

RUSSIAN CULTURE – Ancient Period

Overview Archeological findings indicate that the roots of the early people in Russian territory go back to the distant past, the period of a primitive-communal system, and that the first humans came to Eastern Europe during the very early period of the Stone Age, approximately 700,000 years ago.

Stone Age: The earliest people of the Stone Age used natural formations such as caves and overhangs, like those found in the Crimea and the Dniester, as shelter from the elements. The tools used by the people who lived in these caves were generally made from flint and were very basic in design, requiring only a few strokes to make. These stone tools were then used to prepare wood and bone to create other tools and implements, such as sewing tools and bone projectiles for the sites at Uday and Desna.

Neanderthals were tool makers, but their tools, such as knives made of stone and some bone tools, are very primitive in their techniques. However, in the late Paleolithic period people began to process stone, bone and horn. Therefore, this period is also called the Bone Age. Among the artifacts found in this period are daggers, spears, harpoons and awls.

The oldest known sites of modern human habitation have been discovered in Kostenki, near Voronej, Zaraysk, in Moscow Oblast (both from the 45th-35th millennium BCE), and Sungir, near Vladimir (from the 25th millennium BCE). These people lived in shelters made of mammoth bones that were covered with skins, and most likely used other skins (such as fox, wolf and bear) for bedding. Such shelters were a major development from the earlier use of natural shelters such as caves. Another similar site excavated at Mezin, in the Ukraine, contained the most artifacts discovered from the Paleolithic Age.

This was also the period when the first modern human arts – sculpture and painting- flourished. The earliest examples of wall paintings and engravings found in caves depicted the animals they hunted: bison, mammoths, bears, horses, deer etc. There is also a female deity figurine found in the Kapova cave in Bashkortostan. Bracelets, beads and other ornaments made of bone and stone have also been discovered from this period.

In the Mesolithic era the European part of Russia was inhabited by people from the Kama (Volga-Kama) culture (5th-3rd millennium BC) who used bows and arrows as weapons. In the later stages of the transition to the sub-Neolithic periods, they began to learn how to make ceramics. Their economy was based on hunting and fishing.

The Neolithic Age tribes began to unite, forming the basis for the creation of ethnic groups. This period is characterized by the emergence of grinding and drilling tools made from stone. They attached handles to axes, made clay pottery, knitted nets to catch fish, and built boats. Another important invention was the wheel. It was used for both the potter's wheel, as well as creating a revolution in transportation.

Bronze age: During Bronze age there were tribes in the North Caucasus, Central Asia, the Urals and Siberia living near copper and tin deposits who began to use metals for their tools.

Iron Age: It was during the Iron Age that iron tools and weapons completely replaced stone ones, but ones of bronze can still be found in both the Cimmerian and Scythian periods. It was not until the late Iron Age that iron production in southern Russia became widespread.

The first people to live in the lands of Rus lived mostly by hunting game and practicing some agriculture. Since swamps and forests made up a large part of the land in which they settled, many areas were unsuitable for agriculture; to make a living the people hunted, kept bees, fished and trapped animals for

their fur. Agriculture was only possible after clearing the forests and then working the newly-created fields. However, the forests provided many of the East Slavic tribes' needs: timber was used to build houses, plates and other utensils were made from wood, and tree bark was used to make shoes and clothing.

Cultures:

Hunter-Gatherer Societies.

Grebenikian Culture. Evidence of settled hunter-gatherer societies has been found in the region between the Dnieper River and Carpathian Mountains which has been designated the Grebenikian culture (c. 6000 BCE). This culture survived by fishing, hunting mammoths, wild boar, deer, and birds, and gathering edible wild plants.

Kama (Volga-Kama) Culture. Named for the Kama River, a tributary of the Volga, evidence of this culture has been found in an area extending across the watershed of the Kama, Vyatka, and Ik-Belaya Rivers. The Kama culture existed from approximately 4200 – 2000 BCE in northeastern Europe and was a hunter-gatherer society that made pottery.

Agricultural Societies.

Bug-Dniester Culture. The Bug-Dniester culture became the successor to the Grebenikian culture at some point around the 6th millennium BCE. Inhabiting the region extending from southern Moldova to the Dniester and Southern Bug Rivers in Ukraine, people of the Bug-Dniester culture subsisted by hunting, foraging and agriculture. In addition to agriculture and domestic animals, this culture is characterized by its flint scrapers and axes, as well as its pottery which first appeared around 6200 BCE, spreading from around Lake Baikal to the middle Volga.

