

Slavica Helsingensia 32

Juhani Nuorluoto (ed., под ред., Hrsg.)

Topics on the Ethnic, Linguistic and Cultural Making of the Russian North

Вопросы этнического, языкового и культурного формирования Русского Севера

Beiträge zur ethnischen, sprachlichen und kulturellen Entwicklung des russischen Nordens

Helsinki 2007

ISBN 978-952-10-4367-3 (paperback), ISBN 978-952-10-4368-0 (PDF), ISSN 0780-3281

Andreas Koivisto

(Helsinki)

Thoughts on the Karelian Baltic Sea Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries AD

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD, which was also called the Crusade period in Finland, have traditionally marked the flourishing of Karelian culture. This picture is drawn by the findings of richly furnished inhumation graves. Karelia¹ at the time is described as being a rich area with a unique culture (Uino 1997: 166). It is also during this period that the centre of the fur trade in northern Europe is moved to the areas around Karelia. This fur trade becomes the basis of the commerce between Novgorod and Gotland and later on with the Hanseatic League (Korpela 2004: 41).

Owing to trade in the Baltic Sea region, which started with the Vikings in the eight century AD, goods and traditions were exchanged amongst people in the area. The result of this exchange was something that could be referred to as a common Baltic Sea culture. Especially the material culture, both artefacts and pottery, was very similar throughout the whole region (see for example Roslund 2001; Staecker 1999; Musin 1998). We therefore should not seek strictly eastern or western phenomena in Karelia as often done traditionally, but consider the trade era as being part of the common Baltic Sea culture.

¹ By Karelia, I refer to the area of the former Finnish Karelia which remained on the eastern side of the Swedish-Russian border after the Treaty of Pähkinäsaari (Orekhovec) in 1323. This mainly concerns the western and north western shores of Lake Ladoga. Today this region is part of Russia, after being invaded by the Soviet Union during the Second World War.

Karelian merchants?

The overall picture of a flourishing Karelian culture can be traced to the richly furnished inhumation burials during the Crusade period that have been found in Karelia. A wide range of objects have been found in these graves which show that the Karelians were part of the common Baltic Sea culture. But who were the people who were actually buried in these graves? Were they really Karelians, or were they wealthy foreign merchants who came to Karelia in order to control the fur trade? Most evidence point to them being local Karelian people.

Firstly, among the grave goods, there are typically Karelian artefacts, which were probably made locally (Uino 1997: 167). Secondly, the burial rite differs from the rites conducted in areas nearby during this time period. If the graves would in fact contain foreign merchants, they surely would have been buried according to their own burial traditions. Thirdly, there are no signs of a foreign expansion to Karelia (Uino 2006: 357). From this it is safe to conclude that trade did not bring a new population to Karelia, but it did bring new ideas and impressions.

If we assume that the people buried in the inhumation graves were Karelian merchants, the next question is determining the role they played in the Baltic Sea fur trade. These graves imply that the people buried in them were wealthy with many grave goods from all around the Baltic Sea region. However, this does not necessarily mean that the merchants travelled around the whole region themselves. They could have got these artefacts from other merchants in, for example, the nearby towns of Staraja Ladoga or Novgorod.

The fur trade

The demand for furs in Western Europe had been constantly rising since the eleventh century AD. And a vast number of furs came from the Russian lands, with the market being concentrated in Novgorod (Attman 1973: 11-13). In 1070, Adam Bremensis wrote that the Russian market was overflowing with all kinds of goods² (Mester Adams: 22). The best way to

² Although the most important trade good for the Karelian merchants probably was fur, surely they also traded other goods. They may also have traded, for example, food stuff and handicrafts. But it is really hard to say anything for sure, as hardly any traces of the actual trade goods are left in the archaeological material.

Novgorod from Western Europe during this time period was from the Gulf of Finland via Neva to Lake Ladoga and from there along the River Volkhov to Novgorod.

Very little is known about the role that the Karelian merchants played in the fur trade between Novgorod and Western Europe. However, later historical documents show that Karelians played a big part in supplying furs to the towns of Viborg and Reval (Harder-Gersdorff 2002: 134; Huldén & Huldén 2004: 164-165). We can assume that at this point they had a long tradition of fur trade behind them.

The best quality furs came from the northern areas, where the animals had to develop a thick fur in order to last the cold winter. One indication that the river routes to northern areas rich with fur animals were important is shown by the location of the dwellings in Karelia of this time. These dwellings were situated on the western and north western shores of Lake Ladoga, around the mouth of the River Vuoksi. From here you could travel northward to collect furs. That Karelians travelled along the rivers to the inland to collect furs can be seen by Karelian artefacts and place names in these areas (Taavitsainen 2004: 46-52).

Apparently the Karelians had a pretty good relation to Novgorod as they let the Karelians have some sort of independency in the trade. Instead especially the territories to the northeast of Karelia were controlled by Novgorod. These areas were taxed by the Novgorodians as showed by wooden cylinder tallies found in the town of Novgorod (Makarov 2006: 263).

The market

Where did the actual trade occur then? It is not known whether Karelians traded directly with the Gotlandic or the Hanseatic merchants, or if they had to use Novgorod as an intermediary. At least the Karelians had very good waterways from the River Vuoksi via the Ladoga straight to the towns of Staraja Ladoga and Novgorod. As there was an international market place in Novgorod, this would have been a natural place for the Karelian merchants to sell their goods.

This is supported by archaeological material which shows contacts between Novgorod and Karelia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD. On the one hand, there are Novgorodian artefacts found in Karelia from this period and on the other hand, there are Karelian artefacts found in

Novgorod. At excavations in Novgorod, birch bark documents have been found and some of these mention Karelia. These documents date to the time period between 1100 and 1300 AD (See Uino 1997: 191-192, 194-195 with references).

