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NEW EVIDENCE ON THE LATE VIKING-AGE BURIAL RITUALS IN THE VOLGA-OKA REGION: EXCAVATIONS AT SHEKSHOVO / RU

Barrow cemeteries with earthen mounds which contain cremated and inhumation burials have traditionally been considered the most typical form of burial practice for medieval Rus', characteristic of its cultural traditions from the 10th to 12th century. The idea of a barrow cemetery as a site marking the presence of medieval settlement and the survival of a pre-Christian belief system is a crucial element of the historical picture of medieval Rus' as it appears in historiography. It is also seen as a sign of welfare and social ambitions of various groups and individuals, and of a union between »elite« and »democratic« rites. In the Volga-Oka region, which once comprised the north-eastern part of the Rurikid state, studies of medieval barrows began in the mid-19th century, slightly earlier than in the rest of European Russia. Barrow excavations near Suzdal, Pereslavl' and Rostov in 1851-1854, overseen by A. S. Uvarov, included more than 7700 burial mounds (**fig. 1**) and came to be renowned as one of the largest projects studying medieval burials (Uvarov 1872). Although it had many methodological flaws, with field documentation incomplete and a large part of the collection uncertified, the material from these excavations (**fig. 2**) has shaped the way researchers analyse burial rituals, local cultural traditions, identity and social stratification in this part of Eastern Europe. The findings have since been re-interpreted many times – largely because researchers believed that most medieval burial sites in the heartland of North-Eastern Rus' were cleared in 1851-1854 leaving the region »thoroughly purged of barrows« (Spitsyn 1905, 88; Makarov 2017a, 206-208).

Contemporary ideas about the burial sites of medieval Rus' and related reconstructions of burial rituals and social relations and attitudes are thus in many ways based on excavations from the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. However, archaeological studies across a number of territories which were part of medieval Rus' – including those in the large Volga-Oka region – have now revealed that burying the dead underneath mounds was not the only form of interment known in 10th to 12th century Rus'. These new excavations revealed the presence of flat burials featuring cremation and inhumation, some located adjacent to barrows, others integrated into a joint complex. The nature of these sites, their frequency and the links they might have had with barrow cemeteries are still unclear. A more detailed review of barrow cemeteries excavated in the 19th or the first half of the 20th century shows that visual analysis fails to register their original appearance and layout. In these circumstances, we need new field investigations of medieval cemeteries excavated in the 19th century, to bring the documentation of the burial areas up to contemporary standards and re-examine existing inferences about their character and layout.

The cemetery known as Shekshovo 9 (obl. Ivanovo/RU) lies in the region between the rivers Oka and Volga, 17 km northwest of Suzdal (**fig. 1**). In 2011, it was chosen for reconnaissance fieldwork as one of the sites known from Uvarov's excavations, in order to assess the state of the cemetery, as well as the prospects and methodology for its re-evaluation. This cemetery was chosen as the one linked to a large, unfortified settlement in the Suzdal Opolye (Shekshovo II, see Makarov 2017a; 2017b; 2019). Other contributing factors were the size of the cemetery (with 244 mounds opened in 1852) and the high percentage of early burials, including those with cremations. After the discovery in a 2011 excavation (Makarov/Zaytseva/Krasnikova 2013) of a silver-inlaid battleaxe with symbols of the Rurikids, the site was recognized as containing burials

Fig. 1 Rus', AD 900-1100 with the main centres and sites mentioned in the text and the area (– –) of the barrow excavations conducted by A. S. Uvarov in 1851-1854. – (Map N. D. Ugulava).

of the members of the elite of 11th century Rus'. This was one of the reasons for doing further fieldwork as an in-depth excavation. The most impressive finds and discoveries made between 2012 and 2017 have already been described (Makarov/Zaytseva 2016; Zaytseva 2017): this article aims to summarise the known information about the burial rituals, chronology and cemetery layout, to present a comprehensive view of it and to venture an interpretation of the variety of forms the rituals assumed.

At present, the Shekshovo site is an agricultural field lacking any trace of above-ground funerary constructions (**fig. 3**). Mapping the location of medieval finds in the field (mainly accessories collected with the help of a metal detector) and bones from disturbed burials indicates the total area of the site is c. 6 ha. Geophysical prospection has revealed around fifty ring-shaped anomalies which are likely to be the remains of barrows, with small ditches indicating barrow platforms around them (Modin et al. 2020).

In seven years of excavations in Shekshovo across an area of 2250 m², fourteen barrow platforms have been excavated in part or in full (**figs 4-5**). In six of these, excavations disclosed intact or disturbed burials with both cremations and inhumations. Three of the barrows featured traces of excavation undertaken by Uvarov in 1852. A further 26 intact or partly disturbed burials were discovered to have been inhumations. About 1300 medieval finds made of silver, non-ferrous metals, iron and glass have been collected from the topsoil

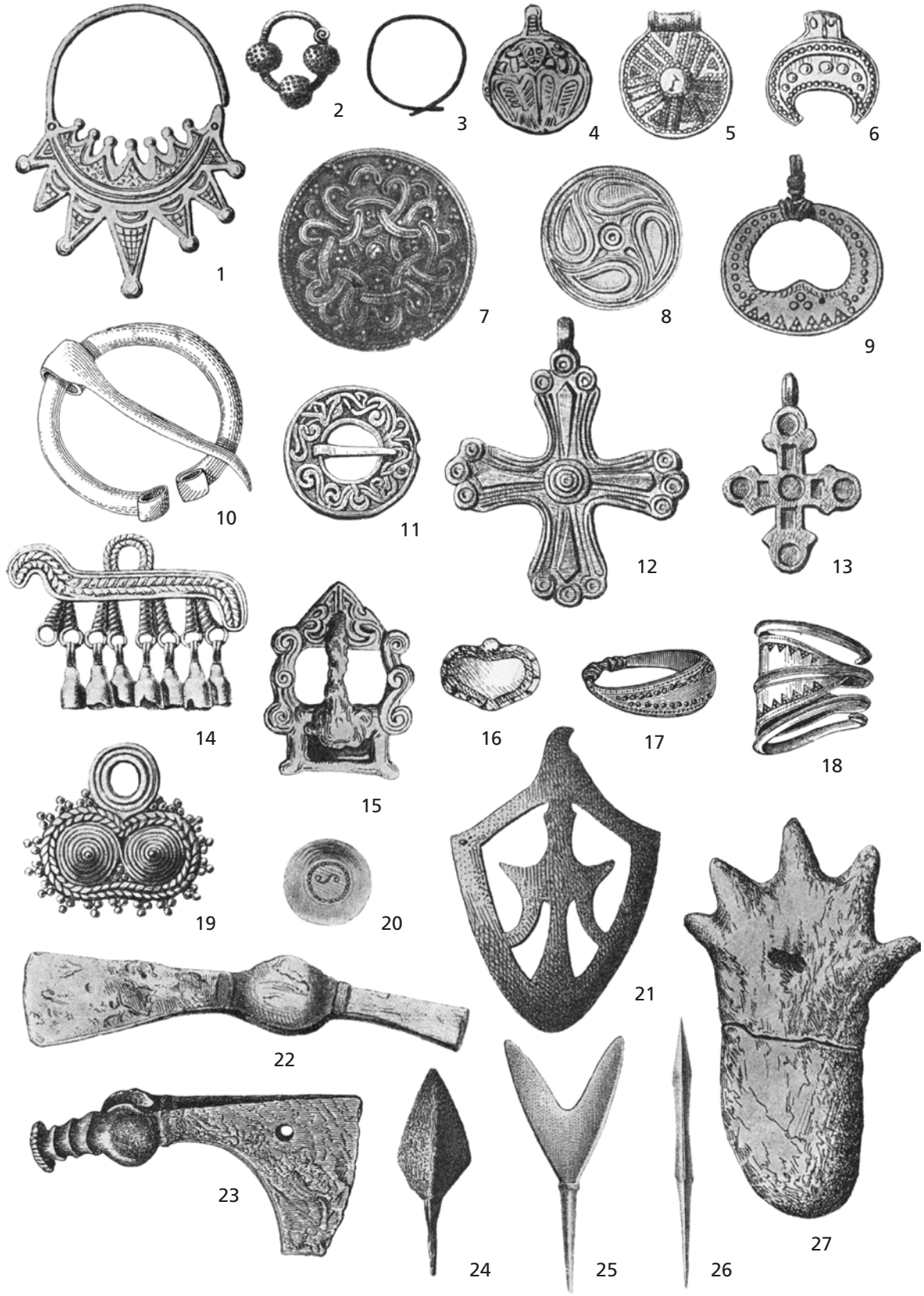


Fig. 2 Artefacts from A. S. Uvarov's excavations at the burial sites of the Suzdal region. An attribution of the greater part of the artefacts to certain sites at present is not documented: **1** Kubaevo. – **2-3. 5-7. 9-10. 13-15. 18-20. 24** site(s) unknown. – **4. 22. 27** Vasil'ki. – **8** Shekshovo. – **11** Gorodishche. – **12** Ves'. – **16** Kuster'. – **17. 23** Kabanskoe. – **21** Sarskoe Gorodishche. – **25-26** Ves'kovo. – (After Spitsyn 1905). – Not to scale.

