

# Ancient Polotsk celebrates its 1150th anniversary

Polotsk celebrates 1150th anniversary — as the first city in Belarus and the capital of the first territorial state in the homeland of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya and Frantsisk Skorina

By Viktor Andrejev

On approaching the most ancient city from Minsk, you first notice the towers of St. Sophia's Cathedral, built a thousand years ago. More than a Christian relic, it symbolises a new age in our history, marking the appearance of written language and the foundations of contemporary culture. This began with chronicles and is now characterised by the age of the Internet.

Sophia, as local residents call the church, is also a symbol of Belarus' hardships. The church suffered in the 16th century: first from Ivan the Terrible and then from Stephen Báthory. Moreover, it was used as a powder depot by Peter I and as a warehouse by those fighting against religion in the 'enlightened' 20th century. In the decline of the Soviet era, the church was restored and a concert hall opened. The basements were cleared and fragments of the 11th century building were revealed (now part of an archaeological exhibition). All of Polotsk is a city-museum.

Walking along Nizhne-Pokrovskaya Street from St. Sophia's Cathedral, trees are blooming between the wooden houses. This part of the city appears much as it did in the 19th century — by some miracle. No prayers are heard in the stone Lutheran church, as it now houses a local history museum. However, it has survived, as has Epiphany Cathedral.

Ancient chambers with thick walls and compass windows are located near

the Orthodox church, housing a museum of book printing — the only one in the country.

Several years ago, Nizhne-Pokrovskaya Street bore the name Lenin Street while Frantsisk Skorina Avenue was Karl Marx Avenue. Polotsk has become one of the few Belarusian cities to take the quite logical step of renaming streets to reflect a more modern outlook. Few would argue against the move.

Polotsk is at the centre of Europe, as proven by Belaeokosmogeodesiya calculations. Its 12th century church, built at the instruction of St. Yevfrosiniya, remains intact. Yevfrosiniya's ancestors were the legendary dukes Rogvolod and Vladimir — the Baptiser of Rus. Moreover, she was the first saint in Rus. The church that she founded was painted in the 12th century by Byzantine masters: from floor to domes. Today, we can touch her relics and see 800 year old frescoes. It seems a miracle.

Is the fact that Frantsisk Skorina was born in Polotsk its only claim to fame? He printed our first book — The Bible. Several decades ago, a monument to the great man was unveiled in the centre of the city, opposite the Dvina Hotel. Now, Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, Vseslav the Magician, Andrey Olgerdovich and Simeon Polotsky are all commemorated in monuments. Other well-known local figures surely exist and I'm sure are unforgotten by local residents.

Polotsk is celebrating its 1150th birthday in grand style, having been first



Polotsk view, with St. Sophia Cathedral in the forefront



Monument-church to 1812 war heroes



Ancient and contemporary features of Polotsk

mentioned in chronicles all those years ago. "Probably, the city existed even earlier," muses Denis Duk, who heads the National and World History Department at Polotsk's State University. "Materials from digs seem to prove so."

"Polotsk's 1150th anniversary is a nationwide, as well as an international event," notes Alexander Poznyak, the Chairman of the Polotsk City Executive Committee, weighing the responsibility and honour of organising these festive

days. "The celebrations are based on three premises: Polotsk is a cradle of Belarusian statehood; it is a spiritual, enlightening and cultural centre; and is a contemporary European city. The programme includes concerts and fairs, as well as the international *History and Archaeology of Polotsk and Polotsk Land* scientific and practical conference, the *Masterpieces of World Art by the Walls of Ancient Sophia* Festival and the *Rubon Fest* of Medieval Culture."

The Mayor guarantees that there will be enough hotel beds and café seats for everyone, with guests able to stay in Polotsk and in neighbouring Novopolotsk. Last year, the pair were visited by 250,000 tourists and 55,000 pilgrims, but more could come. Soon, even more tourist infrastructure sites will appear.

Alexander Kosinets, the Chairman of the Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee, is setting goals for the future, saying, "The concept has been elaborated to develop infrastructure in the historical suburbs of the ancient city; investors should be attracted, enabling us to finish by 2015."

The concept will drastically change the outlook of Polotsk's old town. Archaeologists are to disclose buried buildings in the Upper Castle, around St. Sophia's Cathedral, while those above ground will be restored for public enjoyment. The Basilian Monastery, destroyed in the early 20th century, will be restored to become a centre of contemporary art and a solid wooden pedestrian

bridge is to appear — connecting the Upper Castle and Zapolotsky Posad (the merchant quarter).

Current celebrations aren't the culmination of works aiming to revive the magnificence of our first historical capital.

"In the course of time, Polotsk and Novopolotsk will become a single powerful administrative and territorial unit," forecasts Mr. Poznyak. "85,000 residents live in Polotsk and 105,000 reside in Novopolotsk, separated by just 7km; both cities are expanding and almost look into each other's windows."

Novopolotsk is a centre of oil processing, so is quite wealthy, while Polotsk is a centre of high culture. Finances and spirituality aren't contradictory; rather, their union guarantees the flourishing of a new megapolis. Could Yevfrosiniya have constructed churches and Skorina published books without funds?

Leaving Polotsk with a last glance at the tall Baroque style towers of St. Sophia's Cathedral and at the massive walls of the former Jesuit Collegium, restored from ruin and transformed into a contemporary university, I know for sure that I'll see a completely different city on my next visit — thanks to state funds. The issue isn't whether these 'contributions' will pay for themselves. Our 'Belarusian world' began from Polotsk, which laid the foundations of national statehood and spirituality. Each Belarusian should surely visit here before seeing the churches and museums of Vilnius, Kiev and Moscow.