

NOVGOROD RE-VISITED

Lecture to the Society by Mark Brisbane, Tuesday 12 November 2019

Mark came to talk to us about the archaeological excavations in and around the ancient city of Novgorod in North West Russia. This is a very important site for the Russians as they regard Novgorod along with Kiev as the creators of the early Russian state. With the exception of the period of WWII, excavations have been carried out on a continuous basis since 1932, although Mark has only been involved for 25 of those years!



Carving of Novgorod traders with German merchants,

According to a 9th century Russian chronicle Novgorod was founded in AD859 and became one of the foremost trading centres in a network of trade and exchange stretching from England to the Baltic. By the 9th century long distance trading routes had been established by the Swedes to the Black Sea, exchanging furs for silver. Novgorod was at the crossroads of East/West and North/South trade routes and large hoards of Islamic (Kufic) coins are found in excavations.

Novgorod is situated on the shores of the shallow Lake Ilmen out of which the River Volkova flows North. It is slightly raised above the flood plain and forms an island during the winter floods, and when they recede the alluvial soils left behind make the area extremely fertile although the growing season is short. The population was mainly Slavs who settled around Lake Ilmen between the 6th and 8th centuries, followed by Scandinavians and Germans later. Pagan burial mounds with cremations at the centre and inhumations dotted around the mound bases have been found along the lakeside. Scandinavian items of jewellery and Thor's hammers were excavated alongside Slavic jewellery, arrowheads, pottery and bread ovens. Christianity did not arrive until about 988AD.

Novgorod was a densely settled defended town on the banks of the river, known as a 'Republic' with a form of democracy between religious and merchant communities. The Bishop of Novgorod inhabited the Kremlin enclosure while the Prince's palace occupied the opposite bank. The Boyars, an aristocratic elite who essentially ran the town, lived and operated from the market area. The boyars employed their own artisans and wielded wide influence outside the town and its surrounding area.

Archaeological deposits are up to 7m deep and because of the anaerobic soil conditions organic material is very well preserved. The earliest wooden structures have been dated to 926AD by dendrochronology. By the 10th century Novgorod was a thriving centre with streets constructed from radially split logs, replaced on average every twenty years by building over the previous layer, with 28 levels in total. The earlier medieval street plan was replaced by a grid pattern in 1774, under Catherine the Great. Houses were constructed from wood with entrance porch, wood plank floors and a corner stove. The wood used was mainly pine and spruce, with other items such as bowls made using alder and ash. They used smaller timbers over time as the more mature trees were felled.

The micro climate of the Lake Ilmen area ensures a greater concentration of deciduous forest than in the the rest of Russia with four eco zones around the lake shore: deciduous forest in river valleys, lime in decline from the late 12th century and a decline in pine and spruce at the lakeside.

The current project is to use a software programme to model Novgorod's forests and how population growth affected them over time. It will model eco-zones, pollen diagrams, archaeological evidence and demographics from a digitised base map. The results will then be compared with the extent of forest cover in the 18th/19th centuries. This project is ongoing therefore there is much more exciting news to come!

Chris Evans