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OLD RUSSIAN GRAFFITI AS SOURCES OF WEAPON HISTORY:
PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS

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The wide range of sources is at the disposal of Old Russian weapons historians. It is obvious that archaeological finds are of major importance for weapon studies. They are indeed the most numerous and informative. At the same time, the data obtained from the written primary sources, works of minor sculpture and iconography present the information of great value as well. A special group of sources among the works of iconography is graffiti.

Graffiti with the images of warriors and certain elements of arms differ from other works of iconography being sketchier and with minimal small details drawn. This feature is predetermined by the type of images which could have been scratched by various sharp items on any suitable surfaces: on coins, bones, spindle whorls, whetstones, building materials, etc. Graffiti were made by ordinary people without any special artistic abilities who did not seem to aim to create long-lasting images. At the same time, it is evident that graffiti-makers were quite well acquainted with the objects they drew, as these articles were an integral part of their everyday life. It is also necessary to note, that such images were free or almost free from the common iconographic traditions which influenced the works of professional craftsmen. This fact is especially significant for the Old Russian period when with the Christianization of Old Rus' the new iconographic canons including the principles of Holy Warriors depiction were brought about in art.

That is why graffiti are important primary sources, which reflect day-to-day realities of those times, although their sketchy character requires very accurate interpretation of them. There is a number of papers devoted to the Old Russian graffiti, among which can be seen both publications of certain finds and a range of general reviews (Васильев 2001; Никитина 1990; Разина 2007; Рождественская 1997; Рыбина 1998; Седова 2004). However-

er, as far as I know, there are no special analysis of the Old Russian graffiti as a source for weapon studies that have been yet performed by historians.

Milites Christi of Old Rus by A. Musin is probably the only paper that covers exactly the Old Russian military graffiti (Мусин 2005, pp. 246–254). But A. Musin considers these graffiti in the context of the Old Russian military culture description rather than concerning them from the aspect of weapons studies.

Such state of things seems to be quite strange, taking into consideration the fact that I. Dobrovolskiy, I. Dubov and Y. Kuzmenko's experience of the studies of the Viking Age graffiti on Arabic dirham coins can be called really successful (Добровольский, Дубов, Кузьменко 1981, pp. 60–63; 1991, pp. 51–62).

As regards this survey, it aims to present the preliminary analysis of the Old Russian graffiti as a source for the studies of weapons of the 11th–13th centuries. At the same time, any general conclusions here can be considered as tentative, until the complete catalogue of the Old Russian military graffiti is created. This paper can only be considered as the initial stage of the work on cataloguing and analyzing of the above-mentioned type of sources.

The difference of the 11th–13th centuries graffiti from the Viking Age graffiti should be mentioned before turning exclusively to the first ones. The main difference is that the depicting of the separate items of arms and equipment (swords, scramasaxes, spears, banners) was quite typical for the Viking Age (fig. 1). It is relevant not only for coins but also for other Viking Age artifacts with scratched images found on the Old Rus' territory (Дубов 1982, Fig. 39:11, 40:12).

Concerning the drawings of the 11th–13th centuries, the military graffiti, those with the images of armed people, are definitely prevailing. The images were scratched on absolutely various surfaces. It is possible to distinguish some groups of graffiti according to this:

- on the walls of churches;
- on diverse everyday objects;
- on the birch bark (the letters of a boy named Onthim from Novgorod are one of the most representative series of images (Янин 1975, pp. 46–53).

All the known military graffiti can be divided into two groups: the images of Holy Warriors and the images of secular warriors.

The *images of Holy Warriors* are not numerous. There are three such images. The first one is from Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv and is dated to the 11th–14th centuries. The second graffiti – from the Saviour Church on Nereditsa – is dated not earlier than the very end of the 12th century (the tem-

