

# Viking treasure discovered in Berezina River

Treasures from Rurik age unearthed near Belarusian Borisov, where 1812 battles took place

By Viktor Andreev

In 1812, Russian troops blocked the retreat of Napoleon's army near the Belarusian town of Borisov, at Brilevsky Field. Many years later, ethnographers wrote legends told by local residents of French treasures sent to the river bed and lost in the field. For many years, such stories were seen as nothing but fancy. However, evidence has now been found of treasures — although they appear to date from the time of the Vikings.

The Brilevsky treasure was discovered in 2000 and has been on show to the public at the National History Museum of Belarus. The hoard includes over 290 silver dirhams (Arab coins), 10 small weights, a fragment of a silver neck grivna (a torque necklace) and a sword. This arouses questions among archaeologists and numismatists alike; neither can immediately provide answers.

Nobody imagined that findings from over a millennium ago would be discovered in Brilevsky Field. Initially, Mr. S. Zakharov, an artist and restorer at the Belarusian State Museum of Great Patriotic War History, discovered sword fragments which he thought dated from the battle of

1812. However, he later realised that the sword must date from another epoch entirely. He returned to the bank of the Berezina River and unearthed a whole treasure hoard, with coins merely scattered along the edges of the river's sand!

Soon, a team of archaeologists arrived, headed by Oleg Iov of the

National Academy of Sciences' History Institute. Belarusian State University professor Valentin Ryabtsevich joined the team and immediately understood that more treasure was to be found. A 'black digger' had already sold 25 coins to the state, found in Brilevsky Field.

Andrey Prokhorov, Deputy Dean of the Belarusian State University's History Department and Mr. Ryabtsevich's colleague,



Part of Brilevsky treasure kept at National History Museum

believes that the most important issue is not the number of discovered coins (although this is impressive) but the fact that these are now available to the whole world. The dirhams have been exhibited at the museum and published in a

special catalogue in Belarusian and Russian.

Curiously, the finding may change our ideas regarding Belarus' past. Coins from the treasure were minted from 742 to 891: the time of the Old Russian state being created and the 'inviting of the Varangians'.

These were Scandinavian

merchants and warriors, who comprised the elite of the local ruling Rus class during the first centuries of its existence. They controlled the waterways crossing contemporary Belarus and Eastern Europe. Scientists connect the appearance of coins on the bank of the Berezina River with the expansion of the Varangians. The sword, supposedly created in a German workshop from the Rhine River, also testifies to Viking origin. Arabs were actively trading with the whole Ecumene, so their currency — dirhams — was widespread. These coins were greatly appreciated for containing a high content of silver alloy and were exchanged by weight, like pure metal, rather than using an exchange rate.

The treasure was declared on the eve of Polotsk's 1150th anniversary; Belarus' oldest city is thought to have been founded in 862 by Varangian merchants and warriors as a centre of tax collection from neighbouring tribes. Sergey Tarasov, who has spent many years researching Polotsk, believes that the treasure proves that Belarusian lands were long part of major trading routes and accompanying culture, crossed by Varangians and Arabs. Sadly, this also resulted in periodic conflict.



Participants of military-historical reconstruction club gather to recreate 1812 events on Berezina River

## Observatory from the past reminds of Struve Arc

By Fiodor Mukha

Remains of Struve Arc geodesic point unearthed in Drogichin District

The dig was conducted in the village of Belin, by specialists from Belaerokosmogodesiya and Credo-Dialogue joint venture. In the 1820s, a geodesic point was located there, in addition to an astronomic observatory.

The Struve Geodetic Arc is among Belarus' UNESCO World Heritage List sites. Created in the 19th century by famous Russian geodesist and astronomer Vasily Struve, it enabled him to

calculate the length of the terrestrial meridian. The Struve Arc is a chain of 265 geodesic points, stretching from Norway to the Black Sea, with 31 crossing Belarus' western part; about twenty have so far been discovered. The Drogichin find supplements this figure, hinting at where researchers might find other mini-observatories.

The Struve Arc passed through ten states but the most points have been preserved in Belarus. These differ in shape and size — varying from a pyramid of cobblestones to a granite cube (laid into the ground) and an iron cross.



Struve Arc mark

## New excursion route to show foreigners 'road to churches'

By Andrey Fillipov

New excursion route for Minsk

The route is devoted to the history of religious confessional development in Belarus and includes visits to St. Peter and Paul's Cathedral, Maria

Magdalena Church, a synagogue, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church, St. Yevfrosiniya's Church, St. Simon and St. Helen's Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Spirit Cathedral's St. Roch Roman Catholic Church.

"The route will be inter-

esting for believers and those keen on Belarusian history," stresses the Minsk Information and Tourist Centre's Director, Yelena Plis. "Minsk is a city where people of different religions live in peace and harmony, so this excursion route is well-grounded."

## Military rarity occupies worthy place among old war machinery

By Olga Kobyakova

Self-propelled artillery vehicle supplements exhibition of military machinery at Brest Fortress-Hero Memorial Complex

The Red Army acquired

strong ISU-152 self-propelled artillery vehicles in November 1943, for use by independent heavy self-propelled regiments. 'Deerslayers' — as these machines were called by soldiers — made the Fascists' 'tigers' and 'panthers' recede, as their

strong armour enabled them to approach positions inaccessible to towed artillery, firing over the sights. Their 152mm calibre shells easily broke through enemy tanks, and proved useful during the battles for the cities of Königsberg and Berlin.