Fig. 3 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Barrow platforms in the excavation area. Photo 2017. – (Photo A. M. Krasnikova).

of the field. These come from the burials destroyed or disturbed by ploughing, with 380 more retrieved from surveys. The entire assemblage, including those from burials and the topsoil finds, comprises almost 3000 items.

It became apparent very early in the excavation programme that the assessment and description of the cemetery would depend on locating both the remains of destroyed funerary features beneath the topsoil and individual finds from this layer, many of which are small but important in dating the site. Reconstructing the general layout of the cemetery is possible by combining the location of individual medieval artefacts and bone remains (many lacking any link to a specific burial or barrow), and the data on funerary features, burial and memorial facilities which were left intact or only slightly damaged by previous excavations and ploughing. When selecting locations for the excavation within the site, we were guided, on the one hand, by the accumulations of medieval finds in the topsoil layer and, on the other, by geophysical anomalies which could be tentatively interpreted as barrows. About a quarter of the hand-sorted topsoil underwent floatation in vats to collect small finds and cremated bone fragments. Fieldwork in Shekshovo was our first experience of an in-depth re-examination of a medieval barrow cemetery in the heart of the Volga-Oka region, with the broad aims of both discovering burials previously unknown to archaeologists and reinvestigating previously excavated burial mounds. The current condition of the cemetery makes it difficult to reconstruct the original appearance of individual mounds, links between burial complexes and the layout of the cemetery, since the above-ground burial structures have been irrevocably lost and the majority of the funerary paraphernalia is not *in situ*. In spite of this, the material obtained over the seven years of study is sufficient to sketch the general characteristics of the cemetery and the dynamics of its growth.

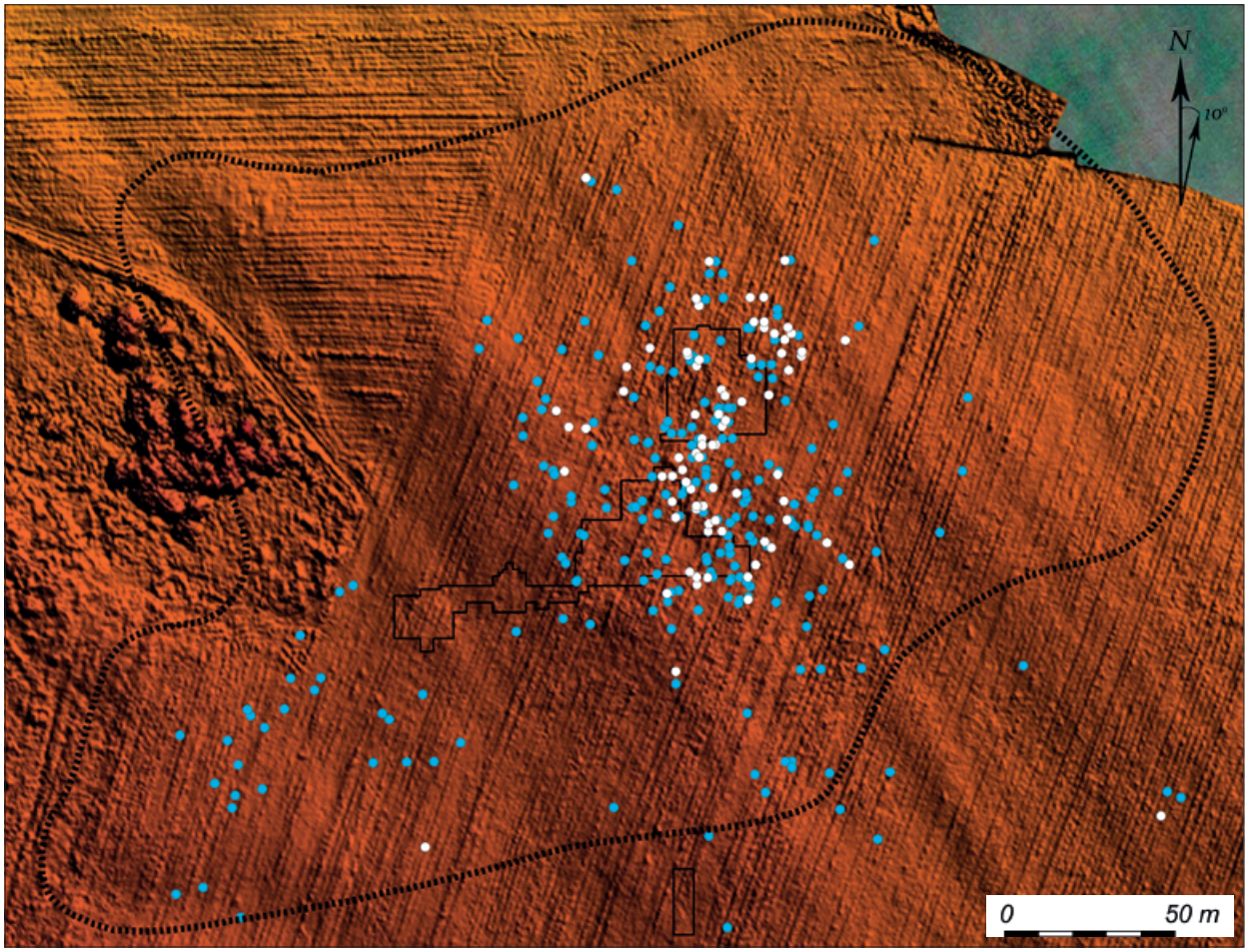


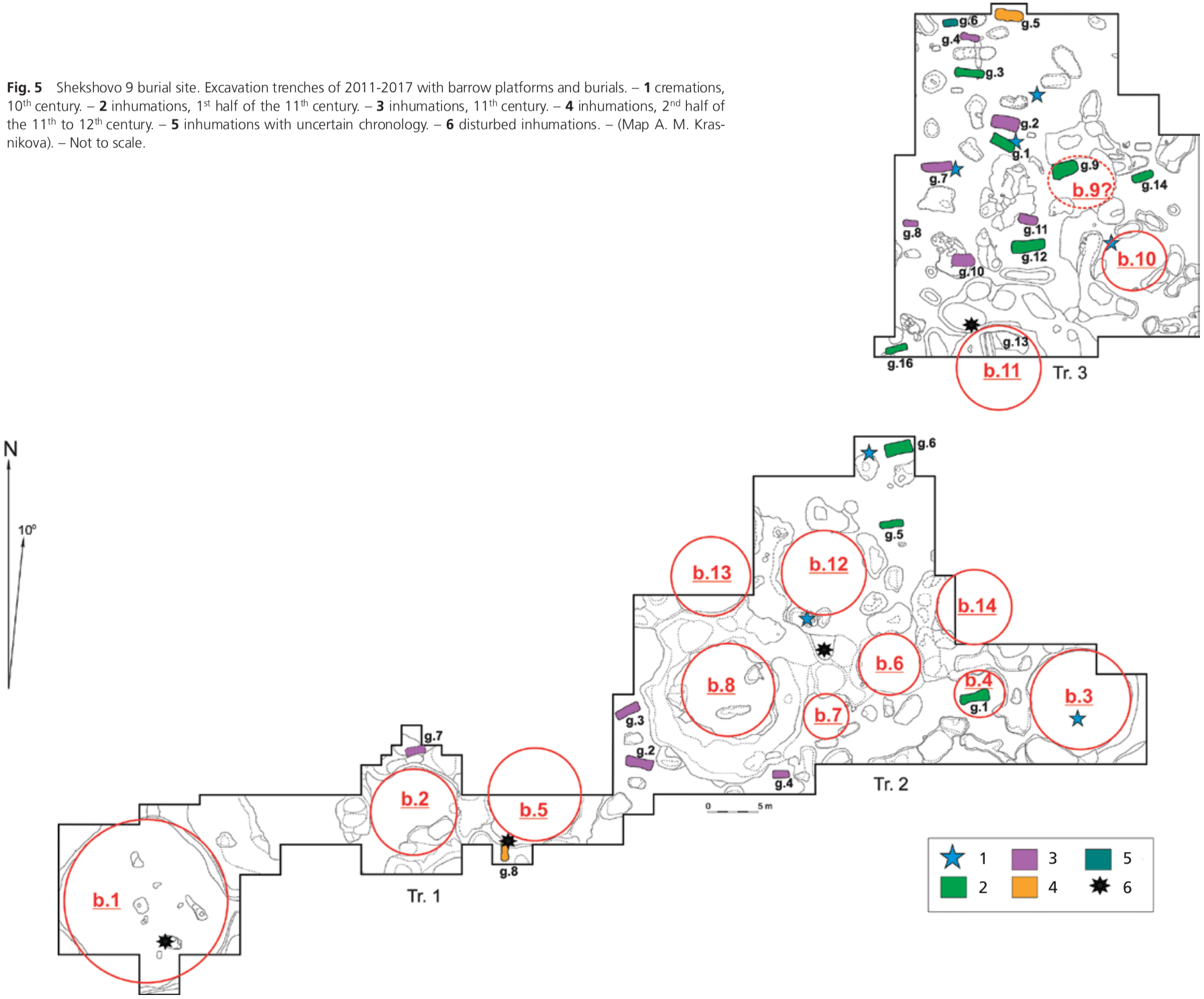
Fig. 4 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Spatial distribution of the artefacts from the surface surveys. Artefacts with (white) and without traces of fire damage (blue). – (Map A. M. Krasnikova).

