

# Necropolises and Burial Sites on the Island of Sviyazhsk Case Study of Archaeological Data

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## Abstract

The archaeological explorations on the island of Sviyazhsk, which are conducted more actively in recent years, allowed discovering the complicated history of ancient days hidden and buried deep in the ground of the island which in the mid-fifties was completely cut off from the modern world by the waters of the Kuibyshev reservoir. Mapping of the necropolises discovered during archaeological, construction and restoration works is important component of the set of actions aimed at complex studying and preservation of cultural heritage sites. Besides abounding material culture, archeologists managed to track the planning features of the development of Sviyazhsk island mountain of the late Middle Ages and Modern Age including those reflected in the arrangement of the monastic and the parish cemeteries. The article provides data on localization of the necropolises discovered during archaeological researches of 2008-2010 on the island of Sviyazhsk. The Orthodox necropolises and individual burial sites under study date back to the XVI-XX centuries. The study materials are of great practical importance for the reconstruction of historical planning and establishment of the memorial site to bring out tourist potential, and to conduct scientific researches of the historical and demographic processes in the Middle Volga region.

**Keywords:** Middle Volga region, Sviyazhsk Island, late Middle ages, modern age, cemeteries, burial, monastery, parish cemetery, human remains

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Urgency of the Problem

Any burial, both within specially designated area, and in occasional areas, always represents a many-sided social-cultural phenomenon (Shokarev, 2000). Proceeding from this assumption, the detailed recording and registration of everything connected with burials in the territory of the island town Sviyazhsk, carried out in recent years, allows to have a new approach to a number of problems which are insufficiently studied in the written sources and have not been explored and analyzed by the archaeologists before the beginning of the XXI century. Studying of Sviyazhsk necropolises and individual burial sites of the late Middle Ages and modern time deals with problems of political, social and cultural history, partially concerning the aspects of public conscience, history of religion, arts, architecture.

### 1.2 Characteristics of the Town of Sviyazhsk

The town of Sviyazhsk built in 1551 on confluence of the Volga and the Sviyaga rivers originally served as a fortified locality for protection of the Muscovite state in the east. A bit later Sviyazhsk became one of the thriving centers of the Orthodox culture of Russia. Being an administrative center, it played an important trade, economic and cultural role in the Kazan province. Periods of the Russian history of the late Middle Ages, modern and contemporary history had particular influence on Sviyazhsk, which carry memorable images of noted eras (Larionova et al., 2013). In 1956, the waters of the biggest on the Volga River Kuibyshev reservoir, along with the Sviyaga and the Schuka rivers and Schuchiye Lake, flooded the suburbs of the former district town, and Sviyazhsk turned into the island. Because of the detached location and complicated communication with the outside world, development of the settlement ceased for almost fifty years that contributed to rather good preservation of archaeological cultural layer (Shakirov, 2010).

### *1.3 Significance of the Research Problem*

As well as in other historical cities the preliminary (preservation) archaeological researches, which in our case were carried out by order of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tatarstan and Republic Foundation «Revival» in 2008-2010, shed new light on topography, and on the dynamics of the development of Sviyazhsk town. Exploration and research area comprised all districts of the town, which arose in the Middle Ages; that allowed us to have a good idea of the town structure and planning features of Sviyazhsk of the second half of the XVI-XX centuries (Siddikov et al., 2010).

Besides the opportunity to reconstruct residential development, administrative buildings and churches, redevelopments and urban amenities, the direction of the streets (Valiev et al., 2014), we got an overview of several hundred necropolises and burial sites made throughout nearly four centuries. Thus, in different parts of the modern island of Sviyazhsk necropolises of 3 Orthodox monasteries, 4 parish cemeteries, 3 mass graves, 2 individual burial sites were partially studied.

### *1.4 Status of a Problem*

Nowadays studying and preservation of the sites of the Russian historical and cultural heritage is implemented in accordance with the Federal legislation, as well as regional practices, which is showcased in the Republic of Tatarstan, and is evident from the international experience.

