FROM GOTHSES TO VARANGIANS
COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE BALTIC AND THE BLACK SEA
Edited by Line Bjerg, John H. Lind & Søren M. Sindbæk
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Finds of Byzantine origin from the early urban centre Gnezdovo in the light of the contacts between Rus’ and Constantinople (10th – early 11th centuries AD)

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Introduction

Political and commercial contacts between Byzantium and Rus’ in the 10th – early 11th centuries AD are attested by written sources and by Byzantine imports comprising numismatic and sigillographic finds, rare luxury goods and Christian cult items. However, it is impossible to assess the intensity of these contacts without a detailed examination of the various kinds of objects that survive from the graves and early towns from the Viking Age. There are two major problems from an archaeological viewpoint. One is the lack of a recent corpus of the objects displaying Byzantine traits from old and new excavations in Russia and the Ukraine. The second problem is that the identification of finds of a clearly Byzantine character, apart from the coins, seals and restricted types of clay vessels, is hampered by our limited knowledge of archaeological material from the Byzantine Empire.

It appears that most evidence for trade and diplomatic contacts between Rus’ and Byzantium comes from Kiev, which was the main residence of the Grand Prince of the Old Russian state. This is true for the period from the 11th to the mid-13th centuries AD. In spite of the well-known and better documented connections between Kiev and Constantinople in the 10th century AD, the objects of Byzantine origin are comparatively rare in the early settlements and graves excavated in the territory of the Old Rus’ capital.

Moving to the Upper Dnieper region, a surprising number of objects of Byzantine origin have been found in the burial mounds and settlements at Gnezdovo. Some unique items from the Gnezdovo cemetery have been known for a long time, such as the famous amphora with a Cyrillic inscription, but many more have not been published yet. The aim of this paper is to present some initial results arising from a study of the surviving objects of Byzantine origin found at the early urban site Gnezdovo.
The Early urban site Gnezdovo according to the archaeological evidence

The Gnezdovo archaeological complex is situated on the banks of the river Dnieper, c.12 km west of the present city of Smolensk. It consisted originally of over 4000 barrow graves dating from the late 9th to the early 11th centuries AD, and several settlements covering more than 30 hectares combined (Fig. 1). The central hillfort, which is dated mainly from the early 10th to the middle 11th centuries, is located on a high outlier above a small tributary of Dnieper. It is surrounded on all sides by open settlements of the same period on the area of the upper river terrace, as well as in the lower floodplain terrain. About 7000 m² of the central settlements have been explored through annual excavations since 1967. A second hillfort of uncertain age and less extensive open settlement remains are situated at the mouth of the river Ol'sha.

The Central and Forest cemeteries, which in the recent past numbered 769 and 1340 burial mounds respectively, are the largest groups surrounding the central hillfort and open settlements on the banks of Svineč river. Five small cemeteries with c.100-150 mounds were located in other parts of the complex. The cemeteries situated at the furthest distance are about 4 km west of the central settlements (Zaolsanska kaja group) and on the left bank of the Dnieper (the Left-bank group). Today more than 1200 graves have been excavated from all eight cemeteries combined; c.1500 burial-mounds remain unexcavated. The total area of the Gnezdovo complex is about 200 hectares.

The name “Gnezdovo” first attracted the attention of historians and archaeologists in 1867 when the famous hoard with luxury silver ornaments from the second half of the 10th century AD was discovered during railroad constructions. The long-lasting excavations have revealed that the earliest settled area was in the south-western part of the central hillfort, at the open settlement west of the Svineč river and at the flood-plain terrain. From the very beginning Gnezdovo was settled by Scandinavians, Slavs and a local population belonging to the Long-barrow culture.

The finds from the excavations of the settlements and graves show that the Gnezdovo population played an important role in a network of trade and communication routes between the Baltic and the East via the Oka and Volga river systems and between the Baltic and Black Seas, controlling the portages from the Dniepr to the Western Dvina and the Lovat’-Volchov. Many authors regard Gnezdovo as a “service station” for travellers between the northern riverways and the Dnieper. It is often argued that the population of Gnezdovo was unstable with “influx or return flow” of travellers dependent on the change of seasons. However, a detailed analysis has revealed a stable demographic structure of the Gnezdovo population based on the calculated proportion of male, female and infant burials. The combined permanent population of the settlements averaged around 800-1100 people. This is evidence against the interpretation of Gnezdovo as a mere seasonal trading and production site. Extensive iron working, non-ferrous and precious metalwork-
Finds of Byzantine origin from the early urban centre Gnedzovo


ing, pottery manufacturing, bone and antler working testifies to the stationary character of the local production. The osteological collection and samples of cultivated plants, together with the rise of indicators of human economic activity in palynological diagrams, show the important role of pasture farming and plant cultivation in the economy of Gnedzovo. Reaching a zenith during the 10th century AD, Gnedzovo grew as an early urban centre, inhabited by
a multi-ethnic population of craftsmen, farmers, merchants and warriors. In
the 11th century AD Gnezdovo was succeeded by Smolensk. Gradually it lost
its importance as a trading and handicraft centre and became a small estate,
eexisting up to the turn of the 11th – 12th centuries.
An impressive collection of artefacts found during the excavations
comprises objects of various origins. A remarkable quantity of oriental silver is
concentrated in the eleven hoards and in the cultural layers of Gnezdovo
settlements. There are numerous finds of belts and belt fittings from
Khazaria, Hungary and the Middle Dnieper area but mostly from Volga Bulgaria.
Gnezdovo is notable for the largest quantity of genuine Scandinavian objects
outside the Nordic countries. A modest group of artefacts indicates
connections to more distant Slavic groups and comprises finds from the Middle
Dnieper left bank (Romenskaja culture) and Central Europe (Great Moravia).
Some rare, exotic objects are of Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Iranian origin. Recent
finds from the excavations and careful re-examination of the old material
give us an opportunity to evaluate the different groups of objects that came
to Gnezdovo as a result of direct and indirect contacts with Byzantium.

Numismatic finds

The objects showing the most obvious Byzantine origin are the coins. Two
coin hoards and nine hoards of coins combined with ornaments have been
found in Gnezdovo. The hoards contain more than 1100 Arabic dirhams, but
none struck in the Byzantine Empire. The settlements and graves, however,
have yielded a number of Byzantine coins. The latest calculation gives the
following statistics on Byzantine coins in Gnezdovo (Table 1).