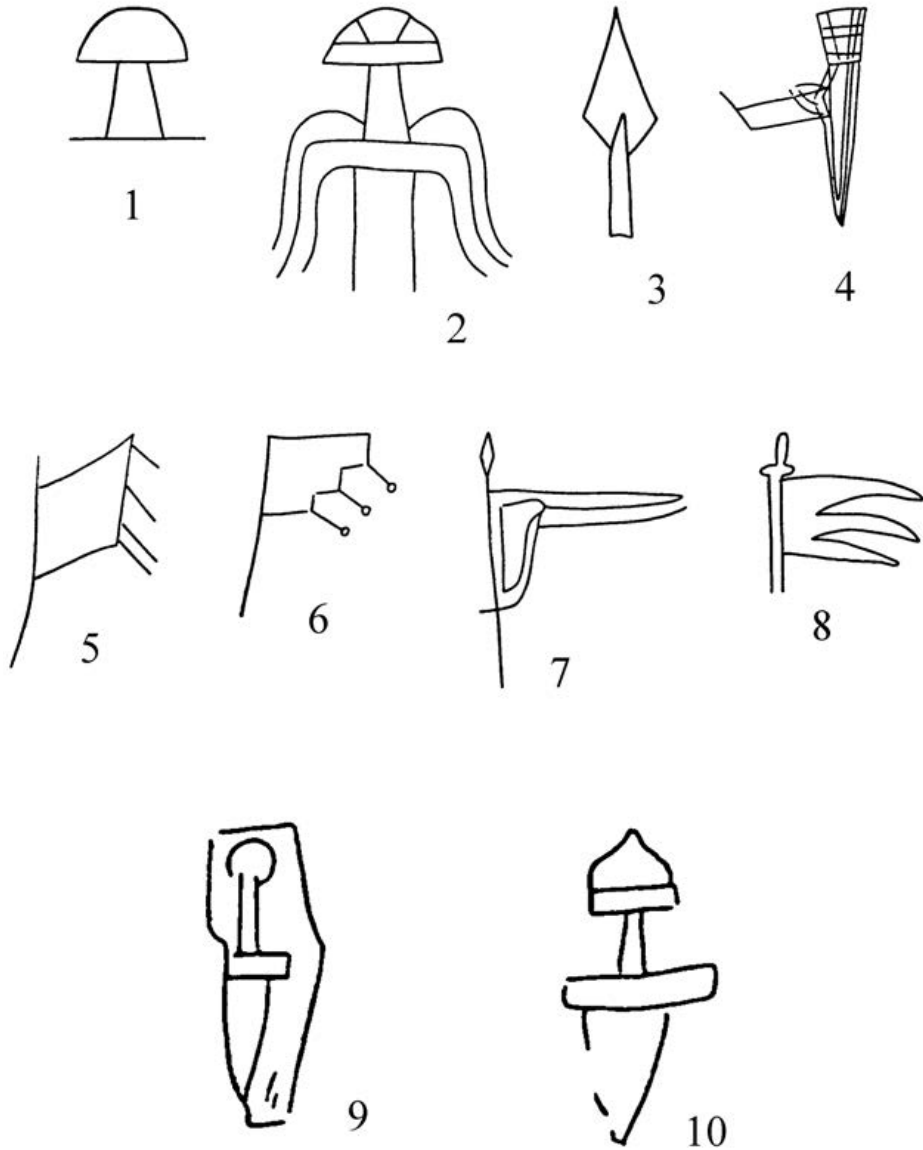


Fig. 1. Viking Age graffiti on Arabic dirham coins (1-8) and artifacts (9-10): 1 - Fridrihsgof hoard, 2 - Erilovo hoard, 3 - unknown location hoard from the territory of Estonia, 4 - unknown location hoard, 5 - unknown location hoard, 6 - Gnezdovo, 7-8 - Paharelshchyna hoard, 9-10 - Timerevo (1-10 - after Добровольский, Дубов, Кузьменко 1991, с. 51-67)

ple was built in 1198). The third image is from Annunciation Church in Vitsebsk, and it is dated to the second half of the 13th century (Высоцкий 1976, p. 118, pl. CXXXVI; Разина 2007, pp. 72–73, fig. 10; Селицкий 1992, p. 83, fig. 51). The images are produced with absolutely different level of professionalism (fig. 2:1–3). The graffiti from Saint Sophia Cathedral is obviously drawn by a hand of a true craftsman, while the images from Annunciation Church in Vitsebsk and the Saviour Church on Nereditsa look quite primitive. At the same time, all pictures actually copy the images of Holy Warriors characteristic for Byzantine and Old Russian art with its above-mentioned canon.

The saint (or archangel) from the wall of Kyiv Cathedral holds a spear in his right hand and a shield (that is likely to be almond-shaped) in his left hand (fig. 2:1). He is vested in a tabard and he is most probably armoured. His armour is the one with pteryges (Высоцкий 1976, p. 118, pl. CXXXVI). The saint from Vitsebsk Church is dressed in the same way and armed with a spear as well (fig. 2:2; Селицкий 1992, p. 83, fig. 51). The warrior from the Saviour Church on Nereditsa is depicted without a nimbus, as opposed to the previous two images (fig. 2:3). However, his pose, being quite characteristic for the iconography, tells that he is exactly a Holy Warrior. He holds a sword in his right hand bent at the and an almond-shaped shield in his left hand (Разина 2007, pp. 72–73, fig. 10).

It is likely that the 12th century image from Polatsk drawn on a birch bark (fig. 2:4) also represents a Holy Warrior with a nimbus and a shield in his hand. However, the extremely sketchy character of the image and the fact that it must have been a part of some composition allow to consider it as the one belonging to the military graffiti type only conditionally (Плавінскі 2011, p. 18, fig. 2).

The *images of secular warriors* present the absolute majority of the Old Russian military graffiti. It is reasonable to discuss them in the chronological order. Here it should be taken into account, that most images cannot be dated more precisely than to the Old Russian times in general. In the first place it refers to graffiti drawn on the walls of churches.

The 11th century image from Brest scratched on the limestone tile is one of the oldest Old Russian military graffiti (Лысенко 1985, p. 225, fig. 259). The warrior is likely to be armed (maybe clad in chainmail?). There is a Norman helmet on his head, and an oval shield with a cross is in his left hand (fig. 3:1).

