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To dear colleague
M. V. Fechner
with all good wishes
D. Stepanov

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Smolensk and the Varangians according to the Archaeological Data

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The historical and archaeological sources from the Viking period which concern the city of Smolensk and the large cemetery at Gnyozdovo by the river Dnieper are discussed.

The author examines the most important find groups and grave types and asserts that extremely few specific Scandinavian traits are to be found.

His conclusion is that Smolensk was founded by the Slavs before the Gnyozdovo cemetery was established. The fact that only a few Scandinavian graves are known from the tenth century and none from the ninth and eleventh must mean that only small groups of Scandinavians had settled in the Smolensk area and these were rapidly assimilated with the Slav groups.

In the first chronicles that tell us about the territories occupied by the Russian tribes, Smolensk is mentioned among the oldest cities of Ancient Russia. The chronicler says that the tribe of the Krivichi occupied the upper parts of the Dnieper, the Volga, and the Western Dvina, their main city being Smolensk. The author of this account seems to have understood the advantageous situation of the Smolensk region and its connections with the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea. It is important to note that Smolensk is not mentioned as a city ruled by a prince but as a centre of the Russian tribe, the Krivichi, who seem to have retained a certain independence of the prince.

The chronicle describing the year A.D. 863 tells of the legendary warriors: 'Askold and Dir asked Rurik to give them permission to go to Tsargrad (Constantinople) and they set off from Novgorod down the Dnieper river past Smolensk but did not enter Smolensk, as it was large and populous'. This is the oldest dated account of Smolensk.

The next reference to Smolensk in Russian accounts dates from 882, when Prince Oleg came with a strong army by the way of the Dnieper to the walls of Smolensk and encamped on the Eastern outskirts of the city. The inhabitants of Smolensk either did not hope to win, or did not see much danger in coming under the rule of Oleg, and submitted to him. There is no doubt that Smolensk had not been ruled by a Prince of Kiev before. Oleg left his vice-regents in Smolensk but their further destiny is unknown to us. The vice-regents may not have been able to preserve Oleg's rule. I believe that Smolensk remained independent to a certain degree as far as the central Prince's power was concerned and that this is why, after A.D. 882, Smolensk was not mentioned in the chronicles for 133 years.

During this period of more than a century, Smolensk developed still greater importance. Its defences were tested by Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who, out of 5 Russian cities, described only Novgorod and Smolensk as fortresses.

