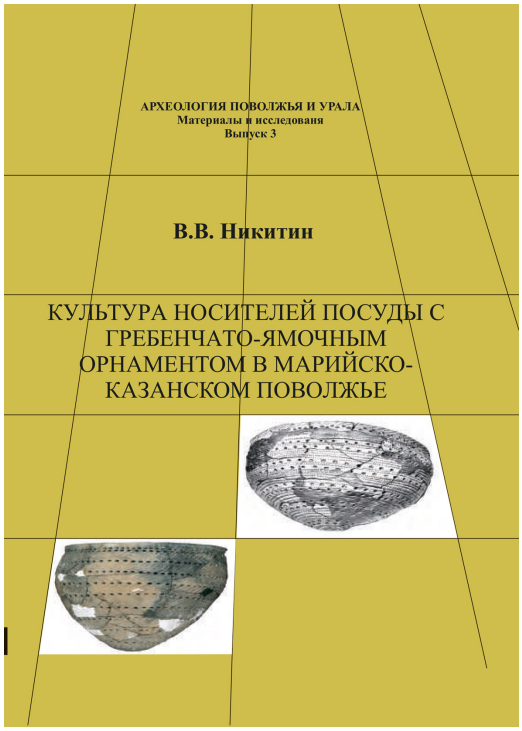
Valeriy V. Nikitin: *Культура носителей посуды с гребенчато-ямочным орнаментом в Марийско-Казанском Поволжье* ('Culture of the Comb-Pit ceramics bearers in the Mari-Kazan Volga River region'). Arkheologiya Povolzh'ya i Urala, Materialy i issledovaniya, Vypusk 3. Kazanskaya nedvizhimost', Kazan 2015. ISBN 978-5-9907552-4-6. 361 pp.



Pit-Comb Ware occupies an extensive forest area from Finland in the west to the northern Urals and the middle reaches of the Volga River in the east. Settlements of this culture in Russia are considered to be quite well studied and therefore do not attract much attention of researchers. However, only two monographs have been published over the years, one of which will be discussed in our review.

The monograph by V.V. Nikitin is dedicated to the 85th anniversary of A.Kh. Khalikov, who was one of the founders of the research of Pit-Comb Ware in the Middle Volga region. Materials of Khalikov are widely used in the book, and according to the original plan, the monograph was supposed to be co-authored with him, which affects its contents. In the memory of Khalikov, Nikitin retains the name 'settlements of the Balakhna Culture', even if in a previous work he concludes that the early materials are similar to the Lyalovo Culture and only at a later stage did the Balakhna Culture prevail (Nikitin 2004: 241–6). In our opinion, it is not important what features – Lyalovo or Balakhna – are more pronounced in the settlement site materials of the Middle Volga. All of them have a common origin, which is associated with the spread of Pit-Comb Ware tradition to the east, along the Oka and Volga Rivers. Accordingly, the Balakhna settlements of the Lower Oka were a link between the Lyalovo sites of the Volga-Oka interfluve and the settlements of the Middle Volga region, and illustrate the primal archaeological continuity of the culture. All early Pit-Comb Ware sites of the Russian Plain share an undoubted unity, and cannot be divided into cultures or local variants. These materials illustrate the relatively rapid spread of new pottery traditions in the forest zone. Therefore, it is still impossible to pinpoint the territory in which the making of Pit-Comb Ware was established. Local differences between the settlements of different regions appear later, which, apparently, is explained by the transition to a more sedentary way of life. Reduced mobility delimited the number of contacts and increased relative isolation, further contributing to differences between individual groups.