The bottom of a birch bark container was found during the excavations in Novgorod in Troitski cut (fig. 3:2). There are some different opinions on the graffiti dating and its interpretation among archaeologists. E. Rybina dates it back to the 12th century (Рыбина 1998, p. 20). She thinks that there is

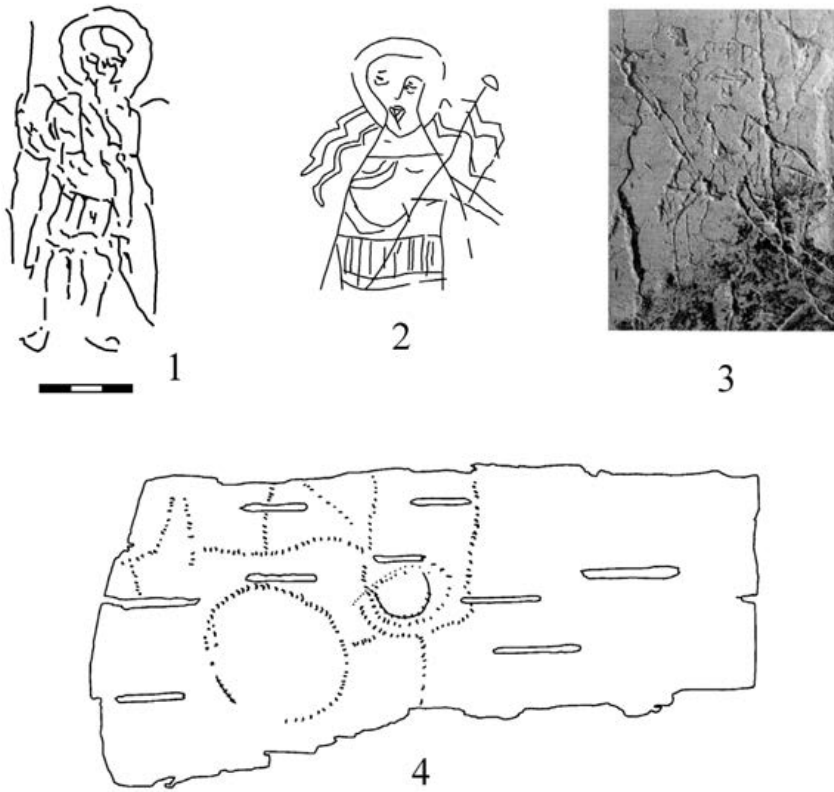


Fig. 2. Old Rusian graffiti with the images of Holy Warriors: 1 – Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (drawn after the photography), 2 – Annunciation Church in Vitsebsk (drawn after the photography), 3 – Saviour Church on Nereditsa in Novgorod (after Разина 2007, ил. 10), 4 – Polatsk (drawing by N. Plavinski, based on the photography)

a marquee with a cruciform top in front of which a man with an axe is depicted in this image. At the same time, A. Musin dates it to the middle of the 11th century and supposes that a warrior with a cross and an axe standing in front of a tent-shaped church topped with a cross is drawn on the bottom of a birch bark container (Мусин 1999, р. 149).

Two graffiti from the Saviour Church on Nereditsa are dated not earlier than to the very end of the 12th century. The first one (fig. 4) is an image of a pacing man with a sword in his left hand and a small round shield in his right hand¹. The warrior from the second graffiti (fig. 3:3) has a sphero-con-

¹ I express my gratitude to T.S. Dorofeeva (Institute for History of Material Culture in Saint-Petersburg) for the opportunity to use photo from the archive of the Novgorod Regional Archaeological Expedition.

