

S. I. Kochkurkina

ANCIENT OLONETS

Abstract

The Olonets Isthmus was colonized by man around 6,000 years ago. Stone Age and Early Metal Period dwelling-sites have survived from the earliest stages of settlement. Between the 10th and 13th centuries A.D. cemeteries with small burial mounds were established in the areas of the Olonka, Tuloksa, and Vidlitsa Rivers by the ancestors of the Livvik Karelians and the Vepsians. The earliest written references to Olonets are in the *Ustavnaya Gramota* of Svyatoslav Olgovich and in annalistic codes of the 13th century. Cadastre books of the 16th century contain a wealth of material on the history of Olonets. The strategic importance of Olonets grew after the Treaty of Stolbovo (Fi. Stolbova) in 1617, which was highly disadvantageous to Russian interests. In 1648–1649 timber and earthen fortifications were built at Olonets, and it evolved into the largest defensive and administrative centre of the Zaonezhye region. Together with documentary sources, archaeological excavations (conducted in 1973–75, 1988, 1990, and 1991) provide material for a study of how the timbered town of Olonets and the courtyard of the fortress were built. They also reveal the factual contents of documentary sources, and describe material culture, which is not accessible through written sources.

S.I. Kochkurkina, Karelian Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Language, Literature and History, Pushkinskaya 11, 185610 Petrozavodsk, Republic of Karelia, Russian Federation.

The Olonets Isthmus was colonized by man around 6,000 years ago. Stone Age and Early Metal Period dwelling-sites have survived from the earliest stages of settlement. Excavations of dwelling-sites have revealed tools of local lithic materials such as quartz, flint, slate and sandstone, as well as pottery decorated with different patterns. The main economic pursuits of the local population – hunting and fishing – determined the array of tools and implements, the choice of sites, and the overall way of life. The Onega-Ladoga watershed, among other areas, was colonized by people from the east, possibly originating in the Ural region. Settlers from the south advanced northwards through the Olonets Isthmus. The influence of the Early Mesolithic European Sviderian Culture is strongly evident at this stage (Huurre 1979, 19). In other words, the region became the site of vigorous contacts between western, eastern and southern populations. Lake Ladoga, with its advantageous geographic location, furthered the development of these contacts.

Between the 10th and 13th centuries A.D., cemeteries with small burial mounds were established in the areas of the Olonka, Tuloksa and Vidlitsa Rivers for the local population. The mounds were 0.5 to 1.5 metres in height and 5 to 10 metres in diameter. Unfortunately, later economic activity has led to their destruction. Along the Olonka River they were located in the villages of Gorka, Gomala, Terkula, Kapshoila, and Issoila. On the Tuloksa, these were discovered in Rabola, Mergoila, and on the Vidlitsa at the villages of Vidlitsa, Pirdoila, Chimayeva Gora, Isakovo, Gavrilovo, Simonnavolok, and Bolshiy Gory. The Finnish antiquarian D.E.D. Europaeus investigated a number of these mounds in the 1870s (Salonen 1929). In 1929 these excavations were resumed by a team of archaeologists from Leningrad under the direction of V.I. Ravdonikas (1934). In the summer of 1943, the Finnish archaeologist E. Kivikoski excavated two burial mounds at Pirdoila (Kivikoski 1944). S.I. Kochkurkina (1989, 224–248) has also excavated a

number of damaged burial mounds. So far, a total of twenty-eight mounds have been investigated, representing the cremations and inhumations of at least eighty-nine persons. Seventeen mounds remained unexcavated. Proceeding from the rough assumption that they might contain the remains of some forty persons, the mounds along the Olonka, Tuloksa and Vidlitsa Rivers may account for 120–130 corpses from between the 10th and early 13th centuries.

Archaeological excavations have provided the following interesting finds: tools, implements, weapons, pots, pans, cauldrons, ornaments, and coins. During the war, this material in our museum collections perished. The surviving specimens had been taken to Finland by D.E.D. Europaeus and Ella Kivikoski, and they have been well preserved.

The mound culture of the Olonets isthmus is a branch of the Ladoga mound culture, representing its northern periphery. The ancestors of the Vepsians arrived in their new territory from the south-eastern Ladoga area, choosing the river banks in accordance with their former traditions. The new population was not large, and gradually, with the influence of local inhabitants, it began to develop features of material culture distinguishing it from the population of the main region. It is by no means accidental that the area of mounds on the Olonets Isthmus coincides with the territory settled by the contemporary Livvik Karelians. On the other hand, this type of burial was alien to the Ludik Karelians inhabiting the western area of Lake Onega. The burial mounds were giving way to Christian cemeteries.

