

The State, Actual Problems and Perspectives of Development of

the Archaeology of Polotsk

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Polotsk is the most ancient town on the territory of Belarus, for many centuries it has been the political and cultural centre of the Dvina region in Belarus. Archaeological study of Polotsk is one of the priority directions of development of Belorussian historical science. Archaeological sources not only sufficiently enrich modern ideas about the past of the town but also often are the only reliable historical sources.

Archaeological study of Polotsk is more than one hundred years old but planned archaeological research of the town began in the late 50's of the 20th century. The priority at that time was the study of the so-called old-Russian antiquities (9–13th centuries) and this determined the choice of objects of study: the ancient site of settlement of Polotsk and the Upper Castle. It was in the 50–60's that the largest excavations were carried out (under the supervision of R. Tarasenko, A. Mitrofanov, G. Shtyhov).

As the result the first indisputable proofs of the existence of Polotsk in the 9th century were received, a number of artefacts were found which testified the highly developed material culture of the Polotsk-dwellers, many problems of the development of city topography were marked. The result of the first phase of the archaeological research on Polotsk was the monograph by G. Shtyhov "Ancient Polotsk".

In the 70's of the 20th century the priority

sector of Polotsk archaeology was the study of the ancient monuments of old Polotsk architecture (expeditions of G. Shtyhov, P. Rapoport). Ten 12th-century temples were located, the main stages and tendencies of development of Polotsk temple architecture in the 11–12th centuries were worked out.

In the 80's to mid-90's it was a new stage in the development of archaeology of Polotsk, which was connected with the work of S. Tarasov, O. Trusov, N. Zdanovich, V. Bulkin. The priorities were still the questions of development of religious architecture, city topography (monograph by S. Tarasov "Polotsk in the 9–17th centuries: History and topography") and material culture of the Polotsk-dwellers in the 9–18th centuries.

Beginning with the late 90's planned archaeological research is carried out on the basis of Polotsk State University.

The main results

The main results of archaeological research on Polotsk are the following statements:

- Polotsk as a city (in the social-economic meaning of the word) appeared not before the middle of the 11th century on the grounds of an earlier settlement of the Slavic tribe of Polotsk *Kryvichy* (end of 8th–10th centuries). It was developing according to the

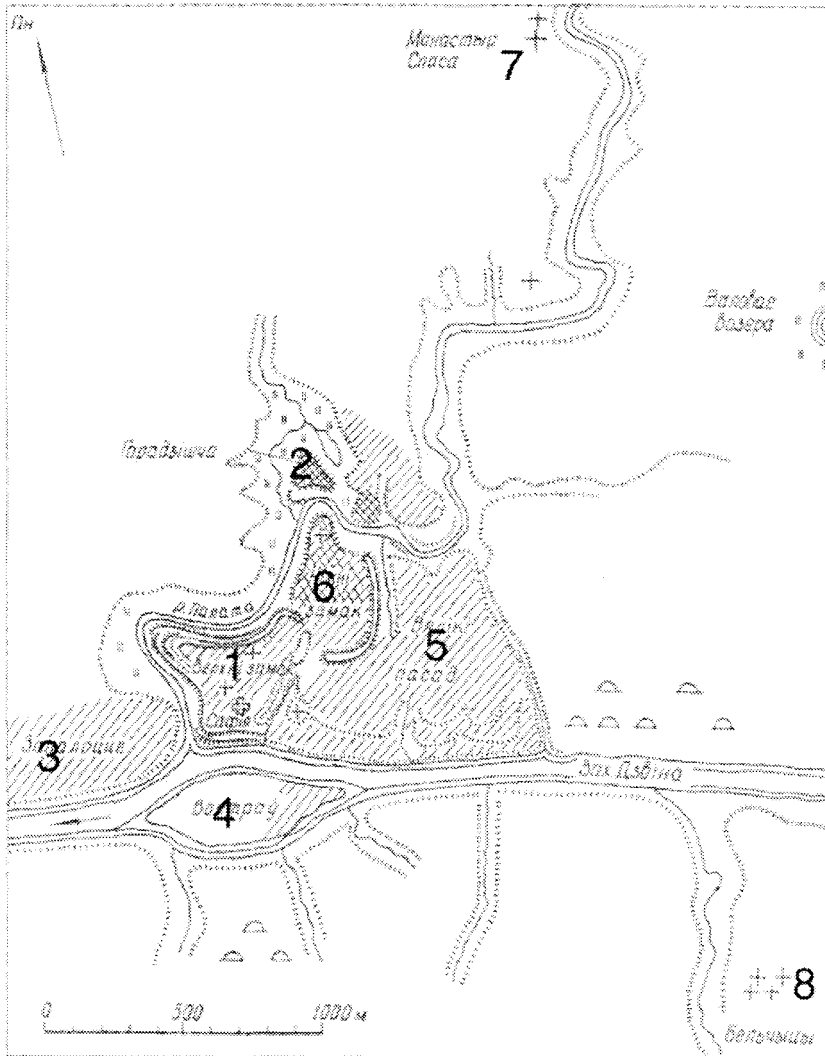


Fig. 1. Archeological sites of Polotsk: 1 – the Upper Castle; 2 – the ancient settlement of Polotsk; 3 – Zapolotie; 4 – the Island; 5 – the Great Posad; 6 – the Lower Castle; 7 – Saviour monastery; 8 – Beltchitsy monastery.

scheme, traditional for the majority of urban centres of Eastern Europe.