Twenty five Byzantine copper coins came from the central settlements. The
earliest is a follis issued by the mint of Cherson and attributed to the reign of
Justin I (AD 518-527). The latest copper coin belongs to the last quarter of the
10th – first quarter of the 11th century AD. Eleven coins were issued in
Constantinople and Cherson in the 9th century AD; five of these are attributed to
the reign of Theophilus (AD 829-842). Coins issued in the 6th – 9th century
AD were circulated for a long time before they were deposited in the cultural
layers or graves. Twenty two coins belong to the late 9th – 10th century AD;
seventeen of these are of copper.

Looking at Table 1 one can see that the folles dominate the Gnezdovo selec-
tion although they were not used as a means of payment outside the areas
of effective Byzantine control. In spite of the fact that these coins would seem
to be useless, they could be reused in several ways in the “barbarian” early
towns north of the Empire’s border. Byzantine copper coins could have been
carried to the local metal workshop as a source of raw material for melting
down in the crucibles, or to be transformed to female pendants with presti-
gious Christian symbols. About one third of folles found in Gnezdovo were
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Table 1. Byzantine coins from Gnezdovo.
M. McCormick assumes that “copper coins could be lost by travellers, individuals who had spent time in towns where the bronze coins were in use”.\textsuperscript{17} The 10th-century AD Book of the Prefect recorded rigid regulations for the moneychangers. It was ordered to give twenty-four folles for one milliareion. Exchange of gold coins to the lower denominations was complicated at the Byzantine markets because of the shortage of copper coins.\textsuperscript{18} Possibly the folles found in Gnezdovo played a role as “reserved” money for future small purchasing at the markets of Constantinople.

Three gold, five silver and one copper coins were transformed into female jewellery and placed in rich single female or double graves. Gold was considered the most precious metal in Byzantium. The stream of Greek gold to Rus’ was limited by the strict rules on the manufacture and sale of gold objects established by the imperial administration and recorded in the Book of the Prefect.\textsuperscript{19} Coins of precious metals were brought from Byzantium by the nobility, warriors and merchants engaged in long distance trading expeditions to Constantinople. Every emissary of princes and notables as well as merchants accompanying Princess Olga to a court reception in Constantinople was granted the value of twelve silver coins or one nomisma as ambassadorial salary.\textsuperscript{20} Minted gold and silver from Byzantium was not used as a means of payment in Rus’; the coins were deposited in hoards and graves or employed in jewellery as a form of wealth or status display.\textsuperscript{21}

Byzantine coins are very rare in the north-west Russia even in such flourishing trading centres as Staraja Ladoga, Rjurikovo Gorodišče and Novgorod. Relatively modest quantities of Byzantine coins are found in hoards deposited throughout Russia and areas around the Baltic Sea from the 9th – first half of the 11th centuries AD. Single coins issued by the mint of the Emperors in the 8th – 9th centuries AD occur in dirham hoards deposited in the 9th century AD. Byzantine coins issued after the first decade of the 10th century AD have been found alongside oriental and West European coins in the thirty-five hoards, deposited mostly in the northwestern regions of Russia and Estonia.\textsuperscript{22}

Byzantine coins are comparatively rare in the 10th – 11th century AD graves. It has been calculated that 1318 coins have been found in 603 graves from the territory of Old Rus’. Merely forty eight of these are Byzantine coinage. The rest were struck in the Caliphate, Western Europe, or Rus’. Silver coins transformed into jewellery dominate in this group.\textsuperscript{23} They are attributed to the reigns of Leo VI the Wise (AD 886-912), Constantine VII, with Romanos I (AD 920-944), Constantine VII, with Romanos II (AD 945-959), John I Tzimisces (AD 969-976), Basil II, with Constantine VIII (AD 976-1025). The earliest coins from the graves, issued by Leo VI, have been found in Kiev, Šestovica and Gnezdovo. This data has been supplemented by two silver coins remodelled into pendants from the female chamber-grave found in Pskov in 2003 (Romanos I AD 920-944 and Constantine VII, with Romanos II (AD 945-959).\textsuperscript{24} Four copper coins issued in Cherson were placed into a leather purse belonging to a rich Scandinavian warrior (Basil I, AD 867-886; Leo VI, AD 890s; Leo VI
and Alexander I, AD 908-912; Constantine VII and Helen, AD 920). They were found in a chamber grave excavated in Kiev in 2002. Two rare gold coins of Alexander and Constantine VII (AD 912-913), both struck in Constantinople and originating from a female grave found at the central hillfort at Gnezdovo in 1940 (Fig. 2). According to the publication of C. Morrison, the issue of these gold coins was very limited because of the short reign of Alexander: only a dozen of Alexander’s nomisma are known from numismatic collections.

Based on the pattern of coin distribution we can conclude that there is a clear predominance of coins issued in Byzantium in the late 9th and the first two decades of the 10th centuries AD in the graves and cultural layers of the Middle and Upper Dnieper regions. By contrast, minted silver from Byzantium issued after AD 945 was deposited in the graves of north-west Rus’ no earlier than by the end of the 10th – early 11th centuries AD. This may suggest that the local population took parts in Prince Vladimir’s raids on Byzantium in the eighties of the 10th century AD. Probably many of the coins were used as pendants with their Christian symbols.

The pattern of finds of copper, silver and gold coins of Leo VI and his immediate successors “may offer a clue as to when the Rus’ first obtained the right to trade regularly directly in Constantinople’s markets”. It seems reasonable to expect that the stream of the Byzantine coins to Rus’ would be increased after the first decade of the 10th century AD, when the treaties with the Greeks, specifying the terms under which the Rus’ were allowed to trade in Constantinople, were concluded. However, there are no reasons to link these
finds directly with the negotiators mentioned in the treaties of AD 907 and 911, since the greater part of this group of Byzantine coins were deposited in graves in the middle or second half of the 10th century AD.\textsuperscript{30}

\textit{Lead seals}

The list of objects of Byzantine origin from Gnezdovo continues with four lead seals. They were found recently at the Central hillfort (three examples) and in the western part of the open settlement (one example). A preliminary assessment of these seals was carried out by Dr E. Stepanova from the Numismatic Department of State Hermitage in Saint Petersburg.