Cucuteni-Tripolye Culture. The Cucuteni-Tripolye culture (4800-3000 BCE) represents the first true agricultural community in the region between the Carpathian Mountains to the Dniester and Dnieper Rivers. Although they still hunted, they cleared extensive areas of forest for pastures and fields. Artifacts excavated from Cucuteni-Tripolye sites show influence from Linear Pottery cultures. Cucuteni-Tripolye culture settlements are larger and denser than previous cultures' settlements. Fields were worked by cattle-drawn plows, and the people of this culture used copper that was imported across great distances.

Pastoralist Societies.

Srednyi Stog-Khvalynsk Cultures. The Srednyi Stog culture (5th – 3rd millennia BCE) was a contemporary of the Khvalynsk culture and had links with their neighbors to the west, the agricultural Cucuteni-Tripolye culture. Found along the lower and middle Dnieper and the lower Donets, people of the Srednyi Stog survived by fishing, hunting, stockbreeding, agriculture and pastoralism. Indications of this culture's mobility can be found in evidence related to horse riding and the first steppe burial mounds. There are also indications that this culture occasionally practiced some form of nomadic pastoralism.

The contemporary Khvalynsk culture was found to the east of the Srednyi Stog culture. While traces of the Khvalynsk culture have been found in the middle Volga, it was centered between the Ural River in the east, the Sea of Azov in the west, the North Caucasus in the south and Saratov in the north. The central role of horses for transportation and warfare in Khvalynsk culture, and the fact that most artifacts from this culture come from burials rather than settlements has been cited as evidence that this was a highly mobile culture.

Yamna Culture (Pit-Grave Culture). Extending from eastern Ukraine up to the Urals as far as the estuary of the Danube River the Yamna (or Pit Grave) culture existed between the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BCE, a period that saw the transition from the Copper to the Bronze Age. Although remains of some hilltop forts and agricultural sites near rivers belonging to this culture have been found, it was a primarily nomadic culture.

The distinguishing characteristic of the Yamna culture is its practice of burial in pit graves covered by a kurgan. Bodies were placed on their sides with the knees bent and then covered with red ochre. Some kurgans were used for multiple burials, some done at a later time from the original burials.

The discovery of the remains of a wheeled cart in the “Storozhova mohyla” kurgan, a Yamna culture kurgan near Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine provided the earliest evidence of the use of wheeled carts in Eastern Europe.

Afanasevo Culture. The first identified culture after the diffusion of pastoralism into the Central Asian steppes and southern Siberia is the Afanasevo culture, which existed from 3500 to 2500 BCE and was centered in the Altai Mountains and Minusinsk Basin of southern Krasnoyarsk Krai. The people of the Afanasevo culture raised cattle, sheep and goats; horse bones have been found in Afanasevo sites, but it is unclear whether they belong to domestic or to wild horses. Afanasevo tools were manufactured from bone (fish hooks, spear points), antler, and stone (arrowheads, axes), and ornaments made of gold, silver and copper are frequently found in Afanasevo pit-grave burials.

Srubna and Andronovo Cultures. The forest-steppe and steppe region north of and between the Black and Caspian Seas was home to the Srubna culture. Srubna settlements are characterized by their partially subterranean one and two-roomed houses and burial grounds made up of between five and ten kurgans.

Between c. 2000-900 BCE the Andronovo culture was found in the region between the Yenisei River in the east and the southern Ural Mountains. The Andronovo culture included small village settlements in Central Asia as well as nomadic pastoralists, and is believed to be the culture of the prehistoric Indo-Iranian peoples.

The link between the Indo-Iranians and the Andronovo culture has been proposed on the basis of a number of factors: the existence of Iranian-based toponyms in the region in which the Andronovo culture has been found, the practice of nomadic pastoralism by both groups, and historical evidence from the first millennium BCE indicating the presence of Iranian-speaking tribes such as the Saka, Sarmatians and Alans in the region.

