

Staraya Ryazan – Major Capital City of Medieval Russia: Standard or Exclusive Model?

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Staraya Ryazan (GUS); atypical Russian town; deserted town; history of research

Staraya (Old) Ryazan is an unique archaeological site of medieval Russia. It is the only large medieval Russian city never revived after it was destroyed by the Mongols in 1237. The first blow of the Mongols against Russia was directed not to the nominal capital of the whole of Russia – Kiev –, but against the most powerful political and military structure of Russia in that times – the lands controlled by the princes of Vladimir and Suzdal. The way to Vladimir from the steppes led through the territory of the south-eastern neighbours of the Vladimir princes, i. e. through the lands of the Ryazan princes. That is why Staraya Ryazan was the first big medieval Russian city captured by the Mongols.

The invasion of Ryazan by Batu-khan (the grandson of Chingiz-khan) is a well-known episode of the early Russian history, described in numerous written sources and reflected in folklore songs. Every Russian has heard about the siege and capture of the city of Ryazan by the Mongols, but only a few people know that the town destroyed was not the modern city of Ryazan but Staraya (Old) Ryazan, which is about 60 km from the new city.

The modern city of Ryazan had in the past another name: Pereyaslavl Ryazanskiy (i. e. Pereyaslavl of Ryazan). Medieval writers sometimes used the word Ryazan as a name for the territory; there are also some cases when one cannot be sure whether they had Staraya Ryazan or Pereyaslavl Ryazanskiy in mind. But nevertheless it is quite clear that by the end of 14th century the capital of the land was already removed to Pereyaslavl Ryazanskiy (modern Ryazan).

Today the fortified settlement of Staraya Ryazan is practically free from houses and gar-

dens. At the foot of the high platform of the fortified settlement there is an existing village called Staraya Ryazan. The memory that this is the place of a medieval city has survived among the local population.

The name of Ryazan appears in medieval Russian written sources in the late 11th century. When the empire of the first princes of Kiev began to disintegrate, the Ryazan land entered the sphere of domination of the Chernigov princes (initially Russia was divided into two parts with the Dnieper as the frontier – the right side belonged to the Kiev princes and the left to their Chernigov counterparts). Later, a political structure of Murom-Ryazan principality was established with its capital originally in Murom (initially the main town of the non-Slavic Finno-Ugrian tribe of Muroma). But in the mid 12th century the capital was removed to Staraya Ryazan, and at the end of 12th century this city also became the residence of a bishop.

Staraya Ryazan represents an atypical version of the emergence and development of medieval Russian capital city. It has no roots in the tribal structures of the period before the establishment of state; it is sufficiently younger than the most of medieval Russian capital cities (Kiev, Chernigov, Novgorod, Rostov etc.). The city founded in the early 11th century was initially a secondary provincial fortress which later became the capital of an enormous territory. Being one of the youngest capital cities of medieval Russia, Staraya Ryazan was at the same time the first of them to lose its political, economic and cultural importance after the invasion of 1237. This extremely short period of development resulted in an unfinished process of the establishment of local cultural traditions.

One more atypical feature is associated with the mechanisms of the initial foundation of the city. The dominating model of the foundation of medieval Russian towns is their establishment in the regions of concentration of an agrarian population. In the case of Staraya Ryazan we deal with quite a different model of development. A Slavic fortress – being the first step of Slavic colonisation – appeared in this part of the Oka valley in the period when the Slavic agricultural population was absent here. Archaeological evidence shows, that in the 9th to the 10th centuries this territory was uninhabited (Finno-Ugrian tribes had left it in the 8th century while the Slavs did not reach this area before the very end of the 10th and the beginning of 11th centuries). The lack of population in these fertile territories abundant in archaeological sites of all chronological periods for not less than two centuries is an interesting phenomenon. Most probably we see here a sort of 'zone of terror' separating hostile ethnic groups, something like the disposition of ancient Germanic tribes described by Caesar or the later situation on the Russian-Tatar frontier in the 14th century.

The natural resources of the Oka valley were extremely hospitable for agriculture and stock-breeding. On the other hand Slavic agricultural colonization of these lands was risking since its forestless territories were permanently in danger of nomadic inroads. Separate nomadic tribes were not a threat for the powerful fortress of Staraya Ryazan (especially after the reconstruction of its fortifications in the mid 12th century); but they were of importance for minor agrarian sites. The strategic frontier position of Staraya Ryazan finally played its decisive role in the tragic fate of the city – its devastation by the Mongols and the following total decline.

