

Beloozero town: an urban centre on the periphery

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Town; outland; changes in economic structure

Beloozero is one of the important historical regions in northern Rus. This vast land situated around the Beloe lake was located on the boundary dividing the central lands (inland) of the ancient Russian state and its northern periphery (outland). The central point of the Beloozero region was the town of the same name mentioned by Russian chronicles as one of the earliest urban centres. The town was not only a significant urban centre, until the last quarter of the 12th century it was the most remote one to outland (fig.1). In the course of the past five decades wide-scale archaeological investigations were conducted in the town and within the region as a whole (Golubeva 1973; Makarov et al. 2001). The urban territory was excavated from 1949 till 1965, when its large area was submerged as a result of reservoir construction. In 1990 a new research cycle was begun, aimed at investigations of the town and concentrated on collecting isolated finds according to the special-purpose principles worked out (Zakharov/Sidorov 1998). The results of conducted works allow to suggest a reconstruction of the dynamics of Beloozero formation and development with regard to the processes taking place in its vicinity.

The Beloozero town emerged in the mid 10th century on the right bank of the Sheksna river, close to its source from the lake Beloe. The Sheksna river – a left tributary of the Volga – represented a branch of the famous waterway once connecting the Volga and the Baltic sea. The location of the town at the key point where the river springs from the lake permitted to control the traffic in this part of the route, which gained importance not later than the early 10th century (Makarov 1997, 50–57). The Beloozero town developed quickly, and by the late 10th century covered an area

around 1.4 ha in size. As early as that time it was the region's largest centre, by far exceeding in dimension the rest of the sites. The town's territory has yielded a great number of various finds that reflect a high level of prosperity of the population in the earliest period of its existence. Early cultural deposits are abundant in glass beads, metal ornaments, kufic coins, and a variety of tools. Besides the ornaments of Slavic and Finnish types, the artefacts of Baltic and Scandinavian origin, pottery from the Volga Bulgaria, Byzantine amphorae and glass bracelets, as well as walnut shells were found (Golubeva 1973, 178–188). A golden solidus minted under Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII should be pointed as one of the most rare numismatic finds ever discovered in northern Rus'. In the layers dated back to the late 10th and early 11th centuries timber paved streets, built according to a plan, and fenced plots were revealed (Golubeva 1973, 81). The culture of the early Beloozero is similar to that of northern viks and unfortified proto-urban sites in northern Rus'.

Two stages of rapid territorial growth and urban life intensification may be singled out in the subsequent development of Beloozero. The first one dates to the 11th century, when the area occupied by the town had grown five-fold and reached 7 ha. In the first half of the 11th century the urban territory crossed the Sheksna and spread over its left bank. The second stage of significant growth fell within the second half of the 12th and the early 13th century and marks the town's golden age. Finds from this period were discovered in all excavation trenches and in all segments of Beloozero that underwent land survey and collecting of stray finds. Dendrochronological data shows,

that the most extensive timber-felling for constructing took place in the first half of the twenties of the 13th century which is interpreted as the proof of high economic activity (Kolchin/Chernykh 1977, 113). The total area covered by the town in that period exceeded 50 ha.

The collection of finds originating from Beloozero comprises over 18.000 items including metal, glass, stone, bone and other artefacts (fig.2). Practically all categories typical of ancient Russian town are present. Over 4.000 glass beads were discovered; the series of golden objects numbers 17 items, including 7 temporal rings. Six silver ornaments adorned in granulation and filigree technique were found. Collection of sphragistic materials comprises 33 lead seals and 178 lead stamps. Around 600 amphorae fragments were collected in Beloozero, which is only inferior to Novgorod among the urban centres of northern Rus' (Koval' 1999). Around 40 different coins were found. The collection of Christian objects numbers over 300 finds, among them 14 small icons, 28 reliquary crosses, and 251 pendant crosses. In spite of its marginal location, Beloozero may be compared to many other large towns of ancient Rus' as far as density of various finds in the cultural deposits is concerned, and, moreover, even surpasses them in some parameters. Numerous and impressive collections of artefacts confirms the prosperity of the population and significant economic potential of the town.

