

# Vikings, Rus, Varangians

## The “Varangian Problem” in View of Ethnicity in Archaeology

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The Scandinavian activity in Russia during the Viking Age has left traces in both the archaeological and the written material. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Russian annals, “The Primary Chronicle”, a story is told of how “Varangians from beyond the sea” founded the first Russian realm. The Varangians have been interpreted as Scandinavians, and the archaeological material has been connected with this story. This has resulted in a scientific debate, which in many cases has been steered by nationalistic feelings and political aims.

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Archaeological and written sources show that contacts between Scandinavia and Russia were extensive during the Viking Age. In the Russian Primary Chronicle, written in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, we learn that the different Slavonic and Finnish tribes living in what is now Russia could not unite, and therefore at the end of the ninth century they turned to the Varangians beyond the sea for help. From the Varangian kingdom called Rus three brothers came to rule, and after the death of two of the brothers the Russian realm was united under the Varangian Rurik. The Varangians have been understood as Scandinavians, more precisely Swedes. This understanding has been questioned and debated, with arguments collected from both written and archaeological material, and it has come to be known as the “Varangian problem”.

This paper reviews the arguments seen in the international debate during the last two hundred and fifty years. My aim is to throw some light upon the connection between the historical and archaeological interpretations and the prevailing political climate. This leads to a discussion about the use of ethnicity in archaeology, in the context of the Vikings in Russia.

## THE VARANGIAN PROBLEM

The source of the Varangian debate lies within the Russian Primary Chronicle<sup>1</sup>, where the story of the calling in of the Varangians plays an important part in the events leading up to the founding of a Russian state.

6368-6370 (860-862). The tributaries of the Varangians drove them back beyond the sea and, refusing them further tribute, set out to govern themselves. There was no law among them, but tribe rose against tribe. Discord thus ensued among them, and they began to war one against another. They said to themselves, "Let us seek a prince who may rule over us and judge us according to the Law." They accordingly went overseas to the Varangian Russes: these particular Varangians were known as Russes, just as some are called Swedes (Svear)<sup>2</sup>, and others Normans, English and Gotlanders, for they were thus named. The Chuds, the Slavs, the Krivichians, and the Ves' then said to the people of Rus', "Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us." They thus selected three brothers, with their kinsfolk, who took with them all the Russes and migrated. The oldest, Rurik, located himself in Novgorod; the second Sineus, at Beloozero; and the third, Truvor, in Izborsk. On account of these Varangians, the district of Novgorod became known as the land of Rus'. (The Russian Primary Chronicle 1953:59f)

The Varangian problem has been debated for a long time, and the definition of the problem has differed somewhat over the years, steered by different historical and archaeological theories, perceptions of the state, political points of view and nationalistic feelings. The essential question discussed is whether Scandinavian Vikings founded the first Russian state and gave the country its name.

The information on the connections between Russia and Scandinavia comes from three different kinds of sources: historical, archaeological and philological. The historical material consists of Russian, Nordic, Byzantine, Latin and Arabic manuscripts. The archaeological material comprises Scandinavian artefacts found in Russia, as well as material relating to Russia in Scandinavia, including the rune stones that mention expeditions to the East (Klindt-Jensen 1970:39).

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian Primary Chronicle also goes under the names *Tale of Bygone Years* and *The Chronicle of Nestor*. The latter name is derived from the monk Nestor of the Cave monastery outside Kiev, who according to tradition wrote the chronicle down in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian Primary Chronicle is the most important of the earliest native written sources for Russian history, the medieval annals. The tradition of writing chronicles was very vivid in Russia and continued well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A great number of Russian cities kept annals; the earliest were written in Kiev and Novgorod, and they all have the story of the Primary Chronicle as their historical base. The Primary Chronicle narrates the early history of Kievan Russia, with a first reference to biblical times. It starts in 852 and ends in 1110. The earliest preserved manuscripts of the Chronicle date from the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and are called Codex Laurentianus and Codex Hypatianus (Bodin 1998: 5-14).

<sup>2</sup> In the Swedish translation the term "Svear" is used here (Nestorskrönikan 1998: 27).



The Varangian problem entered the scientific arena in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the founding of the Russian Academy of Science in 1724 (Rahbek Schmidt 1970:9). The discussion was primarily conducted by linguists and historians, both inside and outside of Russia. Archaeology did not participate in the debate until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the Swedish archaeologist T. J. Arne and his book *La Suède et l'Orient* of 1914.

Two schools evolved concerning the Varangian problem, the Normanist and the anti-Normanist. The Normanists claim that Scandinavians played an important role in the emergence of a Russian state. The anti-Normanists, on the other hand, maintain that the Scandinavian influence has been greatly exaggerated, and that the Varangians only played a marginal role as merchants and mercenaries; they quickly adapted to the Russian ways, and without much racket left the scene of history. Generally the Normanists' standpoint has been strongest in the international debate, while the anti-Normanists' view has been strongest in the national Russian debate, especially during the Soviet era.

*The early years*

Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century the general view on the origin of Russia was that the Rus were a Varangian people, and the Varangians in their turn were Norsemen, more precisely Swedes. A group of foreign historians were invited to Russia to work at the Academy of Science, and among them were two of the most important Normanists of the era, the Germans G. S. Bayer and G. F. Müller (Latvakangas 1995:17). Müller was the first to suggest that the name Rus came from the Finnish word *Ruotsi* – Sweden. The Russian writer M. Lomonosov was strongly opposed to this theory (Rahbek Schmidt 1970:10). On the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 1749 Müller held a speech on the origins of Russia at the Academy, where he presented the theory that Norsemen founded the ancient state of Kievan Rus. The lecture was never finished, however, as a tumult broke out when Russian-born members of the Academy opposed the theory. A committee, with among others Lomonosov, was appointed with the task of investigating whether Müller's ideas were a threat to the nation (Pritsak 1976:5). Lomonosov came to the conclusion that they were harmful to the nation. The ancient Russian state had a purely Slavonic origin, Lomonosov claimed, and could trace its roots back to a time long before the Varangians ever entered the kingdom (Nielsen 1975:352). Müller was not allowed to continue his research on ancient Rus; his publications were confiscated and destroyed, and he was directed to research the less controversial subject of Siberian history (Pritsak 1976:5). The controversy between these two researchers contributed greatly to making the problem known to the learned world outside of Russia (Latvakangas 1995:17).

