THE RIVER SYSTEMS OF EASTERN EUROPE AND THEIR ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF TOWNS AND THE RUSSIAN STATE

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In the history of states, together with ethnic, social, political, and economic factors, an important role belonged to the geographic and topographic features of the regions especially in the early stages of the formation of territories. In the history of Russia they played a particularly significant role. First of all, the early Russian state was formed on a vast territory. Slavic tribes in the second half of the first millennium A.D. occupied an area of approximately 700,000 square kilometres. The distance between Novgorod and Kiev, the two main centres of the state, is about 1,000 km (Fig.1). The proximity to the sea was in all times of great importance for the economic and political history of different nations. Most of the early states in Western Europe had a long coastline. The typical feature of Eastern Europe is its continental character. More than a half of the territory of all Europe (51%) is located not more than 250 kilometres from a sea. Comparatively, for European Russia this figure is only about 15%.

A large part of Eastern Europe is formed by the Russian plain, which covers half of the territory of all Europe. It is a vast highland, the average height of which is not more than 200 m above sea level. In Eastern Europe there are many great rivers - eight of which have a length of more than 1,000 km, and the length of the Volga, the greatest river in Europe, is 3,690 km (its basin covers 12% of the territory of the European continent). The Russian plain is crossed by a broad network of river systems, which belong to the basins of the Caspian, Black and Baltic seas. Because of the above mentioned relief of the region, the rivers on the Russian plain have a slow current and many bends. During the winter for 2 - 7 months the rivers are covered with ice and in spring they are flooded. Most of the largest rivers begin in the central part of the Russian plain (Fig. 1). According to the conclusions of paleogeographers the middle of the 5th century coincides with the peak of the dry period, which continued into the second half of the first millennium A.D., causing the level of water in the rivers during the period of Slavic settlement in the region to be lower than now.

One of the most important factors which we must keep in mind when studying the natural conditions of Eastern Europe is its thick forests. All watershed territories between the rivers at the end of the first millennium A.D. were covered with woods and bogs, stretching for hundreds of kilometres. Written sources of the 12th -16th centuries contain much information about forests and bogs, which divided Russian lands and very often were impenetrable in summer. One of the greatest woods, mentioned in the Primary Russian Chronicle, was "Okovskii wood", in which began such
large rivers as the Volga, the Dnieper, and the Western Dvina.

In such terrain the rivers, during both summer and winter, were the main threads of communication and the only ways along which the Slavs colonized the territory. Furthermore, when the Slavs settled these new lands the only areas convenient for ploughing were the banks of rivers and lakes, because the woods on the watersheds were not yet removed in the second half of the first millennium A.D. The distribution of the ancient settlements and mounds show their location along the river valleys convenient for agriculture and near the wide water-meadows, needed for cattle-breeding. Only at the beginning of the second millennium A.D. did the watershed areas begin to be opened up and cultivated due to the development of agriculture and the density of population along the main rivers. It is not by chance that Russian chronicles narrating about the settling of the Slavic tribes tell us about their distribution according to the main rivers: on the Dnieper - the Polyane; between the Pripyat and the Dvina rivers - the Dregovichi; on the Dvina river - the Polochane; along the rivers Desna, Seim, and Sula - the Severiane, etc. Two main centres were the nuclei of the territories of the early state in Russia, Kiev in the South and Novgorod in the North. Their union in 882 by Prince Oleg traditionally is considered to be the foundation of Kievian Russia. Around Kiev and the tribe of Polyane southern Slavic tribes united; around Novgorod - northern groups.

It is very important from the geographical point of view to examine the places where these centres appeared. Kiev was founded on the right bank of the river Dnieper on the hills not far from the mouth of the Desna river - the last large tributary of the Dnieper (Fig. 1). Here the Dnieper goes out of the forest zone and enters the forest-steppe region. Kiev, located at a key point, controlled the wide network of rivers of the main part of the Dnieper river basin, which went through the regions that contained many of the new settlements, the Slavic tribes - the Polyane, the Severiane, the Drevliane, the Radimichi, the Dregovichy, and partly the Kryvichy. Due to its location Kiev controlled territory of about a quarter of a million square kilometres. The upper tributaries of the river Dnieper were located not far from the basin of the Western Dvina to the North and from the basin of the Volga river to the North-East. It is possible to reach the basins of the rivers Oka and Don on the East along the left tributaries of the Dnieper, and the basins of the rivers Visla, Neman and Dnestr on the West along the right tributaries. Historians who have studied the geographical position of the place where Kiev was erected consider that its location was one of the decisive reasons for the creation of Kiev as the most important place among the towns of the middle Dnieper area. (TOLOCHKO 1975, 19).

