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EVIDENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF SCANDINAVIANS AMONG THE FIRST SETTLERS OF CHERNIHIV ACCORDING TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

ABSTRACT

Scandinavian presence in Chernihiv has previously been addressed through analysis of materials from excavations of barrows within the urban structure of the town. Archaeological research in the 21st century has provided materials that suggest the presence of individuals of Scandinavian origin among the first settlers, for example, disk-shaped ceramic loom weights, which are considered indicators of the presence of people of North Germanic origin. Of particular interest are

the unreadable runic inscriptions on a comb of northern manufacturing tradition, among other artifacts. It is likely that the authors of these inscriptions had some knowledge of runic writing, but did not fully master it. They could have been members of a marginalized group of Scandinavians or part of the generation of settlers who had largely lost connection with their original cultural tradition.

Keywords: Chernihiv, Rus', Scandinavia, first settlers, archaeological sources, material culture

Chernihiv (Fig. 1) developed on a high terrace above the Desna River, near the confluence of its right-bank tributary, the Strizhen River. The historic portion of the city (Fig. 2, 3) occupies three plateaus, each separated by deep ravines along the former course of the Strizhen: Val (a hillfort, 10th–18th century), Yeletska Hill (a settlement dated to 10th–18th century, and a monastery dated to the 12th–20th century), and Boldina Hill (a barrow cemetery dated to the 10th to the early 11th centuries, located 3 km southeast of the medieval town centre, at the original confluence of the Strizhen and Desna rivers).¹

Historically, it was believed that Chernihiv was first mentioned in the Rus'–Byzantine treaty recorded in the chronicle under the year 907. The text of this and other treaties between Rus' and Byzantium is preserved in the Rus' chronicles, including the earliest extant examples (the Ipatiev and Laurentian Chronicles). However, the authenticity of this treaty has since been

disputed.² The present author invokes these written sources due to a longstanding historiographical tradition, which developed before the commencement of archaeological work in Chernihiv and has significantly influenced the dominant scholarly model for the city's development.

In the contested 907 treaties, Chernihiv was listed as the second town after Kyiv, ruled by princes, subject to Prince Oleg ('сѣдаху велиции князи под олгом сущѣ'³ – 'In these cities lived great princes subject to Oleg'⁴). Chernihiv is again identified as the second town after Kyiv in the Rus'–Byzantium treaty of 944 ('первое ѡгорода Кіева. на ки изъ Чернигова'⁵ – 'first, those from Kiev, then those from Chernihiv'⁶). A further mention of Chernihiv appears in the Primary Chronicle under the year 1024, concerning the rivalry between Volodimer the Great's sons, Mstislav and Yaroslav ('Ѧрославу сущю Новѣгородѣ приде Мѣстиславъ ис Тѣмutorокана Кѣеву и не приѣша юго Кѣяне инѣ же шедѣ

¹ Chernenko 2022, 48–50.

² Lind 1984; Tolochko 2015, 265–274.

³ *Lavrent'evskaâ letopis'*, 2001, 30

⁴ Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 1953, 54.

⁵ *Lavrent'evskaâ letopis'*, 2001, 49.

⁶ Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 1953, 74.