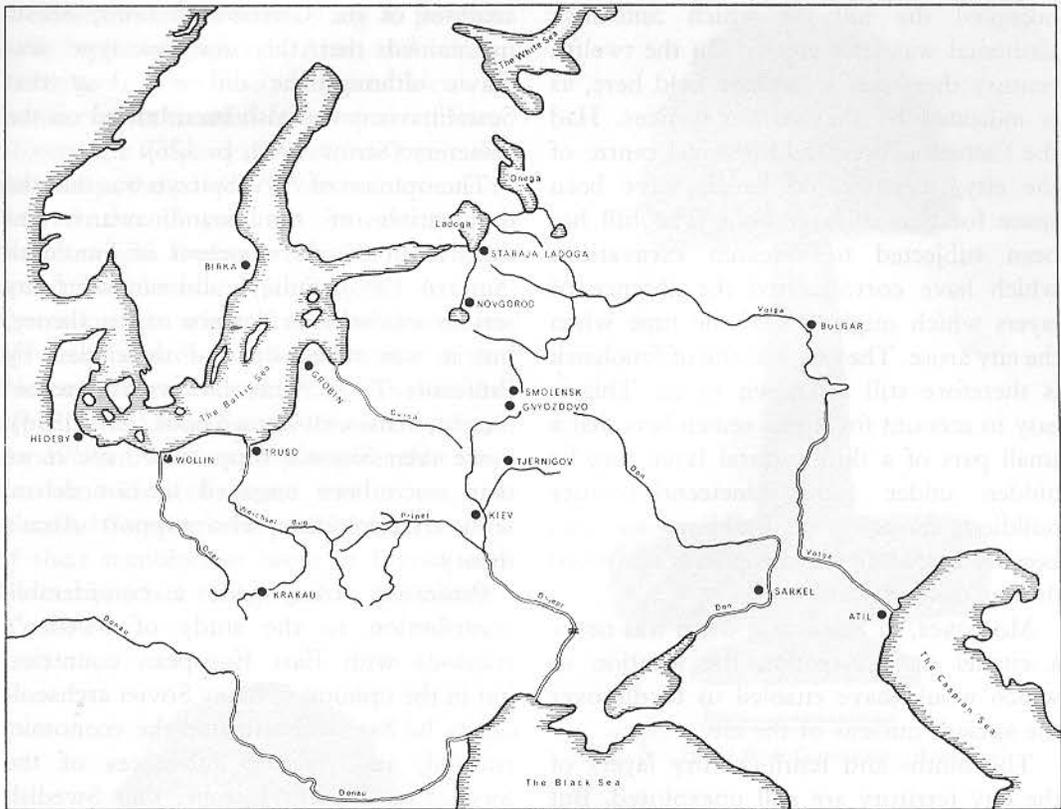


Fig. 1

The ancient sagas do not mention Smolensk. This means that Porphyrogenitus' words represent the first foreign report about Smolensk and are all that the non-Russian written sources have to say about the early history of this city. That is why archaeological data play such an important role in the study of the history of the city.

Many scholars have been interested in the problem of exactly when Smolensk was founded. The Soviet archaeologist E. Schmidt has drawn a map of the settlements of the Smolensk area at different periods (Schmidt 1967). He discovered that in the ninth and tenth centuries the number and density of the settlements had increased rapidly. And he is right in explaining this

phenomenon as caused by an 'emerging' town — an attractive centre. Schmidt's discovery is significant because it indirectly confirms the existence of Smolensk at the time of Askold and Dir and during Oleg's campaign.

However, the original history of Smolensk can be studied only by means of the city's antiquities. At present Smolensk is being intensively excavated by the archaeologists of Moscow University. There are remains of three ancient oppida on the territory which is now modern Smolensk. Archaeological research shows that these oppida all existed during the period from the sixth to the eighth centuries, long before Smolensk emerged; one of them

occupied the hill on which Smolensk Cathedral was later erected. In the twelfth century there was a cabbage field here, as is indicated by the written sources. Had the Cathedral been the historical centre of the city, there would hardly have been space for that cabbage field. The hill has been subjected to research excavations which have corroborated the absence of layers which might reveal the time when the city arose. The original site of Smolensk is therefore still unknown to us. This is easy to account for if one remembers that a small part of a thin cultural layer may be hidden under some nineteenth-century building; though such buildings are few, because Smolensk was completely destroyed during the last war.

Moreover, in Smolensk, there was never a citadel or a Kremlin, the location of which would have enabled us to discover the ancient nucleus of the city.

The ninth- and tenth-century layers of the city territory are still unexplored. But a group of barrows consisting of some 3,000 mounds was found within 10 km of Smolensk down the Dnieper at Gnyozdovo.

The exploration of the Gnyozdovo barrows was begun in 1874. It was conducted by several archaeologists, among whom was V.I. Sizow, who excavated most of the mounds. He referred the construction of the Gnyozdovo barrows to the ninth and tenth centuries. He paid special attention to the great number of weapons in the barrows, which he considered to be of the *druzhina* type.¹ On the basis of his

analyses of the Gnyozdovo finds, Sizow maintained that this *druzhina* type was Slavic although he did not deny that Scandinavians had also been buried on the cemetery (Sizow 1902, p. 125).

The opinion of A.A. Spitzyn was that the domination of the Scandinavians was decisive in the development of Smolensk (Spitzyn 1905). Spitzyn did not offer any serious evidence in defence of his theory, but it was taken up and developed by Professor T. J. Arne, the Swedish archaeologist, in his well-known book (Arne 1914). Since then Sizow's supporters have more than once been engaged in hot debate with archaeologists who support Arne's theory.

Professor Arne made a considerable contribution to the study of Sweden's relations with East European countries, but in the opinion of many Soviet archaeologists he has overestimated the economic, cultural, and political influences of the Swedes on Eastern Europe. Our Swedish colleagues have repeatedly declared the barrows at Gnyozdovo to be entirely or almost entirely Scandinavian. They consider Gnyozdovo to have been the main Swedish centre in Russia. The hypothesis on which Arne's arguments are based, that there were large Swedish settlements in Russia at this period, can hardly be proved.

