

Forgotten Partners: The role of the Slav in the Baltic Viking Age

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Much has been written about the expansion of the Scandinavian peoples and the attendant development of the early Scandinavian kingdoms. However, there has been little western archaeological discussion concerning the contemporary development of early western Slavonic kingdoms and their contacts and role within the Baltic 'Mare Nostrum' of the Viking world. In this paper I would like to briefly describe the origins of the Slavonic peoples, before concentrating on the region of the West Slavs – the southern Baltic coast and inland regions. The relationships between the early Slavonic tribes and kingdoms and their powerful neighbours to the north, south and west will be discussed. I will suggest that these tribes and later kingdoms of the 9th and 10th centuries were powerful enough to contend with – and trade with – the Vikings and others on equal terms.

The Slavonic tribes that arrived in Europe in the 5th to early 6th centuries were not one single unified ethnic group, but had a common language and many cultural similarities. These early individual migrating groups should not even be thought of as tribes, but rather as opportunistic agglomerations of families united behind a strong leader. Political competition between the elites of these groups established the regional dynamics of the period. However, these Slavonic groups did not settle in unpopulated areas of Europe – they merely arrived in a region where the native populations were relatively politically undeveloped. Their successful arable economy attracted native peoples to adapt and merge with the incomers – thus, the native cultural assemblages observed within the archaeological record do not stop abruptly on the arrival of the Slavs, but gradually adapt or disappear.

The leadership structure of these Slavonic groups seems to have been relatively loosely organised, based on a strong leader and group consensus rather than the Germanic model of family dynasties or military hierarchies. Procopius Caesariensis, writing in the 6th century text *De bello Gothico III*, mentions Hildigis, a Longobard prince who was deposed from his throne and escaped to the east; within thirteen years he had raised an army composed of both Longobards and Slavs and had reclaimed his throne. The Slavonic groups were not unknown to follow leaders and elites of different ethnic origins – this tolerance for such external political and social influence is a common thread that runs throughout early Slavonic history.

The relationship between the Avars and the Slavs in the second half of the 6th century played an important role in the development of Slavonic political and military organisation. The Avars very quickly established superiority over the multi-ethnic population of a large area of central Europe – however, their Slavonic tributaries were as much willing partners as conquered subjects.

It was his language and culture that identified the Slav. From their origins through to the establishment of the early kingdoms, the homogenous aspects of language, settlement and material culture prevail. Unfortunately, the Slavonic material culture of the 6th century is not of particularly good quality: the pottery is of a low technological standard; there is very little jewellery or high-status goods; there are no indications of intensive long-distance trade; and there are few examples of combative weapons such as swords – only spear tips and arrow heads. The settlement record contains no large defensive fortifications, only small ag-

ricultural settlements. The archaeological record from the latter half of the first millennium AD in those regions populated by Slavonic groups would seem to indicate homogenous self-sufficient local communities practising a non-specific agricultural economy. As late as the 11th century this impression of a common homogeneity remains. Adam of Bremen (in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis*), presumably referring to the West Slavs, notes in AD 1070 that "Sclavinia is ten times bigger than our Saxony, especially if one treats as part of it Bohemia or the Polan beyond the Oder, since they do not differ, either in customs or language".

However, we should not misunderstand the important aspects of this simple (and yet apparently attractive) pan-Slavonic culture. Ethnographic investigations have shown that the success of a society is closely linked to its ability to easily include alien peoples – treating them as equals (Urbanczyk 2000). This could explain why Slavonic culture survives the geopolitical upheaval and confusion of the latter half of the first millennium AD.

The first Slavonic territorial organisations formed in the regions occupied previously by the Avarian-Slavonic culture. From AD 822 Frankish historical sources mention 'Moravians' in a political context. Moimarus is described as driving out his great rival Pribin and founding the Moravian kingdom in AD 833. Using the examples of his neighbours to the west, Moimarus created a stable political base for his dynasty – his power arose not merely militarily, but as a result of encouraging the spread of Christian ideology. The close links between the fledgling Slavonic kingdom of Moravia and their adoption of Christianity are mirrored in the histories of every other early Slavonic kingdom – for example the later Czech kingdom (whose Premyslid dynasty converted in AD 883) and the Polish kingdom (Mieszko I was baptised in AD 966).