THE AREA OF THE CEMETERY AND ITS LAYOUT FROM GEOPHYSICAL DATA

The main outcome of the geophysical study, which covered an area of c. 7.5 ha (Modin et al. 2020), was the electro-tomography-enabled discovery and mapping of ring-shaped cut features: ditches surrounding the circular former barrow platforms. On the geophysical map (fig. 6), about fifty such ring-shaped anomalies can be clearly located, along with more than fifty others with less precisely circular outlines which are nonetheless still recognizable as platforms over which a barrow would be placed. The diameters of these platforms vary from 4-6 m to 8-10 m, with the average distance between them 1.5 m to 4 m. Many of the ditches are shared by neighbouring mounds. One single barrow, 7.5 m in diameter, stands out from the cluster, located 60 m to the southwest of the area where the mounds are located.

Within the area covered by the geophysical study, two major barrow zones can be identified. These differ in their microtopography and, probably, in geological structure, and are separated by a linear area of lower electrical resistance up to 8 m wide, running NW to SE. This linear strip has so far not been explained entirely satisfactorily. In the north-eastern elevated area of the cemetery, at least seven rows or clusters of barrows have been identified, each comprising six to eleven mounds and running in the same direction as the strip. The NW to SE spatial arrangement of the barrows mirrors the largely ploughed-up ravine leading to the River Urda. The phenomenon of barrows running parallel to a ravine or a riverbank is typical of a number

Fig. 5 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Excavation trenches of 2011-2017 with barrow platforms and burials. – **1** cremations, 10th century. – **2** inhumations, 1st half of the 11th century. – **3** inhumations, 11th century. – **4** inhumations, 2nd half of the 11th to 12th century. – **5** inhumations with uncertain chronology. – **6** disturbed inhumations. – (Map A. M. Krasnikova). – Not to scale.



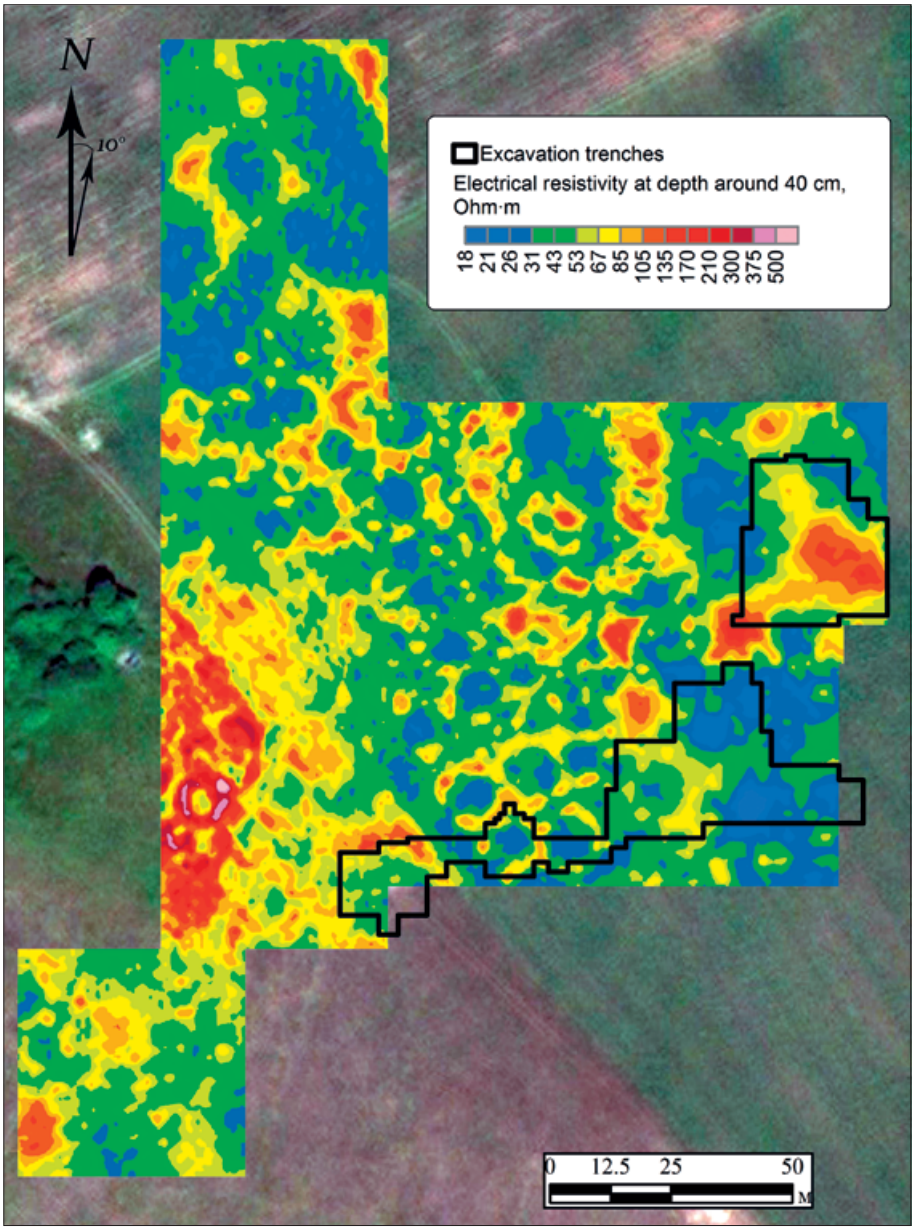


Fig. 6 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Geophysical prospection. – (Map I. N. Modin, S. A. Erokhin).

of other sites in Suzdal Opolye, e. g. the Mzhara cemetery on the periphery of Suzdal (Sedova 1997). However, it should be noted that the earliest finds and objects on this site are located at its highest points near its eastern boundary at the height of 127.0-127.5 m above sea level (the Baltic). Thus, the earlier barrows were most probably not aligned to the ravines. The south-western part of the cemetery is located 1.0-1.5 m lower, in what is now marshland. Rows of barrows do not stand out so clearly there, but their basic orientation is still clearly preserved.

BARROWS AND FLAT INHUMATION BURIALS

The main structural components of the Shekshovo cemetery were originally barrow mounds (**figs 3. 5**), the remains of which have now been completely levelled by ploughing. The descriptions from Uvarov's expedition add very little to contemporary studies and the original appearance of the cemetery is still very hard

to reconstruct. According to the entries in Uvarov's 1852 journal, most of the barrows were 4 m to 10 m in diameter (72 % variation) and sixteen mounds were no larger than 3 m in diameter. The diameters of two of the larger barrows were 13 m and 16 m respectively. It is unfortunately impossible to determine the height of the barrows from the archival notes made in the 19th century, but, judging by the depth of the clearance, their highest points stood between 0.4 m and 3.4 m. For 97 % of the mounds, this figure could not have been higher than 2 m.