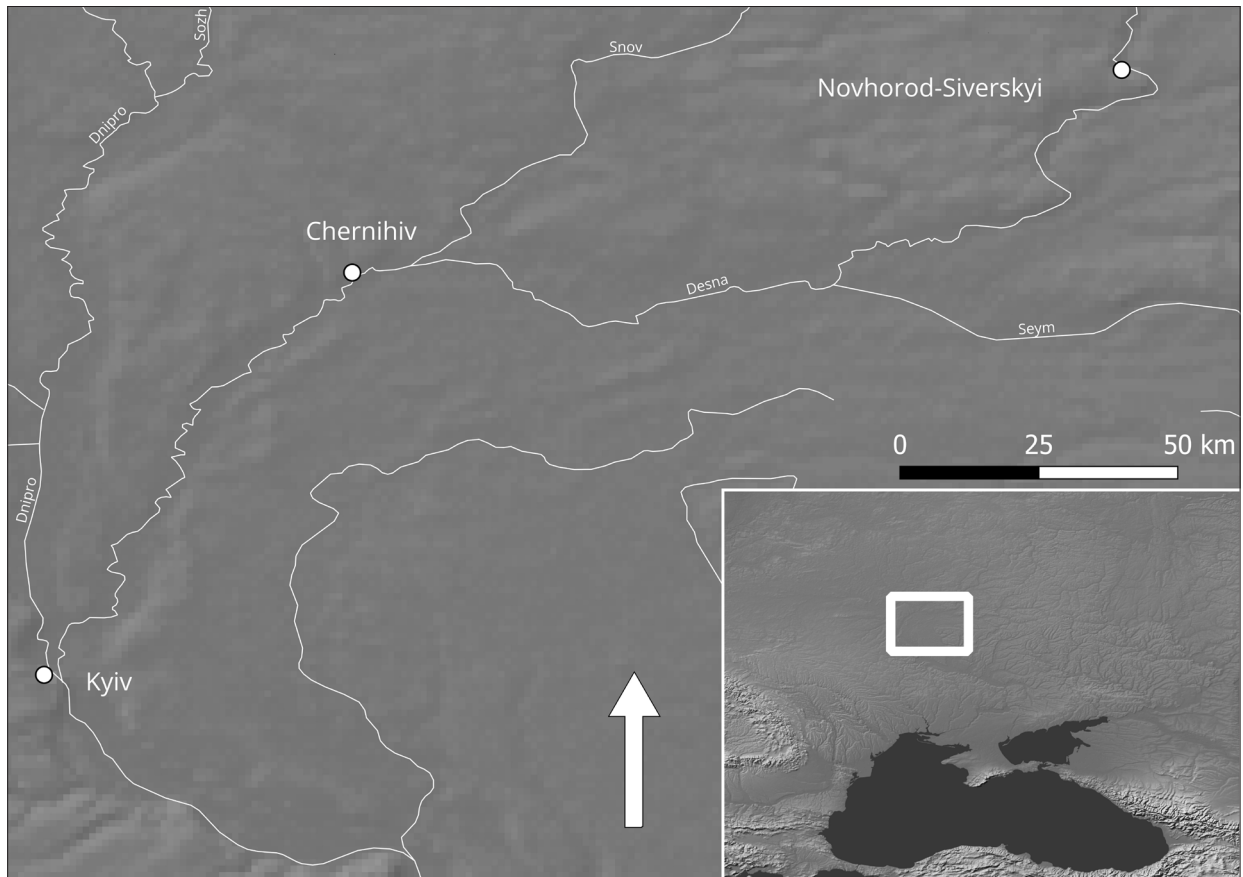


Fig. 1. Chernihiv on the map of Eastern Europe (drawing by S. Stepanenko).

стѣ на столѣ Черниговѣ⁷ – ‘While Yaroslav was at Novgorod, Mstislav arrived before Kyiv from Tmutorakan, but the inhabitants of Kyiv would not admit him: He thus departed thence and established himself upon the throne of Chernihiv’⁸), an episode that is generally interpreted as testimony to the city’s advanced development by that period. Overall, references in written sources suggest that by the early 11th century, Chernihiv was already a sizeable urban centre.

Problem Statement

The majority of scholarly inquiries into Chernihiv’s earliest history focused primarily on establishing the date of its foundation. By the late 20th century, Eastern European historiography typically regarded the town as having originated in the 7th century as a Slavic settlement, which then evolved into a tribal centre (a so-

called ‘proto-city’) in the 8th–9th centuries, and eventually became an administrative centre of the Rurikid state in the 10th century.⁹

However, the area identified by 20th-century researchers as the location of this early settlement was excavated in the early 21st century, uncovering more than 3,000 square metres, but no corresponding occupation layers were identified. Based on research undertaken over the past few decades, it can be stated with certainty that the earliest urban horizon of Chernihiv corresponds to materials characteristic of Rus’ sites from the 10th to the early 11th centuries.¹⁰ If there was any settlement of earlier date within what became Chernihiv, it appears to have been minor in extent and unrelated to the city’s subsequent evolution.

Barrow burials constitute the most extensively studied element of early Chernihiv’s material culture. To date, more than 250 barrows dating from the second half of the 10th century to the early 11th century have been in-

⁷ *Lavrent’evskaâ letopis’*, 2001, 147.

⁸ Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 1953, 134.

⁹ Kovalenko 1988, 22–33; Kovalenko 1990, 15–17; Kovalenko 2007.

¹⁰ Komar 2012, 341; Chernenko 2022, 57–85.



Fig. 2. The central part of modern Chernihiv (2010): 1 – ‘Val’/hillfort; 2 – Yeletska Hill; 3 – Chorna Mohyla (photo kindly provided by V. Ya. Rudenok).

