

# *The problems of urbanism in the Baltic region*

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## **Introduction**

Europe experienced three major changes in social and cultural practices in the first millennium AD: (1) the disappearance of classical antiquity; (2) the rise of the West in the last part of the millennium; and (3) the integration of the barbarian parts of the continent into the main line of development (Randsborg 1989, p. 11).

After the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, at the end of the Migration Period, a period of active formation of early medieval nations followed, and a new ethnic map of Europe appeared. Nation-states were founded in different regions, and Christianity was spread. The early feudal towns originated and grew during this period. The development of the economy reached such a stage that society could no longer exist without markets and craft centres having administrative, military and cult functions. The town, once it appeared, greatly influenced society-life, promoted the stability of state structures and in addition stimulated the development of culture, architecture, written language and spiritual life.

 Urbanisation in the different regions of Europe had distinctive features. I will refer to two zones, the approximate border between them being the frontier of the Roman Empire. (1) On the continent, to the south of the Danube and to the west of the Rhine, and in parts of the British Isles, the towns were reborn on the basis of the previous Roman centres and traditions, though still showing local differences (as in Gaul and Britain for example). (2) To the east of the Rhine, on the Baltic, in Scandinavia and in Russia, no previous urban traditions had existed. Among these agrarian settlements of Germanic, Slavic, Baltic and Finnish tribes, sites with central market and craft functions appeared. Their emergence was owing to the internal social and economic processes that were initiated with the appearance of surplus products suitable for exchange as well as new forms of social stratification in society.

The history of every town is unique as its functions can be seen both to differ and overlap. This leads to sharp discussions in any attempts to elaborate a common definition of the medieval town. I will not examine different points of view here, but only emphasize two general points: (1) economically, the town stands opposed to the village as a centre of trade and crafts; (2) only those sites in which economic functions were combined with the functions of administration and regulation of life of the society became towns. All other features are derivative from these.

This problem has been examined many times from different positions in European symposia, for instance, in Rheinhausen near Göttingen (1972), in Oxford (1975), in Dublin (1978) and at the International Conference on the Rebirth of Towns in the West AD 700–1050, held at the London Museum (1986). I would like to stress another aspect of the problem, namely the common character of the urbanisation process in Europe in the second half of the first millennium AD. At the conference in London, Hill convincingly, from my point of view, showed that ‘there was a general European resurgence of urban life in the period *c.* AD 600–1000, and that when dealing with any regional survey it must always be seen against the continent-wide trend’. One of the most important results of this common process was:

the spread of European culture and economy from a narrow and beleaguered band of states ruled by Christian rulers to a ‘Christendom’ in 1050 running from Damascus to Greenland and from Kiev to Santiago de Compostella. ... In the three and a half centuries from 717 to 1066 the foundations of medieval and modern Europe were laid down. It was a process that depended on and involved the eastern Roman Empire, and was to be seen not simply in the spread of Christianity and therefore of monks, bishops and churches, but also a process that relied heavily on a money economy, towns, trades, Latin (and Greek) as languages of record and diplomacy, the unity of Europe through its diplomatic marriage ties and so on. (Hill 1988, pp. 11–14)

The recognition of the common character of the urbanisation process in Europe in the second half of the first millennium AD, allows me to examine some problems of urbanisation in Russia and its connection with European urbanisation. The territory of Russia formed the remote outskirts of Europe in the second half of the first millennium AD, located thousands of kilometres away from the borders of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, the formation of the first towns here is of common interest. On the vast territories of Russia it is possible to see more boldly some elements of the earliest towns and the process of their creation as a whole. In addition, I suppose that these common features are interesting to different scholars because only a few articles and books about Russian towns have been published in the West and new evidence is not well-known. In the conference in Göttingen in 1972 (Jankuhn 1974), such Russian towns as Ladoga, Novgorod and Kiev were not even mentioned, though their early history is connected with the urbanisation process in Europe as well as with other issues that were discussed.

## **Urbanisation in Russia**

I will begin by examining the region in question. In the first half of the first millennium AD, the territories of the forest zone of eastern Europe were settled by different eastern Baltic and Finnish tribes. The area was sparsely populated and the settlements were very scattered. Isolated societies and under-developed forms of agriculture and social organization are typical features of the history of this area in the beginning of the first millennium AD.