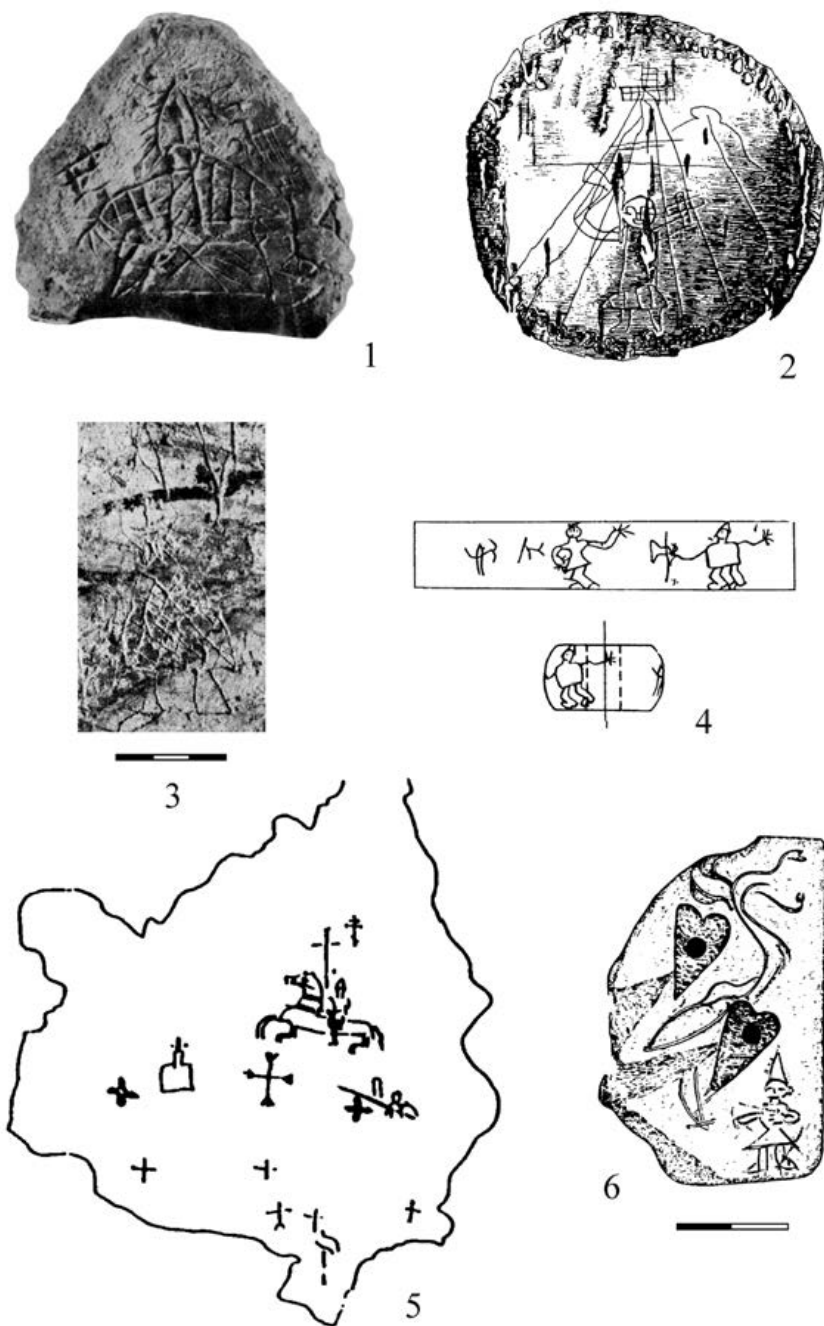


Fig. 3. Old Russian graffiti with the images of secular warriors: 1 – Brest (after Лысенко 1985, рис. 259), 2 – Novgorod (after Мусин 1999, рис. 5), 3 – Saviour Church on Nereditsa in Novgorod (after Разина 2007, ил. 9), 4 – Pskov (after Лабутина 1975), 5 – Dormition Church in Staraya Ladoga (after Васильев 2001, рис. 4), 6 – Vladimir (after Седова 2004, рис. 1:2)



Fig. 4. Old Russian graffiti with the image of secular warrior from the Saviour Church on Nereditsa in Novgorod (photo from the archive of the Novgorod Regional Archaeological Expedition, October 2005)

ical helmet on his head, he is armoured (?), with a short sword (?) in his right hand (Разина 2007, p. 72, fig. 9; Рождественская 1997, fig. 6).

The spindle whorl from the excavations in Pskov, Lenin square, can be dated back to the 11th–12th centuries (Лабутин 1975). There are two figures on it: a dancing woman and a man with a Norman helmet on his head and an axe in his right hand (fig. 3:4). Despite of the sketchy character of the image, it can be supposed that it is an axe with a broad blade and quite a long handle (type M of Jan Petersen (1919, pp. 46–47).

The graffiti on the walls of the Dormition Church in Staraya Ladoga is dated not earlier than to the 12th century (the time when the church was built). In this picture, there is a horseman on a (reared up?) horse (a horse harness can be seen; Васильев 2001, p. 233, fig. 4). He holds a spear or a cross in his right hand and a Norman helmet is on his head (fig. 3:5). Another warrior with a spear in his right hand and a shield in his left hand is standing next to the first figure.

The 1220–1230s is the time when series of graffiti on the birch bark were created by a boy Onthim from Novgorod (Арциховский, Борковский 1963, pp. 29–32; Янин 1975, pp. 46–53). Little Onthim did manage to depict quite well the form of sphero-conical helmets (fig. 5:1) and the motions of a horseman thrusting a spear into the face of a downed enemy (fig. 5:2), despite of the fact that apparently he had some troubles with counting fingers.

A wide range of graffiti cannot be dated more precisely than to the Old Russian times in general (the 11th–13th centuries).

The series of graffiti from Kyiv belongs to such graffiti of Old Russian period. Besides the above-mentioned image of a saint or archangel on the walls of Saint Sophia Cathedral there are two more military graffiti of the 11th–14th centuries known. The first one presents two armored (?) warriors with Norman helmets on their heads and with small shields (one of these two is very likely to be triangular) and spears in their hands (fig. 6:1). Both the warriors are drawn with sufficient details (Высоцкий 1966, pp. 114–115, pl. LXXVII). The dynamism of their motions is depicted quite well: the shields are held in front of them in their bent arms, the spears are raised above their heads.