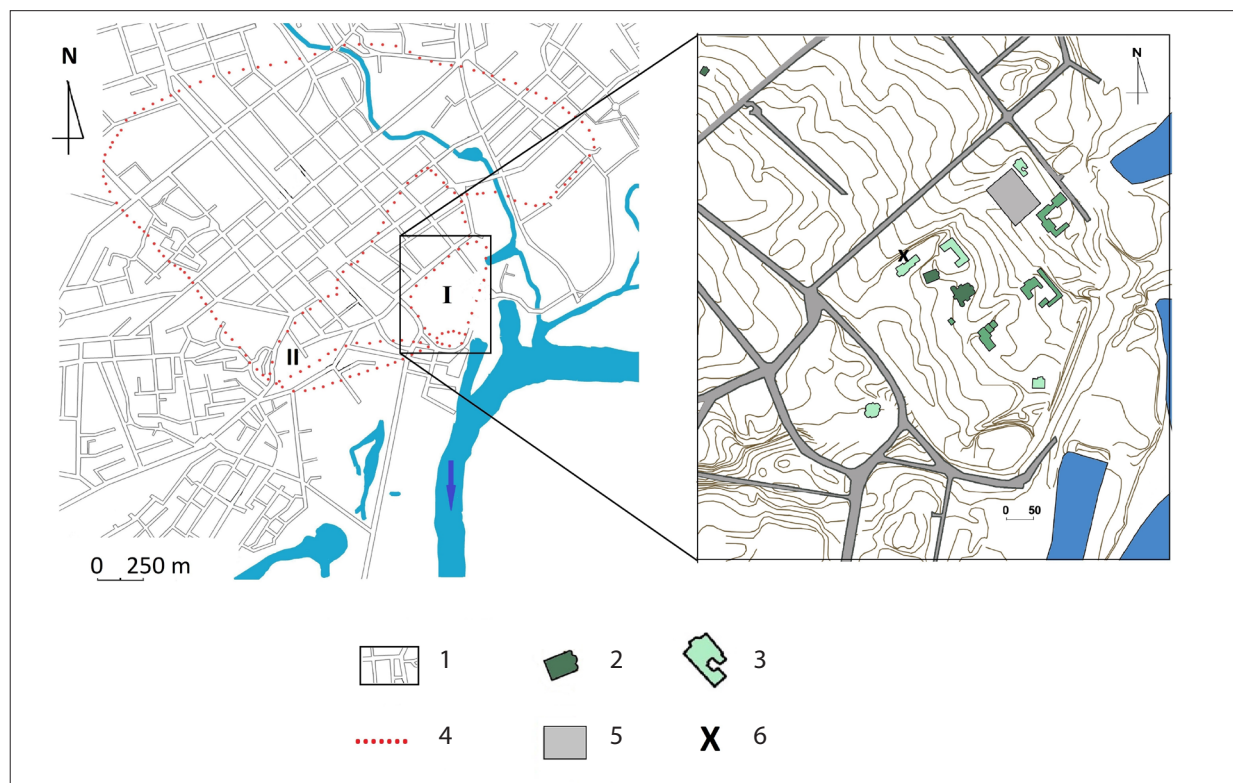


Fig. 3. Map of Chernihiv with modern quarters and the locations of medieval defensive structures indicated (compiled by O. Chernenko).

I – ‘Val’/ hillfort; II – Yeletska Hill; 1 – present-day streets; 2 – preserved buildings from the 11th–12th centuries; 3 – buildings from the 17th–20th centuries; 4 – ramparts and ditches from the 11th–13th centuries; 5 – location of the tranches of 2005-2006; 6 – location of trench of 2008.

vestigated. The urban barrow cemetery features both cremation and inhumation rites, including in burial chambers and grave-pits.¹¹ As in other centres of Southern Rus' in the 10th–11th centuries (e.g. Kyiv, Shestovytsia), these burials often feature socially prestigious artefacts of Northern European origin. According to Fedir Androshchuk,¹² this indicates the presence of noble families who were aware of their Scandinavian roots.

The inventory of the barrow complexes is varied. Except for the unique Chorna Mohyla barrow,¹³ most items demonstrate are analogous to those found in contemporary cemeteries across Rus' and Scandinavia.¹⁴ It is critical to note that no Slavic hand-made pottery has been recovered from any of the Chernihiv barrows, thus reinforcing the narrative that Chernihiv emerged as a Rus' settlement.

The interpretation of Chernihiv as a settlement that emerged during the formation of the Rurikid state in the 9th century requires further re-examination of the site's archaeological record. Of particular interest is the possibility that some of the earliest settlers were connected with Scandinavian traditions. This perspective has previously been explored regarding the large Chernihiv barrows (Chorna Mohyla, Hulbishche, Bezmyanni, and the sizeable barrows at Berizki).

Most of Chernihiv's barrows were excavated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The resulting data was poorly documented, the finds are now dispersed among different museums, and not all of them have been preserved. For many years, specialists in Eastern Europe were aware of these assemblages chiefly through the writings of Dmitry Samokvasov,¹⁵ who classified them as Slavic. His conclusions were adopted by prominent Soviet-era scholars such as Boris Rybakov¹⁶ and Vladimir Sedov,¹⁷ on account of whose considerable authority, this interpretation gained wide acceptance in Eastern Europe.

It was only in the early 21st century that this concept was convincingly re-evaluated. Currently, there is little doubt that elements of Scandinavian tradition can be discerned in the burial practices of the Chernihiv barrows. Iron boat-rivets uncovered in the pyre remains at Chorna Mohyla (Fig. 4) suggest either a cremation in a boat or the use of boat timbers in the funeral pyre. The burial inventories of these barrows include objects characteristic of Viking culture, which understandably attract scholar-

ly attention. At the same time, this focus on artefactual assemblages of the most high-status barrows has led to an imbalance of visibility, as artefact assemblages from these barrows are now more thoroughly studied than those from the urban settlement strata of Chernihiv. This situation parallels developments in several other centres of Southern Rus', notably Kyiv,¹⁸ leading one to concur with Androshchuk¹⁹ that the Scandinavian attribution of finds from Kyiv's urban layers also poses a challenge.

Unfortunately, at present, the pace of archaeological excavation in Chernihiv drastically exceeds the progress of interpreting the recovered material. Consequently, only a preliminary assessment of Scandinavian-related artefacts in the town's archaeological strata is feasible.

This article focuses on the excavations within the medieval Chernihiv hillfort, the Val, and artefact assemblages from investigations in 2005–2008, which uncovered areas where the earliest cultural horizon is best preserved. Although these materials have already been summarized and analysed by the present author in the context of a broader study of Chernihiv's earliest cultural deposits,²⁰ the current focus is on specific categories of objects of Scandinavian origin.

Artefacts 'of Scandinavian origin' ('Scandinavian Cultural Markers') are understood to be those objects that have direct analogues in the archaeology of Northern Europe and lack prototypes in the material culture of the local populations of Eastern Europe in the first millennium AD. This definition applies, among other things, to certain categories of everyday items (for example: keys, locks, particular types of combs, and loom weights for the warp-weighted loom). In studies addressing the settlements that emerged along the Dnieper trade route in the 10th century, such objects are conventionally treated as evidence of direct participation of migrants from Northern Europe in the formation of Rus' material culture.²¹ An in-depth discussion of this concept, which modern scholars favour over the earlier notion of a "druzhina culture", lies well beyond the scope of the present article. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that, in the case of Chernihiv, it aligns with the results of research at the urban cemetery, where not only a diverse assemblage of artefacts of Northern European origin has been identified, but corresponding features of the funerary rite have also been recorded.

¹¹ Androshchuk 1999, 76–84; Komar 2012, 341–345; Mikhailov 2016, 212–214; Sytyi 2022.