The very poor preservation of metal does not allow an exact identification of two of the seals. One of the two identifiable items originates from undisturbed layers in a pit dated to the second half of the 10th – early 11th century AD, investigated at the central hillfort. In spite of the bad preservation of the seal (it was broken in two halves along the channel), it seems to carry an image of the Virgin or a saint in half-length on the obverse and a depiction of Christ on the reverse. It is probably from the 10th century AD. Two small holes on both sides of the seal testify that it had seen secondary use (Fig. 3.1). The Byzantine affinity of the archaeological assemblage in question is demonstrated by several amphora fragments found in the same stratigraphic layer. Another 10th century AD seal with a secondary perforation in the centre was found by accident in the same area of the hillfort. Its obverse bears a cross with fleurons mounted on three steps and traces of an encircling inscription with a standard invocation formula ("Lord, help your slave..."). The inscription on the reverse reveals six lines with the titles of a high-ranking official (Fig.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{led-seals.jpg}
\caption{Lead seals from the central hillfort with an image of the Virgin in half-length (D 24.5 mm).}
\end{figure}
3.2). The owner of the seal was *patrikios, chrysotriklinos* and imperial *sakellarios*. According to the seal's decoration it is most likely dated to the second half of the 10th century AD. The third seal (less than one half) is a surface find from the eastern part of the open settlement (Fig. 3.3). Its obverse bears a depiction of a patriarchal cross with tree branches growing from the base and traces of an encircling inscription. The traces of inscription on the reverse reveal five lines.
Lead seals were used in Byzantium by civil, military and ecclesiastical officials of all ranks at every level of the central and provincial administration.\textsuperscript{31} The official titles found on the seal from Gnezdovo point to a very high-ranking person belonging to civic administration in Constantinople. It testifies that Byzantine officials of high status were in communication with the distant emporium on the Upper Dnieper for the establishment of diplomatic or trade contacts.

Byzantine seals are very rare in Viking-age Scandinavia and Rus’. Very similar seals of the Byzantine official Theodosius (middle 9th century AD) were found at Hedебу, Ribe and Tisso. This is evidence that a high-ranking Byzantine envoy “may have been in northern Europe to recruit mercenaries or to buy iron for the Byzantine army, which had suffered great defeats in the Near East shortly before this”\textsuperscript{32}.

The earliest Byzantine seal in the Old Rus’ territory came possibly from Rjurikovo Gorodischë. According to V. Bulgakova’s, identification the 9th-century AD seal belonged to spatharius and domestikos Leon recruiting mercenaries in the North.\textsuperscript{33} Apart from those in Gnezdovo three 10th-century AD seals with the names of Byzantine high-ranking officials came from Kiev.\textsuperscript{34} Two lead seals and a stamp for sealing with wax occur in Šestovica, situated on the right bank of the Desna River 18 km south of Černigov. One of the lead seals from Šestovica belonged to a high official (logothetes) usually in charge of the fiscal duty. It was found at the settlement in a 12th-century AD context, but according to identification of V. Bulgakova the seal was issued in the narrow period from AD 900 up to 912. She suggests that this item is evidence of commercial activity of the Rus’ in the Black Sea trade region after the first treaties with the Greeks.\textsuperscript{35} The second seal, found in a 10th-century AD context during excavations in 2005, has not been identified yet.\textsuperscript{36} A pyramid-shaped stamp of copper alloy with a tiny loop at the apex for suspension and bearing an image of Christ in half-length was found in chamber-grave 61, which is dated no earlier than the middle of the 10th century AD.\textsuperscript{37} In contrast to the lead items, wax seals were used for sealing a variety of household objects employing a signet ring or a cone seal.\textsuperscript{38} The cone seals dated to the 6th-13th centuries are known from the territories of the Eastern Mediterranean, Balkans, Asia Minor and Syria.\textsuperscript{39} Possibly, the cone stamp from Šestovica was brought from Byzantium or Bulgaria as a souvenir with a depiction of prestigious Christian symbol and placed in the grave of a child from the upper strata of the local population.

It is quite possible that the Byzantine lead seals are good indications of the direct contacts with the Byzantine Empire. The finds from Kiev, Šestovica and Gnezdovo are evidence of Byzantine officials or their envoys travelling along the Dnieper in the 10th century AD.
Byzantine amphorae

Byzantine amphorae were spread widely across the Old Rus' territory from the 11th century AD. They served in the first instance to transport wine and oil, and were convenient as a defined standard volume for exchanges. Once brought to Rus' the amphorae saw secondary use for long-term storage of foodstuffs and goods. It appears that 10th-century AD finds are rare in graves and cultural layers. Extensive investigations in early Russian towns and settlements have produced increasing amounts of single amphorae shards and profile pieces.

The most famous amphora from Gnezdovo was found in 1949 in burial mound 13 situated in the forest mound group. This vessel, which was smashed during the burial ceremony, has a Cyrillic inscription on the shoulder (Fig. 4.1). The inscription indicates that the vessel belonged to a man with the Slavic name GOROUN.\(^{40}\) The vessel type – short-necked orange clay vessels with small handles attached to the rim and body – belongs to the so called “North Pontic” group produced in the Black Sea provinces of Byzantium from the 8th to the 11th century AD. Rare fragments of “North Pontic” amphorae are known from Middle Dnieper settlements and from sites of the Romenskaja culture on the left bank of Dnieper from the 9th – 10th centuries AD. A single sherd of this type occurs at the Timerevo settlement in the Yaroslavl' region on the Upper Volga.\(^{41}\)

The date attributed to mound 13 varies from the first decade to the middle of the 10th century AD. The assemblage is that of a rich cremation grave con-
taining a man, two women and a horse together with a boat. Following the most recent revision it seems reasonable to place the find in the second quarter or even the mid-10th century AD.\(^42\) It is also clear that the last owner of the amphora, who was buried in the mound, was of Scandinavian origin. He was supplied with a broken sword and an iron neck-ring with a Thor’s hammer. This burial is notable for the concentration of valuable objects showing clear Byzantine origin. Apart from the amphora there was a small glazed jug and the oil lamp’s glass handle plate. They indicate that the buried man took part in trade or military raids to Byzantium.