The second military graffiti from Kyiv Cathedral is an image of an armored (?) warrior with a helmet on his head. There is an arrow in his right hand (fig. 6:2). It is quite difficult to identify the item in his left hand precisely. S. Vysotski supposed that it is something “like a bow” (Высоцкий 1976, p. 117, pl. CXXXVI). There are two words: *warrior* and *Georgy* scratched by different hands beside the picture. Taking into consideration the fact, that the graffiti is drawn in the apse of St. George’s side-altar on the southern side of the church, it may be the image of St. George. However, the helmet depicted instead of a nimbus withholds such an interpretation, which was reasonably stated by S. Vysotski (Высоцкий 1976, p. 117).

One more interesting graffiti was found in Kyiv on the wall of the Golden Gates (Высоцкий 1985, pp. 13–15, pl. V). According to S. Vysotski, there is a man in a monk’s klobuk in this image. He holds a blade weapon, most probably a sword, in his left hand (fig. 6:3). S. Vysotski interprets this graffiti as an image of a monk fighting with his flesh (Высоцкий 1985, p. 15), though such a theory could be considered as a witty hypothesis only.

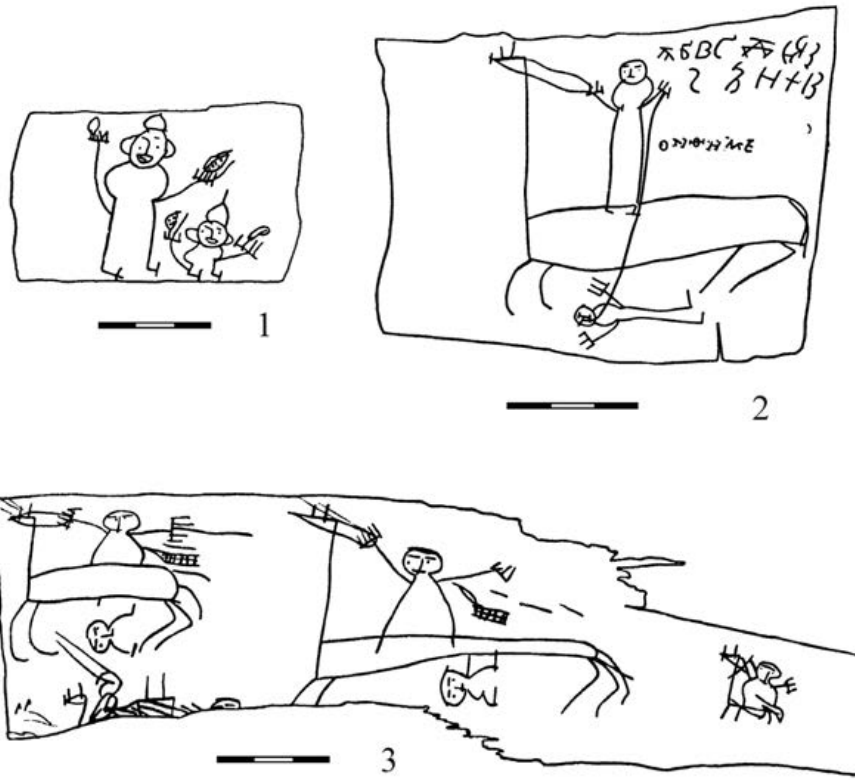


Fig. 5. Graffiti on the birch bark created by a boy Onthim from Novgorod (after Янин 1975, с. 46–53)

The most representative series of the Old Russian military graffiti comes from Maskavichy hill-fort of Braslau district, Vitebsk region. During the excavations of this hill-fort, dated to the period from the turn of the 10th–11th centuries up to the turn of the 13th–14th centuries, L. Duchyts found 107 bones of animals with various graffiti (Дучыц 1991, pp. 79–82). E. Melnikova, who studied this issue, dated them to the 12th–13th centuries and divided these finds into three main groups:

1. runic inscriptions, rune-like signs and separate signs;
2. pictures among which the images of people prevail;
3. images of nets.

It seems that men are depicted with arms in the eleven among eighteen images with people. According to E. Melnikova, the images, signs and pictures were created in the same technique, which allows to assert that they were made at the same time and by one author (Мельникова 2001, pp. 213–



1



2



3

Fig. 6. Old Russian graffiti with the images of secular warriors: 1 – Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (after Высоцкий 1966, табл. LXXVII), 2 – Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (after Высоцкий 1976, табл. СXXXVI), 3 – Kyiv, Golden Gates (after Высоцкий 1985, табл. V)

247). No less than six graffiti among the eleven images of armed people can be considered quite informative. The rest are beyond definite interpretation due to their extremely sketchy character.

