

Final Report: “Excavating Empire: Archeology
And the ‘All-Russian Idea,’ 1846-1914”

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Research Abstract

My current project explores the role of archeology in brokering the competing visions of “nationalism” and “imperialism” in Tsarist Russia. One of several emergent disciplines with which it was intrinsically connected, especially philology, history, and ethnography, archeology recovered and catalogued artifacts that subsequently informed the heady debates about social origins and behaviors. I hypothesize that Russian archeologists gave service, even when doing so inadvertently, to the autocracy’s imperial mission because of the ways in which their excavations normalized the state’s expansion. In other words, excavating within the geographical borders of empire, archeologists recovered objects that could be claimed as evidence of a shared past. Ironically, the particulars of many objects found in their digs could also serve as evidence of ethnic distinction, the cultural basis for an independent polity. Thus did opportunities arise for intrinsic conflicts between imperialist and nationalist claims.

When they organized into their first official society in 1846, archeologists entered directly into conversations about the ‘All-Russian Idea,’ that is, the acknowledged need to come to terms with the reality that Imperial Russia included much more than ethnic Russians, but also to find a ‘Russian’ identity that privileged the Great Russian ethnicity. The ideological jingoism from the 1830s, “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” hummed in the background of their endeavors, even when simply unconsciously. Archeologists participated directly in the conversations that dominated political and intellectual discourse: Where did the ethnic Russian nation intersect with the empire? What role would Orthodoxy play, especially with the absorption of increasing numbers of Muslims? Is Russia a European, an Asian, or a hybrid

civilization? The question that archeologists added was: How did migrations of peoples and diffusions of material culture affect what became Russia?

Research Objectives

Archeologists constructed a new form of knowledge, one based in a material culture that in their opinions endowed it with a truth value superior to that of ideas based in abstractions, such as philosophy. However misplaced, this attitude was grounded in nineteenth-century positivism and elemental to the specific social, cultural, and political milieu in which archeologists developed their professional ethos. My objective is to excavate that milieu and weave it into the larger tapestry of late imperial Russia. Therefore, I am particularly interested in analyzing the private letters, papers, and other unpublished sources written by the men themselves. I am also keenly interested in the single woman involved, Praskov'ia Uvarova, who between 1885 and 1917 exercised the great personal influence over the development of the profession by virtue of both her social status and position as head of the Moscow Archeological Society.¹ Reading into their lives permits me to understand how they viewed their duties, and to interrogate the irony between the objectivity toward which archeologists strove, and the mythologies of history and identity with which their enterprise was deeply implicated.

Moreover, because the personal was always political in tsarist Russia, the omnipresent autocracy plays a leading role, too, in my project; as émigré archeologist Mikhail Rostovtsev wryly observed: “in Russia true science, the basis of intellectual development, lived exclusively by writ of the state, and was allowed to exist solely to the extent to which the state nourished and

¹ The daughter-in-law of Sergei Uvarov, architect of the ideology of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality,” Praskov'ia took over the Moscow Society after the death of her husband. From the princely Shcherbatov family herself, she enjoyed access to the successive tsars wielded a powerful influence over the direction of archeology especially because of the multiple congresses she organized.

supported it.” The state institutionalized its interest in the new profession in 1859 by founding the official Archeological Commission, portentously defining its mission as “the collection of objects from antiquity of the peoples (*narod*) living at one time in the territory currently occupied by Russia.”

Research Activities

Funding from the Title VIII Research Scholar Program of the American Council for Teachers of Russian allowed me to spend the months of September and October in St. Petersburg, and November in Kazan, Russia. In St. Petersburg, I worked largely in the Manuscript Division of the Institute of the History of Material Culture (IIMK-RAN), which, in addition to the documentation from the Imperial Archival Commission, holds the private papers of a number of archeologists associated with the Commission. I also spent time in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), particularly in the *fond* of the Imperial Court (f. 762), which oversaw the Archeological Commission; the Ministry of Education (f. 733), the primary source of subsidies for archeological periodicals; and the Russian Archeological Institute in Constantinople (757), Russia’s singular international institute. The Petersburg Filial of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SPb RAN) also proved significant, with its numerous personal archives of individual archeologists. In addition to the *fonds* of the institutions, which were necessary to reconstruct the structural evolution of the profession, I worked most successfully in the personal files of archeologists N. Ia. Marr, V. I. Veselovskii, and N. P. Kondakov.