The barrow platforms excavated in 2011-2017 were from 4-5 m to 12.3 m in diameter, with a single exception of 17.5 m wide platform. Seven of the platforms (nos 1-3. 8. 10-12) were found to have been surrounded by concentric ditches, some of which (e. g. no. 10) had a small causeway and deepened sections at some points. Two of the barrows (nos 4. 6) featured oval pits on either side of the platform instead of encircling ditches. The truncated condition of the barrow platforms prevented the reconstruction of the mound profiles and in many cases it was impossible even to identify the original location of the burial. Two of the barrows (nos 10. 12) contained remains of cremation burials at the level of the barrow floor, at the edge of the platform. This type of barrow structure has never before been found in the Suzdal Opolye. One barrow (no. 1) featured remains of an inhumation at its base, and two more (nos 4. 11) had inhumations in pits in the natural soil. For five of the barrows (nos 2-3. 5. 7-8) locating the burial proved impossible, but it was evident that the platforms were not cut by the burial pits, thus, the human remains may have been on the barrow floor itself or in the fill. Notwithstanding the fragmentary nature of the new data on the barrows and burials marked by the earthen mounds, it is still clear that ritual related to barrows in the Shekshovo cemetery included a number of different activities, including the interment of either cremated or uncremated remains. This is fully corroborated by the 1852 excavation journal.

Two of the most impressive burial complexes discovered during the recent excavations are also linked to the site and its barrows. On the platform of barrow 1, a battleaxe was found with silver-inlaid symbols of the Rurikid and the cross (cf. **fig. 10**), alongside with a penannular brooch with remains of some cloth attached. Although no osteological remains have survived, these artefacts must have accompanied an interment at the base of the platform and, judging by the diameter of this platform base (17.5 m), the fill of the barrow must have stood out from the rest (Makarov/Zaytseva/Krasnikova 2013; Frei et al. 2016). The other notable complex (a cremated interment in barrow 12) is a cluster of cremated human and animal bone weighing about 4 kg in total. The adjacent finds include a clay model of a beaver's paw, a clay ring, a set of bridle adornments, fragments of a horn comb and other items found at the platform's edge (Makarov et al. 2017). Clay rings and beavers' paws are rare cult objects found in the burials in the Volga-Oka region and the Åland islands of the Viking era which feature prominently in discussions of the Scandinavian presence in the Upper Volga region (Jansson 1987, 782; Fechner 1989, 73-77; Callmer 1994; Duczko 2004; Talvio 2017, 285).

The recent excavation has also found cremated bone and burnt metallic fragments in the ploughsoil beyond the barrow platforms, at the depth of pre-modern soil horizons and in silted-up pits. Some of the bone material and fire-damaged artefacts of glass and metal retrieved from the ploughsoil may also have originally belonged to subsequently destroyed mound burials – for instance, those in barrows 3 and 10 (Zakharov 2014). However, the distribution of the mass of cremated bones leads us to the conclusion that they come from bodies cremated on the ground surface or in shallow pits over which no barrow was erected. Throughout the studied area, four clusters of bone fragments and fire-damaged metallic items have been found at the boundary between the soil horizon and the ploughsoil, or in pits.

Further excavation proved that the Shekshovo inhumations were not always mound burials. Nineteen inhumations were found to have been made in pits lacking clear traces of barrow platforms or levelled mounds. These mound-free, flat burials were localized in four groups in trenches 1, 2 and 3 (**fig. 5**), with about half of them in the highest part of the cemetery, in the northern section of trench 3, where the remains of surface

cremations have been found. In several cases, inhumations cut through cremation sites and cremated bone material appears in the fill of burial pits (trench 3: nos 3-5. 7. 12. 14, trench 2: no. 2), along with fire-damaged metallic adornments and dress accessories (trench 3: no. 7). In two cases, the presence of an earthen mound over the burial pit cannot be proven, since the surface has been heavily eroded by ploughing.
Although most of the Shekshovo burials were inside barrows, with the very construction of the latter the most important visual mark of the cemetery, setting up earthen mounds over the graves or cremation sites cannot be described as a universal norm.

SURFACE CREMATIONS

Throughout the cemetery site, a vast collection of items (631) have been discovered outside of burial complexes (**fig. 7**). Fire-damaged or wholly devoid of their original form, 356 of these were found in the ploughsoil, of which 264 were obviously redeposited, found within the fills of barrow ditches or pits of unclear purpose. Most were found in the highest part of the cemetery plateau, over an area of just over 1 ha (**fig. 4**). Among the fire-damaged finds which do not belong to a specific complex, items made of non-ferrous metals account for 55 % of the total, with a further 23 % for those of silver, 4.2 % of iron, 0.6 % of horn and 1.3 % of stone. Almost half of the silver and non-ferrous artefacts are drops or pieces of metal which have completely lost their original shape (**fig. 7, 12. 22. 31-33**). Among the recognizable items, most are dress ornaments. Female adornment finds include 79 beads of glass (**fig. 7, 21. 23-29**) and 7 of carnelian, fragments of 2 neck rings, 8 bracelets of various shapes, 3 penannular brooches, 4 rings, 35 fragments of pendants of various shapes and 5 small bells. Massive pendants of non-ferrous metals made in »cire perdue«, i. e. lost wax casting, have in part preserved their form (**fig. 7, 6. 9. 13. 16**), while silver artefacts made of thin wire and silver plates have melted in the fires. As a consequence, we may be misinterpreting the set of ornaments discovered on the site. Male apparel is represented by 4 ornamented belt tips (**fig. 7, 1**), 57 belt mounts (**fig. 7, 2. 4**) and 9 fragments of purse inlays (Zaytseva 2015; 2018). Other items with traces of fire damage include iron arrowheads, six knives, a fire striker, two barrel-shaped iron weights and four dirham coins.
Cremated bones cannot be seen on the ploughed surface of the cemetery, hence all of these come from excavation trenches, the ploughsoil, fossil soil or in-filled pits. Most of the bones come from the northern and central parts of trench 3, including places where no traces of barrow mounds have been found. In this trench, the layer featuring cremated remains was cut through by inhumation pits of 11th or early 12th century date. Some of the bones may have been originally placed on the surface or in shallow pits, but the boundaries of bone clusters are often unclear. The total weight of cremated bones in a cluster varies from 30 g to 170 g, with one of the clusters also containing fire-damaged metal adornments, including a pendant made of a dirham coin and glass beads.
The condition of the cremated bones from the ploughed-up layer (weighing 2100 g in total), their white or light grey colour and their small size all indicate a high temperature in the fire. Overall, these are the bones of more than 20 individuals, including 2 men, 2 women and 4 children with the sex and age of the other 12 individuals impossible to determine. The bone assemblage also contains animal bones: pigs (14 fragments), cattle (1 fragment), small ruminants (5 fragments) and a dog (1 fragment). The average weight of the cremated bones in one burial never exceeded 100 g. Judging by these finds, we can suggest that only a portion of the cremated remains was carried over to the burial site and that the burial ritual entailed scattering the bones and funeral accessories over the surface rather than placing them in a compact location. Ground or surface cremations are radically different in their character from cremations such as that in

Fig. 7 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Artefacts with traces of fire damage from the surveys and excavation trenches. – **1-14. 16. 22. 32-33** non-ferrous metal. – **15. 17-20. 30-31** silver. – **21-29** glass. – (Photos N. D. Ugulava). – Scale 1:1.

barrow 12, where a large amount of charred bones was found within a small area together with funeral accessories. In this cluster alone, the bone remains weighed twice as much as all the remains retrieved from all other trenches in the Shekshovo excavation (Makarov et al. 2017).
Metal adornments and glass beads damaged by fire and collected from the ploughsoil were of types common in the 10th (or 10th and 11th) century. None of them are types which were first introduced in the 11th century. Finds of Kufic coins are important for dating the cremations: of six such coins, two can be dated, minted in AD 902-908 and 907-914 respectively (**fig. 7, 18-19**). In the 11th and first half of the 12th century, at least a part of the cemetery where cremated remains were located (northern part of trench 3) was used for inhumation in pits.
A range of types of surface cremation dating back to the second half of the 1st millennium AD to the turn of the 2nd millennium were discovered and rigorously documented at the end of the 20th and early 21st century in a number of cemeteries in the north of European Russia and the Volga-Oka region (Makarov 2009, 181; Zakharov/Mesnyankina 2012, 14-29; Mikhailova 2014; Syrovatko 2014). In the Volga-Oka area, however, known surface cremation sites are extremely rare, and none have been discovered within the 10th to 12th century barrow cemeteries.
Cremated bone and fire-damaged medieval artefacts collected at Shekshovo are in many cases in such poor condition that no conclusions can be made about their original location and interrelationship. We can refer to the cemeteries of the Russian North as »model« burial sites with surface cremations, since these, such as Krutik in the Beloozero region, have never been ploughed (Zakharov/Mesnyankina 2012; Zakharov 2017, 245). Their example shows that the presence of scattered, partial cremated remains can be seen to be an original feature of the burial rituals, rather than a consequence of their destruction.

