In Celebration of Aleksandr Leskov

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Professor Aleksandr Leskov is known in Ukrainian and Russian archaeology as "Sasha the Golden Hand." Indeed, gold jewelry and toreutic from his excavations in the Crimea and south Ukrainian steppes constitute a significant part of the collection in the Ukrainian Museum of National Treasures in Kiev, while his excavations on the northwestern Caucasus (Adygeia) formed the core of the "Golden Chamber" in the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art. Leskov is undoubtedly responsible for more discoveries of ancient gold than any living Scythian archaeologist.

Given that the odds of finding true treasures in archaeological excavations are about the same as for winning a major lottery jackpot, everybody unavoidably asks: what is the secret of Leskov's never-fading luck? The truth is, there are no miracles which lead to buried treasure. At least three serious factors have always significantly increased the probability of Leskov's success.

The first is his organizational ability which enables him to marshal substantial resources effectively. Excavation of a major Scythian barrow involves obtaining sizeable funding and supplies, interacting with multiple institutions, and coordinating the daily work of dozens, if not hundreds, of people. Leskov manages such undertakings with an iron will and in turn inspires devotion from those he is supervising. During the Adygeia excavation seasons of the 1980s, I remember him repeating again and again: "You have only one excavation season in your life. It is this very one. The next season will be different and will take place in a different year. You have to do the maximum today." Doing the maximum of itself should maximize the results.

Yet his success requires a second talent, the ability to select the best excavation site through consideration of all the geographic, topographic and historiographic data about the steppes. For example, his selection of Adygeia for the excavations in the 1980s began from his understanding that the major passes through Caucasian mountains were the shortest route to the rich coastal areas of the Black Sea and further to the centers of Near Eastern civilizations in the northwestern Caucasus. These considerations were supported by his analysis of a great number of exciting discoveries in the area ranging from the early Bronze Age kurgans like the Maikop barrow to the burials of the Belorechenskaia culture filled with objects brought by the Levantine trade of the 14th and 15th centuries CE. The last link in the logical chain leading to Leskov's discovery of the now famous Uliap barrow field was his knowledge of the collection of the local museum - a cauldron delivered there by a tractorist from Uliap field belonged to the type which, as Leskov knew, could be found only in the richest of Scythian burials.

The third and most important factor is Leskov's personal philosophy: "The archaeology of the steppes has its own dialectic — only quantity brings quality there." In other words, only large, long-term excavations requiring years and years of self-discipline and patience can bring major results. To test this conclusion, one would need, like Leskov, to excavate more than 400 barrows with thousands of graves, the lion's share of them belonging to the Bronze Age period. In fact, Leskov's most important books are not devoted to his spectacular Scythian finds but rather deal with the less impressive but equally interesting period of the late Bronze Age and the transition to the Early Iron Age in the steppes.

In short, the secret of Leskov's success is prosaic: his dedication and focus, his ability to mobilize knowledge, and hard work. What shaped this man's strong personality? Born in Kharkov, Ukraine, on 19 May 1933, Aleksandr lost his father to Stalin's purges at age four and grew up with his mother partially in Ukraine and partially (during the five years of World War II) in evacuation in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. His interest in ancient art and archaeology goes back to the age of thirteen — as a sixth-grader he came across a stack of books on the ancient Orient while visiting a cousin studying history at Baku University. This interest quickly developed into a passion and even pushed into second place chess, where Leskov already showed great promise by earning "master candidate" status at the age of 15. (To this day he still can play blindfolded three matches simultaneously.) His lack of interest in natural sciences almost turned Leskov's high school studies into a disaster, but fortunately the grades on the high school diploma were not the major criterion for university admission at that time. Entrance examinations were more important and, given Leskov's field of specialization, the ones that counted were those in humanities, i.e. literature, history and languages.

Leskov and his associates at the Uliap excavation.

The archaeological expedition of Kharkov University, headed by the then young Boris Andreevich Shramko, served as Leskov's first school of field work. It was during a visit to this expedition, that Professor Bibikov, Director of the Institute of Archaeology of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, noted the bright student and invited him to apply for graduate school in Kiev. An early doctorate in 1961, the publication of the first book in 1965, and major success in field work promised Leskov a great career. His image as a very promising young scholar was certainly reinforced by the epic sum of one million rubles (a worker's daily salary being 1.59 rubles), which he squeezed from the Ministery of Melioration of the USSR for the excavation of endangered monuments in Kherson province. On the basis of this financial support, the first Soviet department of contract archaeology was formed in the Institute of Archaeology of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. The following decade was a busy time filled with huge field projects, a large number of publications, honorable official appointments such as the acting editorship of the three-volume *Archaeology of Ukraine* project, and even some recognition beyond the Iron Curtain. For example he was invited to consult on the volume *The First Horsemen* in the Time-Life Books series, and a special number of *Antike Welt* was devoted to Leskov's work on Scythian barrows. His discoveries even won him an important state prize.