In Kazan, the National Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan (NART) houses the *fond* of the Ministry of Education’s Kazan Educational District, which (through the university) oversaw

the local Society of Archeology, History, and Ethnography, which had imperial significance. The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the Kazan University Library proved even more valuable because it held private papers of some of the more important members of the Society, the most significant being those of longtime Chairman N. F. Katanov. Unfortunately, the other most influential figure in the Kazan society, S. M. Shpilevskii, did not maintain a personal *fond*.

In both cities, when the archives closed, I moved to the local libraries' journal collections; all of the major Russian cities had archeological societies that regularly published *izvestia* of their activities. These journals often included redacted protocols from meetings, which can be read to identify the points of debate among members.

Significant Findings

The Imperial Archeological Commission held sway over the designation of sites, the dispersal of funds to excavate, and had first choice among the treasures excavated for display in Petersburg's Hermitage Museum; therefore, all Russian archeologists maintained connection to it in some form. Despite Rostovtsev's tacitly critical evaluation of official influence, however, I found that at least the highest profile archeologists, including Rostovtsev, shared the same objective of looking at empire rather than ethnic nation. (Khvedir Vovk/Fedor Volkov, who fled Russia in 1878 to avoid possible arrest for his participation in a Ukrainian cultural society, but returned to teach at St. Petersburg University after the 1905 Revolution makes a notable exception, though I have not yet had the opportunity to work in his papers.) Because they saw themselves as supremely scientific, and therefore positivistic and objective, they considered their observations politically neutral. The Commission was always staffed by professional archeologists, including Rostovtsev, who enjoyed international reputations. Educated men who

chafed at the autocratic form of government, they nonetheless furthered notions sympathetic to imperialism.

I provide two examples from my research to illustrate the constant tension between nationalism and imperialism: Marr's digs in the ancient city of Ani, located in the Ottoman Empire until it fell briefly to Russian Armenia, 1877-1918; and Katanov's supervision of the ongoing digs at Bulgar, the center of archeological activity in Kazan. Both the cities themselves and the archeologists who oversaw their excavations had unique biographies. Marr, for example, is best known for his Stalinist linguistics, a misguided, pseudo-Marxist search for the singular origin of all languages; before the Bolshevik Revolution, he was a member of the Academy of Sciences and, though Georgian by birth, more of an Armenian by academic interests. Katanov, of Siberian tribal origins, had been sent as a boy to Kazan to study at the seminary in order to become an Orthodox missionary. When area professors recognized his genius, they sent him to St. Petersburg where he finished the university with a degree in Oriental Languages. Unlike Marr, however, Katanov never realized his dream of becoming an academician, despite his noteworthy accomplishments.

At first blush, these two men appear poised to promote a nationalism that could be derived from the sites of their principal digs; Ani and Bulgar were both major trading cities in the tenth century, Ani briefly the capital of the Armenian Bagratuni dynasty, and Bulgar the main trading city of Volga-Bulgaria. Both had endured a variety of conquests over the centuries, and despite the affirmed Christianity of early Armenia and the centrality of Islam to Bulgar, both cities stood out for the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional populations that were uncovered through excavations. Microcosms of the Russian empire, Ani and Bulgar were both heralded to demonstrate how the past could show possibilities for the future. The excavations at both sites set

the cities apart for peaceful interactions of ethnicities and religions. Marr and Katanov were both constantly pleading for increased funding from the Commission, which itself lacked the financial resources to grant every request, though it did support both excavations. Marr, in his private notes, expresses dismay at Armenian nationalism, even as he is forced to rely on private subsidies from wealthy Armenian merchants and their Church. Katanov, more guarded in his communications – perhaps to conceal the bitterness of never receiving the promotion he merited – promotes his Tatar colleagues in academic circles, but sees Bulgar as essential to a Russian identity. After all, the failed mission to convert Great Prince Vladimir I of Rus’ had originated in Bulgar. Significantly, both Ani and Bulgar also represented a new type of archeological mission, the reconstruction of a site rather than the plundering of one for material artifacts. Moreover, the two cities, as befitting their ancient glories, were later appropriated by those with nationalist objectives, as sites of harmony *before* conquest by Imperialist Russia.