The second half of the millennium differs greatly and we see clearly the movement of cultures in the forest zone of eastern Europe. New archaeological cultures and types of archaeological monuments, e.g. the first craft and administrative centres, long-distance trade and inter-regional forms of material, appeared.

Two main historical lines determined those changes:

- (1) In the middle of the first millennium AD, the wide movement of the Slavic tribes from the southwestern areas of Europe to the forest zone of eastern Europe began. It reached the Dnieper basin and then proceeded further to the north. As central European agricultural tribes, the Slavs brought the tradition of ploughing and more developed forms of economy and social organisation compared to those of the local tribes.
- (2) In the second half of the eighth century, the territories of the future northern Russia were crossed by the great trading route between the Baltic and the Islamic East. Along this route silver Kufic coins reached Russia and some of them were taken to the Baltic. The founding of this route greatly influenced the economy of the nearby regions and stimulated their development. The main settlements along the route began to play an important role as administrative, military, trading and craft centres. The first groups of Vikings appeared along this route in the second half of the eighth century. At that time, their main aim was to be close to the sources of silver and to dominate the market places of eastern Europe (Nosov 1976, pp. 95–110; Nosov 1980, pp. 49–62; Noonan 1981, pp. 47–117).

At the end of the first millennium AD, the two historical lines – the penetration of the Slavic tribes and the formation of the great water-route – met. These historical lines were to determine the historical process and the formation of the Russian state and the first towns.

One of the characteristic features of early Russian history is its close connection with the process of colonisation (Klyuchevsky 1919, pp. 18–32; Klyuchevsky 1956, pp. 127–50) and it is possible to say that Russian history is the history of colonisation. During the Slavic settlement of the east European plain, the occupied territory

increased. The constant movement of the population was owing to the natural conditions of the region. The inhabitants of the area initially gained its livelihood from small plots of land along the river-valleys. These lands were convenient for the early stages of agriculture but were surrounded by infertile forest soils and vast unsettled territories. Later needs led to a widening of the settled territory, favouring extensive forms of economy. This process is most typical of north and northeastern Russia.

Such characteristics of the early history of Russia determined some special features of the formation of the first towns, especially those in northern Russia which grew during this period of colonisation. Traditionally, it is considered impossible to speak about the town without keeping in mind its hinterland, and furthermore, to consider that the emergence of towns occurred in the regions with the greatest concentration of rural population. These considerations are logical and we know many examples where the urban process in the Middle Ages developed in this way (for a review of the main ideas about the emergence of Slavic towns in Soviet and Russian historical literature see Nosov 1993, pp. 236–56). The picture was just the same in southern Russia on the territory of the Middle Dnieper basin where the rising of the first towns was preceded by a period of stability within the Slavic society. This period began in the middle of the first millennium AD, maybe even earlier, after the Slavic tribes came to the Dnieper. In Slavic society, crafts and trade developed, the process of social differentiation proceeded, and new social structures appeared.

In the sixth to seventh centuries, some settlements with central functions developed. These were, first of all, tribal, administrative and political centres and some later became towns. However, the widespread process of urban formation began later, in the eighth to tenth centuries. The towns appeared in the densely settled rural regions as hinterland centres, and they acquired administrative, craft and trading functions (Kuza 1983, pp. 4–36; Tolochko 1989). In northern Russia, we see quite another picture. In its central region, namely the Lake Ilmen basin and the banks of the Volkhov river, there were no settlements with central functions in the sixth to seventh centuries. Densely settled agrarian regions which could give life to the town as central places, did not exist here until the eighth century and at that time the Slavs reached them and began to develop the lands. The town as a new type of settlement grew during colonisation (or just afterwards) without an established hinterland. The picture, as we see, is quite opposite to the traditionally accepted one. The town in the north of Russia was founded, first of all, for itself, for its own needs. It existed autonomously and began to create a hinterland by giving economic importance to the region. In this way the history of Ladoga began in the eighth century; that of Gorodishche (Ryurik's Gorodischche), the predecessor of Novgorod near the source of the Volkhov river, and Timerevo and similar nearby settlements on the upper Volga, in the ninth century and

that of Gnezdovo on the upper Dnieper, and Gorodok on the Lovat river in the tenth century and so on (Fig. 1; Nosov 1992, pp. 24–6).

The towns grew at places in those societies where no previous ‘model of the town’ had existed nor was the urban model imported from the previously occupied territories. The development took place during the colonisation itself, and we must speak about the ‘internal nature’ of urbanisation. This picture differs in principle from the process of the appearance of the Greek colonies on the Black Sea, though in outward appearance, they are comparable.