¹² Androshchuk 2004, 10.

¹³ Duczko 2004, 239–241; Zotsenko, Androshchuk 2012, 287–289; Kainov, Shchavlev 2005; Kainov 2019; Murasheva *et al.* 2018; Murasheva *et al.* 2021; Kainov *et al.* 2021; Murasheva, Orfinskaya 2022.

¹⁴ Androshchuk 1999, 76–84; Duczko 2004, 42; Komar 2012, 341–345; Zotsenko, Androshchuk 2012, 290.

¹⁵ Samokvasov 1908, 195–201; 1916, 1–49.

¹⁶ Rybakov 1949, 24–51.

¹⁷ Sedov 1982, 253–254.

¹⁸ Zotsenko 2003; Androshchuk 2004.

¹⁹ Androshchuk 2004, 10.

²⁰ Chernenko 2022.

²¹ Androshchuk 2004; Zotsenko, Androshchuk 2012; Pushkina 2004, 42–43; Musin, Tarabardina 2019.



Fig. 4. Chorna Mohyla (2016) (photo by O. Chernenko).

As supplementary contextual information, the article will consider structures investigated in Chernihiv that may be associated with transcontinental trade.

Scandinavian Cultural Markers in the Urban Layer

No wooden remains (aside from charred fragments) have been preserved in Chernihiv's medieval archaeological layers. This came as a surprise to early researchers. Drawing on the experience of excavations at Novgorod, they anticipated discovering evidence of wooden pavements and structures in Chernihiv, which would have greatly aided in dating and periodizing the site. This expectation was explicitly stated in the city's 1946 archaeological research plan, devised by Vladimir Bogusevich and approved by the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv.²² The reality, however, proved different.

Researchers encountered an amorphous, dry urban deposit that did not lend itself easily to stratification. This led to a succession of erroneous conclusions: for example, that building activity persisted continuously from the 10th to the 17th centuries, or that construction

pits from the 18th–19th centuries were actually moats.²³ Complicating matters further was the poor preservation of the early medieval urban stratum, which was extensively disturbed by later construction.

Not until the late 20th and early 21st centuries did excavations begin to isolate strata belonging to Chernihiv's earliest urban horizon. This was achieved through a methodology originally developed and applied in Kyiv during the 1960s–1980s.²⁴ Volodymyr Kovalenko was the first to implement this approach in Chernihiv, and other researchers have since followed suit, enabling them to establish the stratigraphy of the cultural deposits.²⁵ It was thereby determined that the oldest horizon is present in the area of the former hillfort, the Val, on the adjoining western section of the terrace, and on Yeletska Hill.²⁶ In each case, this earliest horizon is characterized by artefacts dating from the 10th to the early 11th century, broadly paralleling the chronology of the town's barrow cemetery.

These earliest deposits were largely destroyed by subsequent construction. Typically, only minimal traces of buildings (e.g., foundation pits) remain. An exception is the north-western sector of the fortress, where the earliest horizon was covered by the hillfort rampart by the be-

²² Bogusevich 1947, 1–2.

²³ Bogusevich 1949, 9.

²⁴ Tolochko 1981, 7–36.

²⁵ Kovalenko 1988; 1990; 2007.

²⁶ Chernenko 2022.

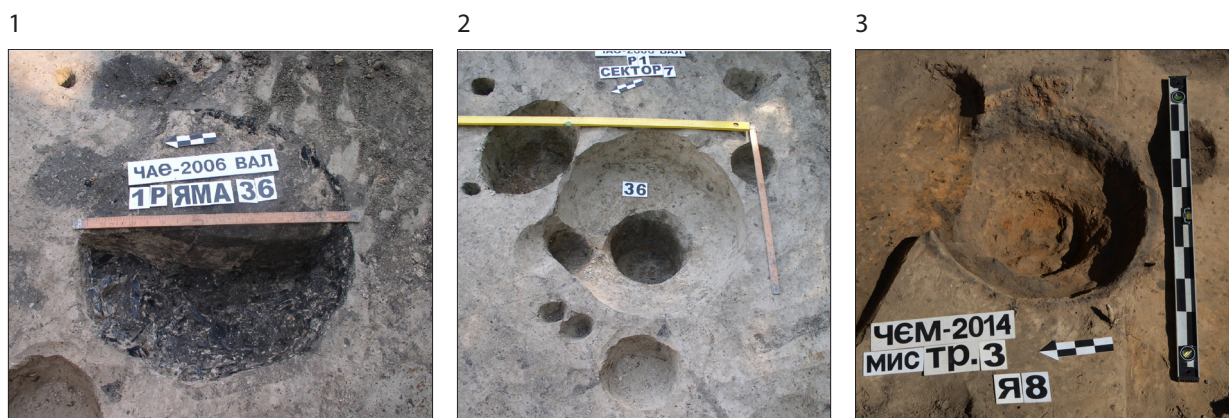


Fig. 5. Tar production pit: 1, 2 – Val'/hillfort (Structures 36 in the course of the research); 3 – Yeletska Hill (photo by O. Chernenko).

ginning of the eleventh century at the latest. This rampart remained *in situ* until the hillfort was dismantled in the early 19th century, effectively shielding the earliest horizon from later disturbances. From 2005 to 2008, more than 1,000 square metres in this area were excavated (Fig. 3:5-6), during which the remains of 10th-century structures were documented close to the rampart line.²⁷

The first phase in the formation of the earliest urban horizon was likely connected to tar-extraction pits (Fig. 5:1-2). These contained only wheel-thrown pottery typical of 10th-century Rus' sites. Notably, analogous features with the same function (Fig. 5:3) were uncovered during excavations on Yeletska Hill.²⁸ The diffusion of funnel-shaped tar-production pits for resinous wood is generally associated with Scandinavian arrivals. Since tar was essential for treating sails and wooden ship hulls, it is logical to find such production features along the Eastern European water routes used by Scandinavian settlers.²⁹ Tar-production pits dated to the 10th century have, for instance, been documented at Gnezdovo,³⁰ and their presence at Chernihiv is therefore highly significant.

