

Nadezhda Tochilova, art historian, PhD (St. Petersburg)

Anna Slapinia, art historian (Moscow)

RESEARCH of CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

between OLD RUS and SCANDINAVIA

in X–XIII CENTURIES

Stockholm, Visby, Uppsala

15 July – 29 August, 2016

REPORT

Introduction

First of all we would like to thank The Sverker Åström Foundation and personally Disa Håstad for choosing our project and warm welcome in Sweden.

Our research group included two medieval art historians: Nadezhda Tochilova — PhD in Art History (Saint-Petersburg) and Anna Slapinia — PhD candidate of The State Institute of Art Studies (Moscow). Our research interests intersect in the area of studying cultural connections between Scandinavia and Northwest of Russia in the medieval period (X-XIII centuries). That's why we carry out cooperative researches and make co-author reports. And that was the reason of making joint application to The Sverker Åström Foundation.

We were very happy to find out that our project was approved and begun to prepare our trip immediately. Next few months we had spent for making connections with persons and institutions we needed. Our trip started 15 of July and lasted until 29 of August. During that period we visited Stockholm, Uppsala, Lund, Gotland Island and several places near Stockholm and Uppsala.

Conception

Cultural contacts between Old Rus and Scandinavia (mainly Sweden) in X-XIII centuries are established through sagas and numerous archaeological findings, which undoubtedly have Scandinavian origin. But there is one more group of material known to archeologists — the so-called “things-hybrids”, or products, made under the influence of Scandinavian art while still containing a significant component of local tradition. Those “things-hybrids” are the object of our study.

In order to find out the genesis of this cultural Russian-Scandinavian tradition and determine its original artistic components as well as the ways of image exchanges we use the iconographic and stylistic analyzes.

In previous years we had already done research in archaeological departments of several Russian museums: Novgorod State United Museum Reserve, Pskov State Historical-Architectural and Art Museum-Reserve and Old Ladoga Historical-Architectural and Archaeological National Park. As well as looked through archaeological collection of Old Ladoga carried in The State Hermitage.

During that period, we made the catalogue of objects we are interested in, but before our Swedish trip we hadn't opportunity to compare Ancient Russian archaeological objects with their presumable Scandinavian prototypes. The situation was complicated by the fact that Russian scientific tradition is oriented mainly to the countries which had connections with

Byzantine Empire. Ancient Scandinavian art isn't well known in Russia, that's why we needed to turn to the specialists from abroad for making serious research on this topic.

Applying to The Sverker Åström Foundation, we had sought to continue our research in an archaeological storages of Swedish museums. By this work we hoped to confirm or refute our preliminary conception about existing certain kind of Russian-Scandinavian art in that period.

Main objectives

Preparing to our Swedish trip, we set ourselves four main objectives:

- *to explore* archaeological collections of the main Swedish museums;
- *to make contacts* with our Swedish colleagues;
- *to learn* about the main Swedish researches in our area;
- *to visit* libraries and to find professional literature unavailable in Russia.

Work timeline

The most important thing for us was to visit archaeological storages of several Swedish museums. That's why we organized our timeline on the assumption of the capacity of museum employees to spent time with us. After a lot of discussions and letters our timeline was organized in such way: we worked two weeks in The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, two weeks in Gotlands Museum in Visby (Gotland Island), and last two weeks in Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala.

Of course, our working timeline wasn't limited by spending all our time in museum storages. We have sought to visit most interesting places situated nearby. When we were staying in Stockholm we visited Birka Island (one of the most well known Viking Age settlements on a Baltic Sea) and Täby church, decorated with XV century late gothic painting. Also in Stockholm we spent few days in National Library of Sweden.



Birka Island

When we were staying in Uppsala we spent a lot of time in Uppsala University library and made two one-day trips to Sigtuna Museum (Sigtuna, Stockholm). Besides that, during our last week in Sweden we were invited to visit Lund by our colleagues from Lund University.

Visby and Gotland Island requires a separate story.



