

Bohai State: Archeology, History, Politics

by Olga V. Dyakova

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The history and culture of Bohai, a medieval East Asian state, continues to excite the minds of Russian historians and remains the object of active research. In its current stage, the historical reconstruction of Bohai State is characterized by an international collaboration of scientists. Russian scholars have cooperated with Korean and Japanese colleagues, taking part in the collective excavations of historical artifacts in the Russian Primorye district.

A new monograph by Professor Olga Dyakova is devoted to the complex study of the archeology and history of the first Tungus Bohai State (698-926), a Far Eastern, multi-ethnic, medieval state. The work examines all archeological sites of Bohai State identified to date, located in Northeast China, the Russian Far East and North Korea. As well, it includes analyses of ethnic, national and cultural written sources, as well

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as literary works by Bohai poets and writers. A composite of these materials provides the foundation for Dyakova's research.

Of particular value in this work is a special methodological section on the development of common criteria for the identification of archeological sites of Bohai culture, isolating them with respect to numerous other medieval sites. Employing her own criteria for determining Bohai monuments, Dyakova investigated more than three hundred archeological sites located in adjacent territories of three countries - China, North Korea and Russia. She developed a classification of archeological materials in terms of indigenous (ethnic) and inter-im-government (landmark) characteristics, thereby creating a systematic catalog of Bohai monuments (p. 32).

Materials demonstrating aboriginal (ethnic) characteristics included molded ceramics marked as "Mokhesky-type dishes" with traditional technical and technological characteristics, forms and decor, as well as Amur-type openwork belts and combined earrings (bronze ring with a stone disc or a coin). Bohai's public signs are represented by circular ceramics, fortifications such as a stone fortress built with "cementless technology," stone and earth ramparts and square mounds. All architecture copied from T'ang China contains religious artifacts with Buddhist symbols. Landmark signs include circular gray-clay pottery of various forms, which imitated the ceramic styles of T'ang China. This series of features is typical for the initial period of Bohai State artifacts, most often appearing in the territory of the Russian Far East and Northeast China. Due to these features, materials can be identified as Koguryo origin in the Mokheskiy cultural formation and differentiated from Mokheskiy pre-state and Bohai State monuments.

The research presents a single set of Bohai archeological sites documented on maps featuring terrain and location. Identified Bohai monuments allow one to accurately determine the boundaries of the Bohai State, the history of the formation of its ethnic composition and the role of each ethnic group in its development (pp. 214-238). The

author indicates that the location of the Bohai State lay between the Amur River in the North to the Bohai Bay in the South and the East Sea in the East.

Identifying a set of sources and analyzing the contents allows Dyakova to conclude that the indigenous population of Bohai state was composed of Tungus, Manchu, and Sumo Mokhe tribes, who founded the state in 698. Modern Manchu and Tungusic peoples of Russia and China are the descendants of Sumo Mokhe tribes.

The study fails, however, to confirm the suggestion that some Koguryo people (ancestors of Koreans) were assimilated by the Bohai peoples. According to archeological and written sources, some Koguryo people were engaged in the pottery industry. They were specialists, who erected stone fortresses using cementless technology along the borders, and built land routes along the seaside. Koguryo people also were soldiers and administrative officials in Bohai State (pp. 231-238).

The Chinese people lived in Bohai State, as well. Their presence is reflected in architecture imitating that of T'ang China as well as the internal structure of settlements, which may indicate ancient city squares and gray-clay dishes of different forms. Probably, Chinese people were involved as managers because they had relevant experience and were literate. Education was necessary for all young Bohai men as without education one did not have the right to marry.

According to Dyakova, the social status of Korean and Chinese people did not extend beyond professions related to handicrafts, agriculture, construction, and officials (p. 293). That is, they belonged to the service class and were not among Bohai nobles. Probably this was the main reason why the indigenous population (Sumo Mokhe ethnic groups) did not assimilate newcomers.

The presence of the Chinese population in Bohai State and close trade contacts with China prompts some European researchers to claim that this state was a Chinese protectorate. However, Dyakova does not share this view, insisting on the idea that Bohai State was independent (p.

237), pursuing an independent foreign policy and having equal diplomatic ties with the Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, and Silla peoples.

Dyakova's discovery of archeological traces of Indo-European traditions (ornamented circular gray-clay pottery and funerary paraphernalia in the form of burial mounds) translated to the medieval Tungus-Manchus via Turkish people (p. 239-244) was of particular note. At present, this phenomenon is actively debated among Russian archaeologists. This controversy may lead to an important historical reconstruction that adds nuances to the discussion of the ethnic and cultural genesis of Bohai State.

Another important part of the monograph is its treatment of the problem of identifying the road transport system as well as the organizational logic in the mountainous area and along the coast. Based on materials from her extensive research expeditions, Dyakova was able to identify the archeological features of the land and sea roads, the length of which amounted to more than 700km along the coastline of Primorye (contemporary Russian Far Eastern territory). Archeological sites show that during the Middle Ages the coast along the East Sea functioned as a busy trade route, controlled and guarded by special units stationed in stone fortresses. According to written sources, we know that Bohai embassies actively visited Japan, with such instances recorded more than 140 times. Bohai people maintained lively trade contacts with China, having there inns and, in the case of offenses and injustices, even engaging in armed attacks on Chinese ports and ships.

Chinese influence was manifest in the state-administrative apparatus, the formation of diplomacy and literary creativity. These issues are discussed in the chapter entitled "Historical and cultural aspects of Bohai State" (pp. 257-275). Dyakova conducts a comparative analysis of a number of works by Bohai Chinese authors and reveals some interesting facts regarding the intertwining of the cultures of the two countries.

The chapter on the historical fate of Bohai State is also especially

significant. Dyakova is the first Russian archaeologist to highlight the monuments related to the post-Bohai period, concluding that a portion of the Bohai administration continued to function even after the state's defeat in 926. Identification of artifacts from late Bohai period monuments does not allow for such a variant of historical events.

In general, Dyakova's monograph is a valuable historical work that introduces the scientific systematization of Bohai's archeological sites, presents an exhaustive classification of materials, defines types of settlements, delineates its borders, and traces its ethnic and cultural genesis and historical fate. The book also includes color illustrations and maps of Bohai monuments, which increases visibility and helps one to understand the role and place of Bohai State in the history of East Asia.