Nearly 50 amphorae fragments have been excavated in various parts of the Gnezdovo settlement recently. There are identifiable profile pieces of one vessel found in the sheds or storehouses at the landing site near the Dnieper shore.\(^43\) The amphora belongs to class I according to N. Günserin’s typology (Fig. 4.2). These amphorae were possibly produced at Ganos on the Marmara Sea coast of Anatolia, in monastic centers in the Byzantine capital or in the south-eastern Pontic region of Trapezunt.\(^44\) The type comprises short-necked amphorae with small D-shaped handles attached to the rim and the body, which is approximately pear-shaped.\(^45\) The amphorae of this type dominate among the fragments excavated at the central hillfort, in the eastern part of the open settlement and in the lower floodplain terrain (Fig. 4.3-4).

These Middle Byzantine amphorae dating from the 9th to 11th centuries AD could be imported to Rus’ between c. AD 900 and the 1070s. They are well represented in Šestoviča and at the rural settlements between Černigov and Šestoviča from the second half 10th – 11th century AD.\(^46\) 10th-century AD finds are known from Kiev and Rurikovo Gorodišče.\(^47\) Amphorae fragments occur
in Staraja Ladoga in “Horizon D” dated to c. AD 930 – c. 970 and in Novgorod around AD 960s. Relatively rare finds of the amphorae in 10th-early 11th century archaeological contexts points to the small number of the imported products’ consumers. The rise of the amphorae fragments in the cultural layers of various parts of the Gnezdovo settlement points to the high ‘quality of life’ of the local inhabitants. These items reflect mainly transportation of “archaeologically invisible” goods. However grape seeds arriving with Greek wine have been identified in the archaeobotanical materials from the eastern part of the open settlement.

Byzantine amphorae are supposed to be significant markers of economic exchanges. They are represented by a few fragments and one complete vessel from Gnezdovo in the first half of the 10th century AD. Based on the chrono-
logical distribution of amphorae finds we may assume that trade between Rus' and Byzantium did not become intense before the second half of the 10th – first half of the 11th century AD.

**Byzantine glazed white-wares**

The 10th-century AD glazed white-wares are very rare. The distribution pattern of glazed Byzantine pottery was recently summarised by V. Koval'. According to his assessment, there are twenty one finds belonging to the earliest group, which is dated to the 10th – late 11th centuries AD. These are found in Kiev, Novgorod, Vyšgorod, Gnezdovo and Staraja Rjazan'. About five fragments recently published from Šestovica and from the small settlements Avtunyči and Liskovoe in the Černigov vicinity also belong to this group. A remarkable concentration of Byzantine glazed pottery occurs in Gnezdovo. This group comprises identifiable fragments of dishes on low ring bases (3 examples), cups (3 examples), and jugs (4 examples), all dated to the second part of the 10th century AD. A single vessel found in a grave (mound 13) is also from the second quarter – mid-10th century AD.

The glazed white wares have a characteristic white or pink clay fabric; the white surfaces are decorated with polychrome painted geometric or floral designs under a thin transparent glaze. The most elaborate and expensive polychrome vessels were produced individually in Constantinople or near the city from the 7th century until at least AD 1200. Polychrome ware forms a small sub-group (175 fragments) of the glazed white ware (20,000 fragments) found
at excavations in Sarachane in Istanbul. The local production was proved by the results of chemical analysis of white clay extracted from the immediate vicinity of Istanbul.\textsuperscript{52} The few polychrome vessels from Gnezdovo have no close parallels among the genuine white wares, which are distributed widely, but "thinly" across the Empire and most of the area under Byzantine control including Bulgaria and Crimea. The most unusual dish bears an image of *semurol*, a mythical creature with a dog’s head, a lion’s paws and wings (Fig. 5.1). Such an animal may have served as a symbol of royalty or divine protection in Sassanian tradition. Near Eastern motifs appeared in Byzantine decorative arts from the 7th century AD, as testified first of all by the silks which have survived in church treasuries in Western Europe and in the 9th-century AD burials from Moščevaja Balka in the Caucasus.\textsuperscript{53}

The *Semurol* dish in Gnezdovo was found in 1885 in a cremation grave in mound 20, one of the biggest and richest mounds excavated in the Central group of the Gnezdovo cemetery. Another fragment of a polychrome white-ware dish came from the damaged inhumation grave 18(86) excavated in the same Central group in 1901 (Fig. 5.2).\textsuperscript{54} A small fragment of a bowl with checkerboard design was found in the flood-plain settlement.\textsuperscript{55}

An almost complete white-ware cup from an unidentified grave excavated
in the 19th century has a ring-shaped handle and a small ring base (Fig. 5.3). Fragments of glazed white-ware polychrome cups were found in the rich chamber-grave Ol-30 and in the cultural layer of the western part of the open settlement (Fig.5.4). They were decorated with identical floral patterns and cross symbols. It appears that cups with crosses filled with milk and honey

Fig. 5.3. White-ware polychrome cup from indefinable grave excavated in the 19th century (H 88 mm D 74 mm).
Fig. 5.4. Glazed white-ware polychrome cups from the rich chamber-grave Ol-30.

may have been used for christening of adults. A glazed liturgical cup with a cross image, dated to the late 10th century AD, was found in Novgorod.56

A small jug with trefoil mouth coated with yellow-green glaze was placed in a burial urn found in the same mound 13 as the amphorae with Cyrillic inscription (Fig. 5.5). Another fragment (handle) of the glazed yellow-green jug was found in the female cremation grave 317 in the Central group (Fig. 5.6). It contains a penannular brooch, antler comb, beads, knife and the silver temple ring.

Fig. 5.5. Small jug with trefoil mouth coated with yellow-green glaze from mound 13 in the Forest group (D 80 mm).
suggested the Slavic origin of the buried woman. She was supplied with one hand-formed vessel and three wheel thrown pots. The wheel thrown ceramic appeared in Gnezdovo in the second quarter or even in the mid-10th century. Two fragments of simple white-glazed jugs come from the excavations of the central hillfort and the flood-plain settlement. The domestic pottery was not as valuable as the polychrome vessels, but when brought to Gnezdovo from Byzantium it nevertheless became luxury tableware for luxury wine or oil.

