Nordman notes that the name Botwi does not appear on any rune stones outside Gotland (Nordman 1924: 69).

To determine whether or not these silver brooches can be considered as being Christian symbols, we have to take a look at Gotland where they presumably have been made. The cross-ornament on four of these brooches are very similar to the crosses found on the Gotlandic grave stones mainly from the 13th century (Staecker 2004: 185–191), and which are, without a doubt, Christian. Gotland had also been Christianized in the middle of the 11th century at the latest (Trotzig 1983: 388).

If these brooches with cross-ornaments were made in Gotland, it is very likely that they had a Christian meaning, at least to the maker of the brooch. The brooches in Karelia were all found in women’s graves and they were used to keep the dress together at the neckline (Schwindt 1893: 112). In three cases, round silver brooches were found in the same grave as cross-pendants, and both a man and a woman were buried in those graves. As the men were bearing such clear Christian symbols as cross-pendants, this could also suggest that the brooches had a Christian meaning to its bearer.

The other objects with Christian ornaments that were found in the graves consist of a chain set with crosses, a “Maria orans” pendant, a ring with a seal picturing a person which has been interpreted as portraying a warrior saint, a ring brooch with the text “AVE MARIA GT”, and a bronze icon, *obraz*a, with a picture of Christ. A knob-ornamented brooch with a cross design has also been found as a stray find. These objects do not form any sort of group, but indicate contacts with both Russia and Scandinavia, where similar objects have been found.

The Christian objects found in the graves merely suggest the kinds of contacts the people of Karelia had to other Christian areas. In other words, these objects reveal little about the whole situation of the Christian faith during the Crusade period in Karelia. All in all the whole concept of Christianity is very problematic. Even though people were buried according to Christian customs and that they began to include Christian objects in graves, this does not automatically mean that people in Karelia were Christians. Probably the Christian god was only one among many. From written sources we know that Karelians worshipped pagan gods as late as in the 16th century.

As mentioned before, a large number of the excavated graves are not dateable. We can, nevertheless, sketch a general picture of the development of the burial customs. For instance, we can ascertain that after burying their dead in a northward orientation with furnished graves, people started to bury the deceased in a westward orientation without grave goods by the end of the 13th century (Uino 1997: 67–68). This latter practice is generally seen as reflecting the Christian burial custom. It is, however, worth noting that the Christian artifacts and the Christian way of burial arrive in Karelia ca. 100 years later than in the surrounding areas in the Baltic Sea region. This strengthens the understanding that no substantial missionary activities seem to have been occurring in Karelia during the Crusade period.

Conclusions

As there are no signs of organized missionary activities in Karelia during the Crusade period, it seems that trade played an important role in bringing early Christian influences to Karelia. Archaeological finds in Karelia indicate their contacts both with Gotland and Novgorod. Both areas were Christian during the Crusade period and the merchants from both places were probably also Christianized. At the end of the 13th century, Christianity became part of the politics in the war between Novgorod and Sweden over the Karelian lands. That is also when churches and monasteries started to appear in the area and make more organized missionary activities possible.

The question is whether the trade between western Europe and Novgorod had such a profound influence that it also had an impact on the burial customs of the Karelian people in the early 12th century. Did lonely missionaries who traveled with merchants have the power to make such a major change as to affect the ancient burial traditions of the Karelians? In light of the knowledge we have today, this question cannot be answered for sure.

But even though there are no traces left of churches before the 14th century in Karelia, this does not necessarily mean that there could not have been any smaller wooden churches before that. In that case, as Finnish archaeologist Markus Hiekkanen has suggested, these churches would probably have been private and could have been situated nearby the places where inhumation graves have been found (Hiekkanen 2004: 198–199). It could be that no traces of such churches were left in the ground as they could have been built directly on the surface without any stone settings. And even if there were some sort of mark-

ings of a building left, a church would be very hard to distinguish from other buildings.

Perhaps the richly furnished graves with Christian objects that were found in Kaukola belonged to rich Christian merchants who also had a church of their own. Maybe there were a couple of such families belonging to the upper class of the society that buried their deceased according to the Christian rite. According to the British professor in medieval history, Peter Sawyer, it was a common missionary strategy to concentrate on the upper levels of society, because if they became Christian, it in turn affected the rest of the society (Sawyer 1982: 139). The question of the ethnicity of these merchants, however, remains unanswered.

Many problems still remain with the Christianization of Karelia. For instance, there is no exact chronology of the graves. We can only say for sure that burial customs changed from cremation during the Viking age to inhumation in the Crusade period. This meant that the pagan northward orientation changed to the more Christian westward orientation without grave goods by the end of the 14th century. Only a very general picture of the burial culture is available today, as no systematic archaeological research has been undertaken in Karelia since the end of the 19th century. There are also very few written sources that could shed light on the Christianization of Karelia. In short, the cliché that much work still needs to be done applies all too well to Karelia.

Regarding the information we have today, it can be said that trade routes played a very important role in introducing the Christian faith in Karelia. These trade routes allowed foreign merchants to find their way to Karelia and they also brought their faith with them. Probably it is also through trade that the first Christian objects arrived in Karelia, the same objects that were to be found by archaeologists several centuries later.

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