The second phase of development in this area appears to have involved the construction of 'long buildings' measuring between 6 m² and 15.5 m².³¹ Their partially sunken remains, which survived as foundation pits, are oval in plan and oriented on a north-south or west-east axis. Their width (c. 1–1.5 m) is considerably less than their length (5–12 m), giving a length-to-width ratio of about 3:1. Eight such buildings were identified on the section covered by the rampart, along with traces of two additional structures to the east of the rampart line (Fig. 6).

All of these long buildings exhibit nearly identical construction techniques, although their dimensions vary. The walls slope inwards towards a flat base that lies 0.6–1 m below the original ground surface. The fill within them consistently reveals evidence of roof collapse, indicated by thin (0.05–0.1 m) deposits of charred wood and fragments of clay daub (Fig. 7). Small post-holes around the perimeters of the foundation pits likely indicate the positions of walls or supports.

In two instances, traces of stepped entrances cut into the subsoil were identified in one of the narrower walls of these pits. Each entrance contained a post-hole at its base, presumably to support the roof structure.

It appears that the 'long buildings' were either contemporaneous or followed one another within a relatively short time span. In two cases, nearly identical structures, both in size and construction, were replaced by their successors, with the later structures' pits intersecting and partially cutting through the earlier walls. This sequence was clearly evident in the stratigraphy.

The fills of these buildings yielded only a modest quantity of archaeological material, including sherds of pottery characteristic of 10th and early 11th-century Rus' sites, fragments of amphora walls, spindle whorls fashioned from pink slate, and a small assortment of metal and bone objects. Such paucity of material suggests that these features remained in use for only a brief period, and, possibly, were used seasonally and rebuilt as needed. They were certainly not domestic dwellings, but rather utility buildings, perhaps intended for storage, likely located on the outskirts of the settlement.

²⁷ Chernenko 2022, 66–85.

²⁸ Chernenko 2022, 67–71, 86–87.

²⁹ Hennius 2018; Shepard 2022, 25.

³⁰ Fetisov, Murasheva 2008.

³¹ Chernenko 2022, 71–77.



Fig. 6. 'Val'/ hillfort. Trench 3 of 2006. Arrows indicate Structures 4 (1) and 12 (2) (photo by O. Chernenko).



Fig. 7. 'Val'/ hillfort. Trench 3 of 2006. Structures 12. Stratigraphic section (photo by O. Chernenko).



Fig. 8. Keys from the 2006 excavations (photo by O. Chernenko).

As noted above, few artefacts were retrieved from these buildings. Of special relevance to this study are two keys, a ship rivet, and some ceramic loom weights suitable for a vertical loom.

The first key (Fig. 8:1), with a flat rectangular bit, was designed for opening a cubic padlock.³² Drawing on evidence from Novgorod, Boris Kolchin³³ classified such keys and locks as Type A, a typology widely accepted in Eastern Europe. Locks and keys of Type A are of Northern European origin. Most scholars refer to them

as being of 'Scandinavian appearance', since they do not feature among the typical metalworking products of archaeological cultures associated with the Slavs.³⁴ Evidence of their manufacture comes from Birka.³⁵ According to Andrey Kudryavtsev,³⁶ Type A locks and keys did not appear in Eastern Europe before the late 9th – early 10th centuries, their spread reflecting the intensification of Slavo-Scandinavian contacts and the movement of Norse settlers into the settlements along the 'route from the Varangians to the Greeks'.

³² Chernenko 2022, Fig. 17.3

³³ Kolchin 1959, 80.

³⁴ Kudryavtsev 2010, 234–235.

³⁵ Gustafsson 2005, 21–22.

³⁶ Kudryavtsev 2016.