The needs of the agrarian population did not create the town, rather the town created the hinterland. Certainly, it is possible to say that it was a complicated process and that there were mutual influences. Yes, it was so, but the foundation of the town *before* the formation of its hinterland and the structure of its rural surroundings, stresses a character of a town as a special phenomenon. It is impossible to speak about such a town’s initial and main functions as, for example, a centre for the processing and redistribution of agricultural products, a centre of the craft production for the surrounding villages or as a centre where land-owners concentrated. The town and its community lived, first of all, for themselves.

## **Determinants of urbanisation in Russia**

Which factors determined the emergence of the first towns in northern Russia? The analysis of the geographical and topographical location of the earliest towns shows that they grew at key-points of the vast river systems, where it was possible to control the communication routes of large territories (Nosov 1992, pp. 24–6). In Russia, the rivers at the end of the first millennium AD were the only ways through the forests. Such location made it possible for the town to collect tributes from the population of large regions and to control trading routes. The first towns were military-administrative, trade and craft centres which were not connected directly with tribal structures. It was the long-distance trade, military administrative control of the river systems and crafts which supplied trading routes and the highest social strata of the towns. The existence of rural settlements near such towns were not obligatory for their emergence, a classical example is Ladoga, but later this fact influenced the fate of a town. The population and the material culture of towns on the trading routes were more poly-ethnic than those of the towns which were centres of agrarian regions.

Ladoga is the earliest trade and craft centre in the northern part of eastern Europe. It was founded not far from the mouth of the Volkhov river in the middle of the eighth century. In the early stage of its history (eighth to ninth centuries), Ladoga was a large settlement without any fortifications. At the end of the tenth century the area of Ladoga was *c.* 10–12 ha. An orientation towards long-distance trade,

developed craftsmanship, absence of any significant agricultural area around it, and a multi-ethnic population were characteristic features of Ladoga in the eighth to tenth centuries. Ladoga ranked with other early urban trade and artisan centres of the Baltic, first of all with Birka. Ladoga played a role as a bridge between the Baltic and the regions of the Russian interior. From Ladoga began the slow passage up the rivers, over long portages and dangerous rapids.

From the middle of the ninth century (perhaps even earlier), a well known military-administrative, trade and craft centre, Gorodishche (Ryurik's Gorodishche), was situated near the source of the Volkhov river. Typologically it is a later repetition of the development of Ladoga (Nosov 1990; Brisbein 1992, pp. 5–66). In the middle of the tenth century, another administrative craft and trade centre in the upper reaches of the Lovat river, Gorodok, was founded on the main water-way to the south, in a region with no rural settlements. On the Tvertza river, on the route to Volga, the history of the town 'Novy Torg' ('New Marketplace') began in the same way. More examples of these centres, connected with water routes and standing aside from the cluster of rural settlements, exist, but the picture in general is clear enough.

In summary, I would like to underline that the first towns in Russia where formed in two main ways, one typical for the south of the country, in the zone of early Slavic colonisation, and quite another occurred in the northern part of Russia.

## **Twin towns**

In addition, I will discuss another aspect of early towns, namely the existence of different types of 'twin towns' supported by their different systems beyond the border of the Roman Empire. This problem has been addressed in the case of Scandinavia, but has implications for a much wider area.

The discussion about the location of some towns near each other started in Russian archaeology at the beginning of this century, with the analysis of Gnezdovo and Smolensk (Dubov 1983 includes a full bibliography about so-called 'twin towns'). Gnezdovo is the unique archaeological complex on the Upper Dnieper, on the break of water systems locked on Kiev, from one side, and on Novgorod, from another. From the area of Gnezdovo the water-ways were opened not only to the south and north, but to the east in the direction of the Volga river, and to the west along the river Dvina as well. Gnezdovo existed mainly in the tenth century and had a poly-ethnic material culture. It consisted of a cluster of settlements, including two fortified parts (the settlement area is about 17 ha), groups of mounds, rich hoards of objects including Kufic coins. Here there are more than three thousand mounds (some scholars believe that the original number was about five thousand). In any case, it is the largest cemetery of the tenth century in eastern Europe. After its intensive development in the

tenth century, Gnezdovo was replaced in the eleventh century by Smolensk at a distance of 12 km. Smolensk was one of the largest towns of Russia and the centre of a principality and an episcopacy.