The beginnings of the formation and centralisation of local territorial organisations in the Slavonic regions can be attested archaeologically by the development of fortified settlements and market places. This growth concerned the neighbouring Carolingian Empire considerably – they prepared the so-called Bavarian Geographer (*Description Civitatum et Regionum ad Septentrionalem Plagam Danubii*) sometime around the middle of the 9th century AD. This described and listed the forti-

fications and settlements of the tribes of the West Slavs. Many fortifications have been built in the region occupied by the West Slavs in the 9th century, demonstrating the political ability of the chiefs and princes to both mobilise a workforce and seek to consolidate their territories. The emergence of silver hoards in the archaeological record of this period also indicates an economic background capable of sustaining the accumulation of capital.

Poland enters history at the beginning of the 10th century, not as a fledgling kingdom, struggling to survive, but rather as a well-developed political entity. The leader who would later become Mieszko I began to consolidate his power over tribes in the Wielkopolska region. Positioned centrally in the area that would become his kingdom, Mieszko had an advantage that his neighbours did not: he was protected from the powerful Christian kingdoms to the south and west by those neighbouring tribes he would later subjugate. An account by Ibrahim ibn Yaqub, a Jewish traveller and merchant from Spain, describing his travels in the lands of the West Slav in AD 956/6, describes Mieszko's Slavonic kingdom as one of the biggest and most powerful he had seen. Ibrahim ibn Yaqub describes taxes, standing armies and towns – all from a state (his choice of word) that had yet to align itself with the Latin or Greek church. The pagan nature of the early kingdom of Poland made it vulnerable to a military crusade by its more powerful Christian neighbours. Mieszko married Dobrawa, a princess from the Czech kingdom to the south, in c. AD 965 and was baptised in AD 966 by the Czech bishop. This was a political decision, safeguarding his independence from the Germanic kingdoms and the Church to the west, while also affording him recognition from Christian Europe. He was then free to turn his attention fully towards Pomerania, the wealthy pagan region to the north.

The tribes of the Pomeranian region occupied the Baltic coast between the Prussians to east and the Wilzians and Abodrites to the west. The archaeological evidence recovered from excavations at Wolin – the most intensively excavated urban site of the West Slavs – illustrates the political and economic strength of the early Pomeranian region. The 9th century Bavarian geographer describes two local Slavonic tribes, the Prissani and the Velunzani, noting that there were at least seventy settle-

ments in the territory of each, illustrating the importance of the region and the power of its tribes. Archaeologically, this is illustrated by the discovery of at least twenty hoards of silver coins in the region around Wolin; one of the most concentrated distributions in both Pomerania and the Baltic.

At the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century, Wolin was a growing urban centre of craft workshops and trade. The town was located where the river Dziwna narrows, near its confluence with the Oder. It was enclosed by a rampart and situated in a good defensive position on a hill surrounded by swamps. In the southern part of the town lay the market place and a port and quayside. The convenient location of Wolin, at the crossroads of several communication routes, both of land and water, led to an early and fairly intensive development of the settlement. Writing in AD 965, Ibrahim ibn Yaqub describes a large town with twelve gates and a port. Archaeological excavation within Wolin has demonstrated the importance of both trade and craft production to its 9th and 10th century inhabitants. By the end of the 9th century the quayside at Wolin was between 250 m and 300 m in length, with regular jetties laid out at right angles to the quay, comparable with Scandinavian quaysides in the north and west. We must remember, however, that the pottery recovered by the excavations was almost entirely Slavonic in nature. The excavation of an area of craft workshops known as *Srebrne Wzgorze* recovered over 39,000 pieces and fragments of horn, the by-product of the production of combs, dice, needles and needle tidies. The scale of such craft production was clearly very large.

The political and economic importance of this region was such, that from the 10th century onwards the neighbouring Polish and Danish kingdoms were actively covetous of the area. By AD 967 the recently baptised Polish king Mieszko I had established control over Wolin. The control of Wolin by the fledgling feudal power of the Polish princes enabled them to consolidate their grip on their territory by stimulating internal trade.

However, the political power of Wolin and Pomerania was not simply a result of successful trade. There is both historical and archaeological evidence of a pagan temple having been situated in Wolin between the 9th and 11th

centuries. Even after the conversion of Mieszko I of Poland in AD 966 – and his subsequent seizure of Pomerania – there are continued historical references to the pagan temple at Wolin. This is both a measure of the continuing relative independence of the town from the fledgling feudal state of Poland – and an indicator of its origins as an ethnic and cultural melting pot. Wolin welcomed merchants from many diverse backgrounds – witness its mix of different house building styles – while retaining its Slavonic origins and nature. It was only after the intervention of the Polish prince Boleslaw III and the subsequent firm imposition of Christianity upon Wolin in AD 1124 that the relative political autonomy of the town was destroyed.