The following graffiti should be mentioned among those worked out in detail:

- the image of a warrior with a Norman helmet on his head and with a sword and a round shield in his right hand (fig. 7:3);

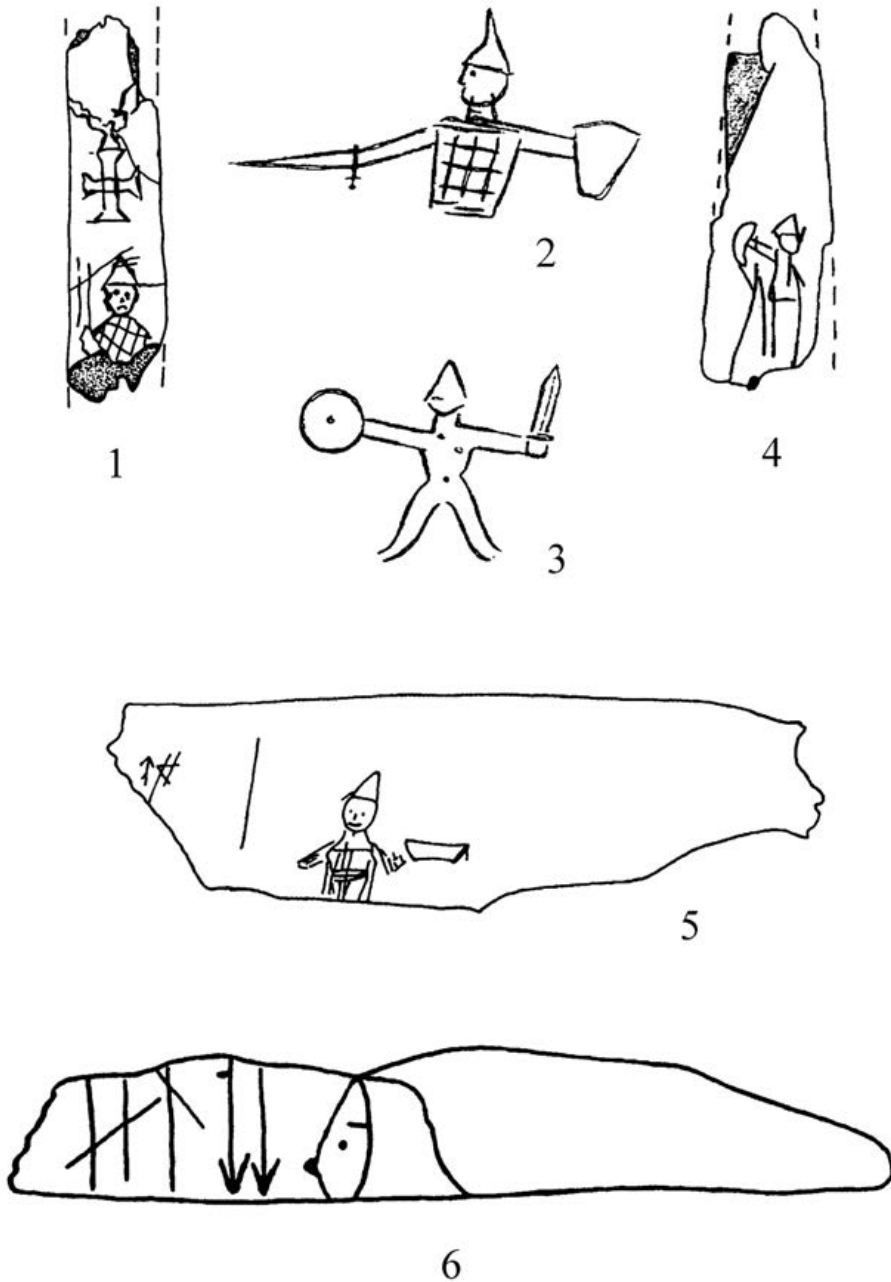


Fig. 7. Old Russian graffiti with the images of secular warriors from the Maskavichy hill-fort of Braslau district, Vitebsk region (after Дучыц 1991)