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century linguistics entered the debate, with one of the most important Normanists of the century, E. Kunik, leading the way. Kunik saw the root of the word *Rus* in the Finnish and Estonian words for Sweden – *Ruotsi*, *Rootsi* (Kunik 1844:88ff). Kunik met resistance in the Russian historian S. Gedenov, who showed a Slavic origin for the word “Rus” (Rahbek Schmidt 1970:14f).

Another important linguist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the Danish researcher V. Thomsen, who in a series of lectures named *The relations between ancient Russia and Scandinavia, and the origin of the Russian state*, held in Oxford in 1876, found evidence that the Russian realm was of Scandinavian origin. The lectures were published as a book a year later and translated into several languages, including Russian in 1891 (Stender-Petersen 1953:5). Thomsen found support for his theory in a number of different sources in addition to the story in the Primary Chronicle: linguistically, the name of Rus, the Scandinavian names of the early Russian princes, the parallel Slavic – Russian names of the Dnepr rapids; and archaeologically, artefacts and Scandinavian runic inscriptions mentioning the East (Thomsen 1882).

In 1914 the Swedish archaeologist T. J. Arne published the book *La Suède et l'Orient*, in which he introduced archaeology into the Varangian question (Arne 1914).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large quantity of anti-Normanistic literature was produced in Russia, especially in connection with the 1000-year anniversary of the Russian state in 1860. Despite this the Normanist school dominated the scene at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even in Russia. The general opinion was that the Russian state was founded by the Scandinavians, who quickly assimilated into the Slavic culture (Latvakangas 1995:18). In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this theory still dominated, and in the 1920s scientists even considered the problem solved in favour of the Normanists (Latvakangas 1995:22).

### *Soviet times*

The controversy between Normanists and anti-Normanists has also been a controversy between Western and Soviet research, where the Soviet research has from time to time been dictated by the government. The Soviet scholars had a strict Marxist view on historical events (Paszkievicz 1963:4). This makes the comparison between the two sides somewhat uneven. It is, however, not constructive to simplify matters into politics versus science. Extreme positions can be found among Western as well as among Eastern scientists.

After the revolution in 1917, a new paradigm based on the Marxist philosophy evolved in Soviet historical research. According to this theory, the notion that one person could found a kingdom was naïve and unscientific. The emergence of a state was the result of inner economic and social development, and could not be created from outside factors (Melnikova 1996:47).

From the Marxist perspective the arrival of the Scandinavians lost its importance. The discussion moved away from the role of the Varangians to more general ideas of state development. "During the last half century the question has been posed differently, resolving itself into the problem of the formation of states in general and of the Russian state in particular" (Grekov 1947:2, 12).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the first greater Marxist historical work was published by the historian M. Pokrovsky (Nielsen 1975:358). Pokrovsky was politically active and a member of the Bolshevik party before the revolution. He was forced to emigrate, but he returned to Russia in 1917 and became one of the most active members of the Moscow Bolshevik Organisation. He was one of the leading historians in the Soviet Union until his death in 1932 (Pokrovsky 1933:7ff). In his works Pokrovsky turned against earlier interpretations founded on nationalistic feelings (e.g., Pokrovsky 1933:41). He considered history to be an ideology as well as a science, and that it was important to work with the sources critically (Szporluk 1970:15). To Pokrovsky the details of history were not important; historians should find the grander patterns, the laws of history, and by means of them understand the present and prepare for the future (Pokrovsky 1933:24f). In this light the question concerning the founding of the Russian realm was of little matter. "The fact that the first princes of Novgorod and of Kiev whose names have come down to us were of Swedish descent (and that this was so is quite certain) is quite unimportant" (Pokrovsky 1933:42).

This view on the origin of the Russian state was in the 1930s considered anti-nationalistic. In 1934 the Soviet government decided to get rid of Prokovsky's views on history and reintroduce a "national historical writing" (Szporluk 1970:35). This can be seen as a reaction against the ideas in Nazi Germany claiming the Germanic race's superiority over the underdeveloped Slavs. The leader for the new "national-Marxist school" was B. Grekov.

The Marxist historical theory on the development of a state made it unnecessary to deny the presence of the Vikings in 9<sup>th</sup>-century Russia. Their impact on the state creation process was considered to be minor. Grekov also shifted the focus from trade as the economic base of Kievan Russia to agriculture, which also diminished the importance of the Varangians (Nielsen 1975:358). The Soviet historians considered the formation of a state to have taken place in the ninth century at the latest, or even as early as the seventh century, which means the Varangians came to an already developed state (Melnikova 1996:47).

During the Second World War and the following cold war, the researchers were divided into an anti-Normanist and a Normanist camp, following the political frontlines (Latvakangas 1995:24).

In the 1950s, the situation gradually changed towards a more open dialogue. A co-operation between Scandinavian and Russian archaeologists played an important role in this (Rahbeck Schmidt 1970:19).