The land of Ryazan was for a long time after the invasion under particular influence of Tatar khans for the reason of its geographical position. There was a serious political struggle between Moscow and Ryazan which was ended by a gradual submission of the latter. But nevertheless, Ryazan land finally lost its nominal independence later than any other region of Central Russia – in the twenties of the 16th century.

The ruins of Staraya Ryazan are situated some 260 km to the south-east of Moscow on the high right bank of the Oka river. The Oka is a

Volga tributary, one of the largest rivers of the Russian plain. Near Staraya Ryazan the Oka runs almost strictly to the north. The territory of the fortified settlement is limited from the west, north and south by an abrupt slope and by ravines. The site has no natural border from the east.

The total dimensions of the city's fortified part are impressive – about 1.3 km by 800 m. This territory is larger than that of the Moscow Kremlin. The height of the fortified settlement above the modern village disposed on the bank of the river is about 30 m. The fortifications of Staraya Ryazan are rather well preserved. There is a 4 m high rampart, its existing part is more than 2 km long, as well as a ditch. The rampart had complicated wooden constructions inside, and there also were wooden walls and towers on top of it.

The enormous space occupied by the fortified settlement is associated with the latest stage of the city's existence, in the (late) 12th to the 13th century. We can trace the gradual growth of the site. First of all, there was a very small fortified settlement occupying 0.4 ha founded in the first centuries AD by non-Slavic Finno-Ugrian tribes. This settlement existed until the 8th century when this population left this territory. The early settlement was situated on the so-called Northern promontory (bottle). Unfortunately it has not been studied well enough since its largest part is occupied by a modern cemetery. Later the settlement was gradually growing, spreading in a southern direction.

In the early 11th century a large medieval Russian fortress was built – the so-called Northern fortified settlement, occupying ca. 7.5 ha. In the second half of 12th century the territory of the city was enlarged manifold – the magnificent ramparts of the so-called Southern fortified settlement were built. The fortified territory covered altogether over 60 ha at that time. The city also had a non-fortified suburb at the foot of the high bank occupied by the fortified settlement – in the place where the modern village is situated. Modern houses and gardens prevent investigations of this part of the city.

The northern fortified settlement is a stratified site. Its cultural layers correspond to the periods of building activity associated with repeated construction of fortifications. The enormous southern fortified settlement with its extremely rich finds is in fact non-stratified. There is a lot of material dated to the periods after the catas-

trophe of 1237, but the upper levels are destroyed by tillage. The cultural deposit of the Southern fortified settlement cover the earlier cemetery of the inhabitants of the northern settlement, dated to the 11th century. In the graves typical Slavic temporal rings, imported Oriental glass-and-gold beads and also an English denarius of Knut the Great were discovered. The cultural deposit of the non-fortified suburb is partly destroyed by the modern village. In this part of the medieval city a common grave of the victims of the Mongol invasion was investigated in the seventies. Up to four levels of skeletons in one grave were excavated. The dead were buried according to Christian funeral rite.

Staraya Ryazan displays one more important peculiarity in its development. Usually in the process of the town's growth, its oldest part retains the role of its centre. But in Staraya Ryazan it is quite clear that when a huge Southern fortified settlement was built all the vital centres of the city were removed to there. All three stone churches were built there, the wealthiest part of population, and also the princes probably lived in this new part of the city. The character and the disposition of finds points to this fact.

Staraya Ryazan was the first medieval Russian city where archaeological investigations took place. After the find in 1822 of a rich hoard of outstanding samples of jewellery (now in the Moscow State Armoury) some excavations of the site and around it were undertaken. It is characteristic that the illustrated book devoted to the finds from SR was published already the following year (Kalaidovich 1823).

This was the first find of a hoard of jewellery from Staraya Ryazan. Now we have 13 such finds from there. All of them are associated with the Mongol invasion. The treasures' owners were either killed or taken prisoner and could not return. We have a rich collection of similar hoards from many cities and towns taken by the Mongols (Vladimir, Suzdal, Kiev, Chernigov, Tver, Moscow etc.). There are no finds of this type in Novgorod since the Mongols did not reach this city. The most numerous hoards in question were found in Kiev, the nominal capital of medieval Russia. Staraya Ryazan is the second.

