

City in endless course of time

Belarus celebrates ancient Polotsk's 1150th anniversary

By Lyudmila Rublevskaya

If Kiev is the mother of all Russian cities, Polotsk can be boldly named the father of Belarus. No controversy is sought; people simply wish to honour our most ancient city — our legacy and pride.

Like most Belarusian cities, Polotsk has endured difficult and dramatic times. Despite waves of outlandish violence, like the Phoenix, Polotsk has always revived from the ruins. Its ancient churches over the Zapadnaya Dvina and Polota rivers have ever remained guiding stars for Belarusians over the endless course of time.

In recent years, the city has significantly improved its appearance. Lyudmila Rublevskaya and Vladimir Likhodedov ponder the correlation of the old and the new in the city, alongside the problems of developing this Belarusian 'old-timer'.

Have you ever realised that you're standing directly over the ruins of a 12th century monastery? Grass and asphalt are seen on the surface but, just below, are the remains of an ancient church — historical evidence from the past. It makes you feel quite strange. However, Polotsk residents daily walk here and are utterly aware of their city's significance.

Some Polotsk residents remember the old churches of their city first-hand. One such is famous collector and local historian Vladimir Likhodedov, who has written 11 books. In 2006, a permanent exhibition opened in the History and Philology Department of Polotsk State University, housed by the former Jesuit Collegium. The joint project by Mr. Likhodedov and SB-Belarus Segodnya newspaper represented the history of Polotsk through postcards and photos from Mr. Likhodedov's collections.

Polotsk is now celebrating its 1150th anniversary, marking the occasion by opening some new sites. These include a unique clock on the former Jesuit Collegium. Like only a handful in Europe, bronze figurines (of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya and other recognisable characters) appear at its window on the hour.



Polotsk. Vitebskaya Street, St. Nicholas' Cathedral and monument to heroes of 1812 Patriotic War

I've admired the city from one side of the Zapadnaya Dvina River, and from the island which once housed the Monastery of St. John the Baptist; a park is found there today, with a monument to those fallen in the Great Patriotic War. This unique view of the city is seen in many of the late 19th-early 20th century postcards in Mr. Likhodedov's collection. Changes to the skyline are especially obvious from here. St. Sophia's Cathedral in Polotsk still 'floats' magnificently over the Dvina River — like a white ship.

Of course, many legendary cities sadly fade, becoming no more than provincial settlements. Past landmarks of Belarusian and world history — Polotsk, Turov, Novogrudok and Krevo — are evidence of this, as I mention to Mr. Likhodedov as we stroll the streets.

L. R.: Why did Polotsk lose its status to such a degree? Was this historical necessity or the hand of fate? I know various stories but even the location was chosen favourably, on the bank of a navigable river...

V. L.: Polotsk was always independent, throughout its whole history. Even as part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania it boasted autonomy. Documents from those times show the name of Polotsk voivod beside the signature of the Grand Duke of Lithuania, in agreements signed with the Grand Duke of Moscow. Even the fact that Polotsk was one of the last Belarusian cities to receive the Magdeburg Right, in 1498, can be explained; it was a significant step for any city but a step backwards for Polotsk.

L. R.: The Magdeburg Right brought many privileges to the city, didn't it?

V.L.: Polotsk simply didn't need them, as it already had everything. Polotsk residents were proud of their city, writing that it was the equal of Vilno and Gdansk in magnificence. Of course, liberty always inspires envy and the desire to conquer. Moreover, no one liked the ancient family of Polotsk dukes, so the city began to lose its political importance. In 1772, after the first division of the Rzecz Pos-

polita, in the times of Yekaterina II, Polotsk became a centre of Polotsk Vicegerency. It then became Polotsk Province and gained its own mint. However, after Yekaterina's death, the city was immediately transformed into an ordinary district town and the Polotsk eparchy moved to Vitebsk. In my opinion, those in power were afraid of Polotsk's strength.

L. R.: The open foundations of ancient buildings are among the top tourist sites in many cities — such as Bulgarian Nessebar.

V. L.: I have photos of the churches of St. Boris and Hleb and Pyatnitsa. Meanwhile, the Monastery of St. Boris and Hleb is of no less importance than St. Sophia's Cathedral and the Polotsk Saviour Monastery of St. Yevfrosiniya. Of course, it's difficult to restore the former Jesuit Church of St. Stephen (St. Nicholas' Cathedral) as a big house would need to be demolished. However, even this is possible!