Gothic church ruins in Visby

Gotland Island



“How to take a good photo”
(Källunge church)

Any researcher of Old Russian medieval art dreams about seeing Gotland where are situated unique medieval churches with Byzantine frescoes. We were lucky twice because we managed not only visit Gotland, but spent two weeks in Visby and immerse in a life of the city and the whole island.

Our main goal on Gotland was Gotlands Museum storage, where we spent almost two weeks with short breaks for visiting places around island. Of course, we were more interested in two churches with Byzantine frescoes

located in Garda and Källunge. There are a lot of discussions between art historians about those frescoes, the history of their occurrence and presumable masters who made them. That's why it was necessary for us to see them by our own eyes.



Nadezhda examines runestone inserted into Bro church wall

Also at Gotland we visited Bro church where are runic stones used as a material for building walls. Then we made trips to settlement Torsburgen and of course magnificent Fårö Island.

Work methodology

Our main method of work (as in Sweden as well as earlier in Russia) was view through the archaeological collections of Viking and Early Medieval times. However this process varied

widely depending on concrete museum. For example, The Swedish History Museum has digital database, so, despite its scope, we realized that two weeks are enough for explore it fully. At the same time there is no digital catalogues or even drawings in Gotlands Museum and Sigtuna Museum. That's why there we discovered storages manually — staying on ladder and looking through boxes. Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala is university museum, so it has very diverse collection (from Ancient Egypt till modernity). That's why there we could not find anything without help of Museum Gustavianum employee John Worley. He had found objects we needed by photos of similar things we showed him.



Archaeological objects in Gotlands Museum storage room

Swedish museums specific features

Museology wasn't the field of our research, but, of course, character of our work helped us to understand and compare museum systems in Russia and Sweden.



Anna in The Swedish History Museum storage room

First of all, we were surprised by completely different way of exposition organization. Expositions in Russian museums may seem boring, but usually they can be used as trustful source for researchers. Museum showcases in Russia are well lit, objects are grouped by their types, and each object has its own number and label where time, material and region of find are clearly noted.

Swedish museums expositions are made by entertainment principle. They must intrigue person who doesn't know anything about this historical period, but they are absolutely uninformative for researchers. There is darkness mysterious atmosphere in exhibition halls, you can't take good photos, and labels consider minimum information.

Firstly we were surprised, but then understood that researches are very welcome into Swedish museum

by entertainment



Nadezhda in Gotlands Museum storage room

storage rooms, which are much more open than in Russia. Unlike in Russia, in Sweden you don't need any official papers, you can take as much photo as you wish, and atmosphere in whole is much friendlier. While in Russia there is a sophisticated system of prohibitions and restrictions.

Moreover, in major Swedish museums you can find special curator position. Curator's main duty is to help researcher, so researcher feel himself very comfortable. He should carry only about his project and shouldn't worry that he disturbs museum employees by his work. Antje Wendt was our curator in The Swedish History Museum, and we are happy to have one more opportunity to express our gratitude to her for two weeks in museum, and also for magnificent trip to main Swedish museum storage in Tumba.

Colleagues

Of course, it is very important for any researcher to meet his colleagues from abroad, so before our trip to Sweden we corresponded for a few months with archaeologists — specialists in Baltic region in general and Russian-Scandinavian relationships in particular. We were honored to become personally acquainted with Professor Ingmar Jansson — a leading Swedish expert in Viking Age and the Russian-Varangian relationships. We are grateful to Professor Jansson for a whole day he spent with us in Uppsala University library and extremely interesting dialogue that helped us to take a fresh look at a number of issues and subjects that are in the focus of our attention. We are also very grateful to Anders Andrén from Stockholm University for meeting, conversation and contacts of several persons who then helped us in our work. For the invitation to come to Lund and a wonderful tour around the Lund Historical Museum we thank to Ingrid Gustin and Mats Roslund from Lund University. Also we would like to thank museum employees, who helped us in our research and answered our endless questions: Antje Wendt (The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm), Birgitta Zeerpe and Per Widerstrom (Gotlands Museum, Visby), John Worley (Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala) and especially Anders Söderberg for two very productive days in Sigtuna Museum.