The most important new arguments during these times came from archaeology. An increasing number of investigations supplied new material to the discussion, leading to new observations and new theories (Šaskol'skij 1970:23f). The question of the Varangians had become a part of the bigger issue of the emergence of a state. "Soviet scholars today consider the question of Varangians in Russia to be a subsidiary problem in their study of the development of the early Russian State. This view is clearly shared by all archaeologists as well" (Dejevsky 1977:34).

K. Jordal describes in 1989 the idea of the Varangians founding the Russian kingdom as outdated and abandoned, both among Soviet and West European researchers. Instead it has been exchanged for an "objective anti-Normanistic" idea, one that contemplates written, archaeological and linguistic sources, and that considers the Varangians to have been a part of the society, functioning in the transcontinental trade with the Arabic world but otherwise with small consequences for the Russian society (Jordal 1989:8). Once again the problem is viewed as being solved, this time in favour of the anti-Normanists.

### *Present times*

With the fall of the Soviet Union came a critique of earlier conceptions, including the historical narration. This opened the way for Normanistic theories in Russia, earlier regarded as "unpatriotic". The focus moved towards what archaeology can tell us about the Scandinavian influence in Russia during the late Iron Age and early Middle Ages.

The interpretations of later years have stressed the mixed, or polyethnic, character of the culture in the Russian lands, where the Norsemen were one of many ethnic groups. It is also worth noting that the Finnish and Baltic groups of people are given a bigger role in the history of ancient Russia.

According to the Russian archaeologist E. Melnikova, there were two major chiefdoms in Russia in the ninth century. One was centred in Ladoga, dominated by the long-distance trade along the Baltic-Volga route, and controlled by Scandinavians. The other, centred in Kiev, originated in the agricultural society and was ruled by local chiefs; it was taken over by the Scandinavians in the mid-ninth century (Melnikova 1996:58). The events in the Primary Chronicle reflect the reality of a Scandinavian overlordship in the region during this time (Melnikova 1996:122). The archaeological material indicates permanent contacts between Scandinavia and the East. The Norsemen travelling between the countries spread influences and stimulated developments in both areas, creating a common heritage (Melnikova 1996:xii).

The Swedish archaeologist I. Jansson suggests that Viking trade and warfare cannot sufficiently explain the large amount of Scandinavian material in Russia, including women's jewellery; only colonisation can explain this. Whole families moved to Russia in such large numbers that they managed to preserve their special culture for several generations. The Norsemen lived together with Finns and Slavs in mixed ethnic communities and formed the culture of Rus (Jansson 1997:27, 54f). The archaeological material does not indicate that the Scandinavians dominated the economical or political life, but they were participants in a process created on local conditions. The eastern contacts were of great importance for the development of the Scandinavian society (Jansson 1987:790ff).

The Swedish archaeologist J. Callmer is of the opinion that the archaeological material cannot say much about political conditions, but it can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the economic and cultural contacts between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (Callmer 2000:7-46). The contacts between the eastern and western parts of the Baltic Sea have a history stretching much further back than the Viking Age. In the sixth century Scandinavians, Finns and Samis traded in fur, and it is probable that the name Rus was used by the Finns for the Scandinavians already at this time. The Rus identity started to develop as a mixed culture with Scandinavian features (Callmer 2000:46ff). The Scandinavians mainly interacted with Finnish tribes in the north Russian lands. The Slavic expansion into the North cannot be dated earlier than the seventh century, and the most important period of Slavic colonisation of the north is the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Callmer 2000:25f).

In the view of the archaeologist W. Duszczko, Norse activity in Russia is of two separate kinds: Rus tradesmen and colonisers who came to Russia in the eighth century, creating regular towns and rural communities; and Varangians of the tenth century. The Varangians were hired soldiers in the forces of the Russian princes, belonging to the military aristocracy of the Russian realm, and they did not have the same impact on the Russian culture as the Rus (Duszczko 2004:258).

The activity of the Norsemen in this area extends over several hundred years, and their permanent presence in the lands made them a part of the “cultural mosaic” of the area, as indigenous as many other groups. They kept close contact with the Scandinavian mainland, in this way preserving a very firm Norse identity. The Norsemen of this society were called Rus (Duszczko 2004:7f).

*The archaeological point of view*

The Varangian problem has in later years been left to archaeology. The idea was that archaeological material could answer the questions in a more objective way than the written sources. The archaeological material can tell many different stories, however, and depending on the interpreter it can prove both the Normanists and the anti-Normanists right.

The majority of Scandinavian archaeologists have regarded (...) the presence of Scandinavian objects in a grave as evidence of the deceased’s Nordic affinity, believing that a Norseman had brought these objects from Scandinavia. Soviet archaeologists, on the other hand, consider finds of Scandinavian objects, especially in graves where burial had clearly followed local ritual, to be the result of trade with Scandinavia. (Šaskol’skij 1970:36)

The archaeological material of Scandinavian origin in Russia consists mainly of material from graves, but also from town excavations. Everyday objects can be hard to determine as ethnically distinguishing, so the finds discussed as Scandinavian consist mostly of jewellery, weapons to a certain extent, and the shape of the graves.

Scandinavian artefacts in Russia originate from a rather limited time frame; the earliest are from the mid-eighth century, to then disappear more or less completely in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. They are located in a concentrated area in northwest Russia, on the whole following the great rivers. This fact led to the general conclusion that the Scandinavians who came to Russia were small in numbers and did not have a great impact on the Russian culture.

Based on the distribution of the material of Scandinavian origin, one can detect that the field of activity has moved from the north to the southeast, from Volga to Dnepr. Scandinavian artefacts dating back to the eighth and ninth centuries are located on the shores of Lake Ladoga, in the upper Volga district, and the upper Dnepr and Smolensk area. The largest amount of finds derives from the tenth century, when the distribution area expanded along the Volga to Beloozero and Novgorod. Artefacts from the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century are distributed along Lake Ladoga, in Novgorod and Gnëzdovo, by Dnpr, Desna and Lake Cud’ (Stalsberg 1979:155f).