Thus far, there have been no discoveries of medieval settlements contemporaneous with the burial mounds of the 10th–13th centuries. The first documentary reference to Olonets is in a supplement to the *Ustavnaya Gramota* of Prince Svyatoslav Olgovich of Novgorod.

The *Gramota* dates back to 1137, whereby Olonets has for a long time been assumed to date from the 12th century. However, recent studies have shown that the supplement referring to Olonets is in fact from the 13th century (Shchapov 1972, 164–165). By that time, Olonets was already a large *pogost* (parish) paying three *grivnas* to Novgorod. In comparison, the *pogost* on the Svir River paid only one *grivna*. Olonets is also mentioned in annalistic codes dated to 1228, when detachments of the *yemi* (Häme or Tavastian Finns) arrived by boat to Lake Ladoga (Kochkurkina, Spiridonov, Jackson 1990, 29–30). However, prolonged archaeological excavations in the area of the Olonets stronghold have failed to uncover any ancient layers. The next mention of Olonets is from the late

15th century, referring to the *pogost* of Rozhdestvensky Olonets. A cadastre book by Andrey Lihachev and Lyapun Dobrynin (1563–1566) contains a description of nineteen *pogosts*, Rozhdestvensky Olonets being the first one named. This data, however, is incomplete; the beginning is missing, and central parts of the text may also be lacking. Juri Saburov's earliest cadastre book on the Obonezhskaya pyatina region (1495–1496) contains no evidence whatsoever on Olonets.

The *pogost* of Rozhdestvensky Olonets, as well as other *pogosts* in Eastern Karelia, has a double name. The first part refers to the site of its main church, and the second part indicates the main geographical area. The *pogost* was the centre of a large administrative district, with its western boundary extending from Obzha to Salmi (Solomenski *pogost*) and bordering on Lake Ladoga. The northern boundary included Lake Sjamozero (Säämäjärvi) and the eastern boundary encompassed Lake Svyatozero (Pyhäjärvi). By that time, the hermitages of Syandeba and Andrusovo had already come into existence, and the Monastery of Alexander Svirsky had been established on the southern boundary. These had come into being as a result of monastic colonization. There are no descriptions of the actual *pogost* as an administrative centre, but there is interesting evidence concerning the rural population of the vast *pogost* of Olonets. The local rural population tilled the land, sowed rye and other grain, and stored hay. An average homestead had an area of 0.3–0.5 *obzha* (an *obzha* varied in area from 5.5 hectares for a single field to 16.5 hectares for three fields) of cultivated land, sometimes even less. Hay was stored in large quantities. Records mention 1.5–10 haycocks per man; at times this number could exceptionally rise to 20–50, or even 60 haycocks. As a rule, hay was gathered along the banks of the Olonets River, which was the earliest name of the Olonka. There are also references to peasant handicrafts. Farmers in various villages in the Olonets River area are mentioned as also being furriers, carriers, shoemakers, and blacksmiths. However, it would be mistaken to assume that the Olonets peasantry limited themselves to these pursuits. The compilers of cadastre books were primarily concerned with fiscal duties rather than an exhaustive account of the district's economy. The scribes only recorded what was required by their duties: accurate registration of homesteads, plots of land and pastures, i.e. all that was subjected to levy. The cadastre books offer scant information on crafts, since handicraft and paid labour was not levied.

The Russo-Livonian war of 1580–1582 laid waste to the *pogost* of Olonets. Andrey Pleshch-

eyev's and Semyon Kozmin's cadastre book of 1582–1583 frequently mentions the phrases *khomoromy stavyat novo posle voiny* (houses are built anew after the war) and *khomoromy sozhgli i krestyan pobili i v polon poimali nemetskie lyudi* (houses were burned down and peasants were killed and taken prisoner by strangers). Churches were burned down in Olonets, Ilyinskoe, and Vidlitsa, and the Syandeba monastery was also razed. The stone-built Church of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker was the only one that survived at the Monastery of Andrusovo. Nor could this area avoid the hardships of the later Polish-Swedish invasion. The Swedes sacked and burned villages, and made captives of their inhabitants. After the Treaty of Stolbovo, the *streltsy* of Olonets had much cause to keep their promise and erect a roadside cross on the bank of the Megrega River 'to be worshipped by all Orthodox Christians' (*na poklonienie vsem pravoslavnyim khristianam*). Growing numbers of farms and estates had been laid waste, and the situation resembled a catastrophe. According to R.B. Muller, 49.5% of all homesteads (*obzha*) existing in 1563 on the palatially owned lands of the Olonets *pogost* had now been abandoned. The corresponding figure for the lands owned by the Konushenny Department was 46.7%, and 79.4% for the *obzha* owned by the Archbishopric of Novgorod. The lands of the *svoyezemetses* (smallholders) disappeared completely.