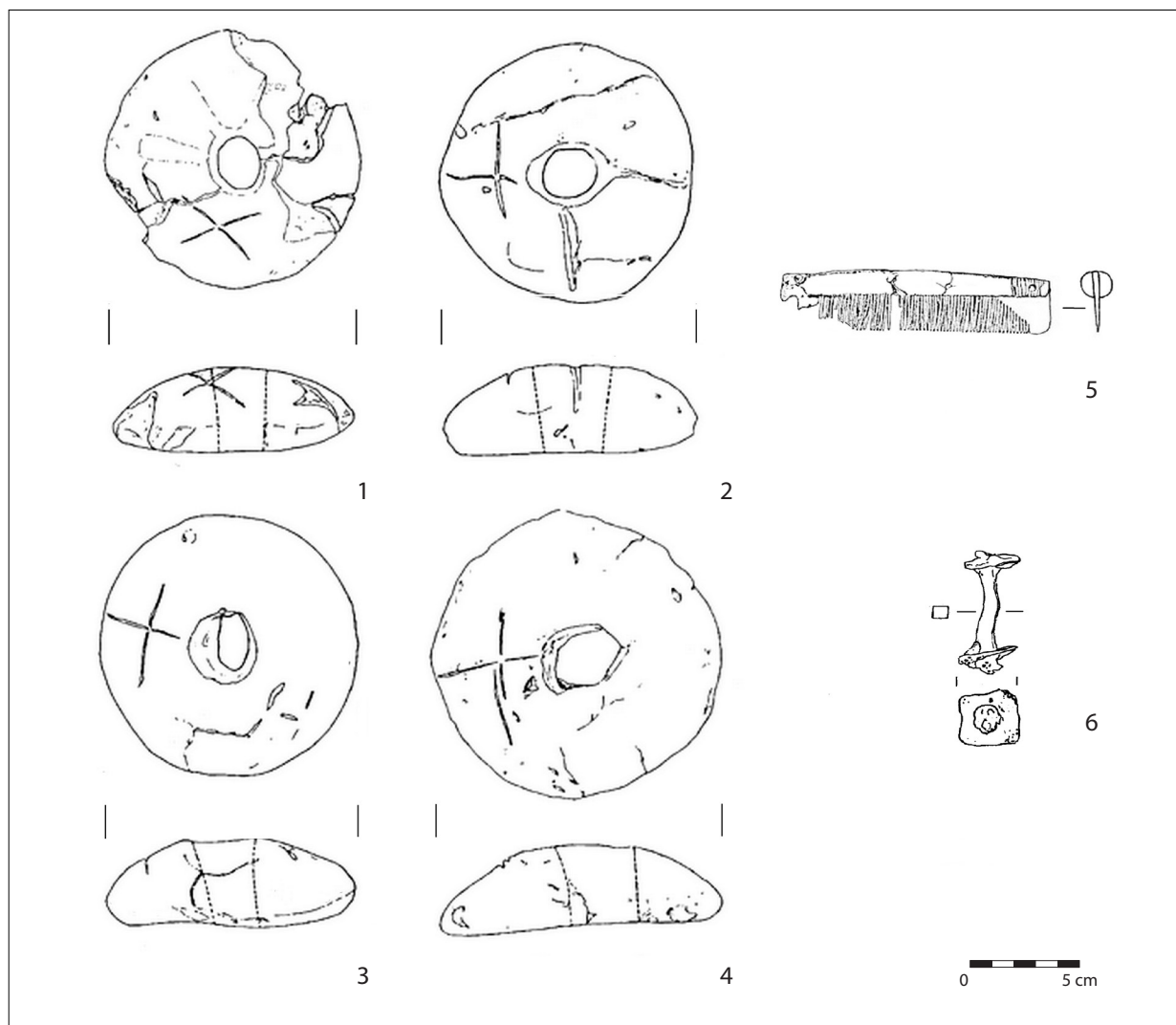


Fig. 9. Finds from 2006 excavations: 1–4 – ceramic weights, 5 – composite bone hair comb, 6 – iron boat-rivets (drawing by O. Chernenko).

During the first half of the 10th century, in Rus', keys and locks of this type tend to occur predominantly in barrows containing Scandinavian burials. Two such keys were found in the eastern part of the Chorna Mohyla cremation area at Chernihiv, alongside other household items.³⁷ In 10th-century Rus' settlements, they usually appear in small numbers. It is generally thought that these keys were used to secure chests and caskets, which had not yet become commonplace in everyday life in Rus' during the 10th–11th centuries.³⁸

The second key (Fig. 8:2) is a rod key with a shoulder.³⁹ It was intended for locks installed either on indoor frames or on the sides of chests or coffers. According to Kolchin's

typology, it corresponds to the first variant of a combined inset lock, in use between the latter half of the 10th century and the early 13th century.⁴⁰ Its relatively large size (total length 10.7 cm) indicates its possible use for securing a chest or door. The spread of such locks is likewise linked to Northern European influence. In 10th-century Rus', discoveries of these locks are exceedingly rare.⁴¹

Among the other finds, the ceramic disc loom weights discovered in 2006 in one of the 'long buildings' (Structure 4) are also worth mentioning. Eight complete examples and one fragment were found, in total.⁴² Each is of the same general type, with one flat face and the other convex, and a circular central aperture (Fig. 9:1–4; 10).

³⁷ Samokvasov 1916, 31 Fig. 34.

³⁸ Kudryavtsev 2016, 119.

³⁹ Chernenko 2022, Fig. 17.2.

⁴⁰ Kolchin 1959, 91.

⁴¹ Kudryavtsev 2016, 115–116.

⁴² Chernenko 2022, 76–77.



Fig. 10. Ceramic weights from the 2006 excavations (photo by O. Chernenko).

Their diameters range from 11 to 14 cm. They were crudely moulded from fine-grained clay, the surfaces smoothed, and fibre impressions are visible. On the convex side of five of the weights, cross-hatched lines were incised into the wet clay. In one instance, these lines are complemented by radial indentations made with a stylus.

These weights were employed on a vertical looms, which are well attested in Eastern Europe and are typically regarded as markers of Scandinavian presence. Within Rus', parallels are recorded from sites dated to the late 10th – early 11th centuries: Rurikovo Gorodishche, Vitebsk, Old Ladoga, Gnezdovo, Timerevo, Pskov, Shestovytsia, and Kyiv.

The ceramic makeup of the loom weights found in Chernihiv is friable, the temper comprises coarse sand with a small amount of crushed grit, and the colour ranges from light brown to grey, with a black core in fracture. These characteristics differ from the pottery of the populations of the Desna basin in the late 10th and early 11th centuries, both the local Slavic tradition (the Romny archaeological culture) and that of Rus'. As the results of petrographic analysis indicate, local ceramics contain a substantially higher proportion of grit and grog.⁴³ It would be interesting to compare the composition of the clay of the loom weights found in Chernihiv with analogous items from other sites (Kyiv, Shestovytsia, Gnezdovo, and others), but this constitutes a separate research question that lies beyond the aims of this study.