FLAT INHUMATION BURIALS

Flat inhumation burials were found in rectangularly cut features or pits which could be distinguished from the natural ground or fossil soil by their mottled fill, containing clay and organic matter. At three sites, clustered burial groups with identical orientation and some evidence of organisation in rows were discovered (**fig. 5**). Most of the excavated burial cuts were 20-40 cm deep, except for some shallower ones which might have contained child burials. Given the thickness of the soil layers, we may suggest that originally the burial pits were at least 40-60 cm deep. The pits which contained adult burials were 2.0-3.3 m long and 0.7-1.3 m wide. They contained inhumation burials in various degrees of preservation: in two child burials only teeth were found and in one no osteological remains survived at all. Thirteen burials were placed with the head to the west (with 30° of variance to the north or south), two to the east and one to the south. Eight burials were of women or teenage girls (**figs 8-9**), five of adult men and eight of children. Judging by the bone fragments, all were extended supine burials. In nine cases, the arms lay along the sides and in three one or both arms were bent at the elbows. The graves may have included some wooden fittings or furniture, with iron nails and spikes to fasten the boards found in two burials, while two more contained timber plates.
Fifteen burials (i. e. all bar three of the males and three children) also contained adornments and metal dress accessories (**figs 8-9**). Fifteen burials also featured grave goods made of metal (household items, tools and weapons), as well as ornaments deliberately placed in the grave. Fourteen burials were accompanied by vessels, which were usually placed at the feet. Among household items, the most frequent finds are knives (found in 12 burials, regardless of age and gender). Four male burials contained fire strikers and two contained arrowheads, while a flint, a key, an awl, a wick pipe, an iron rod and a dirham coin (lacking any hole

Fig. 8 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Burial 6. Flat inhumation grave. – **1** pendant. – **2. 4-7** temple rings. – **3. 13** finger rings. – **8** beads. – **9** coin-pendant (Byzantium, Constantine VII and Romanos II, AD 945-959). – **10-11** coin-pendants, imitation of Samanid dirham, Nasr b. Ahmad, 2nd half of the 10th century. – **12** horseshoe brooch. – **14-15** footwear decorations. – **16** pot. – Non-ferrous metal (1-7. 12-15); glass (8); silver (9-11); clay (16). – (Photos and drawings N. D. Ugulava).

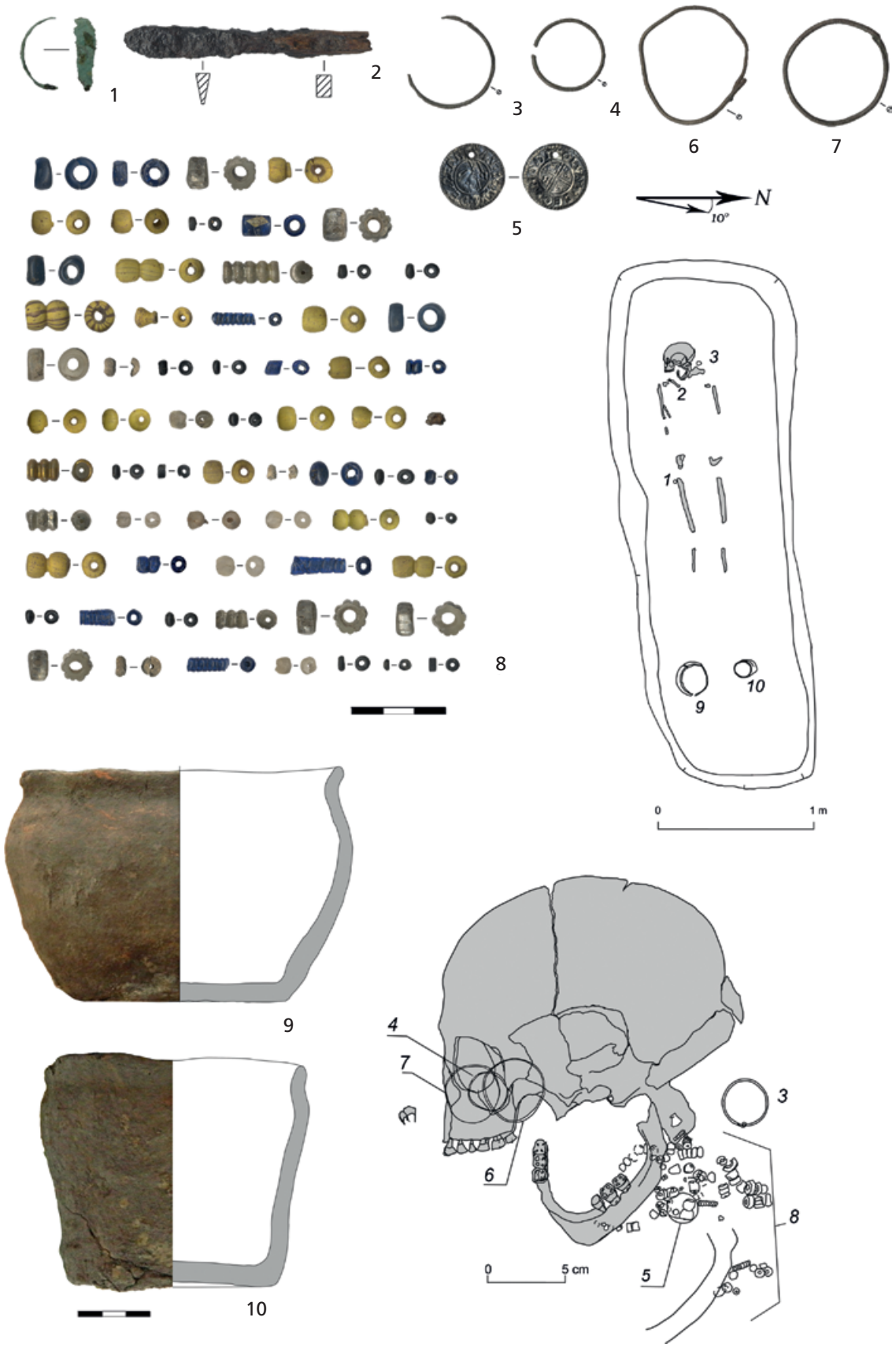


Fig. 9 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Burial 12. Flat inhumation grave. – **1** finger ring. – **2** knife. – **3-4. 6-7** temple rings. – **5** coin-pendant England (Ethelred II, AD 991-997). – **8** beads. – **9-10** pots. – Non-ferrous metal (1. 3-4. 6-7); iron (2); silver (5); glass (8); clay (9-10). – (Photos and drawings N. D. Ugulava).

to attach or suspend it) each appeared only once. Female burials were accompanied by a riveted leather purse, an awl and an iron rod, while children's grave goods included a needle holder and a spindle whorl. Jewellery found in burials of women and girls included wire earrings, some with metal beads (found in nine burials in numbers ranging from 2 to 16), necklaces of large and small beads (thirteen burials containing from 1 to 160 beads, with most adult female burials with 50 to 90 beads), arm rings (found in two burials), finger rings (four burials), necklace pendants including coins (four burials) and a headband (one burial). In two cases these were accompanied by rustling pendants, while in another two penannular brooches occurred. The richest set of adornments was from trench 2, burial 6 (**fig. 8**): in addition to artefacts typical of the Shekshovo site, this also included a neck ring, pendants made of Kufic coins and of a Byzantine coin, and footwear ornaments – arch-shaped pendant with volutes and plated pendants with appendages. Male metal dress fittings – belt buckles and waist rings – were found in two burials.