The general opinion among archaeologists is that the Scandinavian settlers rather quickly assimilated into the local population. “The Viking who came to Russia lost under the influence of local circumstances his national identity, earlier, apparently, than his colleague who had operated in Western Europe or the Baltic” (Kirpicnikov 1970:54).



In the archaeological interpretations of the Vikings' interactions in Russia, the emphasis has mainly been on trade. The importance of the waterway "from the Varangians to the Greeks" has dominated many theories of Scandinavian activity in Russia. Russian archaeologists have also pointed to the role of Varangians as mercenaries in the armies of the Russian princes (Jansson 1994:17). The emphasis on the Norsemen trading with the Orient has given the Norse activity in Russia a touch of temporality in many interpretations.

Other than Russian archaeologists, it is mainly Swedish archaeologists who have carried out the work on Scandinavian material in Russia. The differences in the interpretations between Russian and Scandinavian archaeologists are clear, even though archaeologists from both areas are reluctant to subscribe to either the Normanist or the anti-Normanist school (e.g., Artsikhovskij 1966:175).

The Swedish archaeologist T. J. Arne was one of the first researchers to study the archaeological material in connection with the Varangian question. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large number of artefacts of Scandinavian origin were found in Russian soil; however, they were not properly collected and catalogued. Arne compiled this material and published the studies in his book *La Suède et l'Orient* in 1914. This was the starting point for an increasing interest in the material remains of Scandinavians in Russia (Šaskol'skij 1970:23).

Arne's investigations in Russia dealt primarily with material from graves. He concluded that the first Swedish settlers came to Russia in the beginning of the ninth century. The rather large quantities of Scandinavian women's brooches indicated colonisers who settled together with their women and children. The Swedish influence disappeared some decades into the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as a consequence of new burial costumes connected to Christianity (Arne 1914:61f).

The large quantities of oriental material in Scandinavia coincide with what seems to be the peak of Scandinavian activity in Russia, AD 875-975 (Arne 1914:38, 62). In Arne's opinion the different cultures mutually influence each other. During this period, new hybrids between Scandinavian and Russian objects emerge in Russia, and new decorative patterns evolve in Scandinavia. However, he considers the Scandinavian influence on Russia to be of short duration, since the Scandinavian elements soon disappear (Arne 1914:222ff).

B. D. Grekov, the leading figure in the neo-anti-Normanistic school in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gives the following explanation, supported by the archaeological material: "It was in the 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> centuries that an independent unique East-Slavonic, otherwise known as Ante or Rus, civilisation assumed form. It was in this very area, the Dniepr region, the black earth country, where forests gave way to steppes, that provided conditions for the more rapid development of civilised life as compared with the northern forest belt" (Grekov 1947:1, 19). In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries there existed centres of trade and craftsmanship, as well as military outposts, which indicate the civilisation of a state, formed by Slavs. The Norsemen appeared in Rus rather late, lured by the wealth and the possibility of contacts with the Arabic world (Grekov 1947:1, 25ff).

According to the Swedish archaeologist H. Arbman, the Primary Chronicle gives no reliable account of Scandinavian activities in Russia. The story of the calling in of the Varangians is a reoccurring myth used to explain the Nordic expansion in Russia. It shows great similarities with Widukind's story of the Saxons, and both stories probably have a common origin (Arbman 1962:110). The goal of the Scandinavians' expeditions to Russia was trading with Arabia, so they travelled along the Russian rivers, taking slaves and taxing the native population on the way (Arbman 1961:89).

According to the Russian archaeologist Artsikhovskiy, the Scandinavian material in Russia is scarce and in no way supports the theory of Scandinavian colonisation of the Russian lands. "In the same archaeological record ethnic distinction may be traced, but the hypothesis of large-scale Swedish colonization finds no support whatever. Individual Scandinavians (probably even whole Scandinavian detachments) did settle in Russia, but the rapidity of their Slavification is remarkable" (Artsikhovskiy 1966:180).

The Russian archaeologists Lebedev and Nazarenko stress the fact that the Norsemen who come into Russia interacted with different local cultures. There was no united Russian culture, nor was there a united Scandinavian kingdom. The Norsemen belonged to smaller cultural groups, as did the Finns and Slavs. All these cultural groups participated in the development of the state of Rus. Not until the turn of the tenth century to the eleventh did a common Russian culture replace the different regional cultures (Lebedev & Nazarenko 1973:5ff).

In the opinion of D. M. Wilson, however, the lack of Scandinavian material in Russian cities does not necessarily imply that there was no Scandinavian activity in Russia. An analogy to this phenomenon can be found in England, where the only city with a large number of Scandinavian artefacts is York, despite the fact that many historical sources tell of substantial Viking activity in England. The Scandinavians seem to be quick to adapt to the local ways. It is probable that the trading stations in Russia were established by Scandinavians and initially controlled by them, but they soon adapted to the local population and became Russian (Wilson 170:112ff).

The idea of scarcity of Scandinavian material in Russia is not altogether accurate. The Scandinavian archaeological material in Eastern Europe is much larger than in Western Europe (Jansson 2000:128). Scandinavian inhabitants are detected through status objects and religious artefacts; graves and settlements without distinguishing features are automatically considered to be Slavic. Still, there is a possibility that some of the anonymous graves can host people of Scandinavian origin. Two hundred tortoise brooches have been found in Russia, as compared with 1500 in Sweden. This indicates that a rather substantial Scandinavian population settled in Russia, and it puts the idea of a lack of Scandinavian material into perspective (Jansson 1987:786).