The cadastre book of Petr Voyeikov and Ivan Lgovsky was compiled between 1615 and 1619, when the Romanov government that had come to power decided to begin its work with a census of population and an estimate of its capacity to pay taxes. This book contains evidence of the utter ruin of the region as a consequence of an invasion that laid waste to almost every village. According to the book, 'homesteads were burned down and peasants were killed, bringing ruin' (*a dvory sozhgli i krestyan pobili nemtsy v razorenye*), and 'due to the war, peasants disappeared into obscurity' (*a krestyane ot voiny soshli bezvestno*). Some villages were abandoned by their peasants who had been impoverished (*okhudali* – emaciated). However, the cadastre book compiled by Nikita Panin and Semyon Kopylov in 1628 makes it clear that by this time the Olonets region had managed to overcome the effects of devastation and to improve its economic situation. In the *pogost* of Rozhdestvensky Olonets now stood the wooden Church of the Nativity of the Virgin, next to the Church of St. Nicholas, which already existed on the island. The *pogost's* main church now had a wealth of icons, church plate, and service books, which was a rare collection in those

times. Essential changes had taken place in the rural area during the 10 years since the previous census, although work on Panin's book began at a time when gangs of looters still pillaged the local population. Comparisons of several censuses give a clear picture of the situation of the inhabitants. The 1582–83 cadastre book lists 131 abandoned homesteads in the Olonets *pogost*, the corresponding figure for 1615–17 in 107, while Nikita Panin's book mentions only three uninhabited homesteads.

Around the first half of the 17th century, the clerk Stepan Shishkin drew up a written description of the *pogost*. A strong tendency of population growth is clearly evident in the century or so that had lapsed since the first cadastre book referring to the *pogost* of Rozhdestvensky Olonets. New homesteads were now being established on previously abandoned land. Stepan Shishkin records a total of 125 villages with 505 homesteads and two churches. Another two churches continued to provide divine services in the Ilyinsky *pogost*. Fourteen villages with 41 homesteads and a church were registered in the Tuloksa River area. In the area of the Obzha River were nine villages with 40 homesteads. The increase of homesteads in the Megrega River area is particularly noticeable; the new records list 42 villages with 152 homesteads and a church. There was also a considerable increase of villages and homesteads in the Vidlitsa River area (20 villages, 125 homesteads and two churches). On the whole, Stepan Shishkin's census lists a total of 205 villages, 911 homesteads and nine churches by the middle of the 17th century in the region adjoining the centre of Olonets.

The first defensive fortifications in the area of the Rozhdestvensky *pogost* were already erected at the beginning of the 17th century in response to raids by *cherkas* and *nemetskikh lyudey* (strangers). The stockaded town of Olonets is known to have been built in the autumn of 1613, although its precise location is not given. A decisive rebuff was given to the invaders in January 1614, this event being mentioned in correspondence between the local *voevoda* (local governor and military commander) and the tsar.

Olonets grew in strategic importance after the Treaty of Stolbovo in 1617 (Fig. 1). Placing the new border 40 *versts* (43 km) from Olonets, this treaty was disadvantageous to Russia. The constant threat of invasion by Swedish troops required a number of measures to provide sufficient defensive capability in the border region. Fortifications of timber and earth were built in Olonets, which consequently became the largest defensive and administrative centre of the Zaonezhye region. Nu-

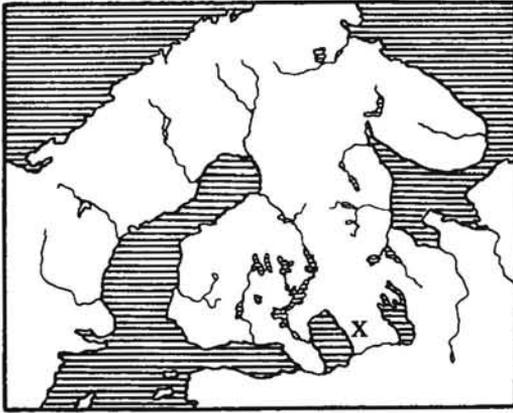


Fig. 1. Location of the fortress of Olonets. X = Olonets.