High-quality glazed pottery, which is definitely to be classified as luxury goods, available only to the aristocracy and to the richest merchants, came to Gnezdovo in spite of the difficulties imposed by sea and land transport of such fragile objects. Its dissemination was probably related to diplomatic exchange rather than trade. Possibly the Christian symbols played a role in the pattern of exchange. The glazed pottery is a certain indicator of the high social and economic status of the men buried in the four richest mounds of Gnezdovo.

Silk and passementerie

Byzantine influence is also discernible in certain elements of dress. Despite the poor preservation of organic materials in the mounds constructed of alluvial sand, six rich male and female inhumation graves with silk remains have been found in Gnezdovo. Eight graves with gold and silver threads and gold-thread buttons were found among the other inhumation and cremation burials (Fig. 6.1). They have clear parallels in the rich Birka graves 329, 520, 561 and 944. Burned silk and tiny remains of gold threads were also found in the excavations in the central hillfort. A preliminary study by M. Fechner
and O. Orfinskaja allows a provisional assessment of the surviving silks based on technical details of manufacture and designs. The silk fabrics have been classified as Chinese, Central Asian, Iranian and Byzantine. Some tablet-woven bands decorated with silver threads are of Byzantine origin.

A ribbon-like band formed part of the female headgear in the rich chamber grave 198, excavated in the central group of the Gnezdovo cemetery (Fig. 6.2). Fragments of bands from two male chamber graves were supplied with ten and twenty-four copper-alloy buttons respectively. They belong to oriental caftan-like garments, which were adopted at the Byzantine court from at least 9th century AD onward. The front part of a caftan from chamber grave Dn-4 consist of bands with loops made out of reused pieces of Byzantine silk (Fig. 6.3). According to the find assemblage and four dendro-dates obtained for this burial, it belongs to the last quarter of the 10th century AD. The same
dates are assumed for graves with the silk remains from Kiev and Pskov. The rich, furnished chamber graves with luxury silk garments from Kiev, Černigov, Šestoviča, Gnezdovo, Timerevo and Pskov often contain Christian symbols such as wax candles and silver crosses. These finds show clear evidence of the dissemination of Christianity among the small group of high-ranking Scandinavians, who were directly connected with the Byzantine Empire. Christian influences in textiles from aristocratic graves of the 10th-century AD have also been traced in twenty-two burials in Denmark and Northern Germany, Birka and Valsgärde in Sweden.

Silk was a most coveted product, valued as highly as gold by the Rus’. It was a product acquired from the markets of Constantinople, since neither Western Europe nor the Slavs produced any silk of their own. According to the Book of the Prefect, its manufacture and trade was controlled, and its quality guaranteed by the state. However, the flow of silks into Europe increased in the 10th century in spite of restrictions on foreign trade in Byzantine silk. The cost of precious textiles bought by the Rus’ could not exceed 50 nomisma. The Russo-Byzantine treaty of AD 944 refers to inspection and sealing of silks exported from Constantinople by imperial officials (PVL.233). They could acquire silks also in the form of official gifts or tribute. As imperial gifts, silks were an important element of Byzantine foreign policy. Princess Olga was granted many gifts such as gold and silver together with silks and vessels at a court reception in Constantinople in AD 955 besides an ambassadorial salary of 500 miliaresion placed on a gold dish (PVL.241-242).

A very peculiar find from one of the richest graves, Ol-30, is evidence of female Byzantine garments. The organic remains and grave goods suggest
that this large chamber grave from the second part of the 10th century AD held two men and two women buried with two horses. The finds included about 100 glass decorations of various colours and shapes which, judging by their compact position in the chamber, had originally been sewn onto a fabric. Some of them were evidently cut from fragmented glass vessels (Fig. 7.1). Gold threads were also detected in this grave (Fig. 7.2). A possible model for the reconstruction of the dress in the burial is provided by a 10th-century marble icon of Saint Eudocia from the Constantine Lips Monastery in Constantinople. The colorful figure of woman was decorated with inlaying with red, green and blue rectangular pieces of glass set into a stone matrix (Fig. 8). The garments denote her imperial status. The costumes of the emperor or empress were rendered valuable not only by their silk but by the large
number of gems and gold embroidery used to adorn the fabric. Possibly the glass fittings in grave Ol-30 were substitutes for such precious stones that decorated the silk garments. They were produced in Byzantine workshops as special “export only” clothing for made for trade with or diplomatic gifts to the barbarians. A similar luxury dress was found in the rich female grave 49 (1999) in Kiev. In this case there were twenty seven blue, brown and yellow mounts cut from glass vessels.71

Several separate mounts of mica, glass or colorless “mirror” lead-glass framed by gold or silver threads were found in several female graves in Birka: near the head (Bj 559); on a pouch with embroidery (Bj 735) and on silk fabric decorated with passementerie (Bj 832).72 There are also triangular pendants with silver-thread borders and gold and glass insertions from the Ladby ship-grave excavated in north-eastern Funen.73 These pieces may have been used as small pendants to a silk caftan. Similar decorations are known from
the Christian tradition as a part of the ceremonial priests' garment bordered with gold bells along the hems.  

We have seen that silk garments with gold and silver embroidery were in vogue from the second half of the 10th century AD, both in Scandinavia and Rus'. The flow of luxury textile was closely related to the diplomatic and trade activity of Rus' in Constantinople, as well as to Christian influence from the Byzantine Empire during the 10th century AD. Clearly, further work is required in order to characterise the silk and precious metal threads from Gnezdovo and from Old Rus' as a whole. Such analyses must be based on a systematic comparison of textiles found in Russia, Ukraine and Scandinavia and examples indisputably manufactured in Byzantium, the Moslem lands and China.