The geographic situation of the foundation of Novgorod is comparable with that of Kiev (Fig. 1). The town, which was built near the sources of the river Volkhov from Lake Ilmen, locked in a key-point the vast network of rivers of the Ilmen basin. Along the Lovat river (536 km long) led the route to the South, to the basin of the West Dvina; along the rivers Msta (445 km) and Pola (258 km) led the route to the East and the South-East, where they met the upper Volga and its tributaries, the Mologa river; and to the west along the river Shelon (253 km) to the basin of Lake Chudskoe and the Velikay river.

Kiev and Novgorod could be compared with the locks on the neck of two large funnels, pulling in all the threads of communication of the East Slavic territories. This gave to the towns the possibility of administrative control of the area.

The rivers were not only the ways of communication between different Slavic tribes, but they were the main routes which connected Russia with the foreign world. The location of Kiev gave an opportunity to control the route down the Dnieper river to the Black Sea and to Byzantium. Novgorod locked the way along the river Volkhov, which led to Lake Ladoga and further along the Neva river to the Baltic (Fig. 2).

The Primary Russian Chronicle contains the description of the route "from the Varangians to the Greeks", which connected Northern Europe with Byzantium. The way, according to the Chronicle, led up the river Dnieper, down the Lovat river to

![Fig. 2) Map showing main water routes, which crossed Eastern Europe in ninth/tenth centuries A.D.](image-url)
Lake Ilmen, then along the Volkhov river to Lake Nevo (Lake Ladoga is sometimes mentioned under this name in the early chronicles) and further to the Varangian Sea. On the key-points of this route were situated Kiev and Novgorod. Five of the ten Russian towns (including Novgorod and Kiev) mentioned in the Primary Russian Chronicle in connection with the events of the IX century, were located on the water-route “from the Varangians to Greeks”.

The most difficult part of the route in question was the crossing from the basin of the river Dnieper to the basin of Lake Ilmen. There have been a number of different proposals about this crossing. It is remarkable, however, that just on the boundary of these two water systems, with Kiev on one side and Novgorod on the other, was situated Gnezdovo - the unique archaeological complex, with polyethnic material culture, which existed mainly in the Xth century. From the area of Gnezdovo in the Upper Dnieper the water-ways were open not only to the South and to the North, but also to the East, in the direction of the Volga river, and to the West, along the river Dvina. Gnezdovo was the predecessor of Smolensk - one of the largest towns in Russia.

River systems were the basis of the Slavic settlements of Eastern Europe in the second half of the first millennium A.D. They determined the location of the building of two leading town-centres of early Russia - Kiev and Novgorod - and the important archaeological complex of Gnezdovo in the 10th century. Now, on the basis of the analysis of the northern part of the Russian state, I'd like to examine the role of the river systems in the process of forming separate parts of it.

The great trading routes which crossed the territory of Northern Russia at the end of the first millennium A.D., namely the route between the Baltic and the Islamic East and the route from the Varangians to the Greeks, greatly influenced the distribution of the population in the Lake Ilmen region and nearby territories, as well as the economic and social development of the area, the formation of the first towns and the borders of territories which were connected with Novgorod. The most important role belonged to the Eastern water-route.

At the end of the first millennium A.D. the trade with countries of the Islamic East was the only source of silver for Eastern Europe. Part of it was used here, another part was brought along the water-ways to the Baltic. This trade began in the 770's or 780's for a number of reasons: the need for silver in the economy of the Slavs (who met during their colonization the population of the Khazarian Kaganat); the growth of the economy and the intensive minting of coins in the Baghdad caliphate; and the existence of the last peaceful relations between Khazaria and arabs.

The silver was brought to Russia along two main routes. One of them was up the stream of the river Volga, through Volga Bulgaria; the other along the rivers Don and Seversky Donez. From the Upper Volga the silver coins were transported to the sources of the Volhov along the rivers Msta or J avon and Pola. Silver was widely used by the population of the Novgorod region, and part of it was brought along the Volkhov river to the Baltic (Nosov 1976, 95 - 110; 1980, 49 - 62).

Ladoga and some nearby settlements were a striking but separate group, moved far away to the North from the main nucleus of slavic population. The quick growth of Ladoga in the second half of the 8th and in the 9th century was determined by its mediatory role in eastern trade and the supplying of the water-route. The economy of Ladoga was orientated towards external connections, and among its population there were peoples of different nationalities - the Slavs, Vikings, Finns.