Taking into consideration the works on tourism expansion in the Republic of Tatarstan, there came up a question of carrying out preliminary (preservation) archaeological researches on the territory of Sviyazhsk island. The systematic archaeological researches begun in Sviyazhsk in 2006 allowed to take a fresh look on the history of the town and played an important role in providing the holdings of the museum-reserve with historical sources. In spite of the fact that the main archaeological material dates back to rather late period, it bears considerable and multidimensional information, which has been well exemplified by our European colleagues who are engaged in study of the late Middle Ages, modern and contemporary history periods (Addyman, 1989; Anichini et al., 2008; Fozzati et al., 2008).

As for studying of necropolises and individual burial sites, it can be stated that there is a wide range of problems, which help to consider them as the sociocultural phenomenon (Shokarev, 2000). The ethical question concerning preservation of cultural information remains relevant (Lebedev, 2012). The problematics deals with the socioecological aspects (Karavayeva, 2007).

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### *2.1 Research Problems*

The description, and, above all, mapping of necropolises and individual burial sites of the preliminary archaeological researches discovered during construction excavation and restoration works in 2008-2010 are provided in our article. The relevance of mapping is defined by the fact that, despite of being sacral, burial sites as well as all sites of the cultural heritage are very vulnerable. Works on the territory of the island of Sviyazhsk brought out the need of preparatory researches when planning construction activities on historical sites especially when necropolises are concerned.

Moreover, in the course of research, there was created a new source base and anthropological collection for further historical reconstruction.

The received information is critical for revealing the capacity of the Sviyazhsk historical, architectural and art museum-reserve as in recent years the number of the sites interested in materials of archeological excavations has been growing. There appear new forms to transfer archaeological data by means of presentations of new museum expositions, establishment of lapidary and memorial areas.

### *2.2 Methods*

In the course of the research, there was used a complex of various classical methods, which are applied while performing historical and archaeological researches. The analysis of literature on Sviyazhsk, statuary and legislative documents on city development in Russia, excavations and laboratory processing of the received materials, supplementing each other, allowed to build a holistic picture.

## **3. Results**

In the territory of the St. John the Baptist Convent, which is nowadays Sviyazhsk Uspensky monastery (The Dormition Monastery), during the study of the monasteries' footing and while searching the possible additional buildings adjacent to them, there were discovered and registered the burial sites made in accordance with the

Christian orthodox tradition. The monastery is located in the southern part of the island and is circled by modern streets Troitskaya, Aleksandrovskaya, Sviyaga Naberezhnaya and Sergiyevsky Spusk. Burial sites are connected with quite an interesting story of the territory of the monastery, which is the most ancient in the territory of Sviyazhsk. From 1551 and before abolition after the reform of 1764 it was a frater and following the names of two main cathedrals, it was called Troitse-Sergiyev monastery. After the fire of 1795 St. John the Baptist Convent that used to be around the corner of modern Uspenskaya Street and Rozhdestvensky Lane was transferred and rebuild on the platform of Troitse-Sergiyev monastery. The St. John the Baptist Convent functioned till 1919.

The oldest one of the remaining cathedrals in Sviyazhsk and in the Middle Volga region in general, is the wooden Trinity Church constructed along with fortress in 1551. Ivan IV, better known as Ivan the Terrible, prayed there before the last assault of Kazan. While searching for the ambulatories – the open ground-floor gallery surrounding church, in the East side of the building (fig. 1: 1), in a pit No. 1 the remains of 5 burials were discovered and recorded (1 child, 4 adults). There were found deceased lying on the back, headed towards the west. In addition, there was excavated a stone plate with the signs of smoothing, but without inscriptions, probably being a gravestone. The revealed funerary complexes, allegedly, are dated by the end of the XVI-XVII centuries (Shakirov & Valiyev, 2009).

In the territory of the same monastery, two underground brick tomb-chests adjoining a northwest wall of St. Sergius Church (fig. 1: 2) are found. The church in honor of the Reverend Sergius of Radonezh is the last Orthodox church consecrated during Boris Godunov reign. Tomb-chests, in the form of boxes with arched ceiling made of the red bricks mortared with lime-white are dated back to the end of the XIX - the beginning of the XX centuries.