Yet, in the weird, unstable political climate of the Brezhnev "Era of Stagnation" almost anything could be pregnant with unexpected trouble. At a New Year's party held in the Kiev Archaeology Institute in 1972, four members of Leskov's Kherson archaeological team sang a song with semi-political Russian words to the tune of the famous "Sholom Aleyhem." Exposure of the "Zionists" followed, and since their chief Leskov tried to rescue them, he was accused of failing to provide sufficient "political guidance" in his division. Note was taken of the fact that Leskov's expedition did not have a single member of the Communist Party in it. After a short delay, Leskov was fired on 20 April 1973. As if it were not enough, this measure was followed by an unofficial moratorium on any publications by Leskov and even on any reference to his work in printed matter produced in Ukraine. For the next three months Leskov was unemployed and then was "sent" to the institute of cybernetics of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, where he was to take part in the development of the keyword vocabulary for a computer search system being designed for archaeological databases. This "appointment" lasted for a year and a half and very much resembled involuntary confinement intended to prevent his having any connection with real archaeology.

No one at all familiar with Leskov would expect him to have accepted this defeat. He cut his losses and used this time to complete the gigantic text of his habilitation dissertation "The Pre-Scythian Period in Southern Ukraine," which he submitted for consideration to the Moscow Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The Department of Scythian and Sarmatian Archaeology of this leading institution deemed this work ready and assigned the date for public defense. Yet the story of this dissertation turned into one of the most famous political scandals in the Soviet archaeology of the 1970s. The so-called external review from the

Department of Archaeology of Moscow University was completely positive as were the examination reviews provided by the three major specialists in the field employed in the process of the defense as the official opponents: Academician and Director of the State Hermitage Museum, B.B. Piotrovskii; the Director of the Moscow Department of Scythian and Sarmatian Archaeology, Professor K.F. Smirnov; and the Head of the Department of Scythian Archaeology at the Kiev Institute of Archaeology of the Ukrainina Academy of Sciences, Dr. A.I. Terenozhkin. There were a number of unsolicited laudatory external reviews from leading specialists such as Professors A. P. Griaznov and I. M. D"iakonov. No objections were raised in the course of the discussion. And yet, when the ballot box was opened, one third of the balls turned out to be black. This meant that the dissertation had failed. This unprecedented discrepancy between the publicly-asserted quality of the dissertation and the secret vote meant only one thing: the small circle of committee members closely associated with the Director of the Moscow Institute of Archaeology, Boris Rybakov, sadly famous for his anti-Semitism, unanimously cast the negative vote. Indeed, Rybakov was known to say publicly about Leskov: "So long as I am alive, this 'American' will never work in an institution of the Academy of Sciences." Most disturbing was the thought that, even with this pre-determined negative part of the vote, it could have come out differently if all members of the committee had been present on that day. In fact, several people, including Professor Otto Bader, were so sure that the quality of the work would result in a positive vote that they did not even bother to attend the defense. The majority of the committee was appalled and drafted a petition, threatening to turn this case into the beginning of an academic "war." Leskov, however, chose another approach. Within the next several months he reworked 60% of the text (as the official rules required for the re-defense) and in less than in a year brought his dissertation to the same committee again. This time even Rybakov wanted to avoid confrontation and sent an unofficial message to Leskov asking him to submit the work to another committee (it could also be done at Moscow University, or in the Leningrad or Novosibirsk Divisions of the Institute of Archaeology), but Leskov refused to do so. This second time the entire archaeological community was alerted and all the members of the habilitation dissertation committee were present. As a result, there were enough positive votes to pass the dissertation, although there was exactly the same number of black balls (eight) in the box as in the first case.

Although victorious, Leskov found himself in a difficult situation. Primarily a field archaeologist by vocation, he was confined to the editorial department in the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad. An optimist, he kept hoping for the best. Meanwhile he continued publishing — four of his books came out during the following four years.

"Stay ready and opportunity will come,"says Russian folk wisdom. By the very end of the 1970s, it became clear even to some members of the governmental elite that the brainless melioration policies and the unrealistic "plans" requiring exceedingly high production levels from collective farms had led to the mass destruction of archaeological monuments, especially in the agricultural regions of the eastern part of the Soviet Union. In response to this problem a government rescript was issued in 1980 leading to the creation of a special archaeological department in the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art. That is when somebody in the administration of the Ministry of Culture remembered about Leskov, who was offered the opportunity to head the new venture.

Several successful excavation seasons in the Northern Caucasus followed. Among the discoveries were stunningly interesting archaeological monuments — the first Scythian sanctuaries of the type described by Herodotus. As if this were not enough, they were (quite in Leskov's tradition) full of rich finds. The 1982 season alone yielded almost a thousand objects of precious metals, among them the now famous Uliap silver rhyton, an amazing sculpture of the High Classical period. This looked like one of the miracles which the Soviet bureaucracy always expected but never really achieved — a governmental decision and the allocation of modest funds had immediately brought sensational results. Stunned by this, the State Committee for Science assigned huge funds to the archaeological work of the museum, which allowed Leskov to hire new people, eventually turning the museum's Department of Ancient Art and Material Culture into the second largest archaeological institution in Moscow. As a result several more excavation projects in the Northern Caucasus were started, and the work of the institution expanded into Central Asia and Siberia. The finds of Leskov's expedition attracted attention in different countries, and a traveling exhibition of them began to make the rounds of the world's capitals. This coincided with a time of great hopes — Gorbachev started the *Perestroika* process, allowing such politically dubious figures as Leskov to travel and even receive

temporary appointments abroad. Within the next decade Leskov held a number of honorary fellowships in all kinds of European institutions and short term teaching positions in several major European universities.