merous written documents have survived bearing witness to the character and organization of military fortification works in Olonets during the 17th century. The most important of these are the *Rospysnye* and *Smetnye* records, outlining the two main periods of constructing defensive works at Olonets. The first period began with the erection of a fortress in 1648–49 (the *Rospysnoy* record of 1649 by *voevoda* Prince Fyodor Volkonsky). The second period is linked to the reconstruction of the fortress after a fire in 1668 (*Rospys smetnaya* record from 1672 by the *voevoda* Ivan Baklanovsky concerning Olonets). These documents make it possible to piece together the appearance and characteristics of the fortress at the time when the main complex of defensive works was erected. There is also written evidence of continued construction after the main works were completed, i.e. final works, and reports about the erection of a stone chamber (*Smetnye stroyelnye rospisi goroda Olontsa* [1670–1677] and *Rospys opisnaya gorodu Olontsu* [1702]).

Of particular interest are plans of the Olonets kremlin at the Department of Cartography of the Central State Archives of Old Documents (TSGADA) and in the Manuscript Department of the Library of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. These plans provide complete illustrations of the various stages of building the stronghold (Ovsyannikov & Kochkurkina 1978, 71–112).

Two wooden towns are known to have been built in late September 1649 on a point at the confluence of the Olonets and Megrega Rivers: the Greater Town with a fortification line of 423 *sazhens* (1 *sazhen* = c. 2 metres), and the Minor Town (360 *sazhens*) with 19 towers separated by a wall. They represented a significant fortress at the time.

In 1668 both towns were destroyed in a fire. The compact plan and a strong wind made it impossible to save any of the buildings. However, the question of rebuilding the stronghold soon became timely.

Work began in 1670 and was completed in 1672. The original plan was for the most part preserved, although certain innovations were introduced. There was no longer a division into two towns, and the number of towers was reduced to 13. There were also alterations to the composition of the town wall and the courtyard of the fortress. On the whole, the fortress was greatly improved by these measures.

Owing to the compact plan the town was cramped; buildings included granaries, shops, domestic and administrative buildings, and houses of timber and stone. The first building of a more impressive character that was erected in the town was a stone chamber for storing gunpowder and arms and also serving as a treasury. In the 1670s and 1680s the Church of the Trinity was built of stone and the Church of the Epiphany was erected of timber. The central paved street (*Moskovskaya Proboinaya*) ran from the Moscow Gate past the eastern side of the kremlin and continued south towards the Megrega River to the Nicholas Gate. Rows of stalls for visitors from 'abroad' (i.e. from *Korel uyezd*) were outside the town on an island known as *Strelitse* where the Megrega and Olonets Rivers merged.

It is assumed that in 1741 the fortress burned down, and it was not restored until the Swedish border had been moved further west after the Russian victory in the Great Northern War.

These were the principal landmarks, attested to with documents, in the history of one of the main examples of fortification architecture in timber in North Russia in the 17th century.

Of particular interest are the archaeological excavations carried out at Olonets. Together with written sources, they provide material for investigating the main stages of building the timber town of Olonets and the courtyard of its fortress. Archaeological surveys have revealed the physical aspect of written evidence, describing the material culture not found in documents. Between 1973 and 1975, excavations were carried out in the area of ancient Olonets by the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the former Karelian Branch of the former USSR Academy of Sciences (the present Karelian Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences). The field work was directed by the author. Six locations were excavated, covering over 300 square metres (Fig. 2). Plots I–II by the steep bank of the Olonka River revealed