In the second half of the 13th century, however, the process of gradual reduction of the urban territory began. The site's earliest territory in the central part of the town, situated on the right bank of the Sheksna, was the first to be abandoned by the inhabitants. The only excavation trench of those inhabitants located there has evidenced cultural deposits of the mid and second half of the 13th century. They were discovered in the trenches within the residential area on the riverside, also included into the central part of the town's territory. In the late 13th century the total number of buildings here also decreased. Only three excavation trenches have yielded material from the early 14th century, constructions of this period were reliably evidenced only in the eastern outskirts of Beloozero. In the 14th century the easternmost portion of the once enormous town remained settled. The above situation revealed by the analysis of the excava-

tions' results has been confirmed by the new data based on the studies of the collection of many thousands of stray finds. Unfortunately, the area covered by the town in the early and middle 14th century may be defined only approximately, since its eastern outskirts have been strongly affected by inundation. The calculations' results range from 0.7 to 7 ha. However, it is clear, that the Beloozero area in the 14th century did not exceed that of the 11th century, and most probably was much less.

What factors could account for the decline of that great a town which had prospered for three centuries? In Russian historical science this phenomenon is usually explained by the plague epidemics of 1352 and 1363–64. It is held, that Beloozero was desolated as a result of the epidemics, while the surviving inhabitants had moved to the south side of the lake Beloe where a new town named Belozersk had emerged (Kopanev 1951, 14; Sakharov 1959, 79–81; Golubeva 1973, 58). Yet the archaeological material accumulated at present and supplemented with investigations of jurid-

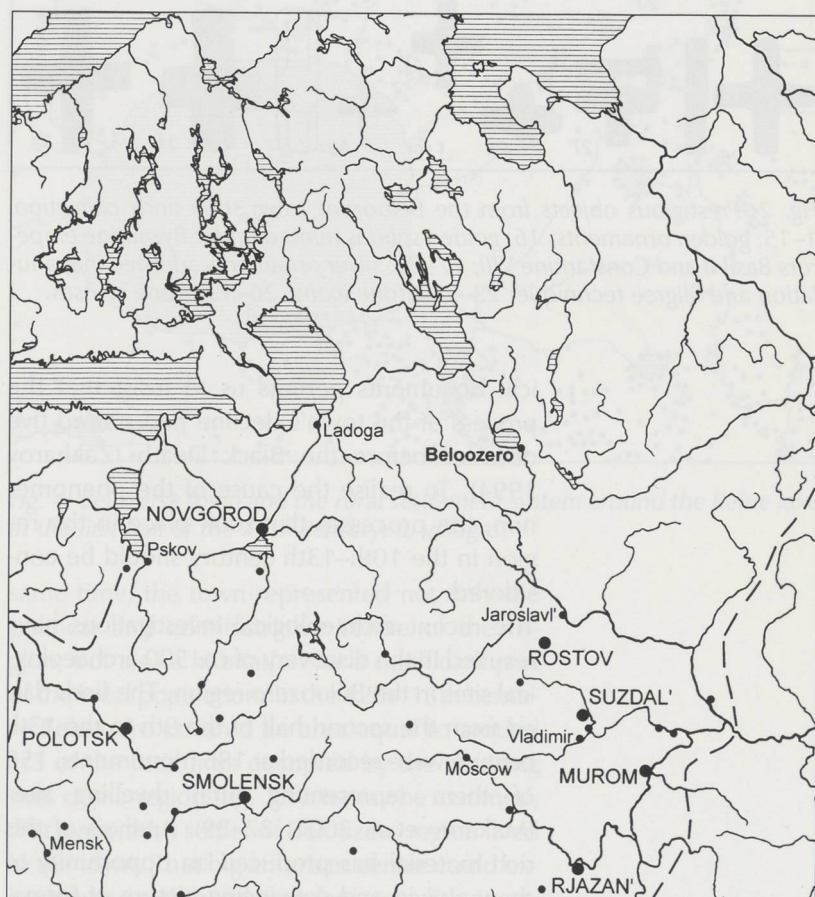


Fig. 1: Northern part of Ancient Rus' and towns emerged until the last quarter of the 12th century (according to: Kuza 1985).