In 2010 at the central portal of the cathedral in honor of the icon of the Mother of God "All the Mournings' Joy", constructed in 1898-2006, under the western pole the remains of partially destroyed burial site were found (fig. 1: 3). Following specific features of the discovered on the skeletal frame baptismal cross – the Golgotha cross "A radiant wreath" is dated by the XVIII century.

At the corner of modern Rozhdestvensky Lane and Uspenskaya Street around the original location of St. John the Baptist Convent (fig. 1: 4) earlier unknown remains of necropolis were found. Before subsurface utility engineering during preliminary archaeological excavations, there had been studied the remains of the convent cemetery, which possibly was situated to the East of the convent and was located there. Everything in the area of the subsurface utility engineering bore traces of destruction caused by the buildings erected in the XIX-XX centuries when the city of Sviyazhsk started to be built up according to the regular construction plan. Based on the analysis of the skeletons remains, we managed to identify 10 women and 4 children who died in the age from 18 to 45 and from 1 to 13 correspondingly.

Within the borders of the Uspensko-Bogoroditsky monastery (The Assumption Monastery) founded in 1555, the burial sites connected with the development of the territory during various periods are discovered. As the cartographic materials do not have this information, only archaeological researches can pinpoint the location of country churchyards of the monastery today. In the cadastres of Sviyazhsk District of 1565-1567, there is information about churches in the territory of the monastery, and about various household outbuildings, but there is no information about the location of the monastic churchyard. In the "Paper on the cathedral authorities", issued in 1599 at the time of the patriarch Job, the Sviyazhsk Bogoroditsky monastery was acknowledged as the seventh in order of importance Russian monastery. In the third quarter of the XVIII century according to the monastic inventory of 1763, 35 monks lived in the Uspensky monastery. In 1764, it was ranked the first class regular monastery. By the beginning of the XX century, the monastery was rated the seventh in the list of the monasteries of the Russian Empire. After October revolution of 1917, in the territory of the monastery there was children's labor colony, labour commune for homeless teenagers, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs prison, lunatic asylum. In 1997, the Sviyazhsk Bogoroditsky Uspensky frater was officially transferred to the Kazan Diocese of the Moscow Patriarchate of Russian Orthodox Church (Shakirov et al., 2014).

Today the territory of the monastery is about 3,5 hectares and it represents irregular polygon in the plan view. It is fenced with a brick wall of the XVII-XIX centuries. As it was noted above, in 2010 during the excavation and research there were found the burial sites connected with development of the territory of the Uspensky monastery during various periods.

