

Fortress

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Medieval Russian Fortresses AD 862–1480



Konstantin S Nossov • Illustrated by Peter Dennis



KONSTANTIN S. NOSSOV was born in 1972. A graduate of Moscow State University, he is a researcher in ancient and medieval military history, as well as author of a number of books published in Russian. He has also written a number of English-language magazine articles.



PETER DENNIS was born in 1950. Inspired by contemporary magazines such as *Look and Learn*, he studied illustration at Liverpool Art College. Peter has since contributed to hundreds of books, predominantly on historical subjects. He is a keen wargamer and modelmaker. He is based in Nottinghamshire, UK.

Fortress • 61

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Peter Dennis
Fieldhead
The Park
Mansfield
Nottinghamshire
NG18 2AT
UK
(email: magie.h@ntlworld.com)

The Publishers regret that they can enter into no correspondence upon this matter.

The Fortress Study Group (FSG)

The object of the FSG is to advance the education of the public in the study of all aspects of fortifications and their armaments, especially works constructed to mount or resist artillery. The FSG holds an annual conference in September over a long weekend with visits and evening lectures, an annual tour abroad lasting about eight days, and an annual Members' Day.

The FSG journal *FORT* is published annually, and its newsletter *Casemate* is published three times a year. Membership is international. For further details, please contact:

The Secretary, c/o 6 Lanark Place, London W9 1BS, UK
website: www.fsgfort.com

Contents

Introduction	4
Chronology	7
The principles of defence	9
The types of fortified settlement • The layout of fortified settlements • General trends and territorial differences The Zmievy Valy (Snake Ramparts)	
Design and development	22
Ramparts • Ditches • Walls • Gates • Towers • Methods of construction	
A tour of the sites	35
Truvor's <i>gorodishche</i> and Izborsk fortress • Porkhov fortress • Pskov	
The living sites	41
The sites at war	46
Aftermath	53
The sites today	55
Bibliography and further reading	60
Glossary	62
Index	64

Introduction

According to the historical annals, in the year AD 862 Slav tribes called upon Varangian princes to come and rule over them. Three Varangian princes (whose names were Rurik, Sineus, and Truvor) arrived in Rus', bringing their troops along with them. Rurik settled in Novgorod, Sineus in Beloozero, and Truvor chose Izborsk (hence the name of the first fortified settlement in Izborsk – Truvor's *gorodishche*). The date indicated in the chronicle has, however, been recently called into question and the above developments are believed to have occurred somewhat earlier.

After the death of these princes, Prince Oleg, the guardian of Rurik's son Igor, seized Kiev and made it his capital, thus uniting the north Russian (Novgorodian) and south Russian (Kievan) lands. This event, which marked the birth of an early feudal state known as Kievan Rus', took place in 882. Prince Oleg and his successors carried out the policy of subjugation and the bringing together of various tribes; they launched several campaigns against Constantinople as well. This contact with the fortifications of Constantinople, which were among the strongest at the time, did not, however, have any visible impact on the evolution of Russian fortifications. As a result of the policy of expansion the territory of Kievan Rus' was considerably enlarged: in the 10th century it extended as far as the steppes off the banks of the Dnieper to the south of Kiev, and the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga to the north.

The 11th century saw the beginning of feudal relationships in Rus', which were further consolidated towards the end of the century. Kievan Rus' as a political entity gradually disintegrated, breaking down into separate minor principalities. By the 13th century feudal disintegration had reached its apogee. The lack of unity between the princes made Rus' fair game for Mongol invaders, who

The Pskov *krom* (citadel) viewed across the River Pskova where the latter flows into the River Velikaya. The *krom* sits on the promontory at the confluence of the two rivers.



captured most of its territory including Kiev. Most Russian principalities found themselves as tributaries to the Golden Horde.

The territory of the feudal principalities of that time can be divided into four large regions: south Rus' (the lands in the area of the mid-section of the River Dnieper); west Rus' (the Galich and Volhynia principalities); north-west Rus' (the Novgorod and Pskov lands); and north-east Rus' (the principalities of Vladimir and Suzdal). The territories of south Rus' and north-east Rus' were devastated by the Mongols, and the building of fortifications would cease for several centuries to come. The principalities of west and north-west Rus' fared better, and it is here that we can perceive the main tendencies in the further evolution of fortifications in Rus'.

The Mongol armies used advanced siege weapons and standard siege methods learnt in the course of their wars in Central Asia and China. It was in this way that the Russians became acquainted with Eastern siege warfare. At the same time both the fortifications and siege weapons of the north-western part of Rus' evolved, in the midst of frequent armed conflicts with German, Swedish, and Lithuanian armies throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. It was here that the Russians became acquainted with European methods of siege warfare.

The beginning of the 14th century saw the rise and growth of the Moscow principality, at the expense of nearby principalities. In 1328 Prince Ivan Kalita of Moscow obtained dispensation from the Golden Horde attesting his right to rule as the 'Great Prince'. The Moscow principality now formed the political centre of all the Russian principalities – a status previously enjoyed by Vladimir. From that time on, the title of 'Great Prince' was held by Moscow princes only.

A wall and the Malaya Tower of Porkhov fortress. The wall is topped with broad, rectangular merlons but lacks loopholes. The space beneath the wall was commanded through the loopholes of the tower. The square apertures are put-log holes, which supported duckboards during the construction of the fortress.