The Varangian debate has not been settled. In later years the theories where the Scandinavians play a decisive role in the development of ancient Russia have

begun to win new ground. As mentioned, the material of Scandinavian origin has mainly been found in graves and towns, and therefore the emergence and function of towns in early Rus have an important place in the discussion of the role of the Norsemen in Russia.

### *Towns of Rus*

The eighth and ninth centuries are characterised by urbanism and an increase in trade, in Russia as well as in Scandinavia. Around the Baltic Sea and in the north of Russia the earliest towns appear along the major water routes, and they all show a mixture of different local and foreign cultures. These early towns seem to be connected to foreign trade (Jansson 1997:25).

The American historian R. Kerner attributes the first Russian realm entirely to the foreign trade. The rivers determined the direction of colonisation for the Slavs and the Scandinavians. The Scandinavians came to this region in order to dominate the trade with the south and east. The Russian state was created in the ninth century under the leadership of Varangians at Novgorod and Kiev. In a century the Varangians were slavified. When the trade route lost its dominating position, the Kievan kingdom disappeared (Kerner 1946:12ff).

The Russian historian M. Tikhomirov is also of the opinion that the emergence of towns in Russia is connected to trade, but that the role played by the international trade is overestimated. Domestic trade was of greater importance than foreign trade, and the towns emerged as handicraft and trading centres for the surrounding agricultural areas (Tikhomirov 1959:461). International trade developed in pre-existing trading places (Tikhomirov 1959:12f).

The Russian archaeologist E. N. Nosov connects the emergence of towns in northern Russia with colonisation. The Slavs expanding to the northern parts from the sixth century, bringing more developed forms of organisation and economy into the land of the Finns and Balts, met with the Vikings from Scandinavia following the trade route through the east. This meeting determined the process of the formation of the Russian state and the emergence of the early towns, situated in locations strategic for the control of long-distance trade (Nosov 1994:187).

The Russian archaeologist E. A. Melnikova believes that the cities emerging along the Baltic-Volga route in the ninth century hardly could have originated on the basis of the local economy. The only economical phenomenon large enough to have caused this change was the trade with the Byzantine world, and the people initiating this trade were the Scandinavians. The culture of these times was ethnically mixed; the upper class of the society was ethnically different from the rest, and consisted of Scandinavians (Melnikova 1996:49ff).

The main part of Scandinavian finds in Russia is concentrated to three settlement sites: Staraja Ladoga, Rjurikivo Gorodišće, and Gnězdovo (Puškina 1997:90).

Staraja Ladoga is the earliest archaeologically confirmed trading place of ancient Rus. It was founded in the middle of the eighth century, and Scandinavian

artefacts in the oldest layers of the town show that Norsemen were active from the beginning. The Scandinavian finds continue into the tenth century, indicating permanent Scandinavian settlement in Staraja Ladoga for a few hundred years. Traces of Scandinavian craftsmanship have also been found in the settlement layers. Outside of Staraja Ladoga is the cemetery of Plakun, which has been interpreted as a purely Scandinavian burial ground. The archaeological material in Staraja Ladoga reveals a mixed community with strong Norse elements (Jansson 1997:27ff).

Staraja Ladoga had a strategic position as the start of the trade route eastwards to Russia, and trade seems to be the main reason for the emergence of the town. The archaeological material shows that long-distance trade was established from the start. This made I. Jansson conclude that Staraja Ladoga belongs to the system of international trading places that emerged in Scandinavia and Western Europe during the eighth century, like Birka, Hedeby and Ribe (Jansson 1997:29).

The indigenous people of this part of Russia were Finno-Ugrians. There are graves mainly from the 10<sup>th</sup> century with mixed Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian features (Jansson 1997:29). The presence of Slavs has been debated: “there is no doubt that the earliest population in Ladoga consisted of Eastern Slavs” (Tikhomirov 1959:407); “according to the majority of scholars there are no traces of Slavs in Ladoga before the tenth century” (Duszczko 2004:66).

Novgorod was the political and commercial centre of north-western Rus, but the settlement in the present city did not begin until the middle of the tenth century. The predecessor of present-day Novgorod was located two kilometres south of the city at Gorodišce, or Rjurikivo Gorodišce (Jansson 1997:31). This town seems to have been settled in the middle of the ninth century, and deserted around the year 1000 (Jansson 1997:35). Where the city of Novgorod lies there is a distinctively Slavic settlement with no Scandinavian finds, while Gorodišce has a very different character with strong Scandinavian elements. The majority of the finds are from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but there is a fair amount of artefacts from the ninth century as well (Jansson 1997:35f). They consist of women’s and men’s jewellery as well as ornaments, amulets and tools. Among these artefacts are objects that could only have been used by Scandinavians, for example pendants with runic inscriptions and Thor hammer-rings (Nosov 1992:52). There is also evidence of Scandinavian craftsmanship. The archaeological material of Gorodišce shows close parallels with that of central Sweden (Duszczko 2004:103). The Russian archaeologist E. Nosov, who has conducted extensive excavations in Novgorod, considers Gorodišce to be an important trading and crafts centre as well as a military and administrative centre in the region of Lake Ilmen, inhabited by a population of diverse ethnic origin (Nosov 1992:58).