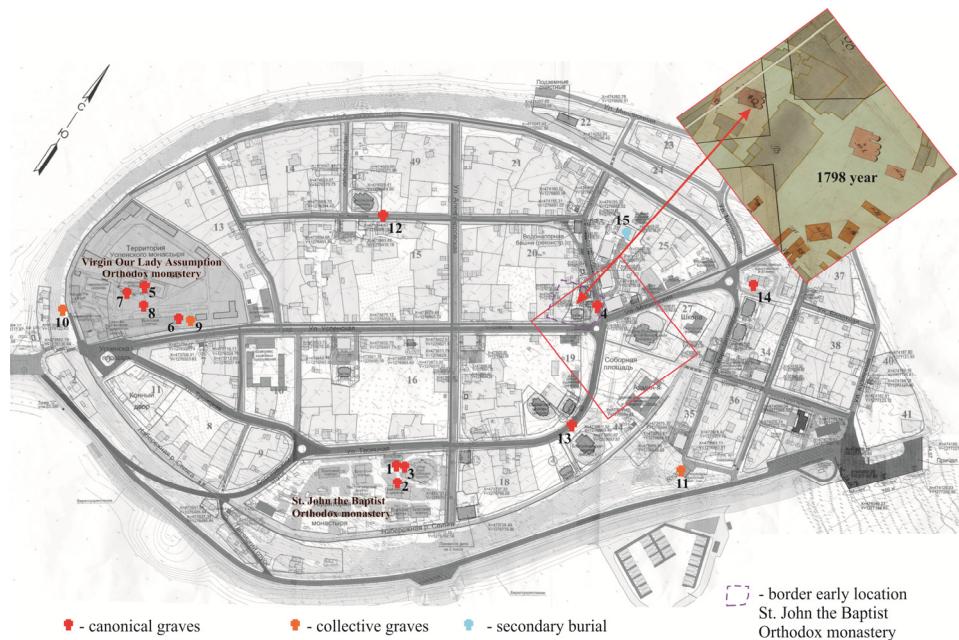


Figure 1. Layout of Sviyazhsk island showing the locations of burial sites

Part of the churchyard area dated back to the end of the XVI – the beginning of the XX centuries was explored during the excavations to the East of the Uspensky (the Assumption) Cathedral apsis (fig. 1: 5). The total area of the excavation is 54 sq.m. In total, there were discovered 7 late grave holes and 37 burial sites during the excavation. All sepulchral holes are stretching from the West to the East; the remains of the decayed coffins representing rotten wood were found in some of them. In late grave holes and excavations of the XX century there were also collected some fragments of bone remains of people. In the excavated graves with heughs and flat bottom, the buried people lay on the back, headed to the west, with hands crossed on the stomach. Burial No. 4, in which there was a skeleton with fetters coming from the neck to the waist (fig. 2: 1), is different from other studied graves. Fetters represent the iron chain worn on the body, falling from shoulders to the waist, with links of 5x2 cm, one of which, near the breast, had the iron four-blade cross attached to it. Wearing various iron chains, strips, rings, etc. for the sake of flesh humility practiced by Christian ascetics. Rostov hermit of Borisoglebsky Monastery, the Reverend of Russian Orthodox Church – Irinarkh Rostovsky (1547-1616), wore similar chains. It is also interesting to note horizontal massive stone gravestone. It has the size of 185x75x38 cm, and is made of limestone. The stone, except its lower part, has smooth surfaces with cut-in ornaments. On side ends of the gravestone, there is an ornament in the form of the repeated arches between twisted borders. The gravestone face is framed with carved "plaiting" along its edge. In one half of it, in the internal part, there are two "braids" coming out of the middle of the frame radius and merging into a round medallion. In the center of the medallion there is a circle with the beams coming out of the middle (the rotating sun?) bordered by three expanding circles drawn in equal distance which are in turn limited by revolving "braid" coming from the middle to the short part of the gravestone. There are no inscriptions on the gravestone, which is allegedly dated to the XVII century (fig. 2: 2).

