

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS

9TH ANNUAL MEETING AT ST PETERSBURG, SEPTEMBER 2003

Russia's second city, St Petersburg, in its tri-centennial year proved to be a place of contradictions. Imagine a street scene with a former American president and first lady on foot with no more than six slightly embarrassed security men, while the passing buses are riddled with rust holes. There are so few normal taxis, that any motorist will fill the commercial vacuum and relieve you of the equivalent of his day's wages for a few miles journey.

Into this colour-washed 18th-century setting, Pushkin's 'window on Europe', flooded more than 800 EAA delegates in September 2003. For the ceramic specialist the conference offered one general session on ceramic studies and dozens of individual papers, integrated into thematic sessions dotted around the State university on Vasilevsky island: an exemplar, was Jomon pottery from Japan in **Archaeologies of Cordage across Eurasia**. Of special interest was the inaugural meeting on the European production centres database (see MPRG's newsletters Autumn 2003-2004). Delegates enjoyed privileged access to the State hermitage, an international treasure house assembled by a communist regime in a former Tsarist palace and the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography which embraced some of his own collections.

St Petersburg clearly has a special place in the hearts of Russian archaeologists, where their national archaeology was born. To western Europeans the modern profession is refreshingly different: regional institutes pursue landscape studies as part of the interpretation of material culture, and indeed interdisciplinary research in some parts has been underway for the past 30 years! If the approach was sound however, it was let down by the facilities, the lack of shutters, blinds or curtains on the windows of the historical faculty suggesting that visual aids are a rarity here. Many sessions happened without any visual aids, which did not help western comprehension of a number of papers delivered in something other than the conference language English (or so it seemed!)

Some 65 sessions and round tables beckoned on the first day and the round tables were often more focused than the thematic blocks of lectures and enabled some useful discussion to progress the core subject.

Any lack of facilities was compensated by Russian stoicism however. On the first morning eleven delegates (five Russian students, three from the United Kingdom and three Scandinavian archaeologists) waited patiently for speakers from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Russia to arrive. An hour later all adjourned for coffee, but while the westerners dispersed

to join other sessions, the Russian students returned to their vigil, evidently no surprise to them!

The Archaeology of the St Petersburg region

St Petersburg is a city planned on alluvial islands to control a Baltic waterway from Hanseatic Europe into the heart of Russia. It sits over a Russian village of AD 1470-1600 and a Swedish site of AD 1611-1702. The modern settlement starts with the Peter-Paul Fortress, now represented by a star-shaped artillery fortification on the north side of the River Neva, while on the adjoining island the university overlies timber houses, stone palaces and the necropolis of the first builders and soldiers of the 'the Primary Peterburg' AD 1703-1753, named after its founder Peter the Great.

Archaeological study has developed rapidly over the past seven years under headings of historical cultural significance, degree of safety and condition report. The city's wider hinterland embraces the Viking and later medieval Baltic centres Sockholm, Lubeck and Gdansk, and the North Sea centres of Hamburg, Amsterdam, York and London. Its closer region includes Pskov, Saryia Lagoda and Novgorod, the latter two being venues of conference excursions. Most startling to a medievalist were the Novgorod birch-bank documents whose inscriptions detail the everyday life of medieval townsfolk, private correspondence of a literate population of the 13th and 14th centuries AD. Should we be assuming comparable literacy in the Hanseatic towns, at the very least? If the bark were used as paper, this is a reflection of a society based on timber. Dendrochronology elsewhere in the region has confirmed the story of the 'Sovereign's road', 260 km of timber carriageway built by Peter the Great from the White Sea to Onega Lake in just one month in AD 1702.

Deploying Digital Data: Making the most of the Digital Archives for archaeology

The second day included a review of the digital world of archaeology, and given the challenges to high tech in the 21st-century Russia, these sessions stand out as some of the most impressive content. A round table was organised by the ARENA project (Archaeological Records of Europe Networked Access) supported by the European Community's Culture 2000 programme, a refreshingly clear exposition of how to reach different cyber audiences and how to evaluate their behaviours.

The University of Sheffield led 'Archaeology in the Information Age' concerned with keeping the discipline relevant to today. X-rays of Egyptian mummies had been transformed into 3-dimensional facial reconstructions that could be manipulated to express different styles of clothing and jewellery from the archaeological record. Two Russian presentations demonstrated 3-dimensional modelling designed to link professional knowledge with technical expertise to create fascinating reconstructions, in one case

accompanied by gutsy Russian music. ARCO (Augmented Reality Cultural Object) is an EU sponsored project seeking to provide non-IT-specialist archaeologists and museum curators with inexpensive 'virtual objects' for archaeological research, display, educational and museum management purposes.

To bring us back to reality English Heritage's Centre for Archaeology reassessed their own current IT procedures for fieldwork recording, post-excavation analysis, publication and dissemination, a very self-satisfied performance.

Ceramic Studies Session

Five papers (of a programmed eleven) spanned prehistory to post-medieval period, embracing regions of Russia, Macedonia, Hungary, Scotland and Ireland. A major sub-theme was the accessibility of scientific back-up to macroscopic analyses, which some countries do routinely for provenance studies while others simply cannot afford to. Neolithic coarsewares from a production centre in Thessaly, Greece, were distributed only locally while the painted pottery had a wider distribution. For the Roman period Macedonian Grey Terra Sigillata (similar to Gaulish terre sigillée grise) was the favourite table ware for a new Balkan aristocracy continuing through to AD 5th and 6th centuries, and it was suggested that the wide continental

dispersal of this cultural style was owed to the arrival of the Goths in late antiquity. Closer to home our Scottish colleague reviewed the state of knowledge of the medieval pottery industry based on production centres and larger assemblages of pottery from the Scottish burghs, backed by C14, chemical sourcing and petrographic analysis. A more thematic paper addressed medieval and later production centres in Carpathian Basin of Hungary, kilns classified on construction type and firing technology, backed up from ethnographic sources and pyrotechnical analysis.

Finally MPRG was closely involved with the inaugural meeting of a project, Perspectives of Medieval and Post-medieval Pottery Centre Researches in Europe, whose principal aim was to establish a standardized record system for a database of the Medieval and post-Medieval Production Centres in Europe. The project would require European Research Cooperation. For project updates see the Group's newsletter <http://www.medievalpottery.org.uk/newsletter>.

Our Russian colleagues were hugely enthusiastic and hospitable encouraging us to attend the annual Party in the House of the Architects, formerly Senator Polovtzev's Palace and the Annual Closing Dinner where we sampled traditional Russian food.

Maureen Mellor

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