Reliquary crosses

Two copper-alloy encolpia cast in two separate pieces and hinged at top and bottom, which allowed the cross to be opened to expose the relic, have been found in the western part of the Gnezdovo settlement; the third one came

Fig. 9.1. Reliquary cross. Encolpion with engraved depiction of Saint John the Baptist on the one side and the Virgin of the Sign with the Child on the back found at the excavations of western part of the settlement.
from the recent excavations of the flood-plain area. Two of these encolpia were separated in the process of conservation; their fillings were investigated with infrared spectroscopy and microscopic analysis in reflected light, but no traces of relics (bone, wood or textile fibres) were revealed. One encolpion is engraved on the front with a full-length standing depiction of John the Baptist in a posture of prayer with the name IOANHC inscribed above the head; the back shows an image of the Virgin of the Sign with the Child (Fig. 9.1). It may have been produced in Chersonesos, in Byzantine provinces in Syria and Asia Minor or in the Balkans in the second half of the 10th century AD. A heavily corroded cast cross, a simpler form of double-sided encolpion, shows a depiction of the crucified Christ wearing a long sleeveless tunic (colobium) on the front; the back shows the “Virgin Orans” – a depiction of the Virgin Mary in prayer with extended arms (Fig. 9.2). Based on their stylistic and iconographic features, these “small” encolpia have often been dated to the 9th century AD. Examples from excavated sites in Thrace and elsewhere in the Balkans are believed to date up to the 11th or even 12th century AD. Certainly they were
manufactured in more than one Byzantine center, including the territory of the First Bulgarian Kingdom.\textsuperscript{76}

The third reliquary cross was found in layers dated to the late 10th – beginning of the 11th century AD. The two outer sides are decorated with scenes in relief. The front shows the Crucifixion: Christ, wearing a cothurnium, is shown standing, his head resting on his right shoulder; he is flanked by bust-length images of the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist. Schematic bust-length depictions of unknown Saints appear above and below the Crucifixion. The back
of the reliquary shows the Virgin Orans surrounded by four bust-length portraits of unidentified saints, presumably the Four Evangelists (Fig. 9.3). This particular type of encoplia was produced in the Balkan-Danube region mainly in the 10-11th centuries AD. Precise parallels are known from Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.77

All three reliquary crosses from Gnezdovo belong to types which were widespread throughout the European part of Byzantine Empire. They can be regarded as the earliest encoplia in Old Rus’ along with a reliquary cross without depictions from Staraja Ladoga from the first quarter of the 10th century AD.78 Further finds of almost the same age in Russia and Ukraine include a silver cross dated to the second half of the 10th – first half of the 11th century AD from the cultural layers of the Old Russian city Uglič situated on the Upper Volga and a cross found in a warrior’s chamber grave dated to the late 10th – first half of the 11th century AD in Podgorcy, Western Ukraine. This place is also known from the Primary Chronicle as Plesnesk.79

The finds of Byzantine reliquary crosses are often discussed in relation to the initial process of Christianisation in Old Rus’ before the official baptism in AD 988/989. The lack of narrow dates for all encoplia except the piece from Staraja Ladoga makes it difficult to estimate when they were brought to Rus’ – before or after the official Christianisation.

The corpus of artefacts indicating a Christian presence in Gnezdovo comprises three reliquary crosses, seven cross-pendants of sheet silver (five graves) and cast copper-alloy crosses (two graves), two cast silver crosses of “Scandinavian” type (hoard, hillfort), four graves with wax candles and a small wax cross, and seventeen Byzantine coins with Christian symbols remodeled as pendants. They were found in five chamber-graves and four inhumations in burials belonging mainly to prosperous men and women of Scandinavian origin. In spite of the Christian symbols, these graves were furnished according to pagan rituals. This fact is often regarded as evidence of syncretism before the official Christianisation.80 The population of Gnezdovo was accompanied by a great quantity and variety of the pagan amulets during their life and after death. In spite of the small part of the Gnezdovo elite which was involved in the initial process of Christianisation, pagan beliefs dominated in the religious views of the local society up to the end of its existence in the early 11th century AD.81

Luxury objects of antler

A fragmented spoon with an oval-shaped bowl and partially preserved handle was cut from a single piece of antler by a skillful craftsman. The junction of bowl and handle is decorated on the back surface with a small animal figure. There is also a shallow lengthwise groove on the back side of the bowl (Fig. 10). We know of at least nine examples of bone and silver spoons from graves found in Kiev, Birka and Sollested in Denmark; these spoons, however, have
Fig. 10. Antler spoon from the rich female grave (central hillfort).

round and shallow bowls and wide massive handles with geometric patterns, and thus look very different from the Gnezdovo item.⁹² The closest parallels to the Gnezdovo spoon derive from the excavations in Corinth and are dated to the Middle Byzantine period.⁹³ The shape of the spoons from Corinth and Gnezdovo is not suitable for eating; neither is antler a good material for everyday use. It appears that this particular type of spoon was not used for the Byzantine sacrament of bread dipped in the Eucharistic wine.⁹⁴ According to written sources, spoons are known as pilgrim badges from the 6th to 7th centuries.⁹⁵ However, the absence of Christian symbols does not allow an attribution of the Gnezdovo spoon as the pilgrim relic. Perhaps it was brought from Byzantium to Gnezdovo as a prestigious souvenir. Finally, the spoon was placed in a rich female grave from the second half of the 10th century AD at the central Gnezdovo hillfort. The Byzantine connection of this burial is also testified by two gold coins (pendants) struck in Constantinople in AD 912. A jewellery set found in this burial is one of the richest in Eastern and Northern Europe. It comprises six gold pendants and a round silver brooch of Terslev type decorated with filigree and granulation.⁹⁶
A famous category of Byzantine luxury goods of the Middle Byzantine period is the so-called ivory or bone “rosette” caskets. Ivory boxes might have been encountered in the houses of Byzantine courtiers and high officials in general. These are also found throughout Europe as the most frequent type of Byzantine secular work from the 10th – 12th centuries AD. They vary in
shape and decorative motifs, but almost all have bands of rosettes and panels fastened to the wooden core of a box.\textsuperscript{67} About ten fragments of a rosette casket were found in the cremation grave 23 excavated in 1905 in the mound group situated east of the river Ol'sa. The remains show rosettes placed into medallions, palm leaves, animal figures and small twisted semi-columns (Fig. 11.1). Rosette caskets from the 10th century AD are not known from the Old Russian territory except in Gnezdovo. A very close parallel has been found in Byzantine Chersonesos (Fig. 11.2). It appears that a local production of such caskets made of cheap bone instead of ivory was established in Crimea during the 10th century AD.\textsuperscript{68} The rich Gnezdovo mound Ol’-23 belongs to the second part of the 10th century AD.