The flat inhumations in Shekshovo largely follow the classic burial rite of the 11th and first half of the 12th century, found in barrow cemeteries in various regions of Rus'. We will now focus on several features of this which have been noted as characteristic of the cultural traditions of this population group. First is the presence of accessories in male burials. With the exception of knives, placement of household items and tools in graves was discontinued in many urban and rural areas of Rus' in the 11th century. In the northeast, this had been widely practised in Beloozero region, along the Mologa, and along the Volga near Tver and Uglich, but in the heartlands of Rostov-Suzdal it was less widespread. Another important element of the burial ritual, featured in eight burials, was the custom of placing two vessels into the grave (in one case, three vessels). Burials in the lands of Rus' of the 11th and the first half of the 12th century usually had a single vessel placed at the feet of the deceased; however, instances when two vessels were used are known from the burial ground near lakes Beloye and Kubenskoye (Makarov 2009). On the whole, this tradition is more common for the Volga-Oka region than for the North. Female headwear found in the inhumation burial at Shekshovo was a set of wire temple rings and necklaces typical for the 11th and early 12th century Rus'. Similar sets have been found in female burials at the cemetery of Suzdal's Mikhailovskaya storona (St. Michael's district). Standing out from the rest is burial 6 (**fig. 8**), where finds include a triangular wireframe pendant, two penannular brooches to fasten clothes at the chest and metal footwear ornaments with hanging chimes. The combination of Rus' and Volga Finnic elements in the set makes it similar to the ones found in the 11th century burials at Volok Slavensky and Lake Kubenskoye (Makarov 2009). This is so far the only burial to feature a Finnic-style footwear with metallic ornaments in the 10th- or 11th-century Suzdal Opolye. It is also characteristic of the burial ritual that ten of the adult burials were placed into graves cut substantially longer than the bodies. In five cases, the pit was 2.5-3.0 m long and in two over 3 m. The use of elongated grave-pits for 11th-century burials has been noted before in descriptions of sites throughout Rus', including two Suzdal cemeteries, and an opinion has been voiced (see Sedova 1997; Makarov/Zaytseva 2016) that such graves are marks of high status. In recent decades, several 10th- and 11th-century flat (barrowless) cemeteries which also feature elongated graves have been studied in Poland and Germany (Janovsky 2011; Kara 2014; Müller-Wille 2014). One feature they have in common with the Suzdal burials is the combination of small numbers of funeral accessories with a large grave size. It appears that a rite which included large grave cuts with burials oriented to the west with few accessories and lacking an earthen mound over the grave was widespread in 11th-century Eastern Europe, perhaps appearing as a new funerary practice for the elites newly converted to Christianity.

CHRONOLOGY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The chronological framework of the cemetery can be established from dating the burial groups and separate datable artefacts collected from the ploughed layers. The majority of artefacts found in Shekshovo date to the 10th, 10th to 11th or 11th and 12th centuries. A significant number of those items was found in disturbed deposits not associated with grave complexes. More than a third of undisturbed burials had few accessories and can be tentatively dated to the 11th century. More precise dating (to at least half a century) is possible for fifteen groups, including those with coin finds (four burials) or with impressive sets of glass beads and metallic adornments.

Coin finds (**figs 7, 18-19; 8, 9-11; 9, 5**) represent useful dating evidence. 41 coins have been found in total: 36 dirhams, either intact or in fragments (10 of which had a hole drilled or a jump ring attached for wearing), 3 *denarii* and 2 *miliarenses*, all turned into pendants. These coins might have been used as the »Charon's obols« (as it has been documented for two burials), yet most of them appear to be included in the grave as dress ornaments. All the datable dirhams were minted in the 10th century, with eleven dating to its second half. The latest are two dirhams of 975/976 and a coin of 994/995. Both of the *miliarenses* were minted between 945 and 959 and the *denarii* in 936-962, 991-997 and 973-1002 respectively. Mapping the locations of coin finds shows they relate to the zone of destroyed 10th-11th-century graves.

Some of the most numerous types of finds in the ploughsoil deposits are around 90 belt mounts, which include 12 plated belts. Three of these, in their turn, feature »late Khazar«-type mounts, first used in the 9th century and common in the 10th. Eight have been identified as Bolgar-type, common in the second half of the 10th century and another includes adornments known from groups dating back to the second half of the 10th and from the 11th century (Zaytseva 2018).

Finds from the ploughsoil include a wide array of artefacts used in the 11th and 12th centuries, but none which could be dated to the later 12th and early 13th century. The latest medieval assemblages indicating that the cemetery was still in use in the second half of the 12th and the first half of the 13th centuries are the finds from the northern section of trench 2 (2012). These include a bronze fretwork »Vladimir-type« pendant in the shape of a cockerel, with hanging chimes (Ryabinin 1981, 18-19; Makarov/Zaytseva/Krasnikova 2013, 435-444). Taking into account details of the burial ritual such as arms folded on the chest or abdomen, burial 8 in trench 2 can be dated to the first half of the 12th century. Among the finds in burial 8 was a *kalach* (twisted ring bread)-shaped fire striker with a tiny puller (Makarov et al. 2017).

Fourteen samples of charcoal, decayed timber and burnt residues, as well as related objects found on the barrow platform, have been analyzed at the radiocarbon dating labs at the Institute for the History of Material Culture (St. Petersburg), Geological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow) and at Kiel and Oxford universities (**tab. 1**). Samples from the burials and ditch in-fills of three barrows and burial complexes have been dated, as well as the grave-pit in-fills from one of the inhumations. On the basis of this dating, the construction of barrow 10 can be dated to the second half or the end of the 10th century. Calibrated dates for three samples of charcoal and decayed timber from a cremated burial in barrow 12 appear close in time: OxA-35668, AD 970-1017 (1σ), AD 896-1021 (2σ); GIN-15514, AD 892-990 (1σ), AD 777-1023 (2σ); GIN-15515, AD 882-978 (1σ), AD 776-990 (2σ). They allow us to date the burial to between the turn of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century, most likely to the last quarter of the 10th century. The dating of charcoal samples from near barrow 3 (KIA-50457, obtained in 2012) places it between AD 890 and 990. To establish the chronological framework for burial complexes in this part of the site, the dating of the burnt residues (KIA-50458) is of special importance as the interval is quite short: AD 960-1040. Using this date as a reference point, we may suggest that the three barrows overlying cremation burials were erected in the second half or, more specifically, at the end of the 10th century and barrow 3 no later than

No.	Lab ID	Context description	Radiocarbon date (AD)	$\delta^{13}C$	Calibrated date (1σ)	Calibrated date (2σ)	Material
1	KIA-50457	Tr. 2, burial 1	1105±20	20	899-976	890-990	Charcoal
2	KIA-50458	Tr. 2, pit 2, fragmented vessel	1040±28	28	987-1020	960-1040	Soot
3	Le-10664	Tr. 3, mound 10, base	1100±20	20	895-985	890-990	Charcoal
4	Le-10665	Tr. 3, edge of mound 10, base	1060±50	50	890-1030	870-1150	Charcoal
5	Le-10666	Tr. 3, mound 10, western ditch	1140±30	30	875-975	780-990	Charcoal
6	Le-11190	Tr. 3, mound 10, north-eastern ditch	1060±55	55	890-1030	860-1160	Charcoal
7	Le-11191	Tr. 3, mound 10, south-eastern ditch	1205±45	45	720-890	680-950	Charcoal
8	Le-11192	Tr. 3, mound 11, eastern ditch	1130±25	25	885-970	820-990	Charcoal
9	Le-11193	Tr. 3, mound 11, northern ditch	1200±25	25	775-870	720-900	Charcoal
10	GIN-15514	Tr. 2, mound 12, cremation	1100±50	50	892-990	777-1023	Charcoal
11	GIN-15515	Tr. 2, mound 12, cremation	1130±40	40	882-978	776-990	Wood
12	OxA-35668	Tr. 2, mound 12, cremation	1066±26	26	970-1017	896-1021	Charcoal
13	GIN-15678	Tr. 2, mound 12, northern ditch	810±55	55	1183-1269	1048-1286	Charcoal
14	GIN-15679	Tr. 2, burial 6, content of grave pit	1255±60	60	675-782	655-894	Humus

Tab. 1 Shekshovo 9 burial site. ^{14}C dates. – (N. A. Makarov, A. M. Krasnikova).

the first quarter of the 11th century. The latest radiocarbon date is the one obtained for the charcoal samples from a deep pit with burnt clay, which cut through the ditch around barrow 12 (GIN-15678, AD 1183-1269 [1σ]). The nature of this complex still remains unclear: did it combine ritual and manufacturing use? It probably marks the period when the platform was transformed into a workspace at the end of the 12th or early 13th century after it was no longer used for burial.