Contrary to the opinion of Nikitin, the late Pit-Comb ceramics of the Middle Volga region are far from identical to the vessels of the Balakhna Culture. On the late Balakhna pottery, as well as on Lyalovo ceramics, a change in the ornamentation system occurs. The main element of the ornament is a shallow pit with a flat bottom, which is not typical for the Middle Volga settlements, where such vessels are present only occasionally. Its appearance is the result of contacts with the population of the Oka River basin, where this pottery prevails at a late

stage. The development of Pit-Comb Ware in the Middle Volga region is different compared to the Lyalovo and Balakhna Cultures. Therefore, the concept of V.P. Tret'yakov, who singled out a special Middle Volga variant of the Pit-Comb Ware (Tret'yakov 1972), is more substantiated. Furthermore, an undoubted cultural and chronological unity exists among such sites in the Sura River basin, which is confirmed by the technological analysis of pottery and the close similarity between the ornamental compositions (Vybornov & Kondrat'ev 2009; Stavitsky 2013).

Nikitin's monograph consists of two approximately equal parts. In the first part, general issues of the research history, topography, chronology and periodization of the Pit-Comb Ware sites are considered, and generalised descriptions of dwellings, pottery and flint inventory are given. This part of the book is essentially an extended reprint of the section on Comb-Pit pottery from Nikitin's earlier monograph on the Stone Age of the Mari territory (Nikitin 1996: 48–75). The author has made only minimal stylistic corrections in the text of the paragraphs 'Research history', 'Topography and planigraphy of the settlements', 'Buildings', 'Stone industry', 'Pottery', 'Stages of development and dating'. Apparently, he believes that the conclusions made twenty years ago are still relevant. At the same time, the periodization of the culture of Pit-Comb Ware of the Volga-Oka interfluve, with which Nikitin connects the origin of settlements of the Middle Volga region, is completely revised.

A number of refinements to the periodization of settlements are given in the following section, 'Stages of development and chronology according to the latest data'. New data on radiocarbon chronology is also added here. Significant changes are also included in the section 'Cultural and ethnic affiliation of settlements with Comb-Pit Ware', where the author presents a detailed argumentation in favour of the Finno-Ugric affiliation of the Comb-Pit Ware populations. His conclusions are based on the coincidental overlap of 'the sphere of influence of the Comb-Pit Ware tribes' and the area of Volga-Oka and Karelian toponyms with an ending in 'ma', 'ha' and 'sha'. In his opinion, during the Eneolithic, this cultural and linguistic community breaks down into separate cultures that are united by the tradition of making organic-tempered potteries. Later, this Finnish line of development continues in the Middle Volga in the cultures of the Bronze Age, Prikazan, Pozdnyakovo and Chirkovo, and then through the cultures of Ananino-Gorodets-Dyakovo type – in Murom, Mordvinians, Mari and Komi. However, the question of continuity is still debatable at the level of any of these links – including even the most recent ones (Stavitsky 2017). There is also no reliable evidence that these toponyms originate in the Neolithic and not appear in the Middle Ages, when the territory under question was inhabited by Finnish-speaking tribes.

Nikitin distinguishes three stages in the development of Pit-Comb Ware of the Middle Volga region. On this basis, he lays down the principles concerning the topographic location of settlements, the presence and absence of organic admixture in pottery, the presence of collars and bulges on the necks of the vessels and changes in ornamentation. Settlements of the early period are located very low by floodplains, on dunes and terraces, 1–3 m above the water level. They are characterised by egg-shaped and straight-walled vessels with weakly formed neck, rounded or pointed bottom, and chamotte or (coarse) sand temper. Decoration on the pots is dense and strictly horizontal: zones of comb stamp impressions alternate with single or double rows of round conical pits. The main ornamental motifs are the rows of diagonal comb stamps between the rows of round pits, and the alternating rows of horizontal comb stamp lines and round pits. Horizontal comb stamp zigzags with pits on the apex, oblique comb stamp lattices, and parallel rows of pits connected with comb stamps are also characteristic to these pots.