Furthermore a ski was discovered in Karelia that is of a type that usually occurs south of Lake Ladoga (Uino 2003: 359). So the winter routes on snow and ice were at least as equally important as the water ways. Moreover the rivers of Northwest Russia are full of difficult currents and rapids, which make the water routes much more problematic than the literature usually implies (Sindbæk 2003). As the ski finding suggests, these winter routes could also have been used as trade routes between Karelia and Novgorod.

The independent trade between Novgorod and Karelia probably ended in the late thirteenth century. In 1278, Novgorodian Prince Dmitrij Aleksandrovič embarked on a war campaign to Karelia and evidently conquered the fortress of Käkisalmi. It is from this year on that Karelia could be considered to be part of the Novgorodian tax district. According to historian Eric Christiansen, that campaign could have been launched because the Karelians had tried to trade directly with the Germans. Furthermore, Christensen thinks that the trade returned back to the old order after the campaign. (Christiansen 1997: 119; Korpela 2004: 62).

Conclusions

The flourishing Karelian culture during the crusade period was probably a result of the Baltic Sea trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The centre of the trade at that time was very close to Karelia. This resulted in the Karelian merchants getting rich and being able to give numerous valuable offerings to their deceased as grave goods. These rich inhumation graves are, however, hardly representative of the whole Karelian population at this time. These graves merely show that some people became wealthy.

Although the graves contain many foreign artefacts, this does not automatically mean that the Karelians travelled extensively. Due to the trade, objects could have been brought to Karelia by foreign merchants. Those graves only indicate that Karelians took part in the international Baltic Sea trade. Indeed, Karelia maintained some independence in trade until the end of the thirteenth century. After that Karelia became a part of Novgorod and was later integrated further into the Baltic Sea world.

References

- Attman 1973 = A. Attman: *Ryssland och Europa. En handelshistorisk översikt*. Göteborg. (Meddelanden från ekonomisk-historiska institutionen vid Göteborgs universitet 27).
- Christiansen 1997 = E. Christensen: *The Northern Crusades*. Penguin Books. London.
- Harder-Gersdorff 2002 = E. Harder-Gersdorff: Hansische Handelsgüter auf dem Großmarkt Novgorod (13.-17. Jh.): Grundstrukturen und Forschungsfragen. *Novgorod. Markt und Kontor der Hanse*, ed. N. Angermann & K. Friedland. (=Quellen und Darstellungen zur hansischen Geschichte 53). Köln, pp. 133-151.
- Huldén & Huldén 2004 = L. Huldén & L. Huldén: Karjalaisten keskiaikainen turkismetsästys. *Viipurin linnaläänin synty*, toim. Y. Kaukiainen & J. Nurmiainen (=Viipurin läänin historia II). Jyväskylä, pp. 164-168.
- Korpela 2004 = J. Korpela: *Viipurin linnaläänin synty*. Jyväskylä. (Viipurin läänin historia II).
- Makarov 2006 = N.A. Makarov: Cultural Identity of the Russian North Settlers in the 10th – 13th Centuries: Archaeological Evidence and Written Sources. *The Slavicization of the Russian North. Mechanisms and Chronology*, ed. J. Nuorluoto (=Slavica Helsingensia 27). Helsinki, pp. 259-281.
- Mester Adams = Mester Adams Canikens i Bremen 1978: *Beskrifning om Sverige, Danmark och Norge*. Förswenskad af Johan Fredrich Peringskiöld år 1718. Stockholm.
- Musin 1998 = A. Musin: Two Churches or two Traditions: Common Traits and Peculiarities in Northern and Russian Christianity before and after 1054 AD through the Archaeological Evidence. A View from the East. *Rom und Byzanz im Norden. Mission und Glaubenswechsel im Ostseeraum während des 8.-14. Jahrhunderts*. Band II, ed. M. Müller-Wille (=Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, Jahrgang 1997 - Nr 3,II). Mainz, pp. 275-295.
- Roslund 2001 = M. Roslund: *Gäster i huset. Kulturell överföring mellan slaver och skandinaver 900 till 1300*. Lund. (Skrifter utgivna av vetenskaps societeten i Lund 92).
- Sindbæk 2003 = S.M. Sindbæk: Varægiske vinterruter. Slædetransport i Ruslan dog spørgsmålet om den tidlige vikingetids orientalske import i Nordeuropa. *Fornvænnen* 98.
- Staecker 1999 = J. Staecker: *Rex regum et dominus dominorum. Die wikingerzeitlichen Kreuz- und Kruzifixanhänger als Ausdruck der Mission in Altdänemark und Schweden*. Lund. (Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology 23).
- Taavitsainen 2004 = J.-P. Taavitsainen: Culture Clash or Compromise? The Notion of Boundary in the Utilization of Wilderness Areas. *The European Frontier. Clashes and Compromises in the Middle Ages* (=Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology 33. CCC papers 7). Lund, pp. 45-55.
- Uino 1997 = P. Uino: *Ancient Karelia. Archaeological studies*. Helsinki. (Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 104).
- Uino 2003 = P. Uino: Viikinkiaika n. 800-1100 jKr. *Karjalan synty*, toim. M. Saarnisto. (=Viipurin läänin historia I). Jyväskylä, pp. 313-382.
- Uino 2006 = P. Uino: The Background of the Early Medieval Finnic Population in the Region of the Volkhov River: Archaeological Aspects. *The Slavicization of the Russian North. Mechanisms and Chronology*, ed. J. Nuorluoto (=Slavica Helsingensia 27). Helsinki, pp. 355-373.