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 Ustavnyaya Gramota of Svyatoslav Olgovitch 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 (Pl. 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.


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 Svidereian 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, Chmaiyeva Gora, Isakovo, Gavrillovo, Simonnavolok, and Bolshiye 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, Tulokska 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. Jurj Saburov’s earliest cadastre book on the Obonezhskaya pyatnya 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 (Solumenski pogost) and bordering on Lake Ladoga. The northern boundary included Lake Sjamozero (Säämäjärv) and the eastern boundary encompassed Lake Svyatozero (Pyhätärvi). By that time, the hermitages of Syandebe 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, curriers, 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 cadastré book of 1582–1583 frequently mentions the phrases kho­romy stavyat novo posle voiny (houses are built anew after the war) and khoromy sozgli 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, Il'yinskoe, and Vidlitza, 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 Olenets 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 pravoslavnym kristianam). 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 paternally owned lands of the Olenets 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 svoeyezemetses (smallholders) dis­appeared completely.

The cadastré 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 sozgli i krestyan pobili nemtsy v razorenye), and ‘due to the war, peasants disappeared into obscurity’ (a krestyanne ot voiny soshli bezvestno). Some villages were abandoned by their peasants who had been impoverished (okhudali – emaciated). However, the cadastré book compiled by Nikita Panin and Semyon Kopylov in 1628 makes it clear that by this time the Olenets region had managed to overcome the effects of devast­ation and to improve its economic situation. In the pogost of Rozhdestvensky Olenets 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 cadastré book lists 131 abandoned homesteads in the Olenets 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 cadastré book referring to the pogost of Rozhdestvensky Olenets. 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 Il'yinsky pogost. Four­teen villages with 41 homesteads and a church were registered in the Tuloksa River area. In the area of the Obzha River there 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 Vidlitza 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 Olenets.

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 Olenets 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 veëvoda (local governor and military commander) and the tsar.

Olenets grew in strategic importance after the Treaty of Stolbovo in 1617 (Fig. 1). Placing the new border 40 vershs (43 km) from Olenets, 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 Olenets, which consequently became the largest defensive and ad­ministrative centre of the Zaonezhye region. Nu-
Numerous 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 Rospyshnye 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 Rospyshnyy 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.

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 southwards the Magrega 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 Olenka River revealed...
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
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 fortification. 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 poorly preserved, but plot fortification, and plot VI revealed a cemetery of 61 graves, in 34 burials; in 12 cases these lay directly 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 (silegi) laid east-west with an occasional slight north-south declination formed the base for other parallel logs laid pell-mell with semilogs (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-
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 vovoda 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 (slegz) 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
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 ad-
ministration). 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 com-
position 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 dis-
mantled as was the case with an earlier construc-
tion 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 be-
yond its limits. However, these isolated observ-
ations do not permit any definite conclusions con-
cerning the older construction horizon.

Archaeological research at Olonets, an import-
ant 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 oc-
cupied 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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