Gnězdovo is situated west of the present-day city of Smolensk. The settlement of Gnězdovo started in the ninth century and continued into the 11<sup>th</sup> century. At Gnězdovo there is a cemetery with more than 3000 graves. The settlement and graves have yielded the largest amount of Scandinavian artefacts in all of Rus,

and they derive from the whole period. Among the material are traces of production of Scandinavian jewellery. There are elements of different ethnic cultures, such as Slavic, Finnish and Baltic as well as Scandinavian (Jansson 1997:47f). The Scandinavian impact on Gnëzdovo has been broadly discussed. Some claim that the significance of the Scandinavian objects has been overestimated, that single objects could be due to contacts with Scandinavia (e.g., Artsikovskiy 1966:176f), and that the purely Scandinavian graves belong to individual Scandinavians from the military nobility of Rus (Avdusin 1969:57f). Others maintain that Gnëzdovo was one of the main centres for Scandinavians in Russia (e.g., Callmer 1971:68). According to I. Jansson, it is misleading to try to interpret different graves as Slavic or Scandinavian. The graves at Gnëzdovo are instead a result of a population of mixed origin, but with one common culture or ethnicity (Jansson 1997:48).

### THE VARANGIANS FROM AN ETHNIC PERSPECTIVE

The concept of ethnicity is complex and includes both political and nationalistic aspects. The interpretation of the influence of a foreign ethnic group in prehistoric times has consequences for the understanding of the present day as well, even on a scientific level. This is very palpable in the case of the Varangians, where we are dealing with something of so high a nationalistic value as the founding of a state.

As has been shown, the view of the researchers is deeply connected to the prevailing political situation. In the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Russian Academy of Science opened, foreign researchers were invited to work there. A large number of Germans had important positions at the Russian royal court, and the German influence was significant (Nielsen 1975:350), hence the acceptance of the Germanic interpretation of Russian prehistory. When Lomonosov made his statement about the Normanist view being harmful to the nation, Russia and Sweden had just fought a war. Claiming the enemies of the Empire to be the original founders of the Russian kingdom did not correspond well with the political situation. In connection with the celebration of Russia's 1000-year anniversary, and the nationalistic feelings surrounding this, a large amount of anti-Normanist literature was published. Towards the end of the century, the Normanist theory dominated even in Russia, but in a mild version that did not offend the nationalistic feeling.

With the Marxist historical theory the focus changed to the emergence of a state. The idea of one person founding a state in a particular year became impossible in Marxist history, and suddenly the nation was no longer threatened by the fact of Varangians being Scandinavians, and by their presence for a few hundred years in the early Russian state. The anti-Normanists no longer had to deny the existence of northern elements in prehistoric Russia; they could settle with quick assimilation into Slavic culture. In the 1930s the anti-Normanists' position became more extreme as a result of the Normanists' position becoming more extreme in Western Europe, where Varangians were used as an example of superiority of the Germanic race. Again the Soviet nationalistic feelings were

threatened by the Normanists. “True, only recently German Nazis had recourse to this outworn theory with the aim of proving that the Slavs, including the Russians, are not a people who made their own history – that they are not capable of developing a state or culture” (Grekov 1947:2, 12).

Russia was on the winning side after the Second World War. In the 1950s the scientific climate was more open towards Western research. With a more relaxed political atmosphere in the 1960s and an enlarged international co-operation, the theories of the anti-Normanists and the Normanists became less extreme and opened up for a dialogue across the borders. The problems attracted less attention in Western Europe, and the largest amount of material has been published in Russia.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Normanistic view was no longer considered to be a threat to the national identity, and research within this school resurfaced. The present-day researchers’ emphasis on mixed culture and many ethnic categories united under one common ethnos is in an interesting way coincidental with a political climate of open borders and global perspectives.

### *What is ethnicity?*

Ethnicity is a much debated concept in science. Two main alignments can be seen in the theories of ethnicity: the primordialist and the instrumentalist. According to the primordialists, ethnic groups are defined by objective criteria like geography, language and physical appearance. Ethnicity is absolute and essential, and consequently fixed and static. According to the instrumentalistic view ethnic groups are politically defined interest groups, serving political or economic means. Ethnicity is constantly redefined, fluid and changing (Eriksen 1993:14). In the Soviet Union and Russia the primordialistic approach has dominated among scholars (Shnirelman 1996:1).

Modern scientific theories in Western Europe all view ethnicity as a social and/or political construction. Ethnic groups are perceived to be “categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves” (Barth 1970:10). An ethnic group is a dynamic and constantly changing constructed reality, not possible to determine by objective variables (Cornell & Hartmann 1998:80).

An ethnic group is a group of people who perceive themselves as belonging together through common culture and common descent. Ethnicity emerges around the idea of unity. An actual common descent, traceable in genes or historical factuality, is not important, but the *belief* in common descent (Brass 1991:70).

Most contemporary understandings of ethnicity rest on the Norwegian anthropologist F. Barth’s theoretical framework. According to Barth, ethnic groups emerge with the creation of social boundaries towards other groups of people. It is these boundaries that make the group stress cultural differences and maintain the boundaries through a “limited set of cultural features” (Barth 1970:38).

Ethnic affiliations are guided by the context in which a person or a group finds itself (Eriksen 1998:42f).

Ethnicity is a subjective, personal, self-ascribed identity, but at the same time

it is collective. Ethnicity cannot exist without a community, an ethnic group. Communicating ethnicity is important for maintaining community among the group and for positioning the group against others, and this is done through cultural aspects, some of them material. It is traces from this communication that the archaeologist can find when studying the remains of past cultures.

*Artefacts discussed as ethnically distinguishing*

In the case of Scandinavians in Russia some artefacts have been discussed as ethnically distinguishing. Among these artefacts, jewellery is an important group and especially women's jewellery. The most striking kind of jewellery is the tortoise, or oval, brooches used by Scandinavian women to fasten their dress at the shoulders. Other brooches of Scandinavian origin, such as trefoil and equal armed brooches, are also found in Russia.