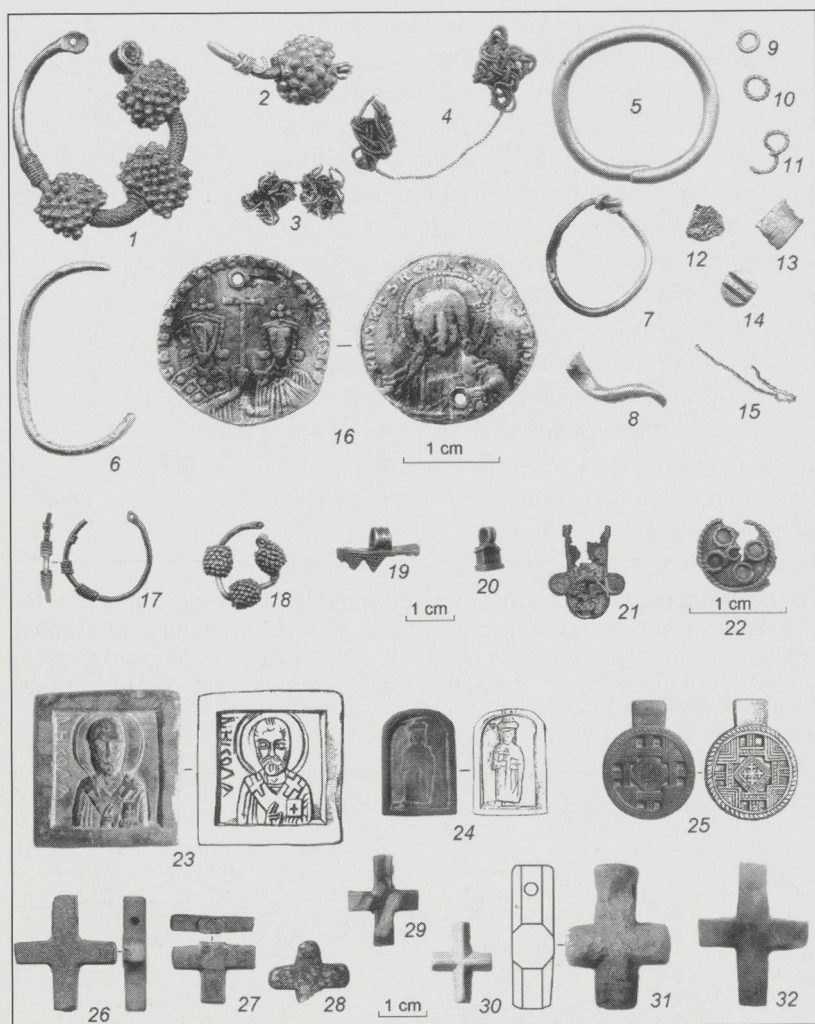


Fig. 2: Prestigious objects from the Beloozero town stray finds collection. 1–15: golden ornaments; 16: golden solidus minted under Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII; 17–22: silver ornaments adorned in granulation and filigree technique; 23–25: stone icons; 26–32: stone crosses.

ical documents permits us to insist that the process of the town's decline had started five decades before the Black Death (Zakharov 1994). To realise the cause of the phenomenon, the processes that took place in the region in the 10th–13th century should be considered.

The recent archaeological investigations have resulted in the discovery of ca. 500 archaeological sites in the Beloozero region. The finds dated from the second half of the 9th to the 13th century were recorded at 186 monuments, 155 of them representing rural dwelling sites (Makarov et al. 2001, 27–29). Analysis of this rich material has produced an opportunity to draw a vivid and convincing picture of formation and development of the rural dwelling sites' network in the region.

The earliest settlements emerged here in the second half of the 9th century, while the formation of the rural sites' network started in the 10th century. The most part of the sites in question were situated immediately on the river banks and the lakesides. In the 11th and 12th century, a rapid growth of the numbers of sites' occurred, concentration within small districts being their typical feature. The basic structural unit of the rural settling system consisted in this period of relatively large groups (clusters) of dwelling sites separated from each other by vast, sparsely populated areas. This system reached its flourishing period in the 12th and the first half of the 13th century, characterised by essential growth of the sites' number and area. It is this period in which large rural sites emerged, each covering an area from 1 to 11 ha (fig. 3). The tendency of their grouping into clusters became more distinct: nearly a half of the rural dwelling sites were comprised within the 12 largest clusters (Makarov et al. 2001, 70–94; 124–167; 215–226).

