ARTICLES

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BIRKA AND SCANDINAVIA’S TRADE WITH THE EAST

Introduction

Through the years, Thomas Noonan’s profound analyses of Viking-age coinage found in Russia and the Baltic area have come to be of significant importance in increasing understanding of Scandinavia’s connections with the East. Without his work, a reliable factual basis would hardly have been possible to achieve. By and large, Thomas Noonan’s hypotheses imply that, already at an early date, the Russian area should have been the mediator of Islamic objects, primarily Islamic silver, to Western Europe. Through this, he links to a tradition whose roots reach deeply into twentieth-century research, originating in the work of Henri Pirenne and Sture Bolin on European trade in the early Carolingian Period.

However, the chronological setting of these Eastern contacts seems to have shifted from Bolin’s clear date of the early access to the northern route at the end of the ninth century, to a general archaeological and numismatic view suggesting that all of the material coming from the East after the mid or late eighth century had travelled along the Russian route.

In the following discussion, I will question some aspects of this view on the basis of current analyses of the finds and stratigraphy at Birka, presenting new evidence regarding these connections. In this discussion, some of the most recent research results of several members of the Birka Project will be summarized. I would like to thank them warmly for the work they have carried out on their respective materials.

Background

The point of departure for this discussion is founded in the results of the comprehensive excavations in Birka's Black Earth between 1990-1995. The stratigraphically well-defined material from these excavations shows that an important shift in contacts took place at the end of the 800s. Prior to this time, essentially all of the imported material found at Birka originated from western and southern sources, from Dorestad at the mouth of the Rhine River and from Wolin at the mouth of the Oder River, both important marketplaces on the European continent. At the end of the 800s, these objects disappeared altogether, being replaced by Eastern Islamic and Russian objects. The only exception to this in the material from the early period are the finds of a couple of Arabic coins and a number of glass beads, both of which are types that are assumed to have originated from Syria or other comparable areas in the Middle East.

The circumstances of Birka's local production are very surprising. In his study of the bone material from the culture layers of the Black Earth, Bengt Wigh, the project's osteologist, has identified large quantities of paw bones from fox, pine marten, and squirrel, all characteristic fur-bearing animals. Birka's inhabitants obviously have converted dried skins, from animals hunted in the forest zones surrounding the Baltic Sea and the Bay of Bothnia, to finished furs. First after this was completed the paws, still attached to these furs, were cut off and discarded along with other waste from the marketplace/early town. Fur-bearing animals constitute a large part of the bones from these excavations. Approximately 16 percent appears in the earliest layers, dating from the mid eighth century AD, and from the end of the eighth century this amount decreases in size to no more than 3 percent by the end of the ninth century, remaining at this low level during the tenth century. From this it is clear that, already from the time of its early establishment, trade in furs was an important part of Birka's economy.

In a parallel way, through Olga Davidan's research on early finds from the oldest stratigraphic layers (E3-E1) at Staraia Ladoga, it is possible to establish the presence of Scandinavians, and contacts between Scandinavia and Staraia Ladoga up to the mid or late ninth century. Also at Staraia Ladoga, finds of Eastern objects as well as Islamic coinage were insignificant in its early existence.

Contacts between Ladoga and Birka existed throughout this period, mirrored in the appearance of Ladoga pottery in the oldest stratigraphic layers at Birka. Moreover, the ninth-century finds from Gorodishche at Novgorod are

5. B. Wigh, Animal Husbandry in the Viking Age Town of Birka and its Hinterland, ibid., 7 (Stockholm: The Birka Project, 2001), 121 and diagram fig. 78.
g (Die Sammlung der Staatlichen Ermitage in St. Petersburg)," Zeitschrift für Archäologie