In 1949 Moscow University organized the Smolensk archaeological expedition, whose work has continued up to the present day. During this time 200 barrows have been opened in addition to 650 barrows excavated earlier. As a result of all the excavations the archaeologists came to the conclusion that cremation was the main funeral rite in Gnyozdovo. Only 16 mounds contained graves with parts of skeletons. Other graves contained no bones at all.

The objects from the barrows of Gnyoz-

¹ The *druzhina* was a group that played a very important part in the development of the Russian State. It was an organized armed force with feudal lords, the country's mainstay and army. The burial mounds which contain rich weapons and armaments are called *druzhina*-barrows by Russian archaeologists.

dovo are widely known owing to publications by Sizow, Spitzyn, Arne, and others. There have been many different views as to the correct method of interpreting these objects, the Gnyozdovo weapons being the most important issue. Professor Arne considered the Gnyozdovo swords to be Scandinavian. Professor Artsikhovskiy contested this claim and pointed out that the aberration has arisen from the abundance of such swords in Scandinavia, which Professor Artsikhovskiy believes can be explained by local funeral rites (Artsikhovskiy 1962). But all over Europe at that time the same kind of sword was in use, the so-called Carolingian type. The main centres of their manufacture were in France and Germany, a fact recognized by the Scandi-



Fig. 2. *Sword from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)*



Fig. 3. *Sword from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)*

navian archaeologists themselves. A most eminent authority of our time, J. Petersen, has demonstrated the foreign origin of several sword types common in Scandinavia (Petersen 1919). No doubt they were made in Scandinavia, but they were made in Russia, too, as has been proved by the Soviet archaeologist, A. N. Kirpichnikov. He found an inscription made by a Russian blacksmith on the edge of a sword (Kirpichnikov 1965). Carolingian swords are also found in other European countries where there were no Scandinavians at all, for instance in Czechoslovakia.

There are many arrow-heads at Gnyozdovo. Arrowheads in Scandinavia are lanceolate, that is long, narrow, and oval, pointed at the apex. Almost all the arrowheads at Birka are of this type. In medieval Russia arrow-heads were mainly rhomboid



Fig. 4. *Sword from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)*

in shape (but usually with the two lower sides concave). There are lanceolate arrow-heads at Gnyozdovo, but most of the arrow-heads found there are rhomboid in form.

At Gnyozdovo 21 battle-axes have been found. They do not resemble the battle-axes found at Birka. Professor Arne considered only one Gnyozdovo battle-axe to be of Scandinavian origin.

Professor Arne pointed out that there had been only one garment of chain mail found in Sweden in the times of the Vikings (Arne 1952, p. 147). This typically Russian object was found in 9 barrows at Gnyozdovo. They are widely known in the Russian antiquities of that time.

Thus it is the Russian types of weapons that prevail at Gnyozdovo.

But an argumentation based only on an

analysis of weapon types does not seem very sound. Weapons could be captured in battle, bought, stolen or lost, and then substituted by a different type. Cheap and widely spread material is a better proof for archaeologists. Pottery is especially good for this purpose.

D. Selling delivered an excellent report on clay vessels from Birka (Selling 1955). She divided them into four groups. The first one consisted of vessels delivered from West Europe. The Slav vessels, or, as she put it, vessels bearing signs of Slavic influence, comprised the second group.

The Finnish vessels formed the third group, and the Swedish vessels proper the fourth. We are mostly interested in the second and the fourth groups. The second one consists of ordinary Slavic vessels with typical profiles. They represent about 13 % of the clay vessels from Birka. D. Selling believes that they were brought to Sweden from the Slavs living on the South coast of the Baltic Sea. Professor Arne regards them as an influence not of the Russian but of the Baltic Slavs. Thus he denies direct connection between Sweden and Swedish settlements in Russia, and this is a cornerstone of his argument.

The fourth Swedish group is not present in Gnyozdovo. But if there had been a Swedish settlement the group would certainly have been found there. But all the vessels in Gnyozdovo are of the Slav origins and belong to the archaeological culture that preceded the establishment of the ancient Russian state.