The Cimmerians descended from the sedentary Srubna (timber-grave) culture of the 2nd millennium BCE. Their economy was based on agriculture and livestock breeding. The Cimmerian culture of the southern Russia is also linked with the Transcaucasian culture of Gandzha-Karabakh. Scholars believe that the Sarmatians, too, descended from the Srubna culture in the Volga River region and the Andronovo culture (c. 2000–900 BCE) which developed in the southern Ural steppes and included the Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans.

Chernyakhov culture. The Chernyakhov culture (The Sântana de Mureș) appeared in the 2nd century CE and was centered in the forests and prairies between the Dnieper and Danube Rivers. This culture spread across Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, southern Poland and Romania between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE. The Chernyakhov culture included the Iranian-speaking Sarmatians. This culture's characteristics are its dense population and highly developed agricultural methods and crafts.

Three distinct types of Chernyakhov houses have been discovered: semi-subterranean dwellings, above ground houses made of wattle and daub, and stone structures. In the forested regions where the Chernyakhov culture existed, traces of walls built from posts, similar to those that would be constructed by later Slavic cultures, and dating from the latter period of the Chernyakhov culture have been found. Chernyakhov settlements typically have storage pits containing traces of different varieties of wheat and barley; clay ovens are also typical feature of their houses.

The Chernyakhov culture had commercial links with Rome and goods obtained from trade with Rome such as glass beads, coins, pottery, alabaster and amber have been found in Chernyakhov sites. Their dead were buried or cremated, with cremated remains found in both small pits and in urns. The custom of leaving grave-goods was widespread and included tools, ornaments, pottery, weapons and what appear to be food offerings.

Several different ethno-linguistic groups settled in the territory that was home to the Chernyakhov culture. One of the most important of these groups were the Iranian-speaking Sarmatians, who inhabited the steppe and forest-steppe zones of this region. Extremely mobile, the Sarmatians left burial mounds across the region and were the successors to the earlier Scythians, who were also Iranian-speakers. Another important element in the ethno-linguistic mix of the Chernyakhov culture came from the northern Przeworsk and Zarubintsy cultures, distinguished by their practice of cremating their dead. Some scholars believe that the Przeworsk and Zarubintsy cultures were early Slavic cultures. Whatever the exact ethno-linguistic composition of the Chernyakhov culture was, it is seen as a contact zone where the linguistic borrowings between Germanic peoples and Slavs, and Iranians and Slavs took place. The movements of the Huns into this region in the 4th and 5th centuries CE put an end to the Chernyakhov culture.

Discussion / Questions:

How important are the artifacts found in the Ancient Rus territory? Do these artifacts provide as much information as a written source? What can they tell us about the culture of early Rus?

Readings:

- 1- Chernykh, E., N., *Nomadic Culture in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World*, Academic Studies Press, 2017.
- 2- Grousset, R., *The Empire of the Steppes, A History of Central Asia*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1991, Ch. 1.
- 3- Dolukhanov, P.M., *The Early Slavs: Eastern Europe from the Initial Settlement to the Kievan Rus*, Routledge, 1996, Ch. 3,4.

VERBAL ARTS

Language

Indo-European people began to migrate to the west and east between 3500 - 2500 BC and began gradually to form dialect communities that separated from each other. The separation of the Proto-Balto-Slavic language spoken by Eastern Slavic tribes from other Indo-European languages was completed by c. 1500 BC. The Slavic tribes that settled in the east spoke a language called Proto-Slavic (or Common Slavic), a branch of Proto-Balto-Slavic. Later, the Eastern Slavs were separated from the Western and Southern Slavs by geographical barriers and each group developed their own spoken language with certain dialectical features.

Discussion / Questions:

How did the Ancient Rus' communicate?

What are the historical and socio-cultural factors that have played a role in the evolution of the Russian language?

Readings:

Birnbaum, H., "Common Slavic in time and space", *Scando-Slavica*, 44:1, 1998 pp.131-143.

Mythology

The pagan Russians worshipped the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water. It is possible to see traces of these beliefs in the one of the oldest manuscripts, *The Tale of Bygone Years*.

The Russians conducted their religious ceremonies, prayers and supplications in these forests and temples; in these ceremonies they rang bells and played trumpets wildly, and danced hopping and jumping. Sacrifices were offered during these ceremonies for the fulfillment of their prayers. Animal and human bones, skulls, vessels, coal and ashes have been found in archaeological excavations.

Discussion / Questions:

Describe the deities the pagan Russians worshiped that were absorbed into Christianity.
What sources provide us with information about Russian mythology?