The tortoise brooch is the largest group of Scandinavian artefacts in Eastern Europe. It has been suggested that they came into Russia as trading goods, but according to, for example, I. Jansson, their special function in the Scandinavian costume implies that they were worn as a token of ethnic affiliation. The Finno-Ugrians and the Balts had dresses like those of Scandinavian women and could therefore have used the brooches, but Slavic women wore a different kind of dress. On the whole it seems probable that the distribution of tortoise brooches in Russia reflects the inhabitation area of the Scandinavians (Jansson 1987:776ff).

The Carolingian sword is a type common in Viking Age Scandinavia. This type of sword exists all over Europe during the Viking Age, and is often found in graves of Scandinavian type in Russia. Some archaeologists view this sword as Scandinavian in origin, while others believe it is Slavic. Some of the hilts are decorated with Scandinavian patterns, but most swords are rather anonymous. Their existence can support arguments from both sides: "Sword types are no more evidence of Scandinavian colonization in Russia than they are in other European countries where there were no Scandinavians at all" (Artsikhovskiy 1966:176). "It is, however, striking that weapons of types used in Scandinavia are found in the same places as women's brooches and that they are restricted to the same small areas" (Callmer 1971:68).

A special kind of object among the Scandinavian artefacts is the Thor hammer-ring, special because of its obvious function as a pagan cult object. Thor hammer-rings are mainly found in graves of both women and men, but fragments found at settlement sites show that they were used in everyday life as well (Novikova 1992:87). Their crude shape and cheap material make it unlikely that they are trade goods; instead their presence indicates a Scandinavian pagan cult in Russia (Stalsberg 1982:269f). The Thor hammer-rings are also interesting, because they have a much smaller distribution area in Scandinavia than other Scandinavian objects in Russia. They are concentrated to the Åland Islands and the area surrounding Lake Mälaren in Sweden, indicating that the Scandinavian immigrants in Russia came from there (Stalsberg 1979:157).

Pottery has been used by Russian archaeologists as an argument against Scandinavian immigration in Russia. There is no pottery of Scandinavian origin found in Russia (e.g., Artsikhovsky 1966:177). Scandinavian pottery is of rather poor quality in this period, however, and therefore the advocates of Scandinavian immigration have not seen this as a convincing argument (e.g., Blindheim 1970:115). There is an interesting distinction in theory between Soviet and Western Scholars regarding pottery. Among Soviet archaeologists the analysis of decoration and technology of pottery was of great importance in the ethnic discussion (Shnirelman 1996:11). "As every archaeologist knows, pottery, thanks to its mass character, is justly held to be the most important index of cultural development and the most reliable ethnic criterion" (Artsikhovsky 1966:177). In Western theory, where ethnicity is thought not to be an objective but a subjective affiliation, common everyday objects like pottery are not regarded as ethnically distinguishing.

A much discussed group of artefacts are the so-called hybrids, artefacts of Scandinavian type but with "errors", used in the wrong way or with Slavic character. Arne viewed these artefacts as a result of the oriental and Russian influences on the Scandinavians in the colonies in Russia (Arne:62, 228f). These artefacts were used by Normanists as an argument for second or third generation Scandinavians in Russia, who continued the Scandinavian tradition but misinterpreted or forgot the original use and meaning. Other scholars claim these artefacts as evidence against Scandinavian colonies. They must be a result of Scandinavian motifs misunderstood by Slavic craftsmen, as the mistakes are too grave to be made by a Scandinavian craftsman, even by one of the second generation (Artsikhovsky 1966:178; Avdusin 1969:57). Archaeologists of later years tend to consider the objects discussed as hybrids to be nothing other than purely Scandinavian objects (Callmer 1971:68; Jansson 1987:780).

According to the archaeologist N. Price, the discussion of ethnicity not only should include artefacts or graves, but also the surroundings; the landscape is an active participant in the organisation and creation of a society, and therefore it expresses identity (Price 1998:48-56).

Which material objects to be considered as ethnically distinguishing are connected to the theoretical understanding of ethnicity? If ethnic groups are thought to be firm and objectively formed groups of people, as the primordial theory suggests, it is only a question of finding the differentiating cultural features that distinguish an ethnic group. If, on the other hand, ethnicity is thought to be a subjectively created affiliation, the starting point is quite different. Every situation has to be investigated separately, with the questions *if* there were ethnic aspects among a group, and *how* in that case they took their expression. Because of these very different understandings of ethnicity, Soviet/Russian researchers and Western researchers have had a hard time discussing the ethnicity of the cultural groups in Russia. This is also why Russian researchers concentrate on mass-produced materials like pottery, while Western researchers discuss status objects like jewellery.



*Ethnicity and nationalism*

When the civilisation of one or another nation is under discussion, one should consider not only the direct achievements of the given nation, but also the heritage which is received from its ethnic forerunners. (Grekov 1947:1, 13)

Central to the “Varangian problem” is the ethnic identity of the Rus in ancient Russia. It is this question that adds more fuel to the discussion and lets it be constantly debated. Several factors can explain the constant interest in this short period of history.

First of all we are dealing with a time that prepares the ground for the Russian Empire, one of the greatest empires of the world. To admit to foreign interference in these events is to diminish the abilities and importance of the Russian forefathers. The fact that the Slavic tribes are emigrants arriving not long before the Scandinavians puts the legitimacy of the Slavs at question. One also has to consider the traditional conflict between East and West, Slavs and Germans, when looking at this problem. For the Russians the East is as good, or better, than the West and the interpretations should not be allowed to contradict this, while for the Western scholars the foundation of the Russian state by Scandinavians can be seen as proof of the superiority of the Germanic race.

Another important factor is that we are dealing with the “heroes” of Scandinavian history: the Vikings. The Viking Age is considered to be “*Sveriges första storhetstid*” (Nerman 1942), Sweden’s first time of great power, and the Viking carries the flag of the nation high.