The social and economic situation changed in the 10th and 11th centuries, resulting in the decline of long distance trade and the increase in the importance of local markets. Long-distance trade precipitated local trade, the trading settlement and attendant power base stimulated local production and exchange, while this in turn consolidated the political power of the early urban centre. Nearby Szczecin, with its large hinterland of agricultural production, came to the fore at the expense of Wolin. Subsequently, Szczecin became the main centre of local trade and production – and of political power.

It is rare for the surviving runic inscriptions and later sagas of the Viking world to describe contacts between the Scandinavian world and the West Slavs of the Baltic coast – the Pomeranians, Abodrites and Wilzians. However, historical sources and the archaeological record would seem to point to an equal balance of power between the Scandinavian and Slavonic regions of the Baltic. Trade networks operated throughout the region and occasional political ties – such as marriages or trading agreements – are mentioned in the political sources. In the 9th century the tribes of the West Slavs were at a very similar level of social and technological development to the Vikings. They were skilful ironworkers and craftsmen, active traders and efficient farmers, while many of their fortified settlements were fast approaching urban status. Agriculture and animal husbandry were the mainstays of the economies of both the Scandinavian and Slavonic areas. However, one major difference between the two was the poor agricultural

quality of the land in the Scandinavian north when compared to the rich black earth of the Slavonic lands to the south.

Between the 9th and 11th centuries an area including Scandinavia and central and eastern Europe can be described as one zone of exchange, with the Baltic Sea as the axis of trade. One expression of this uniformity is the distribution of the silver Arabic dirham – and of hack silver – within the archaeological record. From the middle of the 10th century we can also include local, Carolingian and Saxon coins as indicators of trade. A common system of weights also operated in this zone of exchange, while West Slavonic pottery types such as the Feldberg and Fressendorf types have been found in many settlements around the Baltic and northwest Europe. Over time, the increasing complexity of social organisation within the zone of exchange can be seen to mirror the increasing complexity of trade systems.

Baltic trading emporiums (such as Birka in Sweden) began to grow quickly from the 9th century onwards. The early towns of the Scandinavian and Slavonic lands grew in societies that were very different from those of post-Roman Europe and trade was certainly one of the main stimuli for the growth of these towns. The archaeological record of the West Slavonic region demonstrates that there were no purely Viking settlements on the Baltic coast and that those settlements that existed were predominantly Slavonic in nature. Could the growth of towns like Wolin, Menzlin and Oldenburg be as much a result of indigenous activity – such as a Slav-controlled trade in corn (the Slavic agrarian economy producing corn in great quantity when compared to the Scandinavian north) – than of a foreign mercantile influence?

Viking Age trade and exchange in the Baltic zone was loosely organised around the Arabic

market weight system, visible archaeologically by the wide distribution of standardised weights. Further archaeological evidence includes Arabic coins, weights, scales, hack-silver and Slavonic pottery (which has a wide distribution throughout northern Europe). My current research has suggested that there may well have been a standardised volume system operating within this widely distributed Slavonic pottery. I would argue, that the archaeological uniformity – perhaps most perfectly encapsulated by the wide use of the Arabic market weight system – and the evidence from the historical sources could point to some degree of co-operation between the early trading emporiums of the Baltic. Similarities between the archaeological evidence from town excavations – and the uniformity of trading equipment such as weights – throughout the Baltic would seem to suggest a distinct mercantile group; perhaps a form of pre-Hanseatic League?

In conclusion, I hope that I have illustrated that the West Slavonic tribes of the Baltic coastline could easily have competed as equals with the Viking traders and warriors – and that political development and economic development in the Baltic region was broadly contemporaneous. As early as the beginning of the 9th century, Reric (a trading town of the Abodrites) is mentioned in the Royal Frankish Annals. Godfrey, king of the Danes, destroyed Reric in AD 808 and transferred the Slavic merchants to Hedeby, an act that points to their importance and perhaps success. I have argued that trade and political power in the Baltic region went hand in hand and that there may well have been some degree of co-operation between the trading centres of the Baltic region. I would suggest that it may have been a search for easier profits that led the Swedish Vikings to explore the waterways of Russia – a Viking Age 'Northwest Passage'.

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