- In the 9–11th centuries the city had a fortified “*detinets*” (a fortified administrative centre – the so-called Polotsk old settlement) which was adjoined by the common settlement – *posad* (from the 16th century–the Lower Castle). In the 11th century the *detinets* of the city was shifted to the Upper Castle, the general settlement growing rapidly, together with suburban areas with monasteries. The main body of the radial city-planning was formed (Fig. 1).

- The material culture of Polotsk-dwellers developed on the Eastern Slavic basis under the influence of Byzantine and Roman cultures (9–13th centuries), in the Gothic (14–15th centuries), the Renaissance (16th century) and Barocco (17–18th centuries) tradition.

However there exist a number of actual problems, the solution of which greatly depends on archaeological study.

First of all at the question of the origin of Polotsk is under discussion. From the start Polotsk originated as the administrative centre of the Polotsk region *Kryvichy*, and the earliest archaeological materials let us understand that there existed a settlement of Early Slavs in the 8th century. From the middle of the 9th century the place is often mentioned in chronicles and Scandinavian sagas, its development going along together with such settlements of the Belarussian Dvina region as Vitebsk and Lukoml.

It is possible to assume that the questions of the earlier history of the city are still far from being answered. The ancient settlement of Polotsk, now viewed as the place of the original settling of Polotsk-dwellers, might not be such, or more probably was not the only one. This hypothesis is supported by the long distance (about 800 metres) from it to the Dvina – the largest water route of Eastern Europe, which was very inconvenient for *Kryvichy* settlers on the headland far from

the Polota River mouth. Moreover the size of the ancient settlement (not more than 1 hectare) makes it highly doubtful that this was the most important place in the stormy political period of the 10th century.

Archaeological study of this place is quite difficult to carry out due to the dense civil housing on the site, and archaeological excavations which have already been made, are not sufficient for making final conclusions. Still the artefacts give clear evidence of a system of fortifications and initial settling of *Kryvichy* Slavs here in 10th century. At the foot of the ancient settlement there was a general settlement, open for newcomers. The existence of the system “*detinets–posad*” complies with the traditional scheme of ancient urban settlement development, the ancient settlement was the fortified centre of old Polotsk, but most probably not the only one.

The original settlement

We suggest that the original administrative centre of Polotsk could not be so removed from the Dvina River, so its location must be quite evident. As the real place of the original fortified settlement (or a number of settlements later forming a town) we suggest 1) the ancient settlement on the Polota River (the so-called *Zapolotie*); 2) the Island. In both cases archaeological excavations have been inconsiderable in comparison with the ones at the Upper Castle and the Great Posad.

Large scale archaeological excavations in *Zapolotie* are prevented by dense private housing. However some research has been done and it showed satisfactory preservation of the cultural layer of the Principedom period. The southern bank of the Polota River, washed by the Dvina, holds a great number of artefacts of the 9–13th centuries including finds testifying contacts with Vikings.

The cultural layer of the Island, which until the 20th century had a natural water barrier, is preserved badly due to large-scale

earthwork in the 20th century. Archaeological investigation of the Island disclosed materials of the Princedom period, and according to manuscripts before the 16th century, here there was St. John the Baptist monastery, founded by a missionary named Torvald in the 10th century, according to the legend. Materials from private collections from the banks of the Dvina River opposite St. Sophia

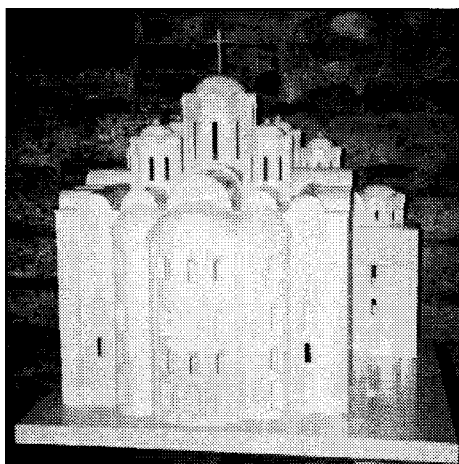


Fig. 2. Model of original architecture of St. Sophia in Polotsk. 11th Century.

Cathedral give evidence of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age settlements (antique-looking stone and iron axes, flint scrapers, etc). It is highly possible that the Island, which at that time was surrounded by water on all sides and had a very favourable position for navigation, was very attractive for the first settlers of Polotsk.

Another very important question lies in the stages of settling in the territory of Polotsk in the pre-state epoch. Materials of the Baltic Dniepr–Dvina culture were found in the ancient settlement of Polotsk. Yet the cultural layer of the *Bantser* culture (6–8th century) was not detected on the specimens, that is why the question of the order of settling in the early Middle Ages remains.

All these problems can be solved only by having complex archaeological excavations in *Zapolotie*, on the Island and in the ancient Polotsk settlement. However it is complicated by dense housing but still possible on the consent of the local residents.

The Island holds significant attraction for archaeologists but as the cultural layer was disturbed, extensive excavations are not ex-

pedient without prior archaeological exploring by pitting to find the best-preserved-cultural layer spots.

And finally, Polotsk is a large trading and political centre in Eastern Europe. Up to now there is no exact information about the character of inter-ethnic contacts on the early stage of existence of Polotsk, about the settling of Slavs on the territory of the Belorussian Dvina region and their relation with the Baltic population.

The role of Vikings in the process of the state formation in *Kryvichy* lands and their influence in Polotsk is not defined yet.

All these problems can apparently be solved only through complex archaeological excavations. These are the priority questions for the Belorussian historical science, because the working out of the Belorussian state-formation conception and preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of the country depends on the solution of these questions.