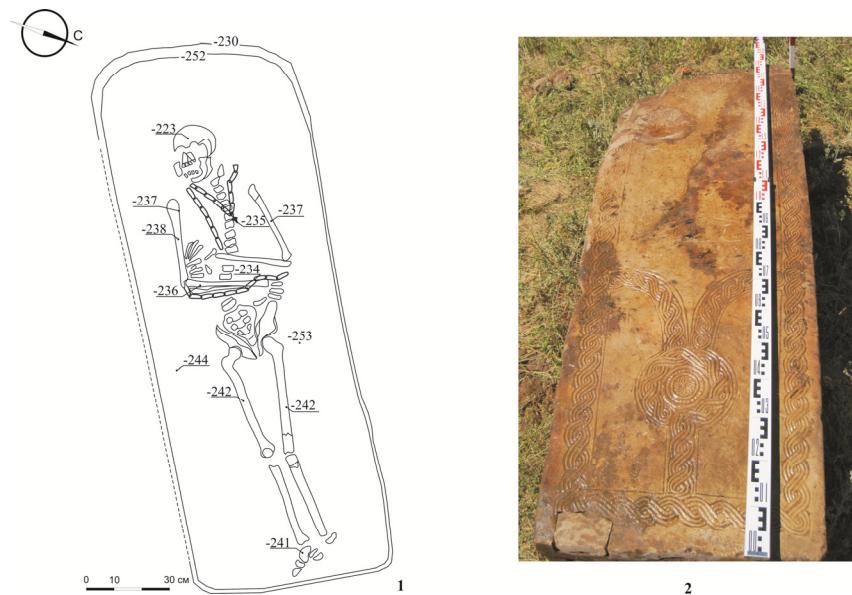


Figure 2. 1 – burial site No. 4, 2 – gravestone of the XVII century

Sepultures were made in bone chambers No. 6, 14, 17, and 25. Sepultures represent arch designs made of red brick mortared with lime-white. Burials in sepultures is pro-cutting of sepulchral holes and the size of bricks (28x13x6,5 and 25x12x7 cm) dated to the period not earlier than the XIX century. On the territory of excavations, there is an arrangement of graves along the line from the North to the South - two rows of graves with the lane between them of about 1 m wide. Thus, burials of the excavation, allegedly, are dated by as follows: 2 – at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries, 7 – XIX century, 7 – XVIII century, 10 – the XVII-XVIII centuries, 11 – XVII century. All these admit that this area was most intensively used for burials in the XVII-XVIII centuries. All anthropological remains studied throughout the excavation belong to the men who died aged 25 – 60 (Akhmetgulin, 2011).

Besides, human remains were discovered during the excavations carried out by the builders at different sites of the Uspensko-Bogoroditsky monastery:

- the burials under the apsis of the Germanovsky church consecrated in 1799 (fig. 1: 6) that were destroyed as the result of church's foundation laying. The burials, considering the time of church construction, were made before the XVIII century;
- at the southern ground gallery of the Uspensky (the Assumption) Cathedral (fig. 1: 7) the restorers came across vaulted overlapping of a brick sepulture (the brick size 7x12x27sm);
- when digging a trench between the Uspensky (the Assumption) Cathedral and the brethren building (fig. 1: 8) the top part of the skeleton headed to the southwest is recorded.

Certainly, during functioning of churchyards, some graves were designated what is proved by the gravestones which we managed to discover during the restoration of the brethren building foundation and ruins of the sepulchral monuments on the territory of the monastery.

Two mass graves are connected with the tragic period of political repressions of the 1930-1950th and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs institutions functioning in the territory of the monastery. The Corrective Labour colony No. 5 was probably the most famous among these institutions. The first grave was found at the monastic wall to the East of the brethren building (fig. 1: 9) in a gave hole about 2 m in depth, there were seven chaotically lying remains of skeletons. In occipital lobe of the skulls, there were holes (bullet holes?) of about 1 cm in diameter. The second was found when digging a water trench. The grave hole was behind the monastic wall, 3 meters away from the east corner of the Arkhimandritsky (Archimandrite's) building at the edge of the slope (fig. 1: 10), 1,4 to 2,5 m deep. In a hole, only within the trench borders, there were about 30 skeleton remains lying one on the other. In our opinion, much more people were buried there in the mass grave as its hole ran into the trench walls. Remains belonged to men and women of 20 to 60 years old.

We consider one more mass grave to be collective grave found while constructing a pump station to the southeast

of the complex of buildings of the vocational school and fire transport (fig. 1: 11). Under a layer of the turf, about 15 children and teenage remains were found. Perhaps, chaotically laid remains are possibly connected with the pupils who died during the time of the boarding school of the Soviet period.

The next series of burials is connected with functioning of parish cemeteries of the town of Sviyazhsk started in the end of the XVI century. They, just like other similar town necropolises of the Russian Empire under Orders of 1771 (No. 13.724), and of 1772 (No. 13.803) (The Complete collection ..., 1830) and because of the fire in Sviyazhsk in the spring of 1795, stopped functioning in the end of the XVIII century and were taken out of the town borders. The cartographic materials are also evidence of that as it says in the explanatory note to the town map of Sviyazhsk of 1798: "There are no cemeteries in this town, and people of Sviyazhsk District are buried near the Vedensky Settlement" (fig. 3). In addition, it is a worth noting that the finds of sepulchral vaults and gravestones of the XIX-XX centuries in the territory of monasteries, suggest that they were still used as places for burials of priests and wealthy citizens.