That strong concentration of population in small micro-regions allows us to raise a question concerning the economic ground for their inhabitants' life support. The solution has been found in the course of the excavations of the rural sites with well-preserved cultural deposits: dwelling sites Krutik (9th–10th century) and Minino (10th–13th century), and cemeteries Nefedievo (11th to the early 13th century) and Nikolskoe III (11th century). As a result of the field investigations, abundant artefact collections have been accumulated, producing the evidences of a high level of prosperity typical of the rural population from the 10th to the early 13th century. According to such indications as concentration of glass beads, bronze ornaments, silver coins and various imported articles, the discussed sites have turned out to be similar to the urban centre. Having examined the economic activity of the people that left the sites it became clear that their life-style and consumption pattern had been based on a complex economy, including different crafts, agriculture, fishing, and stock-breeding. But, the most important data was obtained by the investigations of osteological collections. The share of wild animals' bones in the collections originating from the dwelling sites of Krutik and Minino was over 65%. Among wild animals the objects of fur-hunting prevailed, mainly beaver, though other fur-bearing ani-

mals like marten, fox, squirrel, otter, and hare were also present. The collections' total volume is very large, thus testifying great furs bag hunted by the settlers of the rural sites. This fact permits us to consider a strong development of fur-hunting to be the basis of their complex economy and well-being, and accounts for the abundance of imported articles, silver coins and ornaments made of non-ferrous metals clearly mirrored by the composition of artefact collections (Golubeva/Kochkurkina 1991; Makarov 1997, 159–160; Makarov/Buzhilova 1997).

This system of economy and settling came to its crisis in the second half of the 13th and the 14th century. The archaeological material of the 13th century gives for this period the impression of an impoverished material culture of the rural population, a significant reduction of goods exchange and exploitation of the resources of the wilderness. Numerous rural dwelling sites, inhabited during the 10th–13th century, lack in cultural deposits dated to the 14th–15th century. Some early settlements continued functioning but their dimensions decreased. It is in this period that the settling of the rivers' interfluvies began, accompanied with a population outflow from the largest river banks and lakesides. A new settling system came into being, based on a network of numerous villages consisting of few households and located at a short distance from each other. The said changes reflected the transition to a more natural system of economy with a higher essential role of agricultural constituent; more grounds suitable for agriculture, as well as essential changes in settlements spatial structure were needed.

The revealed evolution in the rural dwelling sites' system perfectly fits the dynamics of the town's development. Another circumstance should be stressed, namely, that Beloozero emerged in an uninhabited region without any connection to agricultural settlements. The nearest sites with cultural deposits of the 10th century are situated at a distance of 17–25 km. The town's vicinities were not settled during the whole 11th century. The network of rural dwelling sites was in an embryonic stage even in the epoch of the most intense development of Beloozero town and the entire region. Only five minor rural settlements existed in the second half of the 12th and the 13th century within a radius of ten kilometres from Beloozero. At the

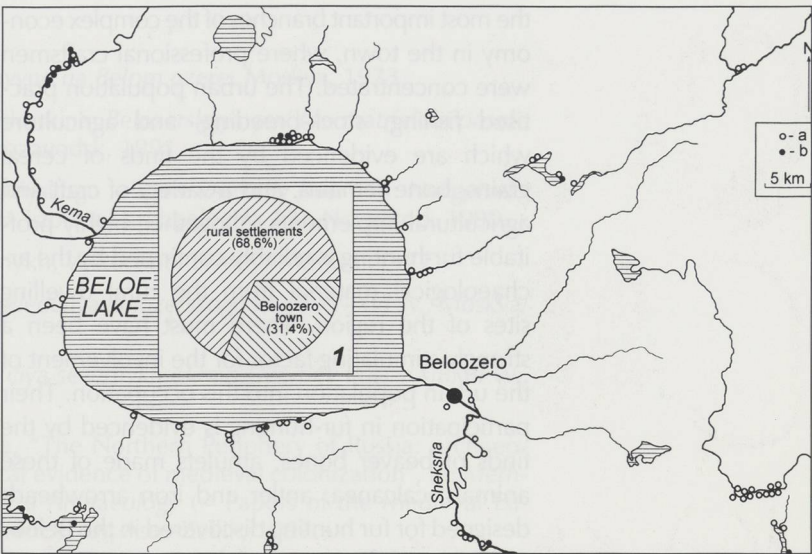


Fig. 3: Beloozero town and medieval dwelling sites in the central part of the Beloozero region. a) dwelling sites of the 10th–13th century; b) dwelling sites with cultural deposit of the end 9th–10th century; 1: diagram showing the shares of the Beloozero town and rural settlements in total area covered by the dwelling sites in the 12th–13th century.