Jewellery

Semi-precious stones inserted into gold or silver frames are highly characteristic of Byzantine applied art. Middle Byzantine staurotekia and book covers were lavishly decorated with framed oval gemstones.\textsuperscript{69}

An oval, conical inlay produced by a skilled craftsman from a white-brown agate was found in the eastern part of the open settlement at Gnezdovo (Fig. 12). There is a considerable concentration of evidence for a jewellery workshop from the late 10th – early 11th centuries AD in this part of the excavations. The chipped edges of the stone indicate the barbaric methods by which it had been detached from its frame. A small channel had been drilled in order to rework the agate inlay into a pendant. Similar gemstones framed by gold

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![Fig. 12. Oval agate insertion found in the eastern part of the Gnezdovo open settlement.](image-url)
interlace filigree occur on luxury gold arm rings from the Eastern Mediterranean from the 5th – 6th centuries AD.\textsuperscript{90}

We can assume that the exotic agate inlay appeared in the workshop of the Gnezdovo jeweller as a result of the plundering and capture of ecclesiastical and secular treasures during the raids of Rus’ against Byzantium. Gold and silver was melted down, but gemstones were put to secondary use.

Glass-finds, including small vessel fragments, gaming pieces, beads and bracelets, were recovered from the Gnezdovo burials and settlements. In spite of attempts to identify some of these items in the wider context of Byzantine glass, the lack of clear morphological criteria for the identification of Byzantine vessels and beads from the 7th to 10th centuries, and problems in the interpretation of the chemical composition of glass, affects previous attributions.\textsuperscript{91} Only a dark blue bracelet decorated with polychrome floral painting and a piece of gold glass tesserae are of undoubtedly Byzantine origin.\textsuperscript{92}

A copper-alloy finger-ring decorated with an engraved image of a heraldic bird with spread wings framed by a rim of punch dots was found in the female inhumation grave Dn-17, situated in the Dnieper mound group (Fig. 13). Simple wire temple rings point to a Slavic origin of this woman, who was buried in the second half of the 10th century AD. A similar finger-ring was found during recent excavations at the settlement in the flood-plain area, dated to the late 10th – early 11th century AD.\textsuperscript{93} Close parallels from the 9th -11th centuries AD are known from Corinth, Balkan-Danube region and Slovakia.\textsuperscript{94} A single finger-ring of this type has been found at the Timerevo settlement.\textsuperscript{95}

A copper-alloy buckle of unambiguously Byzantine origin was found in the upper, heavily disturbed layer of the Central hillfort. It is a cast plate in
the form of a truncated ellipse, hinged at the straight end. At the centre is an engraved depiction of a fish surrounded by a stepped border (Fig. 14.1). There are three loops on the outer side. According to the classification of M. Schulze-Dörrlamm it belongs to type E35. Similar belt buckles with relief depictions of fighting lions and birds or engraved floral motifs from the 8th – 9th cen-
ries AD are known from Spain, Sicily, Asia Minor, Iran, Ukraine and Corinth (Fig. 14.2). Two single-type Byzantine trapezoid cast buckles bearing depictions of engraved ‘stepping’ lions (Fig. 14.3) were found in the Central mound group (cremation grave 15(26)) and in the Forest group (cremation grave 44). They belong to the Middle Byzantine type C2 according to the classification of M. Schulze-Dörrlamm. Numerous buckles of this type are known from Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iran, Greece, Italy, Belgium, Hungary, Bulgaria and Crimea. A single find is known from the Scandinavian chamber grave excavated in 2002 in Kiev, with four copper coins issued in Cherson. “Stepping” lion buckles occur also in Volga Bulgaria. Only a few belt buckles of Byzantine origin and their imitations are known from burials from the 9th–12th centuries AD in the Russian territory, including the buckle found in the Plakun cemetery in Staraja Ladoga, Šestovica (grave 70) and Rurikovo gorodišće.

Other objects

An elaborately made copper alloy pair of tweezers was found in the excavations in the central hillfort. They were used for cosmetic purposes (Fig. 15). No
Fig. 16. Copper-alloy peg in the form of a dagger for fastening of the bindings of manuscripts found at the central hillfort.

exact parallels for this item have been found, but a group of similar tweezers from the Middle Byzantine period are known from Corinth.101

A small copper-alloy peg in the form of a dagger was also found in the central hillfort (fig. 16). Pegs like this one were used for fastening manuscript bindings in Byzantine scriptoria. They were composed of metal pegs and rings inserted into the edge of the boards. The item from Gnezdovo belongs to an early type of these fittings, dated to the 9th – 11th centuries AD according to the Chersonesos material. Early pegs have a round hole in the middle of the dagger's blade.102 It is doubtful if Byzantine manuscripts moved along the road “From the Varangians to the Greeks” in the 10th century AD. This item, found in a metal workshop context, was most likely part of the metal stock. Copper-alloy recycling was vital for the jewellery production in Gnezdovo.

Conclusions

In assessing the total material from Gnezdovo it is difficult to escape the conclusion that it is the largest concentration of finds of Byzantine origin in Old Rus' from the period 10th – early 11th centuries AD. Luxury goods such as amphorae, glazed and glass vessels, precious textile and passementerie,
bone casket and pendants made of gold and silver coins were found in twenty graves situated in five mound groups. Eleven mounds were situated in the biggest Central group, but Byzantine objects were also found in the graves of Forest, Dnieper, Olšanskaja and Zaolšanskaja mound groups. In most cases, mounds with finds of Byzantine origin belong to the richest burials of the Gnezdovo necropolis. These are mounds 20, Sizov 1880 (without number), 97, 18 (86), 198, 208 and 306 (Central group); 23 and 30 (Olšanskaja group); 25 and 62 (Zaolšanskaja group); 13 and 47 (Forest group); 4 (Dnieper group). Some of these graves contain two or three rare and expensive objects from Byzantium. A polychrome dish with senmurv and passemenererie were found in the mound C-20; an amphora, a glazed jug and an oil lamp of glass came from the grave L-13; a glazed white-ware polychrome cup and glass decorations for garment are known from the mound Ol'-30. Finds from the mounds 15 (26), 175, 317, 251 (Central group); 76 (Zaolšanskaja group); 44 (Forest group) and 17 (Dnieper group) are less diverse, but it is not reasonable to qualify them as modest. According to such criteria as boat cremations, chamber inhumations, genuinely Northern dress accessories and weapons, a total of seventeen from twenty mounds were left by Scandinavians. Byzantine objects were obtained by trade, plunder, tribute or gift-exchange and brought from Byzantium, Crimea or Bulgaria by nobility, warriors and merchants buried in the various parts of the Gnezdovo necropolis. However, some female inhumations containing a single follis (C-251), a glazed jug (C-317) or a simple copper-alloy finger-ring (Dn-251) are Slavic.