Now a few words about 'hybrids' as Professor Arbman calls them in his valuable work (Arbman 1959). These are objects the Northern ornaments of which were misunderstood by the artisans who produced them, for instance, a Gnyozdovo sword, the hilt of which is decorated with an orna-

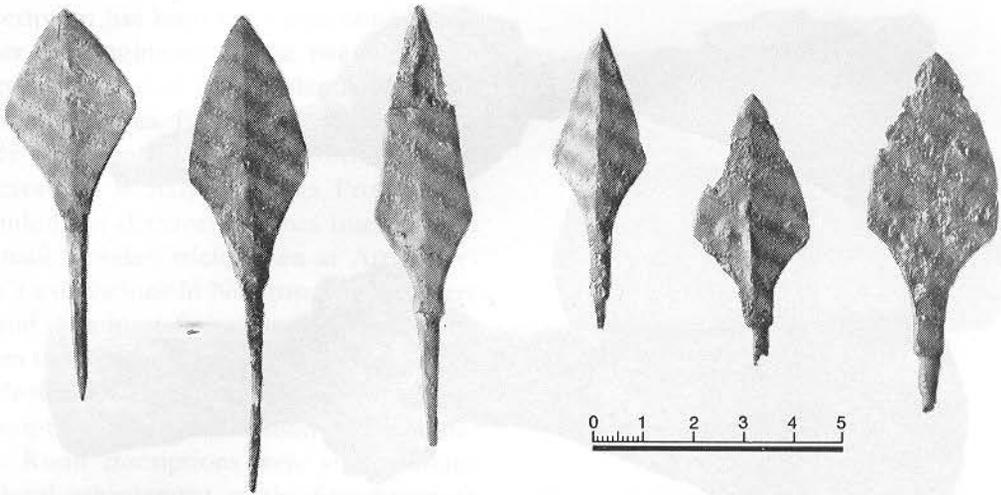


Fig. 5. *Arrow-heads from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)*

ment typical of tortoise brooches. There could be two explanations of the origin of this. Professor Arbman assumes that the hybrids were created by the second generation of Swedish artisans who were ignorant of the peculiarities of the Northern Style. Professor Artsikhovskiy believes they were created by Slavs under the influence of imported Scandinavian production. To me the second version seems more reliable, for on the one hand 'hybrids' existed only in Russia, and on the other hand the Gnyozdovo barrows did not appear during the ninth but in the tenth century. In other words, the cemetery was used only during a short spell of time, so the first generation could not have disappeared (I shall try to prove this below), and thus the Northern Style technique could not have been forgotten. Certainly, the second generation of Scandinavians in Russia could have come to Gnyozdovo from somewhere else, if we admit the fact of its existence at all. But if this is the case we destroy the theory of the Swedish settlements at Gnyozdovo.

Brooches of oval, round, and other shapes represent a large group among the

objects found in Gnyozdovo. Tortoise brooches are more frequent; their chronology has been well elaborated by Scandinavian archaeologists and is very reliable in dating. Speaking on this matter at Moscow University, Professor Arbman said:

These typical pairs of brooches we would regard not only as ornaments but as a part of the normal attire. Consequently, Scandinavian women in Russia wore their Northern tribal clothes. It goes without saying that Northern women could be bought. But when we find signs of Northern funeral rites and Northern goods in a grave we can state without fear of contradiction that it was a Scandinavian grave, for funeral rites could not have been imported.

Now we come to the funeral rites. This is a very complicated question, for there were very many different rites both in Russia and in the Scandinavian peninsula. The solution of this problem is especially difficult because until the ninth and tenth centuries the Upper Dnieper and the upper part of Western Dvina had been inhabited

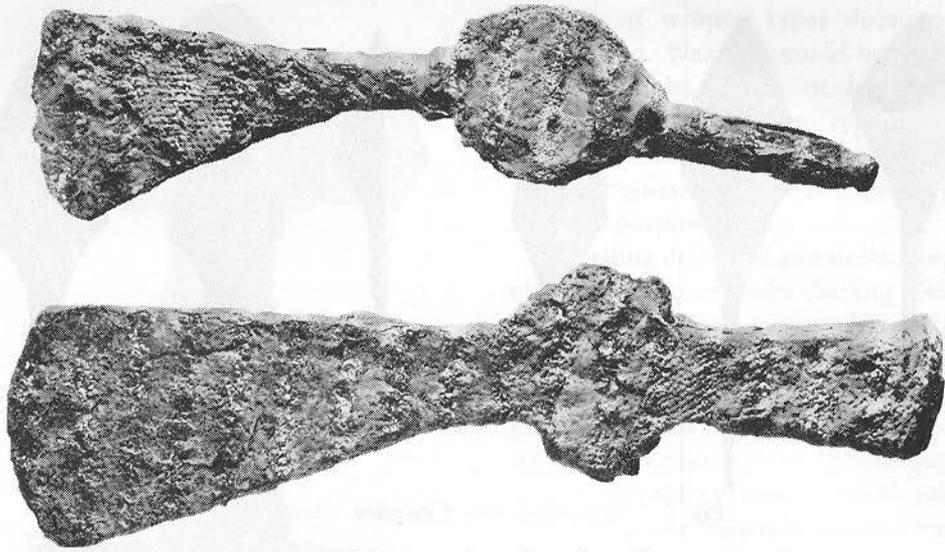


Fig. 6. Battleaxes from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)