In addition to the conflation of nationalism and imperialism, my research shows the promise of further elucidating Russia’s sense of self vis-à-vis both Europe and Asia. Significantly, I have not found a single archeologist who speaks of “Eurasia.” Veselovskii, a member of the Commission and the most important archeologist to explore Central Asia once it had been incorporated into the empire, recognized influences that dated back to Persia’s Sassanid Empire, as did a number of Western Archeologists.² Although three months of research only allowed me to begin to chart trails rather than to reach the end of them, I feel confident that as I continue this project I will be able to contribute to a number of ongoing historiographical discussions about both Russian Orientalism and its relationship to Europe. First and foremost, Russia’s archeologists were digging in an empire rather than a nation-state, and this difference

² Suzanne L. Marchand, Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

finds itself underscored in the different agendas that they served. For example, England, France, and Germany all looked East, especially to ancient Greece and Sanskrit-India, to uncover the origins of their democratic and aesthetic cultures and put themselves in competition with each other for original purity.³ Russia, which by the rise of archeology in the nineteenth century included “New Russia” along the Black Sea littoral, laid claim to the Greek colonies located there as their heritage; more specifically, they accented the influence that the Scythians, recognized as Russia’s heritors, levied over the Greeks.⁴

Another significant difference that I see between Russian and Western archeological agendas lies in their different approaches to the role that the search for the origins of Christianity played in the profession. Without diminishing the Russian interest in the Holy Land, which provided the catalyst for the Crimean War in 1855, Russian archeologists privileged Orthodoxy and therefore Byzantium. Where the French (Dominicans) sponsored the establishment of the *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem* (1889), the Russians established their first extra-territorial archeological institute in Constantinople (1894), capital of the Ottoman Empire, and concentrated on the Orthodox Balkans territories rather than Jerusalem and other biblical territories occupied by the Ottomans.⁵ Kondakov’s pathbreaking work on icons led the developments in this branch. This provided one more way in which Russia’s archeologists continued to further the ideology of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” even when they personally opposed it.

³ Of the considerable literature on the single states, I recommend instead the synthesis: Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ In addition to Rostovtsev, archeologist Boris Farmakovskii enjoyed an international reputation for his work in this area. Rostovtsev emigrated successfully after 1917 with the help of his Danish archeological colleagues, but Farmakovskii remained behind and continued his influence into the 1902s.

⁵ E.Ī. Basargina, *Russkiĭ arkheologicheskiĭ institut v Konstantinopole* (St. Peterburg: DB, 1999).

The nature of Islam also played out differently, particularly because Russia had a Muslim population that Western Europe did not. Where Marr and Katanov found a peaceful Islam at home, Western archeologists turned to the reforming sultans of the Ottoman Empire.⁶ Whether excavating mammoth bones in Perm Province or trying to dispute the Danish position that “there was no Bronze Age in Northern Russia,” the Russians did constant battle with their western colleagues. Moreover, the Russians differed from the western colleagues on the Darwinist interpretations of archeological evolution (though once again Khvedir Vovk/Fedor Volkov makes the exception).⁷ This underscores the importance of my continuing my research into the archeological digs in the Western provinces, notably Poland and the Baltic states. I also realize that I must expand my project chronologically as well as geographically, and take it through both the Great War, which prompted a number of digs in “enemy” territory, and the initial transformation of the Archeological Commission into the Institute of the History of Material Culture after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Policy Implications

Archeology’s role in the construction of historical memory remains of paramount significance for the long-term possibilities of co-operation in international relations, because the durability of any nation-state depends upon its networks with others, especially when the thread of history sews them together. My project speaks directly to a fundamental issue of US foreign policy: the nature of Russia’s relationship to “post-Soviet” territories, from such successor states as present-day Ukraine to the Russian Federation’s republic of Tatarstan, of which Kazan is the

⁶ Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, Edhem Eldem, eds., Scramble for the past: a story of archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914 (Istanbul : SALT, 2011).