Thus, the cemetery in Shekshovo was first used no later than the second half of the 10th century – the period which accounts for the barrows with cremated remains and the flat cremations. There is no data to prove that cremation as a practice survived beyond the first quarter of the 11th century; the tradition might have ended even earlier, at the turn of the 11th century. Inhumation in Shekshovo appeared, at the very least, in the early 11th century and possibly at the end of the 10th. Bodies were buried underneath barrow mounds (in grave pits, or at the foot of the barrow), or placed on open platforms within flat, barrowless graves with no earthen constructions to mark them. Of all burial complexes at the site, either intact or partly disturbed, six date back to the second half or end of the 10th century, three to the late 10th or first half of the 11th, seven to the first half of the 11th, ten to the 11th century in general, one to the second half of the 11th and one to the first half of the 12th century. Judging by the material obtained in the 2011-2017 excavations, the cemetery was in its most active use between the second half of the 10th and the first half of the 11th century. The cemetery must have been still in use in the 12th century, but the areas studied to date have revealed only a few traces of the burial complexes from that period. The spatial orientation of the dated burials and coin finds indicates that the cemetery (within its excavated areas) had been gradually expanding to the west and southwest.

How can we interpret the impressive variety of burial forms practiced at the same cemeteries over two or two and a half centuries? Does this variety correspond to different ethnic traditions, social stratification or simply

ideological change over time? The same layer which produced the disturbed surface cremations contained numerous fragments of rustling adornments and pendants. Making use of such techniques as imitation wickerwork and composite structure, these are traditionally seen as originally belonging to the Finnic culture. The ritual of surface cremation is itself usually associated by archaeologists with the burial rites of medieval Finns, but, in fact, this is found in different regions separated by considerable distances and with significant cultural differences (Mikhailova 2014, 331-332). The Shekshovo inhumations are mostly characterised by female adornments of Old Russian/Slavic types, while rustling pendants appear in two burials only. The rise of the barrow rite in the Volga-Oka region is usually considered to be related to Slav and Scandinavian settlement; however, elements of Finnic culture are quite conspicuous in a number of 10th- and 11th-century barrow cemeteries (Nedošhivina/Zozulja 2017). Female apparel and the burial ritual suggest there are various cultural components at work at Shekshovo, but we have no reason to unequivocally describe surface cremations as Finnic and inhumations under barrows and in pits as Slavic. Rather, the variety of burial rituals reflects, on the one hand, the instability and variation of cultural norms (especially in the second half of the 10th and 11th centuries) and, on the other, the general change in the Rus' culture during the 11th century: the move from cremation to inhumation and the decline in the number of funerary accessories.

A silver-inlaid battleaxe from barrow 1 (**fig. 10**) is a unique specimen of ceremonial weapon. A personalized weapon, it is different in its décor from traditional, inlaid battleaxes which date back to 10th- and 11th-century Rus', Volga Bulgaria, the Eastern Baltic, Poland and Scandinavia. This outstanding find was described in a dedicated article which explored its archaeological context, the technique of the silver inlay and the place of the Shekshovo battleaxe in the line of ceremonial axes which have personalized decoration (Makarov/Zaytseva/Krasnikova 2013, 435-444). It must be noted that placing *tamga*-like princely insignia on battle weapons is a rare practice. Beside the Shekshovo axe, only two more are known

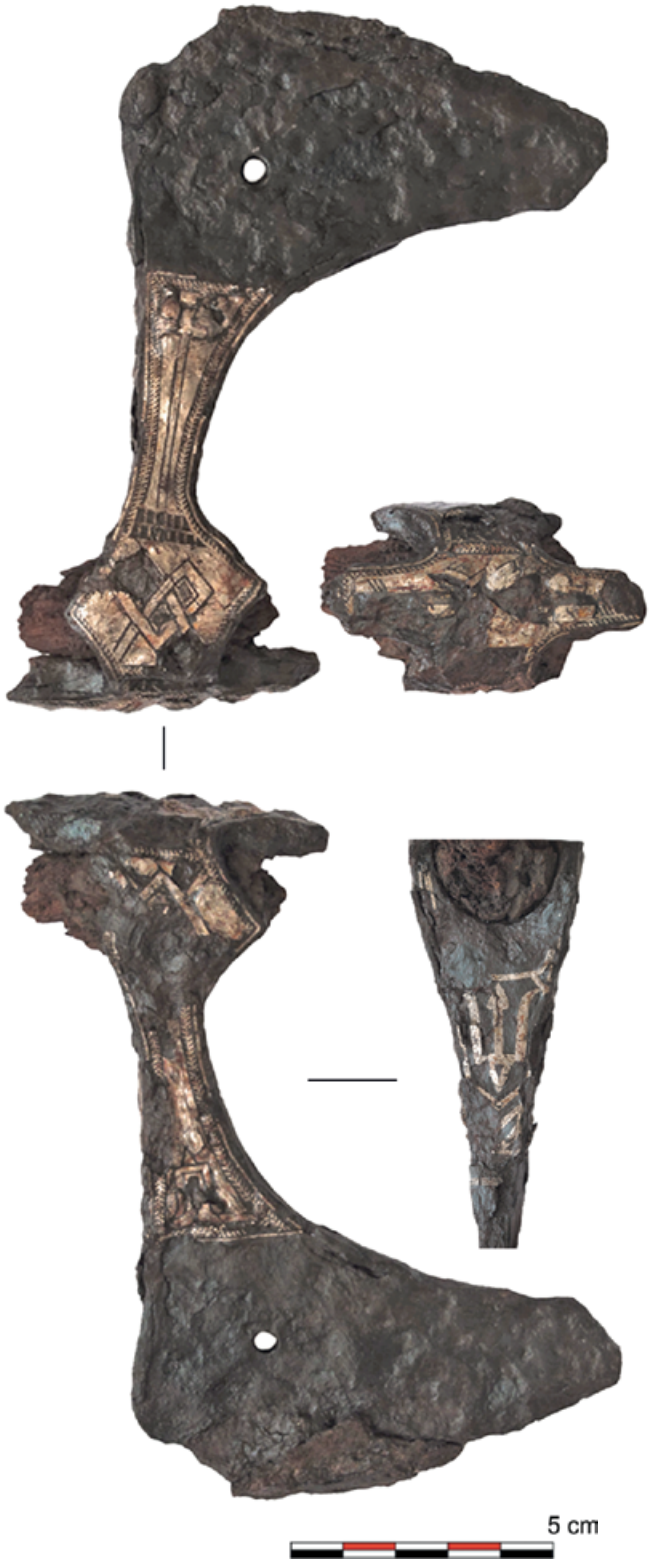


Fig. 10 Shekshovo 9 burial site. Battleaxe from the disturbed inhumation in barrow 1. – (Photo N. D. Ugulava).

to carry such insignia. One came from the mid-11th-century (or its second half) barrow in Beloozero (the north of Rus') (Makarov 1990, 119-124), while the other was retrieved by looters in Ukraine (in the vicinity of Chernigov?) (Beletsky 2020). A trident-shaped *tamga* with a triangle on its highest prong, placed on the side of the axe, is similar to the tridents on the coins of Vladimir Svyatoslavich, which are interpreted as his personal emblem. The bident, considered a family emblem of the Rurikid princes, had been in use in the 10th and early 11th century (Molčanov 2017, 250-281). The discovery of the battleaxe is thus an unexpected and dazzling piece of evidence which proves that the Rurikids took part in ruling the territories of North-Eastern Rus' in the late 10th and early 11th century. We can be sure that a high-profile representative of princely power was present at Shekshovo.