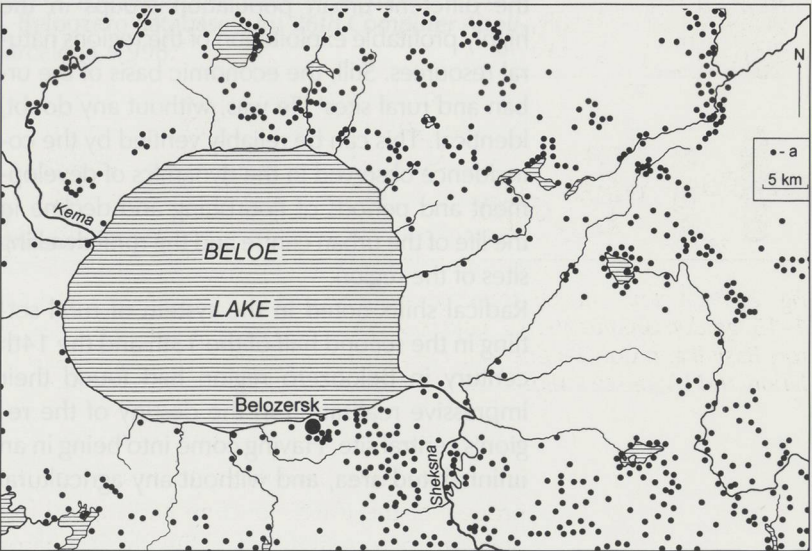


Fig. 4: Belozersk town and the rural settlement system around the Beloe lake in the first half of the 19th century; a) villages.

same time, the town represented not only the political and administrative centre of the region, but also a habitation for a significant part of the local population. In the 12th–13th century Beloozero covered an area equal to around 1/3 of the total area occupied by the dwelling sites of the region (fig. 3.1). It may be assumed, that every third settler of Beloozero region lived in the town. That big an urban centre could exist only as a rather independent unit with an agricultural and forest resources zone of its own. Undoubtedly, manufacture and trade represented

the most important branches of the complex economy in the town, where professional craftsmen were concentrated. The urban population practised fishing, stock-breeding, and agriculture which are evidenced by the finds of cereal grains, bone remains, and a variety of craft and agricultural implements. Altogether, highly profitable fur-hunting is reliably confirmed by the archaeological material from the rural dwelling sites of the region. There must have been a strongly stimulating factor for the involvement of the urban population into this occupation. Their participation in fur-hunting is evidenced by the finds of beaver bones, amulets made of these animals' calcanea, antler and iron arrowheads designed for fur hunting discovered in the Beloozero cultural deposits (Golubeva 1973, 191). At the same time Beloozero was a significant urban centre, the residence of the upper strata representatives notable for their welfare standards and social status. Therefore, it is possible to suppose rather reliably various forms of participation of the different urban population groups in the highly profitable exploitation of the regions natural resources. Still, the economic basis of the urban and rural sites' life was, without any doubt, identical. This can be reliably verified by the coincidence observed in the dynamics of development and periods of flourishing and decline in the life of the urban centre and the rural dwelling sites of the region.

Radical shifts noted in the system of rural settling in the second half of the 13th and the 14th century in Beloozero region had found their impressive realisation in the destiny of the region's central site. Having come into being in an uninhabited area, and without any agricultural

countryside, the Beloozero town, however, was an integral part of the economic system which in the 10th–13th century produced favourable conditions for a dynamic development of the town and the entire region as well. It was based on the complex economy of rather high marketability guaranteed not by agriculture, but, in the first place, by wide-scale extraction of forest resources. This economic structure was of particular efficiency and stimulated the formation of a special settlement pattern, which was flourishing in the 12th and early 13th century. The following crisis was caused by a number of factors. One of the most important points was probably the noticeable exhaustion of natural resources of the surrounding territories and a significant population growth, bringing the demands for some changes in the functioning of the economic structure. In the rural regions the crisis manifested itself in cardinal reconstruction of settlements' organisation, aimed at increasing the share of agriculture in the local economy. But the change of economic structure turned to be a disaster for the town. Beloozero was fading away, unable to find any means for development in the new situation. A new town superseded it, located only 15 km westward, but situated in quite different geographical and landscape conditions. Hilly moraine landscapes typical of Belozersk could satisfy the growing requirements in significant extension of agricultural grounds and were intensively settled in the 14th to the 15th century (Kopanev 1951). This situation can be most clearly seen in the map dated to the mid 19th century which reflects the new rural settlement system in its entirely developed final shape (fig. 4).

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