⁷ Н.И. Платонова, История археологической мысли в России : вторая половина XIX--первая треть XX века (Санкт-Петербург : Нестор-История, 2010).

capital. The archeological museums in Kyiv (Ukraine), Tbilisi (Georgia), and Riga (Latvia), for example, were all founded by the Imperial Archeological Commission in the nineteenth century, and today receive substantial funding to exhibit their national integrity and independence. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin consciously invoked the significance of archeology to his search for a new “All-Russian Idea” when in 2003 and 2004, he took active part in excavations in Staraia Ladoga, an archeological site east of St. Petersburg discovered in 1909 to have the ruins of a fort that predated the Viking Conquest (862). Putin doggedly attempted to connect that dig to his search for a usable Russian past, and his ambitions resulted most famously in the publication of a controversial textbook that betrays politicized nostalgia for the Russian/Soviet Empire.⁸ This nostalgia continues to influence Russian foreign policy.

In Kazan, archeology remains as relevant today as it was two centuries ago, when faculty at Kazan University began collecting antiquities and opened a museum in 1810. In 1977, Tatar historian Alfred Khalikov engaged with Moscow’s Alexei Smirnov on the archeological dating of the pre-Mongolian capital of Volga Bulgaria; at stake was the acceptance of an independent state to which Tatarstan could deploy for a pre-Russian identity. Then in 2005, Moscow pumped 80 billion rubles into a celebration of the thousandth anniversary of Kazan, a date disputed by Khalikov’s successors among local archeologists because it ties Kazan’s origins to its subjugation by Muscovy. Today, “we are Bulgar” graffiti continues to invoke this.

The demonstrations today in the streets of Kyiv, to cite another example, reflect the Russia vs. Ukraine disagreement over “whose past is it?,” a question that has reverberated into academic archeology. Nineteenth-century archeologist Vikentii Chvoika enjoyed a transnational reputation for his digs in ancient Slavic lands, primarily present-day Ukraine, and his studies

⁸ Виктор Шнирельман, “Президенты и археология, или Что ищут политики в древности: далекое прошлое и его политическая роль в СССР и в постсоветское время,” Империя и нация в зеркале исторической памяти (Москва: Новое издательство, 2011).

were interpreted to suit both nationalist and imperialist agendas. In 2010, Chvoika was celebrated in an international conference in Kyiv, organized by Russian archeologists, the proceeds of which were published in Ukrainian as well as in Russian. Ukrainian historian L. M. Zhvanko includes a chapter on Ukrainian archeology in the recent textbook that, not surprisingly, emphasizes the present nation-state.⁹ The tension implicit in these two orientations underscores that same problematic dynamic that bedeviled Marr and the other Russian archeologists: where to draw the geographical borderline when interpreting digs? Because for all the sincerity about scientific objectivity, archeology has an ideology.¹⁰

The globalization of archeology also can also be seen in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) directives to protect archeological sites for their value as “world heritage.” UNESCO has attempted to mediate post-Soviet relations, as with the 2011 year-long conference it sponsored, designed “to enhance intercultural dialogue and promote the notion of cultural and ethnic diversity, in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia, on a local, regional and translational level.” The archeological museums provided the sites at which participants ideally moved “Beyond Boredom, Dust and Decay.” In 2012 Ani was placed on the list of recommendations to be categorized officially as a World Heritage Site, which if approved will elide a border between Turkey and Armenia.¹¹

⁹ Л. М Жванко, КРАСЗНАВСТВО: Конспект лекцій (для студентів усіх урсів денної і заочної форм навчання напрямів підготовки: 6.030504 «Економіка підприємства», 6. 030509 «Облік і аудит», 6.030601 «Менеджмент»).

¹⁰ For example, see Silvia Tomášková, “Nationalism, Local Histories and the Making of Data in Archaeology,” The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Sep., 2003): 485-507.

¹¹ Ludomir R. Lozny, “Archaeology in the Age of Globalization: Local Meanings, Global Interest,” in Lozny, ed., Comparative Archaeologies: A Sociological View of the Science of the Past (2011), 21-49.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

Although writing an academic monograph is my primary goal, I aim with this project to attract a broader international audience. I further expect to engage in joint projects, given the transnational nature of archeology, and I have already begun to establish professional relationships with archeologists in the Russian federation and the successor states of Ukraine and Armenia. I have joined a Faculty Learning Community in Digital Humanities sponsored by the UNC Digital Innovation Lab, where I will learn to build a web-based platform of the virtual reconstruction of digs; this will permit coordination with the many archeological museums in Russia and the successor states. My purpose is to facilitate interactive programs that provide access to the publics who visit these museums as websites. As I develop both the scholarly monograph and web-based platform, I will present my research at professional conferences and publish articles in journals that specialize both in Russian and archeological history.