Readings:

- 1- Blakey, Kate, "Early Russian Folk Epics", *The Slavonic Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Mar., 1923), pp. 525-532.
- 2-Simonov, P., *Russian Mythology*, Thorsons, London, 1997.
- 3-Warner, E., *Russian Myths*, The British Museum Press, 2002.
- 4-Ivanits, L., *Russian Folk Belief*, ME Sharp, Inc., 1989.
- 5-Kennedy, M.D., *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, ABC-CLIO Inc., 1998.
- 6-Bailey, J. and Ivanova, T., *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, ME Sharpe, Inc., 1998.

Folklore:

Paganism: Like most pagan peoples, the pre-Christian Rus' revered numerous gods and spirits, particularly the gods of the heavens, and prime among them was Perun, the god of thunder. Traces of old pagan beliefs and practices have survived up to the present in folklore and some folk traditions.

In addition to their own traditions, the folklore traditions of neighboring peoples such as the Finns, the non-Russian peoples of Siberia and nomadic Turkic tribes, have also influenced the Russians. Written works from the 11th through 14th centuries give evidence of the survival of folkloric traditions, although until the 18th century attitudes towards them were ambivalent.

Discussion / Questions:

Talk about the influence of the Pagan elements in contemporary Russian culture.

Readings:

Andreyev, N., "Pagan and Christian Elements in Old Russia" *Slavic Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Mar., 1962), pp. 16-23

VISUAL ARTS

Painting

Cave Paintings: The Kapova Cave paintings, dated to 12,500 BCE, are the oldest known stone age art in Russia. They depict various Ice Age mammals painted, in addition to abstract signs, pictograph, handprints and hand stencils all painted in red ochre. Near the town of Kislovodsk in the Caucasus red ochre cave painting dating to 3000 BCE have also been found.

Petroglyphs: Ancient petroglyphs have been discovered at a number of sites across Russia. Ones dating back 10,000 years in the Paleolithic period that depict bison, horses and other animals are found on the Ukok Plateau in the Altai Mountains. Petroglyphs from the Neolithic period have been found at Besov Nos in Karelia. These petroglyphs contain not only images of animals, but also individuals, activities such as swimming and skiing, battles, religious scenes and geometric shapes.

Petroglyphs from the late 2nd millennium BCE, in the transition period between the Stone and Bronze Ages, have been found on cliffs at Sagan-Zaba near Lake Baikal. The variety of animals - including deer and swans - depicted has led some scholars to interpret them as tribal totems. In addition, scenes of birth and death, daily life and hunting are also found. Images of a dancing horned man may represent a shaman performing a ritual dance.

Another group of petroglyphs, the Kanozero petroglyphs, dating from the 3rd – 2nd millennia BCE was discovered on Kamenny Island. In addition to the usual images of birds and animals, the petroglyphs also include images that have been interpreted as religious symbols, depictions of household items and typical activities, along with more enigmatic images such as bird of prey with five talons, a large shaman and a flying crane.

Discussion / Questions:

What did ancient people depict in cave paintings and petroglyphs? What was their purpose?

Readings:

Brentjes, B., "Rock Art in Russian Far East and in Siberia" <http://www.rupestre.net/tracce/?p=2065>
Prehistoric Russian camel painting could be 38,000 years old <https://www.rt.com/news/411435-kapova-cave-camel-painting/>

Sculpture

Paleolithic:

Venus of Zaraysk: Named after the site southeast of Moscow where it was discovered, this figure was found buried in a storage pit in next to a group of Kostenky-style hollowed out earth dwellings dating from the last Ice Age.

Venus of Kostienki: Carved from a mammoth tusk, this figure of a tall, pregnant, and possibly older woman, was discovered near Voronezh on the the west bank of the Don River.

Avdeevo venus: This work depicts adult women in differing stages of human reproduction and was discovered near Kursk, at Avdeevo on the Sejm River.

Bison Sculpture: One of the largest Ice Age sculptures ever discovered, this figure of a bison was carved from a mammoth tusk and tinted with red ochre.

Mesolithic Period:

Shigir Idol: Discovered in a peat bog in western Siberia near Yekaterinburg in the Middle Urals and radiocarbon dated to between 9500 and 11,000 years, the Shigir Idol is the oldest known wooden sculpture in the world.