Gorodishche, near the source of the Volkhov, gave way to the 'New Town', Novgorodat, 2 km downstream, in the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century. Novgorod became the economic, political and administrative centre of a vast territory. The Christian complex (Bishop's residence and church, the town's cathedral), the market place, the Prince's yard and the new own fortress were located there (Brisbein 1992, pp. 5–66).

Sarskoe Gorodishche, on the Baltic-Volga route in northeast Russia, was an early administrative and trade centre in the ninth to tenth century. It was replaced by the town of Rostov in the beginning of the eleventh century, which became the centre of an episcopacy and the strongest point of the prince's power. At the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century, three early urban settlements on the Upper Volga, Timervo, Mikchailovo and Petrovskoe, were abandoned and at a distance of 10–12 km from them a new town, Yaroslav, appeared. In the beginning of the eleventh century, the trade and craft centre of Gorodok on the Lovat river was deserted and nearby a town, Luki, was founded.

We can conclude that at the end of the tenth and in the beginning of the eleventh century, the system of towns changed on a large territory of northern Russia and to some extent in southern Russia. Near the early, urban centres new towns were erected. For a long period it was widely believed that this shift in urban location was caused by, for example, the change of trade routes, the lack of territory for the growth of a town, the change of the ethnic structure of the population, and so on. Now, it is clear that the shift of towns in Russia reflects a general process, which demands one general explanation.

In searching for this we must keep in mind three principle points: (1) among the 'twin towns' one was founded in the eighth to ninth centuries without close ties with its hinterland; (2) the new town was situated close to the previous one. From one point of view, the paired towns were incompatible, but from another point, the urban tradition in the region was not interrupted; (3) the urban system changed at the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century.

The towns in question, dating from the eighth to tenth centuries, were oriented towards external ties, trade and craft and did not depend upon the local hinterland in their main activity. The new towns, based on the economy of their local regions, became regional centres. After the end of the tenth century, when Russia was converted to Christianity, new state and administrative power concentrated in the new towns. The foundation of the new towns was connected with the stabilisation of the

state structures, with the spread of Christianity, and with the formations of new economic regions, *not* based on external ties, but on the progress of the internal economy of the states.

The towns shifted because their functions changed, they became the strong points of Christian states and their social structure changed. The main reason is that the new towns were the Christian centres, where the Bishop's residence and church, and the town cathedral were located. It was impossible to combine new ideology and the pagan beliefs of the previous period. This topographical situation is very interesting in Novgorod. The pagan sanctuary Peryn was situated in front of an ancient centre, Gorodishche, and the new Christian centre was founded in a place 3 km down from Peryn and became the centre of Novgorod.

There are some exceptions, for example Ladoga. In the early period of its existence, it played the role of a gate between the Baltic and Russia and, being situated on the outskirts of the Slavic world, was never a regional administrative centre. Later in the eleventh century, Ladoga still did not acquire such a role and retained the same functions as earlier, namely the gate to the Baltic. The stability of its functions determined the stability of its location.

The change of the town system in the north of Russia can be compared with the change of towns in Scandinavia, where there also were two systems of towns in the period from the beginning of the eighth century to the middle of the twelfth century. The early system prevailed up to the tenth century and the later one from the end of the tenth to the beginning of the eleventh century.

Amongst the early towns there were small ones up to 1.5 ha (periodically used settlements, such as Paviken), somewhat larger (up to 4 ha), such as Kaupang or Åhus, and major sites, as Birka, Hedeby and perhaps Ribe. The economy of these towns grew from their location on the cross-roads, where tribute from external exploitation came. Andrén (1989, pp. 173–77) has stressed a connection between urbanisation and external exploitation. New towns reflected the rise of a new political order and a new central system. The formation of Christian states dates to the end of the tenth century in Denmark, around the year 1000 in Norway and there were signs of a state in Sweden about the year 1000. The same social process occurred at the same time in Scandinavia and in northern Russia. It is interesting that 'twin towns' existed in Scandinavia, for example Birka and Sigtuna, Hedeby and Schleswig, Kaupang and Tensberg or Skien, and the shift of Åhus in Skania to a new place.

Clarke and Ambrosiani suppose that the reasons for these shifts in site during the early Middle Ages are complex and therefore there cannot exist any one simple explanation for the obvious discontinuity. Changing methods of transport and the route of communication must be one explanation, the development of bigger ships demanded

more elaborate harbours with deeper-water access. The movement of towns would not have entailed much capital loss to their founders (Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991, p. 138).