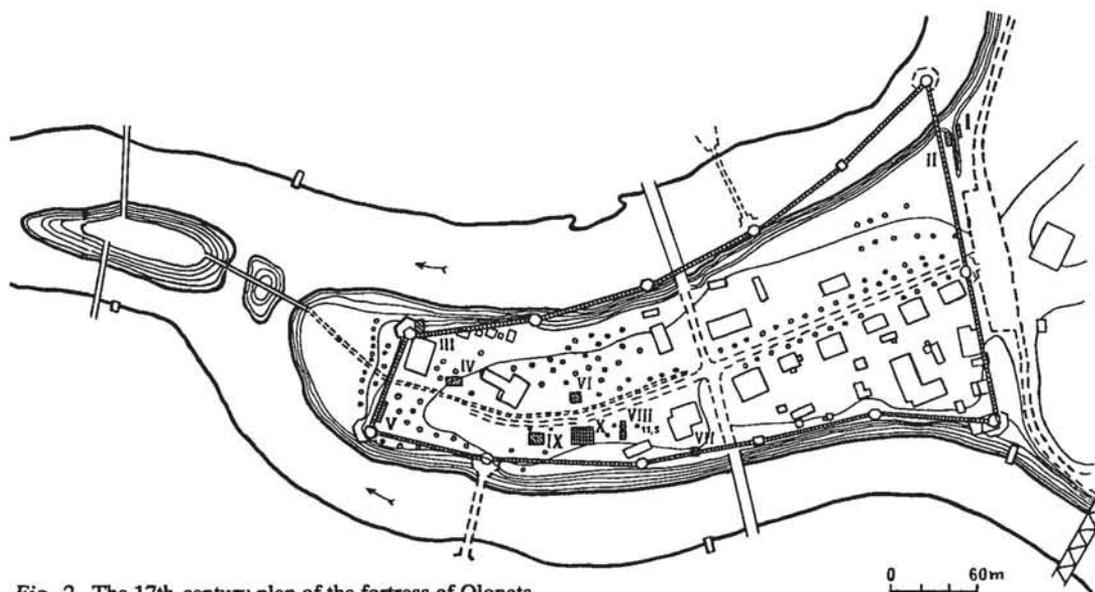


Fig. 2. The 17th-century plan of the fortress of Olonets.

a timber framework for strengthening the moat. Dating back to 1672, the second construction period of the fortress, the framework had withstood the effects of time fairly well, with few signs of wear (Fig. 3). On the face of the frame was a double wall of logs (with a space of 40 cm between

the individual walls). The interior transverse walls were of logs of smaller diameters and were at distances of 3.4 to 4.16 metres from each other. The ends of the long logs were linked with dovetail joints, and the transverse walls were joined to the long walls with so-called 'claw' joints. The long



Fig. 3. The fortifications of the moat.