Zbruchsky Idol: This three-meter tall, limestone statue was found near the town of Gusyatin on the Zbruch River. The statue was carved in a square column with three levels depicting from top to bottom the realm of the gods, the world of men and the underworld.

Discussion / Questions:

What were the purposes of sculptures for the ancient inhabitants of Russia?

Readings:

Rare and Enigmatic Zbruch Idol: 4-Headed Slavic God Pulled from a River
<https://www.ancient-origins.net/artifacts-other-artifacts/rare-and-enigmatic-zbruch-idol-4-headed-slavic-god-pulled-river-003794>

Architecture:

Stone Age:

Dolmens (Burial Chamber): In the north-western Caucasus archeologists found 3,000 megalithic monuments known as dolmens that date to between the end of the 4th millennium and the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE. The dolmens are built with huge stone blocks that look like tables and were supposedly used as burial tombs, however there is no solid evidence to support this theory.

Iron Age:

Kurgans (Tumuli): Scythian and Sarmatian tumulis, burial mounds built over log houses, have been discovered in the area of the Dnieper River, the Strait of Kerch, the Kuban River and the Don River in southern Russia. The tumuli discovered in the region are the Alexandropol (Lugovaya Mogila), Chertomlyk, the Royal Tumulus (Tsarsky kurgan), the Golden Tumulus (Zolotoy kurgan), the Tumuli of the Seven Borthers (Semibratskaya Mogila), Karagodeuashkh, Kelermes, Kostromskaya, as well as many others.

Discussion / Questions:

For what purpose were the Dolmens and Kurgans constructed?

Readings:

Earliest tomb of Scythian prince discovered in Tuva Republic, Russia

<https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2018/01/earliest-tomb-of-scythian-prince.html#pr5sB06SM716YHZf.97>

Dolmens of the Black Sea coast

https://www.rbth.com/arts/travel/2014/01/22/dolmens_of_the_black_sea_coast_32475

PERFORMING ARTS

Dance

Khorovod (Karagod, tanok, krug, ulitsa): This ancient folk dance originated as part of pagan rituals performed both to honor the sun god, Yaril, and to show repentance. The songs and the dances were slow with participants holding hands, generally in the middle of a circle created by three women.

Plyaska: Performed by one dancer, pairs, or numerous dancers, this folk dance is characterized by passionate movements, emphasizing the dancer's individuality. The music for this dance is a traditional instrumental form of music whose origins pre-date Kievan Rus.

Pereplyas: Performed in pairs, this dance takes the form of a competition with each dancer attempting to outdo the other through a display of skill, power and talent.

Discussion / Questions:

How did the Russian ancient folk dance originate?

Readings:

Tradition of Russian Folk Dance

http://russia-ic.com/culture_art/traditions/1523#.W2wYPLh9jIU

Theatre:

Pagan ceremonies in which tales, proverbs and fables were recited, together with the songs and dances of itinerant jesters, known as *skomorokhi*, laid the foundation for the development of Russian theater.

Discussion / Questions:

How and why did the Skomorokhi emerge?

Readings:

Zguta, R., "Skomorokhi: The Russian Minstrel-Entertainer", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Jun., 1972), pp. 297-313

WORLDVIEW

Religion

Paganism: Centuries ago tribes in Kievan Rus' believed in gods and spirits which they identified with the forests and meadows. Although very little information has survived about the religious customs of these tribes, we can learn about the religious beliefs and practices of one East Slavic tribe, the Rus, from priests' manuscripts, epics and some treaties signed with princes. The pagan Russians, as mentioned in *The Tale of Bygone Years*, worshipped the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water. The Russians conducted their ceremonies, and made their prayers and supplications in these forests and in shrines. During these ceremonies they played trumpets and rang bells in a wild, noisy fashion, and danced skipping and hopping. Sacrifices were made during these ceremonies to obtain from the gods what they had asked for. Animal and human bones, skulls, vessels, coals and ashes have been found in archaeological excavations. Human sacrifice in Russia continued up until the middle of the 16th century.

Discussion / Questions:

Since the pagan Rus had common beliefs, common myths and common rituals, and had a number of followers, can we consider paganism a religion?

Readings:

Andreyev, N., "Pagan and Christian Elements in Old Russia", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Mar., 1962), pp. 16-23.