Tamara Pushkina has thoroughly examined occurrences of vertical loom weights in Eastern Europe, noting that known examples display similar dimensions, manufacturing techniques, and ornamental motifs.⁴⁴ Finger impressions, stamp or tubular (possibly bone) impressions, punctures with a sharp stylus, or cross-hatched lines frequently adorn their surfaces. Such weights tend to cluster at sites in Northern Rus'. At the Gnezdovo, for example, a concentration of loom weights was found alongside evidence for a local workshop producing Scandinavian jewellery and amulets.⁴⁵ In most Eastern European sites, however, the number of these discoid weights per location rarely exceeds three, although a complete loom set would contain about 20–30 pieces. The set from Chernihiv, consisting of nine weights, is not only the largest known in Southern Rus', but also one of the most substantial yet documented in Eastern Europe.

A boat rivet was recovered from one of the second-phase structures of the earliest horizon (Structure 26).⁴⁶ It measures 55 mm in length, with a washer measuring 22 × 23 mm (Fig. 9:6). Similar rivets, used to secure the hull planks of Viking Age ships, are well attested in boat (ship) burials. Researchers generally regard them as indicators of a Scandinavian settler presence.⁴⁷ Along the Desna River, such rivets appear at 10th – early 11th-century sites, both in barrows (e.g. Chorna Mohyla) and in the archaeological layers of settlements at Shestovytsia and Sedniv.⁴⁸

Combs are also worth mentioning. Most notably, a fragment of a single-sided composite comb, fastened with bronze rivets, discovered in 2008 (Fig. 11:1). It was found in a deposit sealed beneath the hillfort rampart, south of the area investigated during the 2005–2006 fieldwork (Fig. 3:6).⁴⁹ In Eastern Europe, such combs are typically categorized by the system devised by Olga Davidan for Staraya Ladoga material.⁵⁰ As Lyubov Smirnova notes, Davidan's criteria parallel those established by K. Ambrosiani⁵¹ for the Birka combs.⁵² Ambrosiani's Group A equates to Davidan's Group 1. In Birka, these represent an earlier chronological group, predominant in the layers from the 9th to the late 10th century.⁵³ In Staraya Ladoga, Group 1 combs appear in the 10th-century deposits. Davidan's Subgroup 2 corresponds to Group B in Ambrosiani's typology, broadly dated to the 9th–11th centuries but peaking in the 10th century. According to Davidan's system, the comb fragment from 2008 falls into Subgroup 2.⁵⁴

Pseudo-runic Inscriptions

A complete comb (Fig. 9:5, 11) of a similar type was recovered from one of the buildings adjacent to the hillfort rampart.⁵⁵ This find is especially intriguing because graffiti was incised on both sides of its plates. On one side, the engraved motifs comprise a row of notches and a zigzag pattern, including five symbols that, according to Sviatoslav Podlevskyi, resemble letters from the Younger Futhark: *t* (tiwaz), *l* (laguz), *i* (isaz), *u* (ūr).⁵⁶ On the reverse, a series of X-shaped scratches appears. Given their superficial resemblance to runic script, these marks may be regarded as 'pseudo-runes'.

⁴³ Korokhina *et al.* 2022.

⁴⁴ Pushkina 2020.

⁴⁵ Pushkina 2020, 291–294.

⁴⁶ Chernenko 2022, 77.

⁴⁷ Leontev 1999; Shepard 1922, 22–24.

⁴⁸ Kovalenko *et al.* 2008, 184–185; Zotsenko, Androshchuk 2012, 353, 358–359; Chernenko 2014.

⁴⁹ Chernenko 2022, Fig. 13.

⁵⁰ Davidan 1962.

⁵¹ Ambrosiani 1981; Ambrosiani 1984.

⁵² Smirnova 2005, 26–27.

⁵³ Ambrosiani 1981, 62.

⁵⁴ Davidan 1962, 28.

⁵⁵ Chernenko 2022, 71, Fig. 21.

⁵⁶ Podlevskyi 2018, 71.



Fig. 11. Composite bone hair combs. 1 – fragment of a comb from the 2008 excavations; 2 – comb from the 2006 excavations (photo by O. Chernenko).

The term ‘pseudo-runic inscriptions’ (runliknande inskrifter, runelike inscriptions) is employed by scholars to describe forms of everyday writing produced with runes or rune-like signs, but which do not constitute a meaningful text. In other words, the signs may resemble runes, yet reading them as genuine runes does not yield an intelligible word. As noted by Elena Melnikova,⁵⁷ their creators were not fully literate, made errors, or employed altered forms of runic characters. The vast majority of known Futhark inscriptions from Southern Rus’ belong to this category, and almost all have been found at centres situated along the principal waterways of Eastern Europe. Melnikova argues that the proliferation of pseudo-runic inscriptions in Rus’ was one outcome of the assimilation of Varangian descendants who had become isolated from their Scandinavian homeland.⁵⁸ It is equally plausible that those Scandinavians who moved to Rus’ were never fully proficient in runic writing, as they did not belong to the educated echelons of society.

It is worth mentioning that a sign akin to the *oPila* rune of the Elder Futhark was recorded on an astragalus found in the Chorna Mohyla barrow.⁵⁹ Over 100 astrag-

ali were recovered from a melted bronze vessel in this context, likely used for divination or other ritual practices.⁶⁰ Given the site’s Scandinavian cultural backdrop, it is highly probable that this symbol should be regarded as a pseudo-runic inscription.