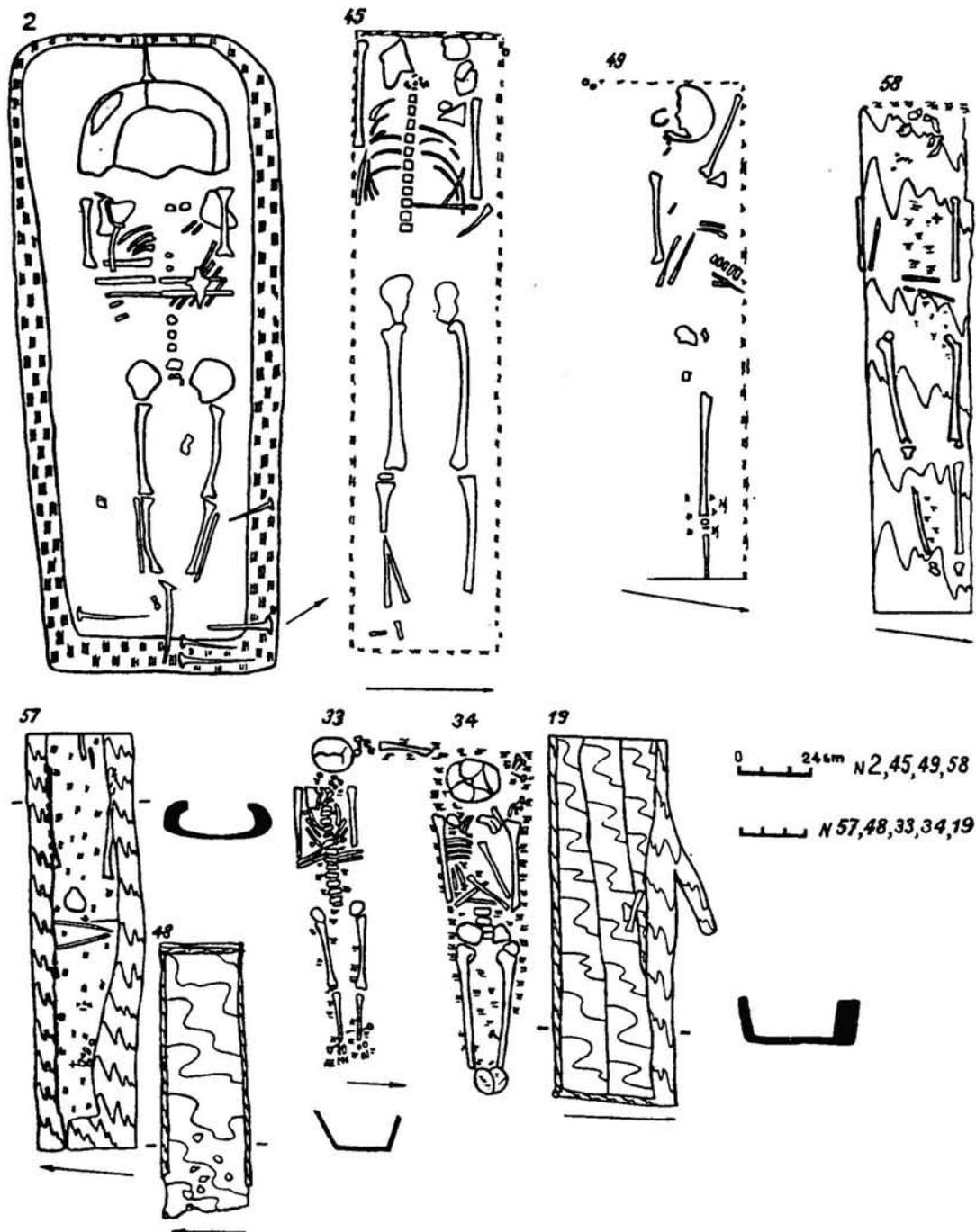


Fig. 4. Burials.

logs were preserved to a height of 0.76 m from the base in 3-4 courses; the preserved transverse logs extended to 0.72 metres in 2-3 courses. Extra supports were added to the structure after filling to prevent the framework from slipping. These consisted of short transverse logs at distances of 88

and 40 cm from the transverse walls; they were linked with timber joints to the walls of the face. The timbers had square slots through which pickets could be driven into the ground to help keep the structure in place.

A framework of similar construction was dis-

covered on the west side of the moat. Documents refer to 'arrows', i.e. crosspieces of logs spanning the moat. These were not, however, found in the excavated area, apparently because they were at intervals and not along the whole course of the moat.

The remains of a corner tower and an adjoining wall were found in plot III in the north-west section of the Minor Town. These features were poorly preserved, but plot IV included the area of the fortress. Plot V was laid out near the wall of the fortification, and plot VI revealed a cemetery of 61 burials, of which 28 were of children. Most of the graves are in dark-grey clay with the burial layer resting on a light-grey mainland clay deposit. The bodies were aligned on their backs with their hands folded at the waist and their heads most often pointing to the west; with some occasional deviations to the north or south. Decomposed wooden remains of the burial structures were found in 34 burials; in 12 cases these lay directly on the skeletons. There were four burials in rectangular coffins of hewn planks; and there were also four in wooden block-like cists that were quite well preserved. Small pieces of charcoal were found in seven burials. A wooden transverse beam was discovered under the bottom part of a burial, and of particular interest is a wooden cist hollowed out of a tree trunk that had survived quite well (Fig. 4).

Thirty-four of the graves contained no objects, while the others revealed 22 crucifixes worn on the body, a part of a folding icon, copper buttons, a spiral ornament, a small silver cup with an engraved foliate pattern, and three sherds of pottery.

The tier-like arrangement of the graves, a certain variety of details in the burial rituals, the presence of coffins, tombs, wooden blocks, and admission interments indicate that the cemetery had been in use for a long time. Its plan shows that it was used in the 17th century, occupying the area between the Cathedral of the Trinity and the Church of the Epiphany. The graves apparently date from before the erection of the fortress. The cemetery most probably belonged to the villages of Oksentyevo and Tolmachov Navolok, which were originally in the area where the fortress was built in 1649.

Excavations were resumed at Olonets in 1988. Plot VII was laid out to cover part of the wall of the fortification. Unfortunately, it was discovered that the wall had been destroyed in later construction activities, and only its bedding and foundation could be investigated. The structure was on rising ground; a sewage drain running from the former priest's house to the River Megrega had survived

as evidence of later construction. It was a wooden rectangular trough of 5 to 8-centimetre-thick planks, with a fourth plank as a lid on top. The trough had been preserved well, because it was laid in a small trench dug in humid clayey soil. A coin from 1910 was found in the trench, possibly indicating when it was excavated.

Later, a well 2 x 2 metres in area and 112 cm deep was excavated. Water was encountered at this depth. The interior of the well had a wooden framework with logs joined at the corners in oblo. The well was subsequently abandoned and filled with waste (brick fragments, pieces of glass jars including chemist's phials), and everything had been levelled to the ground.