The settlements of the developed stage are found on terraces or dunes 6–8 m high. The number of buildings at the settlements increases at this stage. The pithouses are built in rectangular pits and have a gable roof supported by post construction. Buildings connected by passages are also known. The number of cutting tools decreases, whereas quartzite becomes more common raw material and the selection of woodworking tools diversifies. Vessels with elongated egg-shape and organic and chamotte temper predominate the assemblages. Zigzags, rhombuses and grids with pits are rarely used in decoration. Protruding bulges or collars are common at the

necks and seen to reflect the influence of forest-steppe settlements of S'ezzheskaya type. However, the settlement sites in the Mari territory lack tools made of large plates that are characteristic of the forest-steppe Eneolithic. No Eneolithic settlements of Samara Culture are known here either. All this leaves open the question of the possible interaction between the bearers of these traditions.

Nikitin considers the collar-like thickenings to be attributes of the developed stage, but it would be necessary to confirm this with radiocarbon datings. However, there are no dates for settlements of this type in Mari. In the neighbouring regions, datings exist from the Mysy site on the Vyatka River, the Russian Azibey site on the Ik River and the Nepryakha VI site on the Kama River. Judging by these dates, the sites date to the interval of 4500–4300 calBC – in this case, the settlements are not of a developed, but of a late stage.

At the final stage, according to the observations of Nikitin, settlements are moved to terraces and capes up to 20 m high. Rounded, low vessels with bent neck prevail; admixture is usually chamotte and organic matter, preferably crushed shell. Loosely applied pits in horizontal rows, diagonal and vertical festoons, combinations of pits and comb stamps, oval, elongated and flat and finger-impressions are present in ornamentation, collars disappear.

Changes in the stone industry are less clearly traced. This is because there are very few settlements with a homogeneous cultural layer consisting only of Pit-Comb Ware. Nikitin considers the ninth structure at the Dubovskoe VIII site to be one of them. However, the material includes a large number of blade cores, various burins, arrowheads on blades, various points and a significant number of blades, all which are more typical of the Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic. The second settlement, Dubovskoe XII, is represented by limited stone inventory. This complicates the full characterisation of the settlement: flake scrapers are not standardised, typical arrowheads and knives are missing, burins have random shapes and there are no proper axes, adzes or chisels.

The second part of the monograph is an appendix in which excavated materials are described for each site. It briefly describes the research history of each site and the results of their research. The description of the materials is illustrated with 136 drawings and 20 photographs. Unfortunately, the material is not presented in a systematic way. First, a description of excavated sites is given, grouped by the year of research, and then other materials are described. This is not convenient for the reader, because in order to find material from a desired settlement, one needs to go through the entire section. For a number of settlements, there is information about the size of the excavated area, stratigraphy, hypsometric marks, etc. – but for others not.

Despite the noted shortcomings, this part of the work is the most important one. It is the first full-length publication of materials on settlements with Pit-Comb Ware of such a vast region in Russia. Therefore, the present book allows us to verify the previous conclusions as well. For example, it becomes clear that the hypsometric marks of the settlements do not always correspond to their place Nikitin's periodization. The settlements Dubovskoe VIII and IX, associated with the late period, are situated quite low (c 3–5 m above the water level), whereas the Otary V of the developed stage occupies a cape 25 m high. Furthermore, judging by the published illustrations, pottery complexes of different stages look quite homogeneous. All this, in addition to the weakly differentiated nature of the radiocarbon dates of the Pit-Comb Ware settlements of the Sura River and the Middle Volga, testifies in favour of Tret'yakov's assumption that the Middle Volga settlements belong just to one chronological period (Tret'yakov 1972). An important part of the monograph is the publication of vessels originating from a number of sites that combine pits and triangular impressions or pricks. They testify to the contacts of the bearers of these two traditions. This allows us to conclude that representatives of the culture with Pricked Ware existed not only in the first half of the 6th millennium calBC, but lived to see the emergence of Pit-Comb Ware, that is, to c 5000 calBC.

These remarks made above do not detract from the importance of the reviewed monograph. This publication takes understanding of the sources and problems of studying the Pit-Comb Ware of the Russian Plain to a new level.

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