Thus, the Varangian problem is connected not only to the Russian nationalistic self-image, but also to the Scandinavian, and particularly the Swedish. The grandness of the state has been important to emphasise and support with scientific arguments.

Thomsen’s book, *The Relations Between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia, and the Origin of the Russian State*, was translated into Swedish in 1882. Already in the Swedish title, *Ryska rikets grundläggning genom skandinaverna*,<sup>3</sup> one gets a picture of the nationalistic Swedish self-image, further illustrated by the words that end the book: “It is the Northmen who laid the foundation on which the native Slavs have raised a colossal superstructure, and the insignificant germ planted by them has developed into one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen” (Thomsen 1877:130).

Thomsen writes in an environment where the “Varangian problem” already is an ongoing debate. In the beginning he refers to, and argues against, the anti-Normanists (Thomsen 1882:15ff). He uses many different arguments to support his opinions, and being scientific is important in his argumentation: “I believe that every impartial judge will come to the conclusion that Nestor is perfectly correct in representing the original Russ as Scandinavians” (Thomsen 1877:86).

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<sup>3</sup> *The Foundation of the Russian State by the Scandinavians* (my translation)

The same kind of “scientifically supported” arguments can be seen all through time, often with the “objective” archaeological material used as evidence.

In the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1947 there is an interview with the Swedish archaeologist T. J. Arne, concerning a lecture held in Helsinki by the Russian professor Mavrodin. Mavrodin claimed that the Vikings did not found the first Russian kingdom in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but that the origins of the first Russian realm can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and that the first state was created in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. This theory, Arne asserts, has no scientific foundation, neither in history nor archaeology, but is founded on nationalistic feelings. “*Den ryska teorin är helt enkelt ett försök att göra historien inhemsk*” (“The Russian theory is quite simply an attempt to make history domestic”, my translation) (DN 26/4 1947).

A rather sharp reply to this article, written by B. Grekov, is found in July the same year in the Russian newspaper *New Times*. Grekov means that the article in DN is as much an attempt to “nationalise history” as it claims the Russian theories to be. The scientific approach in the article in DN is, according to Grekov, outdated. To avoid nationalisation of history, whether Swedish or Russian, one should approach the problem from a modern, objective, scientific standpoint. The new theories concerning the formation of a state together with the historic and archaeological evidence show that the Russian state already existed when Rurik captured power over Kievan Russia. No one is trying to deny the fact that the Varangians played a part in Russian history, but this is a long way away from stating that they founded Russia in 862 (Grekov 1947:2, 12-15). The Russian theory “is not a “nationalistic” invention but a premise based on sound facts” (Grekov 1947:2, 15).

### *Implications of ethnicity in the archaeological material*

My understanding of ethnicity is that it is a subjectively created sense of community. The cultural elements signifying ethnicity vary over time, with the situation and from group to group. This means that each case has to be discussed separately. One cannot make generalisations about ethnicity, or the material expression ethnicity takes, and one cannot use one type of artefact as an indicator of ethnicity. “A type of object might denote status in one generation, ethnicity in the next, and fashion in some other place or point in time”(Wood 1998:300). This makes ethnicity very hard to find in the archaeological material, and many times it can probably not be detected. In some cases, however, it is likely that ethnic identity has been important, for example in contexts with clear confrontations with others, such as trade or immigration.

I consider ethnicity to be a consciousness of being different from others and of belonging together. This consciousness is created in the meeting with others; the confrontation makes people aware of themselves as being alike and kindred, and of others as being different and not belonging. In such situations it is likely that one stresses these similarities to create a stronger sense of community. From

this point of view the situation in Russia is ideal for studying ethnic expressions in material culture.

The problem with ethnicity is that political motivations control ethnic reasoning, and that ethnic interpretations in archaeology have political consequences; ethnicity used in this way is not a useful concept for science. Talking about ethnic identity in relation to archaeology, two different forms of ethnic identity can be considered: the prehistoric ethnic identity, and the present ethnic identity based on prehistory. The wish to find ethnic identity is often combined with a desire to find a historically based identity in the present. Questions of prehistoric identity seem to attract the most interest when they have relevant use in contemporary society.

The idea of historical continuity is central to the concept of ethnicity. Ethnic groups search for their roots in history, to provide them with historical authenticity in the present. A sense of security is created through a connection with the people before us, the ancestors. The relationship between the present and the past is one-sided, however. History is a contemporary construction, which gives us the opportunity to trace our roots back whichever way we please. The definition of an ethnic group is constantly changing and being renegotiated, and with the cultural boundaries kept more or less intact, creating a sense of continuity. This continuity is a contemporary construction. Tracing an ethnic group back in time is therefore not possible in the way ethnic and nationalistic movements want it to be.

Archaeology plays an important role in the construction of identities, both cultural and national. History gives authenticity to – and legitimises – the present. “Nations without pasts are a contradiction in terms and archaeology has been one of the principal suppliers for constructing pasts in the modern struggles for nationhood” (Rowlands 1997:132). But past ethnic identities have to be distinguished from present ethnic sentiments in scientific discussions. In the case of the Scandinavians in Russia, it has been a battle between nations; the ethnic groups have been treated as if they carry a nationality, and the interpretation of their actions has consequences in the present. This, however, is an anachronistic perspective on history. There can be no nationalities if there are no nations, and the Vikings of the ninth century are as foreign to me, a Swede in the 21st century, as the Slavs of the ninth century. Scandinavia and Russia can be seen as nothing else than geographical conceptions, necessary for us to use for communication but not having any of the attributes we have given them today. The Norsemen who came to the Russian lands were not Scandinavians, and they were certainly not Swedes, no more than the Slavic tribes they encountered in the East were Russians.

*English revised by Laura Wrang.*

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