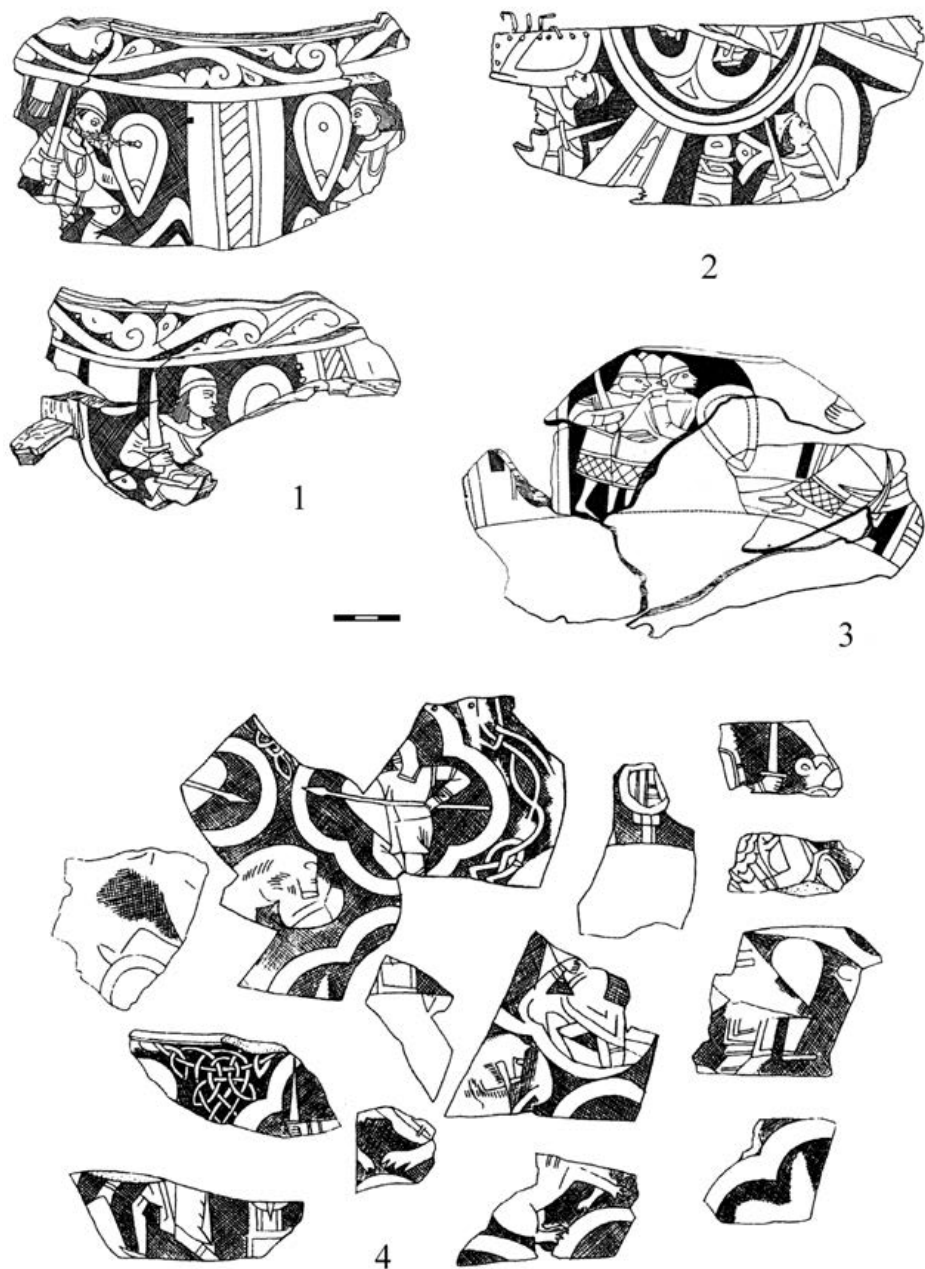


Fig. 8. Wooden fretted cups with military scenes: 1 – Novgorod, Troitski cut (after Сорокин, Тянина 2006, рис. 3), 2 – Novgorod, Nerevski cur (after Сорокин, Тянина 2006, рис. 1), 3 – Rostislavl, Smolensk region (after Алексеев 1980, рис. 28:1), 4 – Chernihiv (after Моця, Казаков 2011, с. 149)

- two images of warriors with Norman helmets on their heads who are probably armoured as well (fig. 7:1,5);
- the image of a warrior with a Norman helmet on his head and with a convex round shield (fig. 7:4);
- the image of a head in a Norman helmet (fig. 6:6);
- the most interesting among all, the graffiti from Maskavichy seems to be an image of a helmeted warrior (fig. 7:2), probably with a Norman helmet, who holds a sword and an early form of a pavise shield without a groove.

The rest of the graffiti from Maskavichy are of extremely sketchy character. However, it should be mentioned that probably all armed people hold in their hands the items, which may be interpreted as swords.

Lastly, a casting mold with a man shooting an arrow was found in Vladimir. It might be a Norman helmet on his head (fig. 3:6; Седова 2004).

Thus it is possible to draw some interesting conclusions on the basis of the analysis of the materials reviewed. So, it is obvious that the graffiti depicting horsemen appeared not earlier than in the 12th century. It corresponds well with the actual notions of the heavy cavalry combat tactics spreading over the Old Russian lands (Кирпичников 1973, pp. 85–86).

Despite all the variety and sketchiness of the images, it can be noticed without any difficulties that the most frequent objects depicted in the graffiti with secular warriors are helmets (in 14 of 19 images), shields (in 7) and swords (in 6). Other types of arms seem to be really uncommon for these graffiti (the interpretation of warriors' bodies cross-hatching as indicating armoured warriors may be considered hypothetical only, and therefore such images are left out of account here). The above-mentioned points make it possible to conclude that a helmet, shield and sword were exactly the main attributes of "a true warrior" in the consciousness of people of the Old Russian times.