not by Slavs, but by Balts, as has been proved by Soviet archaeologists. That is why there are very few Slavonic graves near Smolensk, which we needed for comparison. Fortunately our archaeologists have some relevant material.

Up till now we have compared only the general character of the Scandinavian and the Gnyozdovo funeral rites. Cremation is typical of both. Now let us examine variations. My statement about funeral rites will be tentative. We should consider the special clay beddings on which funeral urns were sometimes placed as a feature of the Scandinavian rites which we can trace in Gnyozdovo. In some cases the funeral urn was surrounded by stones, and sometimes an iron ring was placed on the neck of the urn. Some barrows in Gnyozdovo contained the remains of cremation in a boat. All these features of funeral rites we may consider to be of Northern origin. They and a considerable number of objects of Scandinavian type make it reasonable to

suppose that Scandinavians were buried in some Gnyozdovo barrows. But the number of such graves is about 20-30, which makes only 3-4 % of the total figure. The objects buried together with the dead often revealed the significance of the role he had played when living. Sometimes very few things could be found in these barrows.

It has always been difficult for the supporters of Arne's theory (about a Scandinavian centre at Gnyozdovo) to explain the absence of Scandinavian runic inscriptions in Gnyozdovo. The discovery in Gnyozdovo of a Slavonic inscription, written in the Cyrillic alphabet on a clay vessel, therefore has some relevance to the ethnic problem, even though the find is unique. It was uncovered during excavations in 1949, in a barrow dating from the third quarter of the tenth century. It is the most ancient Russian inscription ever found.

I should like to mention 3 Scandinavian inscriptions found in the USSR. One such

inscription has been known in our country since the beginning of the twentieth century; it was found on the island of Berezan in the Black Sea. For a long time it was the only one in the USSR. During recent excavations at Staraya Ladoga, Professor V. Raudonikas discovered runes inscribed on a small wooden stick. Then at Artsikhovskiy's excavations in Novgorod, runes were found on a bone fragment at a level dating from the beginning of the eleventh century.

Professor Arne wrote that 2,300 runic inscriptions have been found in Scandinavia. Runic inscriptions were an important cultural achievement of the Scandinavians in the Viking period. But the high number of them in Sweden makes their absence at Gnyozdovo even stranger, if there really once was a Swedish colony there. Three runic inscriptions undoubtedly prove the presence of individual Scandinavians in Russia, as other written and material evidence confirms. The extreme rarity of runic finds in Russia is in striking contrast to their abundance in Sweden. Evidently there was no mass penetration of Scandinavians into Russia.

The British historian P. Sawyer also shares this opinion. He says:

However this Scandinavian activity is understood, one thing is clear; the Swedes can never have been important in Russia as settlers. Their influence on place-names is confined to the river routes and there is nowhere archaeological evidence sufficient to justify the assumption of extensive, dense Scandinavian settlement. (Sawyer 1962, p. 204)

Scandinavian archaeologists often support the Swedish colony theory in Gnyozdovo by referring to the Russian legend about three Varangian brothers Ruric, Sineus, and Truvor, whom the Russians summoned to administer their country. The



Fig. 7. *Sword from Gnyozdovo with non-Scandinavian ornament. (Scale cm)*

Russian linguist A. A. Shakhmatov proved that this legend had been introduced into the chronicle later (Shakhmatov 1904). But the time when they were summoned (according to the legend the middle of the ninth century) coincided with the formation of the Russian state. Seen from the point of view of Soviet historians, it was a result of the inner social development of the East Slavs.



Fig. 8. Example of non-Scandinavian ornament from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)

In Gnyozdovo there are no Russian or Scandinavian barrows belonging to the ninth century. There are no graves from the time of Askold's and Dir's campaign, since they avoided going through Smolensk, for fear of its numerous population (see above, p. 52). There are no graves of the participants in Prince Oleg's campaign of 882.