On the Volhov the fortified settlements were located near the most dangerous and key-points of the water-way near the Gostinopolskoye rapids (Novye Duboviki), Pchevskoye rapids (Gorodishche), bifurcation of the river (Kholopi Gorodok and Ryurik Gorodischche) (Fig. 3). All these indicate the aspirations to ensure the security of the route, to control it and to promote overcoming its most dangerous parts. Such location of the settlements indicates the existence of an organizing power, which aspired to regulate the water-route. In a Latin edition of the 1270 treaty between Novgorod and the Hanseatic League reference is made to the landing-stages and the rules of the transportation of goods. I believe that this organization of the 13th century waterway with clearly

Fig. 3) Map showing the location of fortified settlements, mounds and rapids on the Volhov river.
defined landing-stages for vessels laid down in a
treaty can be traced back to the Viking period
(Nosov 1992, 24).
The geographical location of the sources of the
river Volkhov was very convenient. It was the
cross-road of the two main water-routes of Eastern
Europe (the Volga-Baltic route and that from the
Varangians to the Greeks). Here, from the IX cen-
tury, Ryurik Gorodischche, the predecessor of
Novgorod, played the same role as Ladoga did.
Other towns of the Novgorod Land were also
founded at key-points of water-routes (Fig. 4). On
the route to the Volga, on the bank of the Tvertza
river, after (or before) the dangerous portages
from the Ilmen basin, was built Novii Torg (“New
Marketplace”). In the same way began the history
of the town Volok Lamskii (“the portage on the
river Lama”), which was located very far from
Novgorod to the South-East on the watershed
between the rivers Volga and Oka. On the upper
Lovat, not later than the middle of the 10th
century was founded Gorodok, the predecessor of the town
Veliki Luki. The lack of rural settlements nearby
and its role as an administrative and a trading
centre, were characteristic features of the site.
The water-routes with fortified settlements at
key-places and with towns on crossing-points
formed the backbone of Novgorod Land in the 10th
century. These waterways connected in one whole
the vast territories of Novgorod Land.
But if the rivers connected the areas, waters-
sheds between them were the main borders which
divided the territories of Russian principalities. It
is not by chance that the border of Novgorod Land
with Polotzkay and Smolenskay Lands was going
along the watershed of the Lovat, Kunya and Pola,
with the rivers of the basins of Western Dvina and
Volga. Natural borders divided Novgorod Land
and from the territories of North-Eastern Russia: the
vast wet woods and the watersheds of the Ilmen
basin rivers and the upper tributaries of the Volga.
The crossing of the watersheds demanded a
special organisation. Here, it had to be the groups
of people engaged in bringing the vessels and
goods through the portages. On the watersheds
were situated special princes and state settle-
ments, which controlled the routes and where
taxes were collected (Nosov 1980, 49-60).
Due to the geographical position of Russia the
towns in its northern part were scattered over
large distances. It is impossible to speak about one
network of towns covering this part of the country.
This picture differs greatly from the distribution of
towns in Western Europe. On the territory of the
Novgorod land, which in the 12th century covered
approximately 350,000 square km, there were only
seven towns (Fig. 4). Ladoga was situated 200 km
from Novgorod which was the centre of the region,
Rusa 55 Km, Pskov 200 km, Izborsk 230 km, Novy
Torg 300 km. The towns were small islands in a
forest sea, connected to each other by threads of
rivers.
Novgorod, the main town of the Land, was
distinguished from all the others. In the 12th-13th
centuries it covered 150 ha. The next after it,
Ladoga and Pskov, covered 16 and 15 ha respecti-
vly. In the 11th century the population of Novgo-
rod was 10-15,000 people, at the beginning of the
13th century - 27-30,000. Compared to its region,
Novgorod had a very high concentration of popula-
tion, administrative institutions, stone churches,
trading and other activities. By the middle of the
13th century, at the time of the Tatar invasion,
there were 39 stone churches in Novgorod and
numerous wooden ones. In Ladoga there were
seven stone stone churches, in Pskov - four, in
Rusa - one. At the same time in the rural territo-
ries the first stone churches were built only in the
15th century. In Novgorod lived all the people that
belonged to the upper strata of society within the
region, among them the rural landowners. The
town, the capital of the region, embodied the state.
It contained the yards of land owners, merchants,
craftsmen, market places, administrative institu-
tions, bishop's and prince's yards, churches and
monasteries. The town, in such a situation, was
the only conveyer of economic and cultural con-
tacts, of new trends, influences and interaction.
Thus, because of the geographical position of
the territory of Russia, the rivers played a very
important and sometime decisive role in the Slavic
settlement of Eastern Europe, in the foundation of
the first towns and the formation of territories of
separate lands and the state.
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