A wide range of finds of Byzantine cultural affinity came from the excavations in the different parts of inhabited area. They include expensive glazed vessels, coins, passemenererie and gemstones Amphorae sherds may bear evidence to the movement of such archaeologically invisible luxury goods as wine, oil and spices. At the same time, lead seals cannot be considered as valuable items but indicate direct trading and diplomatic contacts between the early urban centre and Constantinople.

Judging by the finds of copper, silver and gold coins of Leo VI and his immediate successors, Gnezdovo was involved in the relationships between Rus' and Byzantium in the first decades of the 10th century AD. However, graves with Byzantine imports were constructed no earlier than the middle of the 10th century AD, and they mainly belong to the second half of the 10th century AD. This is demonstrated by the chronological distribution of amphorae finds. High-quality glazed pottery and luxury silks were probably distributed through diplomatic exchange rather than trade. These goods point to the life-style of people of the upper strata. They also relate to the gradual spread of Christianity from the Byzantine Empire beginning from the middle of the 10th century AD.

Based on the results presented here we can conclude that the early town Gnezdovo held a unique position in the exchange network and diplomatic contacts with Byzantium from its emergence to the last quarter of the 10th
century AD. Some researchers argue that the Russo-Byzantine treaties under the years 907, 912 and 945 testify that an annual tribute was paid by Byzantium for the maintenance of peaceful relations not only to the rules of Kiev but to the great princes who lived in Černigov, Perejaslav' , Poloch, Rostov, Ljubeč and other towns as well. Great princes sent independent emissaries to Constantinople to obtain treaties alongside with Grand Prince of Kiev. Their disappearance from the treaty, under the year 971, points to a unification of Old Rus' only in the last quarter of the 10th century. According to the Russian Primary Chronicle, independent Scandinavian princes “kept the power” in Poloch and Turov up to the year 980. The great princes, who ruled in the Upper Dnieper region up to the last decades of the 10th century, may even have had independent relations with Constantinople, despite the vast political and territorial expansion of Kiev.

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Notes

1 Darkevič 1975, 295-297.
2 Karger 1958, 215; Sahajdak 1988, 140.
7 Nosov 1987, 49-62.
8 Bulkin & Lebedev 1974, 12-13; Shepard 1995, 258.
16 Byzantine coins from Gnezdovo were identified by M.A. Tchanova (Leningrad), V.V. Kropotkin, V.L. Janin, N.A. Frolova, A.A. Molchanov, V.V. Zajcev (Moscow).
19 Sjuzhumov 2006, 291-293.
20 Litavrin 1981, 42-44; Grierson 1999, 44: II.
22 Kropotkin 1962, 16-18.
Radvina 1988, 72-74.
24 Jakovleva 2005, 72.
26 Milonov & Andreev 1945, 26-28, fig. 21. Actually, just one gold coin of Alexander was found in 1940. The second one came from the mixed soil thrown away from the site which was poorly excavated before the last war. It was reexamined in 2008-2009. Comprehensive washing revealed some valuable objects missed in 1940.
27 Morrison 1992, 401-402, fig. 310.
29 Shepard 1995, 258.
30 Radvina 1988, 72-74.
32 Jørgensen 2003, 203.
33 Bulgakova 2010, 25-27.
34 Bulgakova 2004 49-51; 69-70; 173-174.
36 Kovalenko 2006, 90, fig. 7.
37 Blifeld 1977, 151, fig. 29.
38 Nesbitt 2008, 150.
41 Koval’ 2003, 350.
43 Muraševa, Eniosova & Fetisov 2010, 514-515, fig. 4.
46 Kovalenko 2007, 248-249.
47 Koval’ 2003, 353.
48 Stankevič 1951, 239; Rybina 2001, 68-70.
49 Kir’janova 2007, 140.
51 Kovalenko 2007, 252.
52 Mason & Mango 1995, 322-331.
53 Gonosova 1997, 224, fig. 148.
54 Žarnov 1991, 223; Makarova 1967, 63.
55 Koval’ 2005, 167, fig. 2, 5.
58 Geijer 1938, 103-104, Taf. 26,4; 28,9, 13; 29,1.
59 Fechner 1999, 8-10.
60 Kondakov 1924, 7-49.
61 This chamber-grave was excavated in the Dnieper group of mounds situated in the flood plain terrain near the river bank 1.5 km southwest of the Central group.
65 Sjuzjumov 2006, 377-381.

This chamber grave was excavated in the mound group east of the small river Oľša that is tributary of Dnieper (map).

Saint Eudocia was wed to Emperor Theodosius II in AD 421.

Gerstel 1997, 42-43.


Gejer 1938, 118, 120-121, Taf. 31, 4-5; 34, 6; 35, 7a; 36, 4; Hägg 2003, 22-23.

Sorensen 2001, 76.


Korzuchina & Peskova 2003, tab. 9; Liwoch 2007, 323-324.

Žarnov 1992, 136-166.


Karger 1958, table XVII; Arbman 1940, Taf.151; Pedersen 1997, 256, fig. 8.

Davidson 1952, pl.84, 1393-1395.


Musin 2009, 251-252.

Eniosova 2007, 176-177, figs. 1-5.

Kalavrezou 1997, 221-223.

Vizantijskij Cherson 1991, 103.

Maguire 1997, 37, 41, 78, 88.


Muraševa, Dovgaljuk & Fetisov 2010, 514, fig. 1,1.

Muraševa, Dovgaljuk & Fetisov 2010, 514, fig. 1,6.


Sedý 2000, 188, fig. 9,2.


Spičin 1905, 37,57, fig.42; Avdusin 1957, 117-118.

Schulze-Dörrlamm 2009, 204-253, Abb. 89.


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