The Slavs had built the city before these events. They worked quite independently. In this connection the title of one of Professor Arne's articles "Det vikingatida

Gnezdovo, Smolensk föregångare" (The Viking Age Gnezdovo, the predecessor of Smolensk) sounds somewhat strange. Gnyozdovo was founded after Smolensk, not before.

The most ancient set of objects from Gnyozdovo belongs to the beginning of the tenth century. One grave contains a sword of an early Carolingian type and spearheads of a Scandinavian type. The funeral rite seems to be Scandinavian as well. I shall not venture to point out the other few barrows of that time.

Most of the Gnyozdovo barrows appeared in the second part of the tenth century. This coincides with the Soviet archaeologists' conclusion that most of the Scandinavian objects all over Russia belong to the second half of the tenth century (Djedjukhina 1967).

This observation contradicts Professor Arbman, who referred the Volga trade route to the end of the ninth century, the Dnieper one to the beginning of the tenth century, and the route through Poland to 960-970. This dating is based on the alleged existence of a Varangian colony on the banks of the Dnieper and in Gnyozdovo in particular. If Professor Arbman had been right there would have been no point in



Fig. 9. Tortoise brooch from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)

establishing a settlement in Gnyozdovo when the Dnieper route lost its importance. But judging from the number of graves, Gnyozdovo began to flourish at the time when the trade route was transferred to Poland (according to Professor Arbman).

I shall not discuss the problem of the transit trade here. I shall only recall the sound words of the Soviet scholar V. I. Yanin. The idea that the Scandinavians played the leading role in transit trade with the Orient resulted from failure to analyse the chronological distribution of the hoards (Yanin 1956).

It was not in the time of Ruric and Oleg that the Gnyozdovo-Smolensk barrows were constructed. It was in the time of Prince Svatoslav, whose very name and whole activity were Slavic. Svatoslav's time was a period of great campaigns and bloody battles, in which many nationalities of ancient Russia took part. Individual Scandinavians (probably even whole Scandinavian detachments) settled in Russia.

The rapidity of their assimilation is remarkable. By the beginning of the eleventh century no Scandinavian features remain that are traceable archaeologically. A parallel phenomenon is the disappearance of Scandinavian names in Russia, which, judging by the chronicles, happened at about the same time.

As mentioned above, Gnyozdovo was situated at a distance of 10 kilometres from Smolensk. This remoteness could be due to the fact that two waterways to the Dnieper from the rivers Lovat and West Dvina cross into the Dnieper in the Gnyozdovo region. In ancient Russia, the dead were

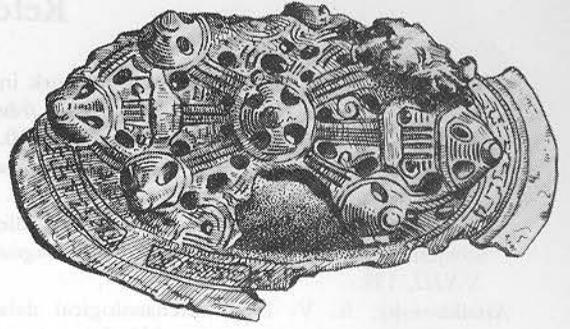


Fig. 10. *Tortoise brooch from Gnyozdovo. (Scale cm)*

buried on the 'ways' – the Russian chronicle reports. At any rate there were no oppida in Gnyozdovo or its surroundings that had appeared at the same time as these barrows. The oppida at the place V. Sizow thought Smolensk had been situated at that time belonged to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the excavations proved.

The latest Gnyozdovo barrows belong to the very beginning of the eleventh century. By this time the funeral rites had changed. Recent excavations of the Gnyozdovo barrows have revealed inhumations in small graves. The graves were dug at the places of the future barrows but first ritual pyres had been burnt. We can see that this rite does not resemble that of the funeral chambers which were observed in Birka. In this version the Gnyozdovo funeral rites were influenced by Christianity, which had not become the dominating religion at that time. When Christianity came to Smolensk, it terminated the appearance of new barrows and graves in Gnyozdovo. Many historians refer this event to 1013.



Fig. 11. *Early spearhead from Gnyozdovo. Found together with the sword Fig. 2. Length 53 cm.*

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