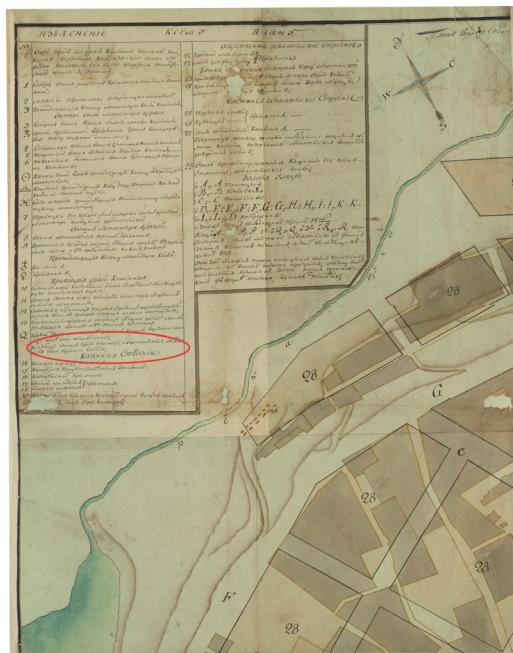


Figure 3. Plan fragment of Sviyazhsk of 1798

There is a description of the burials connected with the parish necropolises which were revealed during preliminary excavation before laying of communication lines:

First, under the modern Nikolskaya Street which received the name from the Three-throned church of Nicholas The Wonderworker which stood there till 1930th (fig. 1: 12), 28 burials were studied. All of them were made following the orthodox traditions. As it was discovered there were remains of 10 men, 9 of them died in the age of 40; 10 women, 9 of them died in the age of 35 and 8 children before 10.

Secondly, on Troitskaya Street to the East of the Sofia church which was also destroyed in the early 1930s 3 undamaged burials were studied and separate human remains were collected (fig. 1: 13). We managed to determine the sex and age of the deceased person only in the grave No. 3, where the girl of 13-17 years old was buried.

Thirdly, a large number of human remains was collected during the site improvement and construction of dead-house in the only remained and operating parish church in honor of Konstantin and Elena (fig. 1: 14). Unfortunately, archeologists were not involved in the conservation works, and bones were reburied without anthropological analysis.

Another grave, which was found during the excavation to the South of the building of a territorial board archives, is a secondary one (fig. 1: 15). The sepulchral hole was aligned with the North-South direction, bones were laid chaotically – without anatomic order, the skull was missing, thus, suggesting the irregularity of burials at this site.

#### 4. Conclusion

Excavation of necropolises and individual burial sites of 2008-2010 allowed to map them on the plan of the modern island-town of Sviyazhsk. As a result of researches, it was possible to discover that besides monastic necropolises and cemetery at Konstantin and Elena's church, researchers were able to establish the existence of cemeteries near all parish churches, as previously there was no information about it. Authors managed to prove that from the end of the XVIII century town layout had been changed considerably and parish necropolises are found under residential areas and roads of the XIX century, which comprise the basis of Sviyazhsk modern layout. The submitted materials became the basis for preparation of archaeological researches, construction and restoration works to discover the churches destroyed in the Soviet period and for development of Sviyazhsk in 2011-2014.

Closeness of graves and the received anthropological materials allow us to make a conclusion about some specific features of these burial platforms' use, gender and age differences, life expectancy variations of the population of different status:

- All burial sites, except for the secondary ones, are made in accordance with the Christian orthodox canons of inhumation, with the head pointing to the west;
- In all burial sites, the remains of wooden coffins or boxes represent rotten wood;
- Several layers and graves overlapping each other in the territory of monasteries speak for these areas being intensively used for burials;
- Existence of sepulchered vaults and gravestones of the XIX-XX centuries in the territory of monasteries is indicative of the fact that they were actively used, despite the forbidding documents, as well as of the status of the buried in those times;
- Gender and age characteristics of the religious men are the evidence of the status of the monasteries and change of the status (fraternity or convent);
- Longer life span of the buried - approximately 17 years more for men and 8 years more for women in comparison with parish cemeteries;
- Modern data do not allow speaking about earlier assumptions about very high child mortality rate though it may be relevant only for the town of Sviyazhsk;
- It is supposed that life expectancy of women buried in parish necropolises is about 5 years less than of men.

#### 5. Recommendations

The collected materials of 2008-2010 and data received in 2011-2014 in combination with scientific methods allows to create a new source base for researches on getting the idea about housing, food, water supply and environmental conditions during the different periods of Sviyazhsk history. Excavation of burial sites allows to estimate the impact of living and environment conditions on life expectancy, physical conditions, incidences, stress and trauma. The detailed processing of particular individual remains that has been initiated implies the novelty of the materials and research potential (Makarova et al., 2012).

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