SHEKSHOVO AND THE CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE BURIAL PRACTICES OF MEDIEVAL RUS'

The experience of fieldwork in Shekshovo has shown that new studies of medieval burial sites excavated in the 19th century and almost invisible in the contemporary landscape can be quite promising. This may mean not looking solely for impressive burial complexes but also for individual finds unnoticed during the original excavation. Other priorities are to look for other, previously unknown forms of ritual, to reconstruct the lay-out of the cemeteries, to provide more precise dating and to trace the history of their use. In the light of the recent excavations, it has become evident that Shekshovo is not a field of barrows which archaeologists see as typical for Medieval Rus' – it is a complicated assemblage of surface and pit burials and barrow mounds. The oldest features in the Shekshovo cemetery are the cremated burials, where the remains were placed on the ground, in small pits or underneath barrow mounds. It is highly likely that it was the cremated burials scattered across the surface that formed the nucleus of the cemetery. At the turn of the 11th century or at its beginning, cremation gave way to inhumation, with no evidence to suggest that the former practice was continued in the 11th century. It seems that the changes in the burial ritual came as a swift and radical transformation: burials started to make use of spacious and deep grave-pits, funeral accessories became scarce and, in general, burials were more in line with the traditions associated with Christian cemeteries. Burials occupied the area where cremated remains had been previously scattered upon the ground. Shekshovo is one of the few medieval cemeteries in the Volga-Oka region where the dynamics of this transformation has been well-documented.

Barrow mounds on elevated ground near a large 10th-12th century settlement marked the cemetery as a location endowed with special status. But the recent excavations showed that, unlike the Sopka-type barrows and large *kurgan* barrows typical for many other regions of Rus' (lands along the Volkhov, the Msta, the south-eastern Ladoga, the Upper Dnieper or the Moskva river basin), the Shekshovo mounds were of a relatively modest size and never dominated the landscape.

The burial rituals used in the cemetery, with their wide range of forms, aimed to demonstrate the status of those buried there. The finds across the platform and in the burial complexes include weaponry and male dress adornments (belt mounts etc.), weights and fragments of balance scales. Among the Rus' cemeteries of the 10th and 11th centuries, Shekshovo stands out for the large number of coins found (41). There are only two sites with more finds of this type: the Gnezdovo barrows near Smolensk (101 finds, see Pushkina/Murašheva/Eniosova 2017, 270-271) and the Nikolskoye III cemetery near Lake Beloye (Beloozero) (80 finds, see Ravdina 1988, 27-30). Byzantine silver coins are also exceedingly rare finds. Nevertheless, the »richness« of the funerary inventory and the prestigious accessories reflect the general lifestyle and ambi-

tions of the people of Shekshovo rather than their unique position as social elites. Shekshovo is a cemetery with a normal gender-age distribution (ten men, ten women and fourteen children and teenagers, with twelve others impossible to determine). This cemetery belonged to a population where the percentages of males, females and children were proportionate, while the funeral accessories, the quality of ornaments and household items, as well as of the burial constructions, indicate relative social homogeneity among those buried.

The dimensions of barrow 1 must have made it stand out among the rest. With the diameter of its platform twice as long as the average for the site, and with its unique find of a battleaxe inlaid with the Rurikid family symbols (**fig. 10**), this is the only burial which can be unambiguously said to be of a high-ranking member of the elite. A study of plots of land adjacent to the barrow shows that the mound was located at the edge of the group of barrows identified by geophysical prospection, about 70 m southwest of the oldest cremation burials, that is somewhat aside from the 10th-century core of the cemetery. The »battleaxe barrow« was never the centrepiece of the necropolis: rather, its construction might have symbolized the »arrival« of the power of the princes in a territory which had originally developed on its own.

The burial ritual of the Shekshovo cemetery reveals the specific identity the Rus' population of the heartland of the Volga-Oka region possessed. This identity was shaped by Slavic-Finnic ethnic interaction, with some participation by Scandinavians and with cultural impetus from the Baltic region (Callmer / Gustin / Roslund 2017, 2-6; Roslund 2017, 168-181). In the 10th and 11th centuries, this population was concentrated in large, unfortified settlements, near one of which the Shekshovo cemetery was located. At the same time, many elements of rituals practised at Shekshovo (oversized grave-pits, »Charon's obols«, the presence of weapons in some of the elite burials) have their counterparts in late 10th- and 11th-century cemeteries in other regions of Eastern Europe, including the cemeteries in Bodzia and Ciepłe in Poland, which have been recently studied in detail (Janovsky 2011; Buko 2014a; 2014b; Wadyl 2019). All of these reflect the generic means of representing social status and prestige in the burial rituals in the north of Eastern Europe at the end of the Viking Age.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Neue Erkenntnisse zu den spätwikingerzeitlichen Bestattungsrituale im Wolga-Oka-Gebiet: Ausgrabungen in Šekšovo/RU

Die Bestattungssitten in der Rus' des 10. bis 12. Jahrhunderts werden traditionell mit Grabhügeln bzw. mit Hügelgräberfeldern in Zusammenhang gebracht, doch lässt sich diese Vorstellung vor allem auf die Grabungsberichte des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts zurückführen. In diesem Beitrag werden neue Erkenntnisse zu den spätwikingerzeitlichen Bestattungsritualen im Wolga-Oka-Gebiet vorgelegt. Diese Daten wurden durch jüngste Feldforschungen in einem der Gräberfelder des Gebiets – Gräberfeld Šekšovo – gewonnen, das bereits im Jahr 1852 ausgegraben worden war und als vollständig zerstört galt. Dank der geophysikalischen Untersuchungen im Rahmen der jüngsten Grabungskampagnen konnten auch Brandschüttungsgräber auf der Erdoberfläche mit verstreuten kalzinierten Knochen identifiziert sowie die Struktur des Gräberfeldes rekonstruiert werden. Im Lichte der jüngsten Ausgrabungen erweist sich das Gräberfeld nicht wie früher angenommen als reines Hügelgräberfeld, sondern als ein komplexes Ensemble aus Brandschüttungs- und Brandgrubengräbern sowie Grabhügeln. Die Vielfalt der Bestattungsrituale spiegelt einerseits die Instabilität und Variabilität kultureller Normen (besonders in der zweiten Hälfte des 10. und 11. Jahrhunderts) sowie andererseits den allgemeinen Wandel der Kultur der Rus' im 11. Jahrhundert wider, die sich durch eine Abkehr von der Feuer- zur Körperbestattung und einen Rückgang in der Zahl der Grabbeigaben auszeichnet.

New Evidence on the Late Viking-Age Burial Rituals in the Volga-Oka Region: Excavations at Shekshovo/RU

Funerary practice in 10th to 12th century Rus' has traditionally been considered to be characterised by barrow cemeteries with earthen mounds, but ideas about these sites are mostly based on excavation reports of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This paper presents new data on the Late Viking-Age burial rituals in the Volga-Oka region, obtained through recent field investigations at one of the cemeteries – Shekshovo – that was excavated in 1852 and subsequently believed to have been totally destroyed. The fieldwork reported here has reconstructed the cemetery using geophysical survey to reveal new evidence for surface cremations comprising scattered remains. In the light of recent excavations, the burial site is shown not to be solely a barrow cemetery but a complex ensemble of surface and pit burials and barrow mounds. The variety of burial rituals reflects, on the one hand, the instability and variation of cultural norms (especially in the second half of the 10th and 11th centuries) and, on the other, the general change in Rus' culture in the 11th century, characterised by a move away from cremation to inhumation and a decline in the number of funerary accessories.

Nouvelle preuve de la présence de rites funéraires de l'époque viking tardive dans la région de l'Oka et Volga: fouilles à Shekshovo/RU

On considérait généralement que la coutume funéraire dans la Rus' du 10e au 12e siècle était caractérisée par des nécropoles à tumuli, mais ces idées remontent à des observations de fouilles du 19e et début 20e siècle. Cet article présente de nouvelles données sur les rites funéraires de l'époque viking tardive dans le bassin de l'Oka et Volga, obtenues à la suite d'investigations récentes dans une des nécropoles – Shekshovo – fouillée en 1852 et considérée par la suite comme complètement détruite. Le recours à la prospection géophysique, dont il est question ici, a permis de reconstituer la nécropole en localisant les incinérations en surface comprenant des restes éparpillés. Les fouilles récentes ont révélé qu'il ne s'agit pas simplement d'une nécropole à tumuli, mais d'un ensemble complexe de sépultures en surface et en fosse, et de tumuli. Cette diversité de rites funéraires reflète d'une part l'instabilité et la variation des normes culturelles (spécialement dans la deuxième moitié du 10e et au 11e siècle), d'autre part un changement général dans la culture rus au 11e siècle, caractérisé par une transition de l'incinération vers l'inhumation accompagnée d'une diminution des offrandes funéraires.

Traduction: Y. Gautier

Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots clés

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Medieval Rus' / Volga-Oka region / Late Viking Age / burial sites / burial rituals / barrow mounds / surface cremations / geophysical survey

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