Results

The results of our trip were much less predictable than we expected, but not less interesting. Going to Sweden, we had a very clear and, as it turned out later, a very limited view on the medieval Swedish art. We imagined it as a series of clearly marked styles, where each object easily fits in its niche. In reality, the situation is much more complicated: the art of the late Viking Age and the early Medieval Time is not monolithic and not clearly stratified. There are many transitional forms, mixing traditions and local variants of the grand style. Thereby, our original formulation of the problem wasn't quite correct. To research Russian-Scandinavian

material we shouldn't consider it as a unique mix of monolithic Scandinavian tradition with foreign Slavic elements, because Scandinavian tradition itself is not monolithic. Reaching territory of Old Russia it was transformed in one way, mixing with Byzantine tradition on Gotland in another way, and influenced by continental Europe in third way. Thus, archaeological objects from Russian territory fit well into a variability of medieval Scandinavian art. This conclusion, in spite of its simplicity, is one of the most important basic theses of our further work that could not be made only on the basis of literature, without direct contact with objects of Swedish archaeological art.

In addition to this basic thesis, we obtained several important *theoretical results*:

1. It is believed that art of medieval Scandinavia is fully ornamental and completely devoid of figurative forms. This is not true. There are a number of little-known monuments containing no ornament at all, but decorated with figures of people and animals.
2. In spite of the strong influence of Byzantine art on the murals and stone sculpture of the Gotland Island, Russian-Byzantine mark isn't seen in common materials from archaeological layer. It seems that Byzantine influence concerned only a certain group of monuments, but not reflected in the everyday life — there are no traces of it in an archaeological layer.
3. The number of archaeological sites with so-called “wet layer” (wet ground, preserving organic materials) in Sweden is very limited. In fact, we can find it only in Sigtuna and Lund. Therefore, comparing archaeological objects from Sweden and Russia, we must not forget that more often we compare works from different materials: for example, metal with wood. But material largely determines the style of decoration. This part is often omitted by scientists, but it cannot be overlooked in the attentive study.
4. Both Russian and Swedish scientists usually aren't very good in foreign material, and that causes similar problems on both sides. All unusual art forms, which cannot be attributed to the Scandinavian art, Swedish scientists usually interpret as Russian influence. As well as Russian scientists tend to explain all unknown objects as Scandinavian influence.
5. The situation of interdisciplinary researches in Sweden is similar to the Russian one. In both countries archeology and medieval art history are deeply separated and colleagues from those two fields of research have minimum connections with each other. That's why when archaeologists find a non-trivial artistic object, they have numerous problems with its interpretation and usually they can't make a whole research of it.

And, of course, our Swedish journey helped us to obtain some *practical results*:

1. We collected a corpus of interesting for our research archaeological applied art objects of the late Viking Age and Early Medieval period from Swedish museums. This corpus will be included in the Anna Slapinia's PhD thesis and Nadezhda Tochilova's research papers.
2. We explored a content of archaeological layers of Swedish medieval settlements and determined the place which applied art objects take in it.
3. We found extremely important for our research publications about Viking and Medieval Sweden art, which are not available in Russia.
4. We made connections with our colleagues from Sweden, who can give us an advice in future, if it will be needed.
5. By the result of meeting with colleagues and reading books and articles we made a clear idea about the geography of archaeological areas with "wet layer" both in Sweden and in other countries of Baltic region. This result will greatly facilitate our work in the future.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to once again express our gratitude to The Sverker Åström Foundation and its employees for giving us the opportunity to get closely acquainted with the materials of Swedish museums and to spend six weeks in this beautiful country. In addition to the invaluable scientific experience, which unlikely to have been able to obtain without support from the Swedish side, we have with great interest plunged into Swedish life, social structure and mentality — which is so different from Russian, despite just fifteen hundred kilometers between Moscow and Stockholm.