Andrén, concerned with two systems of Scandinavian towns, connects the foundation of early towns with external exploitation and later towns with the formation of central states. He underlines the role of power in the changing system of towns. The existence of trade and crafts is not denied, but it is pointed out that the conditions of these activities must be regarded in a perspective of power. The different systems of centres, as Andrén supposes, can be regarded as expressions of gradually changing structures of power (Andrén 1989).

The Russian material shows the contemporary process of urbanisation on the vast territories of northern and eastern Europe. Scandinavian and Slavic societies had no previous urban traditions and the first towns appeared at the same time on the base of exploitation of new territories and new sources for the economy. The similarities in social structures show why Scandinavians so easily have integrated into local Slavic society and its ruling elite.

### **Town–hinterland relations**

Russian archaeological evidence clearly shows the lack of a formed rural hinterland around the earliest towns, which were founded as part of a process of colonisation. This fact gives us an opportunity to judge more decisively about the functions of the early urban centres on the Baltic. I am unsure of the correctness of the conclusion, even more popular in our days, about a close connection between an early town and its hinterland. For example, Birka is studied a great deal in this context. Certainly, it would be naive to think that there was an impenetrable wall between the town and its surrounding region, but we must speak about the priority of functions. At the end of the tenth and in the beginning of the eleventh century, the urban systems changed in Scandinavia and in northern Russia. It confirms once more that the shifts of the towns should be explained not by many concrete reasons, but by general explanations which must go wider than the borders of the states. The general reason focuses upon early towns, dependent upon external ties, international trade, collecting of tributes from far distant lands as well as upon a system of internal exploitation, and on the personal duties of the peasants. A new political order, based on the new towns, was formed.

Owing to the geographical position of Russia, the towns in its northern part were scattered over large distances. It is impossible to speak about one urban network, covering this part of the country. This picture differs greatly from the distribution of the towns in western Europe. On the territory of Novgorod land, which covered approximately 350,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the twelfth century, there were only seven towns. Ladoga was situated at 200 km from Novgorod which was the centre of the region,

Rusa at 58 km, Pskov at 200 km, Izborsk at 230 km and Novy Torg at 300 km. The towns were small islands in a forest sea, connected to each other by riverine threads (Fig. 1).

Novgorod, the main town of the land, was distinguished above all others. In the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, it covered 150 ha, the next after it Ladoga and Pskov covered 16 and 15 ha respectively. In the eleventh century the population of Novgorod was 10–15,000 people, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, 27–30,000.

Compared to its region, Novgorod had a very high concentration of population, of administrative institutions, stone churches, trading and other activities. By the middle of the thirteenth century (at the time of the Tatars invasion), there were thirty-nine stone churches in Novgorod and numerous wooden ones. In Ladoga, there were seven stone churches, in Pskov four and in Rusa one. At the same time in the rural territories, the first stone churches were built only in the fifteenth century. All the people who belonged to the high strata of society within the region, among them the rural landowners, lived in Novgorod. The town, the capital of the region, embodied the state. It contained the yards of feudal rulers, bishops and princes, merchants, craftsmen, market places, administrative institutions, churches and monasteries. The town, in such a situation, was the only conductor of economic and cultural contacts, of new trends, influences and interactions.

The evidence from early medieval Russia compels us to re-examine the problem of connections between the town and its hinterland. The tendency, which seems rather attractive, to pay more attention to the economic development of the town together with the village, often involuntarily underlines the agrarian component of town life. Scholars mark the finds of the agricultural implements in the towns, quote the written sources about fields and the cattle which belonged to the inhabitants of the towns and so on. In Soviet and Russian literature of the last years, there has been a strong tendency to examine the town mainly as a centre of redistribution of the surplus products from the hinterland. The town was thus seen as a development, albeit complex, from the simple village. I think this is wrong. Even on the territory of agrarian Russia, where the rural element dominated so completely, the towns are anything but agrarian in character. Here we see more boldly than anywhere else in Europe the civilised character of towns. When towns appeared, they immediately began to function in their own manner, as economical and social units.

I have focused on some general questions concerning the development of Russian towns rather than summarise the knowledge of towns in Europe and Russia, and I hope these questions are of general interest.

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## **Captions for illustrations**

Fig. 1: The towns of Novgorod land (borders from the beginning of the twelfth century).