Such a conclusion corresponds well with the data of the other types of iconographic sources, which did not undergo the strong influence of the canons of Holy Warriors depiction. First of all, it refers to wooden fretted cups with military scenes (fig. 8). Helmeted warriors with shields and swords are depicted on the cups of the first half of the 13th century from Novgorod (Nerevski and Troitski cuts) and Rostislavl, Smolensk region (Алексеев 1980, p. 182, fig. 28:1; Сорокин, Тянина 1999; 2006, pp. 465–470). There is one more cup dated to the 12th–the first half of the 13th centuries from Chernihiv. The warriors depicted on the cup, which is preserved just in small fragments, hold almond-shaped shields, swords and spears in their hands

(Моця, Казаков 2011, p. 149). It is impossible to identify whether there are any helmets on their heads because of the bad state of the fragments.

So, a brief review of the Old Russian military graffiti makes it possible to state that they are valuable sources for the history of weapons of the 11th–13th centuries. This paper just outlines the issue of the above-mentioned finds interpretation. More precise conclusions may be drawn only after the complete catalogue of all the known Old Russian graffiti is created.

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STRESZCZENIE

GRAFFITI DAWNEJ RUSI JAKO ŹRÓDŁO DO BADAŃ BRONIOZNAWCZYCH. UWAGI WPROWADZAJĄCE

Do dyspozycji historyków staroruskiego uzbrojenia pozostaje duża liczba źródeł. Oczywiście jest, że najważniejszą grupą są znaleziska archeologiczne. Są one w istocie najliczniejsze i dostarczają najwięcej informacji. Cenne są również uzyskane dla tego czasu informacje z pierwszych źródeł pisanych oraz niewielkich rzeźb czy ikonografii. Pomędzy wskazanymi rodzajami źródeł wyjątkową grupę stanowi graffiti. Graffiti wyobrażające wojowników oraz pewne elementy uzbrojenia różnią się od innych przekazów ikonograficznych tym, że przedstawiają jedynie obrys obiektu z minimalną liczbą detali. Te cechy dominują w rysunkach, które mogły być wydrapane za pomocą ostrego przedmioty na każdej nadającej się do tego powierzchni, np. na monetach, kościach, wrzecionach, osełkach, materiałach budowlanych etc. Graffiti było wykonywane przez zwykłych ludzi, którzy nie posiadali specjalnych zdolności artystycznych i nie zamierzali tworzyć długotrwałych wyobrażeń. Jest jednak oczywiste, że autorzy graffiti byli całkiem dobrze obeznani z rzeczami, które przedstawiali. Stan ten wynika z faktu obcowania z tymi przedmiotami w codziennym życiu. Warto również zaznaczyć, że takie wyobrażenia były wolne lub prawie wolne od powszechnych tradycji ikonograficznych, które przesiąkały dzieła profesjonalnych wytwórców. Ten fakt jest znaczący zwłaszcza w czasach dawnej Rusi, kiedy chrystianizacja była nośnikiem nowych kanonów w ikonografii. Dlatego, pomimo trudności w interpretacji graffiti, są one ważną grupą pierwotnych źródeł przedstawiającą codzienną rzeczywistość tamtych czasów. Jak dotąd nie powstało żadne specjalistyczne opracowanie staroruskich graffiti w kontekście studiów nad uzbrojeniem. Graffiti odnoszące się do sfery militarnej dominują w okresie do XI do XIII w. Wyobrażenia te były wydrapywane na różnego rodzaju powierzchniach m.in. ścianach kościołów, różnorodnych obiektach codziennego użytku, korze brzozonej. Wszystkie znane z XI–XIII w. grafiki „militarne” można podzielić na dwie zasadnicze grupy: przedstawienia wojowników świętych (fig. 2) oraz świeckich (fig. 3–7). Na podstawie analizowanego materiału wysnuto interesujące wnioski. Graffiti przedstawiające jeźdźca pojawiają się nie wcześniej niż w XII w., co koresponduje z aktualnymi ustaleniami na temat rozpowszechnienia się taktyki walki ciężkiej

konnicy w dawnej Rusi. Pomimo różnorodności przedstawień, można zauważyć bez większych trudności, że wraz ze świeckimi wojownikami ukazano takie elementy, jak: hełmy (w 14 na 19 wyobrażeń), tarcze (w 7 przypadkach) i miecze (pojawiają się 6 razy). Pozostałe rodzaje uzbrojenia wydają się być niepopularne w tego typu wyobrażeniach (interpretacja skrzyżowanych linii jako pancerza noszonego przez wojownika może być rozważana jedynie hipotetycznie). Z powyższych ustaleń można wywnioskować, że hełm, tarcza i miecz były w świadomości mieszkańców dawnej Rusi głównymi atrybutami „prawdziwego wojownika”. Niniejszy, krótki przegląd staroruskich graffiti odnoszących się do sfery militarnej pozwala zaliczyć rozważaną grupę zabytków w poczet źródeł ważnych dla historii uzbrojenia w XI–XIII w. Artykuł ten nakreśla jedynie podstawowe zagadnienia związane z interpretacją wspomnianych znalezisk. Przedstawienie bardziej szczegółowych wniosków będzie możliwe po skompletowaniu pełnego katalogu graffiti znanych z obszaru dawnej Rusi.

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