St. Nicholas' Cathedral on festive day. Early 20th century

Polotsk library is thought to be buried.

V. L.: When we were children, we looked for those dungeons. There were once various entrances: from under the Epiphany Monastery, above the Dvina River and from under the Jesuit Collegium and the Saviour Monastery of St. Yevfrosiniya. However, all have collapsed.

L. R.: What about Polotsk's library?

V. L.: When Ivan the Terrible 'took' Polotsk in 1563, he said that the city's greatest treasure was its library. Some say that he took many editions away

with him. This would mean that his famous unfound library includes Polotsk books. In 1579, Stephen Bathory 'took' Polotsk and again discovered a unique library. I say 'took' because I believe the city to be free: it cannot be owned by anyone. Academician Shchapov mentions that the Jagiellon library includes some ancient books from Polotsk, so it's likely that Bathory also removed some editions. The library moved to the Jesuit Collegium and some books found their way to Kiev and Moscow.

L. R.: Polotsk is also remarkable in the number of characters who have become symbols of Belarus: Rogneda and Rogvolod, Vseslav the Magician, Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, Frantsisk Skorina and Simeon Polotsky. There are also less familiar legends — such as those regarding the dungeons of Waclaw Lastowski, where the famous

L. R.: I'd like to believe that the Polotsk dungeons hold unique books, as well as other relics.

V. L.: I'd also like to believe that artefacts will be found which are even older than the Cross of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya. These may throw light on the earlier period of Polotsk's existence.

L. R.: You've written many times that Polotsk is much older than officially recognised.

V. L.: I'm sure of it! Archaeologists have found 5th century items here and some Icelandic sagas mention Polotsk and its stone walls. They tell of Attila's commander taking Polotsk in the 5th century! Even if this is a legend, why not use it? Yes, we count Polotsk's age from the first chronicle mention — in 862. However, Polotsk had been a powerful city before this.

We continue chatting about Polotsk in the History and Philology Department of Polotsk State University, where famous historian and archaeologist Denis Duk, who heads the department, joins our musings.

L. R.: Do you agree with Vladimir Likhodedov's theories regarding the significance of ancient Polotsk and its existence in the 5th century?

D. D.: Archaeology is an exact science. If written sources aren't proven by findings, we should doubt them. The most vital thing is that we've proven chronicle data regarding Polotsk's age. The second important

discovery is that we know that Polotsk was far larger in the 12th century than previously believed. It was one of the largest cities in Europe, rivalling Kiev's square. It considerably outstripped Novgorod. In the 11th century, our city covered 180 hectares. Moreover, we've refuted the opinion that Polotsk declined in the 18th century.

V. L.: Yet the political role of Polotsk faded?

D. D.: Yes, but it remained a sacred and cultural centre. In the second half of the 18th century, Polotsk occupied 250 hectares. According to censuses, there were almost 3,000 residents and we've proven that there were at least 10,000. It was only during the second half of the 18th century that the stone buildings of the Jesuit Collegium and St. Nicholas' Cathedral were built. St. Sophia's Cathedral was restored and the stone Bernardine Monastery was constructed, alongside Franciscan and Dominican monasteries and the Epiphany Church. These works were funded by the state treasury while the Epiphany Church was paid for by Polotsk's bourgeois.

V. L.: Doesn't the construction of churches prove that the city was highly developed from an economic point of view?

D. D.: At that time, even the Jesuit Collegium had many workshops where various professions were taught: from plastering and carpentry to painting and architecture. In the 16-18th century, Polotsk's population expanded, with people arriving from its suburbs. Their shared surnames (from the names of neighbouring villages) show their similarities.

L. R.: The presence of a town hall indicated that a city had the Magdeburg Right.

D. D.: This is another finding. Until recent times, even the presence of a town hall was unknown. We discovered its depiction on a mid-18th century icon of St. Nicholas, from St. Sophia's Cathedral. The town hall has three floors and was located in Veliky Posad (the Great Trading Quarter).

The city is graced with posters bearing many images from Vladimir Likhodedov's postcards; ancient Polotsk looks down upon us, showing the magnificence of its churches.