Excavation plot VIII was laid out 30 metres west of the local sports school building. Discovered here was the foundation of a dwelling or domestic construction in the form of a log frame of two courses of logs. Only part of this feature could be excavated, since it extended beyond the plot, but it could be identified as a two-room dwelling. Adjoining it on the north side was a refuse pit, and a drain ran along the south side. The house-floor most probably dates from the second half of the 18th century.

A total area of 116 square metres was excavated in 1988. A large number of the recovered objects were of iron (pieces of axe blades, cauldrons, spades, nails, keys and hasps). There were also objects of glass (pieces of glass decanters, bottles, and window panes), ceramics (tableware, tiles and smoking pipes), and copper (buttons and a crucifix worn on the body). The finds also include 63 copper coins of 1, 2 and 5 kopeck denominations, and a *polushki* (quarter-kopeck) coined between 1727 and 1770.

Excavations continued at Olonets in the summer of 1990. Plot IX revealed two wooden pavements. This was the first discovery of pavements in all the years of field work at the fortress. The older pavement was on the mainland, running east-west and almost parallel with the Megrega River and the Nicholas Tower. The excavated area measured 8 x 3.2 metres. The pavement structure consisted of the following features: two parallel foundation beams or logs (*slegi*) laid east-west with an occasional slight north-south declination formed the base for other parallel logs laid pell-mell with semi-logs (logs split lengthwise). The latter pointed north-south with an occasional slight east-west declination.

The pavement was built on a bed of yellow river sand 70–86 cm deep. The sand was transported to the site for this purpose, and was also used to cover the pavement, which may have been due to drain-