It was in 1990 at the height of all these activities when, after being a member of Leskov's team and a personal friend for eight years, I notified him about my plans to emigrate to the United States. He was not happy with the fact, but merely said something which I believe was a part of his credo: "An archaeologist should be close to the land, while by leaving the country you cut these ties." Thus it was quite a surprise when six years after my departure in the following year, I received a call from the new immigrant Aleksandr Leskov. A few months later, Leskov came with lectures to Bloomington, and, sitting in my dining room, told me the sad story of everything coming to a halt in Russia, about the same party functionaries controlling the ball, albeit with much less regulation by the state, about the growing corruption, about the absence of funds and lack of opportunities for field research. Surprising as his decision might seem, it was very clear why even such an optimist and practical magician as Leskov would leave the country.

As an immigrant myself I have seen many excellent scholars from the former Soviet Union come to the United States and, after struggling for some time, drop their ambitions and abandon their research. This is especially common among the people of the older generation who have but very little chance to proceed with their professional careers. Yet Leskov is the *only* one whom I personally know, who came to the USA near retirement age (he was 64!) and instead of accepting the quiet life of a retiree kept fighting for the continuation of his professional life. Many of our joint acquaintances were more than skeptical — Leskov did not even have a command of spoken English. But he studied the language and tried, and he worked and pushed. Of course there were people who understood the situation, saw his efforts and helped. Leskov told me many times how grateful he is to Professors David Stronach, Philip Kohl and Holly Pittman, without whose encouragement he would have lost the faith.

It is already the fourth year that Leskov has been hosted by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, where he works under the auspices of Professors Donald White and Holly Pittman. Presently, he is preparing the full publication of the famous Maikop treasure, the largest collection of the ancient artefacts from the Eastern European steppes housed outside the museum collections of Russia and Ukraine, which happens to be divided among the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the State Museums of Berlin and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In fact, he made here another most important discovery: according to him the Maikop hoard is by no means a treasure, but a private collection of the French adventurer M. A. Merle de Massoneau, which was sold in the early 20th century to different institutions and private individuals. In other words, what scholarly literature during the last century treated as one complex of finds (although not free from admixes), turns out to be a random selection of objects from various regions (Ukraine, Crimea and Northwestern Caucasus) belonging to completely different epochs from the early Bronze Age to the Medieval period!

What does Aleksandr Leskov do now that he has celebrated his 70th year? If you ask him about the essence of his present life, he will tell you that he is on a mission to increase the awareness of the ancient cultures of the Eastern Europe in the American academic community by showing the pivotal role of the steppes in the formation and development of Eurasian civilizations. Two years ago he organized the first major professional archaeological tour through the monuments and museums of Ukraine. He has recently joined the efforts of Professor Renata Holod to organizes a center of Ukrainian archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania. Among their plans are publications of scholarly and popular books devoted to the ancient cultures of the area, field projects and, of course, the training of graduate students who would in the future deal with this field of study in the USA. Part of the plan is to exchange graduate students between Ukrainian research institutions and The University of Pennsylvania.

As is always the case with Leskov, he has many other irons in the fire... One which began last year was to join an Israeli project "The Seventh Century," being developed by the Olbright Archaeological Research Institute. Following this, he spent three months studying archaeological collections in Israel and Jordan. He hopes to find material evidence testifying to the presence of nomads from the Eurasian steppes, whom the Bible and other early Middle Eastern annals mention as passing through this area in their offensive against Egypt in the seventh century.

Let us wish him good luck in these and all his future endeavors!

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*This tribute was originally written to celebrate Professor Leskov's 70th birthday in 2003.

About the Author

Born in Tashkent, **Aleksandr Naymark** received his education in archaeology and history at Tashkent and Moscow Universities. After moving to the United States in 1992, he received a Ph.D. in Central Eurasian Studies from Indiana University, his dissertation being on "Sogdiana, Its Christians and Byzantium: A Study of Artistic and Cultural Connections in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages." He has participated in more than 30 excavations in Central Asia and for a time worked in the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art as its curator of Central Asian pre-Islamic art and coins. Between 1997 and 1999 he was a fellow of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin. Dr. Naymark is currently an Assistant Professor in Art History at Hofstra University. He has published widely on early islamic art, numismatics and archaeology in Central Asia. His article on the Sogdian palace complex of Varakhsha appeared in *The Silk Road*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2003). He may be contacted at Aleksandr.Naymark@Hofstra.edu.