Scholars generally agree that the *oPila* rune fell out of use by the 17th–18th centuries, although it persisted in the Anglo-Saxon runic tradition.⁶¹ Nonetheless, characters of the Elder Futhark (including *oPila*) have been identified on bone artefacts from the 10th-century complex at Maskovichi in the Vitebsk region of Belarus.⁶² According to Melnikova, certain archaic runes continued to be used for some time in Rus’, which was detached from broader cultural developments in Scandinavia.⁶³ Another view holds that signs of the Elder Futhark, having lost their linguistic function, might have survived as magical or cryptic symbols.⁶⁴

Likely evidence for the existence of pseudo-runic inscriptions in Chernihiv during the town’s early history is reinforced by finds of a mid-12th century silver Byzantine cup discovered in a hoard in 1986 and silver ingots from the late 12th century, found in a hoard in 1999. The latter

⁵⁷ Melnikova 2001, 80–83.

⁵⁸ Melnikova 2001, 86.

⁵⁹ Samokvasov 1916, 33.

⁶⁰ Serheeva 2002, 50–58; Mikhailov 2016, 125.

⁶¹ Düwel 2008, 88.

⁶² Melnikova 2001, 80–83.

⁶³ Melnikova 2001, 86.

⁶⁴ Düwel 2008, 184–187.

hoard contained six ingots dated to the late 12th or early 13th century.⁶⁵ The ingots bear marks resembling Cyrillic letters and, in one instance, a symbol similar to the rune Þ (þurs).

Conclusions

The archaeological record of Chernihiv has yielded artefacts widely considered indicative of a Scandinavian presence in Eastern Europe. The occurrence of pseudo-runic inscriptions at Chernihiv may well be another marker of such contacts. Nevertheless, both the quantity and nature of the relevant finds in Chernihiv fall significantly short of the material recovered from the 10th–11th-century strata of Northern Rus' sites, such as Novgorod.⁶⁶ Certainly, the present overview does not exhaust all potential sources of evidence. It is also worth emphasizing that the area investigated in 2005–2006 probably lay on the settlement's periphery.

As new archaeological data is analysed and published, the number of diagnostic markers may grow substantially. One should also bear in mind that the relatively low methodological standards of mid- to late 20th-century research led to the irreversible loss of some information. Consequently, even the limited material discussed here is of real importance.

A further point to highlight is the marked discrepancy between artefacts from Chernihiv's earliest urban strata and the grave goods from the town's barrow cemetery. The latter include prestigious items, such as swords, 'barbarian sceptres', Thor figurines, and precious-metal jewellery⁶⁷ that have, so far, found no parallels in the town's archaeological layers. A comparable discrepancy has also been observed in Kyiv, where Zotsenko⁶⁸ and Androshchuk⁶⁹ connect the richly equipped northern burials to elite residential compounds, a conclusion that seems well-founded. Yet, excavations of these compounds have not uncovered any counterparts to the prestigious items interred in the barrows. Moreover, while weapons and costly jewellery are sometimes regarded as ethnic in-

dicators, they can only serve this function in a limited way: such objects often change hands through trade, gift exchange, and various other channels. More secure evidence of ethnic affiliation typically emerges from items linked to everyday cultural practices. It is precisely these that have been identified in Chernihiv, namely keys, combs, and loom weights.

Certain researchers have proposed that the 'large' barrows were associated with a separate settlement housing the Rus' elite. However, after many years of excavation, there is no indication of such a distinct settlement. Indeed, considering the scale of archaeological research in Chernihiv, where thousands of square metres of cultural deposits have been examined, there seems little prospect that such a settlement will come to light in the future.

Those who may have been interred in Chernihiv's barrows with grave goods of Scandinavian origin were not permanent town residents. They might have been participants in Rus' transcontinental trade along one branch of the 'route from the Varangians to the Greeks'⁷⁰ or perhaps along the so-called Khazar route,⁷¹ or they could have played a role in the seasonal collection of tribute from subordinate territories. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus⁷² describes precisely such a tribute-gathering system employed by the Rus'.

Nonetheless, another explanation appears more plausible. In light of the diagnostic 'Scandinavian' markers in the urban layer, one can theorize that at least some of the earliest inhabitants of Chernihiv were indeed of Scandinavian origin. However, their community was likely small, perhaps marginalized, and eventually lost direct links to its original cultural tradition. Support for this hypothesis includes, among other elements, the presence of pseudo-runic inscriptions. In this scenario, the prestigious 'northern' items found in Chernihiv's large barrows may have been treasured heirlooms, ultimately accompanying the last members of such lineages into the afterlife. Notably, the conspicuous size of the barrows themselves hints at an especially elaborate effort to honour the deceased.

⁶⁵ Melnikova 2001, 82–83.

⁶⁶ Musin, Tarabardina 2019.

⁶⁷ Androshchuk 1999, 76–84; Kainov, Shchavlev 2005; Komar 2012, 341–345; Zotsenko, Androshchuk 2012, 287–290; Kainov 2019; Murasheva *et al.* 2018; Murasheva *et al.* 2021; Kainov *et al.* 2021; Murasheva, Orfinskaya 2022; Kainov 2022.

⁶⁸ Zotsenko 2003.

⁶⁹ Androshchuk 2004.

⁷⁰ Shepard 2022.

⁷¹ Zotsenko 1991.

⁷² Constantin Porphyrogenitus 1967, 56–63.

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