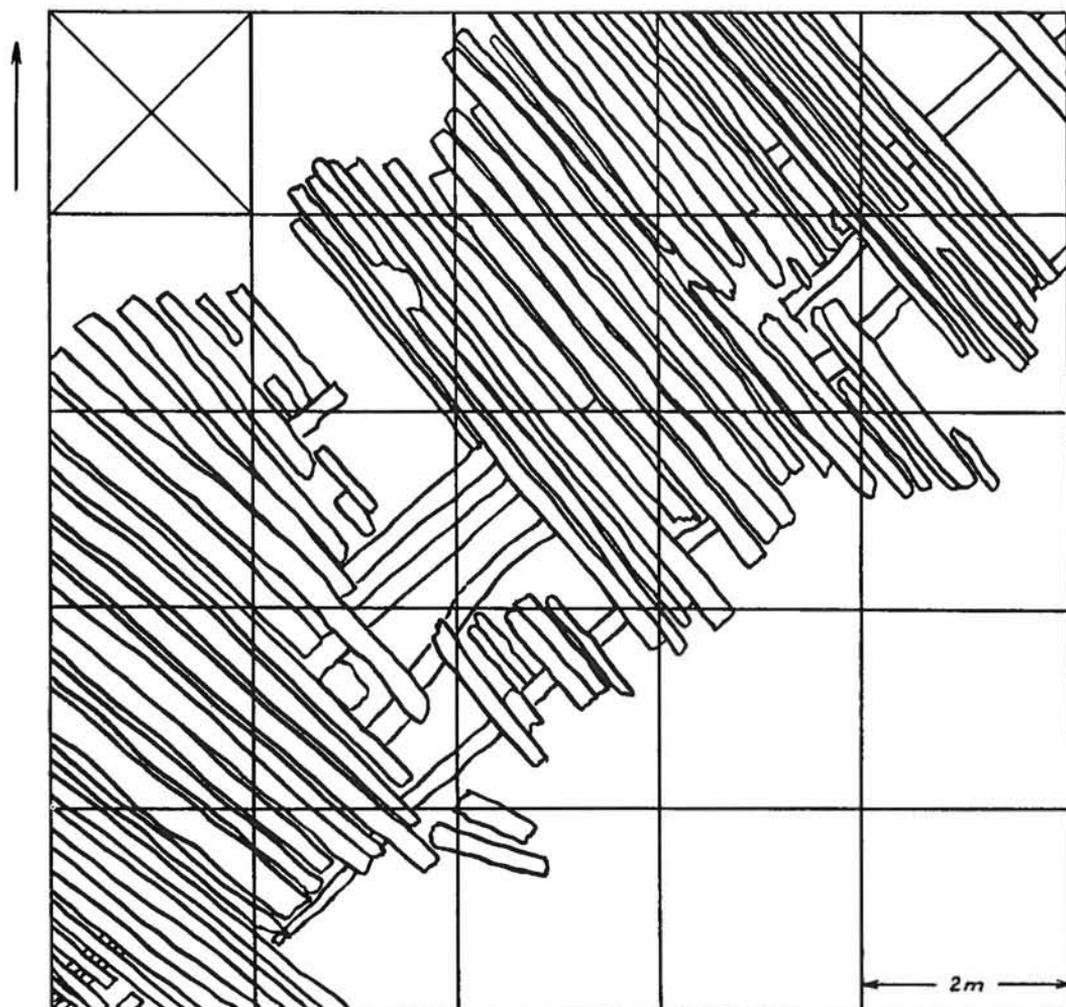


Fig. 5. Wooden pavement.

age needs. The logs and split timbers measured 24 cm in diameter and were quite hard. They appear to have been tarred and charred for longer durability and greater strength. Three copper coins were found at this location, one of which dated from the year 1769. The pavements appears to have extended to the strelets guard-house near the Nicholas Tower, or it may also have run to the *voevoda* courtyard.

The second pavement was at a depth of 44–60 cm. It measured over 14 metres by 6.4 metres at its widest part (Fig. 5). It was mainly constructed of pine semilogs 20–30 cm in diameter. Few nails were used, and only one cramp-iron was found. A single axe-trimming of an upper log was found in the process of dismantling the pavement.

The second pavement was built similarly to the first one. Two of the central foundation logs (*slegi*) had survived well, extending south-west from the north-east corner along the diagonal line of the site. Remains of construction refuse found on the north-east side of the pavement show that the pavement logs were peeled of bark and trimmed at this location.

The second pavement excavated at Olonets corresponds to the pavement depicted in a 17th-century plan of Olonets, running from the street known as *Moskovskaya Proboinaya* to the Nicholas Tower. Twelve coins were found at the site of the pavement, the oldest dating back to 1727. The youngest coin, a 20-kopeck silver piece, is from 1855. It is difficult to estimate the exact age



Fig. 6. Wooden flooring and remains of brickwork.

of the pavement, but it was most probably built in the 17th century and remained in use until much later.

Excavation plot X, 17 metres east of plot IX, was dug in 1991. According to the 17th-century plan of Olonets, this was presumably the location of the *prikaznaya palata* (a building for local administration). Built between 1674 and 1676, it was the first stone construction in Olonets, and served also as a treasury and a store for gunpowder, lead, and other supplies. A 120-square-metre area of the floor (at a depth of 40–76 cm) was revealed, the remainder extending beyond the limits of the plot. The floor was constructed of planks 3–4 cm thick and 15–32 cm wide running north-south. Remains of brickwork (3 x 1.4 m x 20 cm) with pieces of mortar under the bottom layer were also found. There were a few planks under the brickwork with no obvious purpose in the construction (Fig. 6). One possibility is that they were the remains of a barrow.

Fifteen copper coins were found in and under the floor. These were mainly *polushki* coined in 1730, permitting a dating to the first half of the 18th century. Other finds were scarce. Their composition suggests that the excavated feature was not a domestic construction, but a building for other household use without a proper foundation (dense grey clay mixed with brick fragments was

used instead). It was apparently designed and built for storing bricks and other building materials. When it was no longer needed, it was later dismantled as was the case with an earlier construction of which remains were also found in the same plot. An even earlier construction horizon smaller in area and much thinner was found at a depth of 80–90 cm. It contained damaged layers of broken brick, scarce remains of decayed logs, mortar crumbs, and pieces of wood. Its main part ran through the north wall of the site, extending beyond its limits. However, these isolated observations do not permit any definite conclusions concerning the older construction horizon.

Archaeological research at Olonets, an important military, administrative, trade and crafts centre, is of particular interest for the history of not only Karelia but North-West Russia as a whole. Many features still remain to be studied in detail, such as the above-mentioned stone chamber, the Nicholas Tower gateway, the pier, and the bridge. Unfortunately, possibilities for archaeological field work at Olonets are extremely limited. First of all, the whole area of the old fortress is now occupied by buildings of various kinds, and older constructions are under present-day buildings (e.g. the Cathedral of the Trinity). Secondly, the historic area is covered by a park with rare species of trees, thus limiting the scope of excavations. Because of

these limitations, it is extremely difficult to carry out excavations in the area of the old town and the fortress.

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