There were some further excavations in the 19th century, partly launched by some non-professional enthusiasts. Some excavations in

the early 20th century also took place. In 1926 the Russian archaeologist V. A. Gorodtsov, one of the best professionals of the period, worked in Staraya Ryazan. His excavations discovered the traces of dwellings not studied here earlier. During World War II an outstanding Russian archaeologist A. L. Mongait was preparing a dissertation on the antiquities of Staraya Ryazan, summarising existing information and analyzing museum collections. After the war he organised a large-scale excavations from 1945 to 1950. The results were published in his fundamental book on Staraya Ryazan (Mongait 1955).

Later, A. L. Mongait turned to the study of some other sites in the Ryazan region; in 1966 he launched a new series of excavations in Staraya Ryazan. Main attention was paid to the investigations of major parcels of the site's territory. These excavations had greatly changed the ideas on its topography (Darkevich 1974). After A. L. Mongait the expedition was headed by V. P. Darkevich, a well-known specialist in the field of studies of imported objects of applied art in medieval Russia. This series of excavations finished in 1979 (Darkevich/Borisevich 1995).

In 1992 a small excavations headed by V. P. Darkevich brought the new discovery of a hoard of jewellery (Darkevich/Borisevich 1995, 64–77). It captured the attention of the public. Consequently we found an opportunity to begin the new series of field investigations in 1994 (Chernetsov/Strikalov 2001).

A question may be raised: is it necessary to study the same city after so many years of excavations? Actually it seems it is not easy to say anything new about Staraya Ryazan. On the other hand, after such a long period of research we have investigated only 4–5% of the territory of the site's fortified part. This is certainly not representative, even from a statistical point of view. We must take into account that a good deal of the city was outside the fortifications on the river bank. In fact until recently this territory was not studied by archaeologists.

New excavations in Staraya Ryazan are now urgently needed because the abrupt slope of the site's platform is being gradually damaged by ravines and landslides. Moreover, the permanent presence of archaeologists prevents illegal excavations. These illegal digs take place in our country in particular in the region in question.

The strategy of our recent work includes paying special attention to the oldest part of the city – the Northern fortified settlement. The southern part of the site, marked by outstanding rich finds, is an archaeological object having an extremely short period of existence – about 70–80 years before the Mongol invasion. The life in the city was not completely over after 1237, but we have here no later cultural layer. The northern part of the city had a longer history, and here we can try to find a detailed answer to the questions of the town's foundation and the first stages of its life.

In spite of the fact that the northern fortified settlement is partly occupied by houses and gardens and seriously damaged by ravines, landslides and the excavation trenches of 1926, there exist considerable possibilities for serious field-work here. We have begun it with a cross-section of the rampart. Another important sphere of our interests is studying the non-fortified part of the city, partially occupied by the modern village. We cannot make wide-scale excavations here, but nevertheless it is possible to investigate a rather large territory. An important peculiarity of the cultural deposit of Staraya Ryazan is its dryness. That is why we did not find there objects of wood, leather, birch-bark and the like as in medieval Novgorod with its damp cultural deposit. However we discovered that the cultural deposit of Staraya Ryazan was not dry everywhere.

A considerable part of the city outside the fortifications has damp cultural deposit and we can now study wooden objects and constructions from Staraya Ryazan. It was a sensation, when in 1997 we found some fragments of the first birch-bark charter with some seven letters disposed at least in two lines in SR. We certainly have no data for the reconstruction of

the whole text, but it is a significant find demonstrating the possibility of other finds of this sort here.

One more serious direction in our work is the systematic archaeological reconnaissance of the areas around Staraya Ryazan. We have already made a number of corrections of the archaeological map of this region. A lot of archaeological sites of various epochs were discovered, and a considerable part of them had close contact with Staraya Ryazan.

We are also engaged in some work on the Southern fortified settlement, in particular we have begun studies of the ruins of a cathedral dated to the 12th–13th century.

Old and new investigations of Staraya Ryazan demonstrate principal peculiarities of this medieval Russian city and its history. In fact, we have no average model of a capital city of medieval Russia. There was a number of basic types of them. Two of the most important archaeological sites of medieval Russia – Novgorod and Staraya Ryazan – represent quite different patterns of development; both, by no means, can serve as a standard model of a medieval Russian capital city.

New series of field investigations of Staraya Ryazan were organized by the Institute of Archaeology, Russian Academy of Sciences; Ryazan Museum of History and Architecture; and the Russian State University for Humanities (the latter from 1997). The investigations were financially supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities (project N 02-01-18100e); Centre for Cooperation of Higher Education and Fundamental Science of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation and Russian Academy of Sciences ('Integration'-Centre) – (project N 51-657/54), and the Presidium of Russian Academy of Sciences.

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