



Sergei Stepanovich Miniaev (1948-2020)

Xiongnu archaeology lost one of its most productive and innovative contributors with the death of Sergei Stepanovich Miniaev on 11 April 2020.

The focus of much of his work was Transbaikalia, the region encompassing the Buriat Republic, where in the late 19th century Iu. D. Tal'ko-Gryntsevich pioneered archaeological survey and a certain amount of excavation of what he was the first to identify as Xiongnu remains. Among Sergei Miniaev's important contributions was to inaugurate a series devoted to *Archaeological Monuments of the Xiongnu*, one of whose volumes reprinted his distant predecessor's work which would otherwise today be difficult of access. The next major landmark in the history of Xiongnu archaeology was the excavations undertaken in the 1920s at the cemetery complex of Noyon uul in north central Mongolia during the expedition organized by Petr Kozlov. That work uncovered striking artifacts, ones which have done much to shape our perceptions of the Xiongnu nomadic confederation that at its peak ruled a huge swathe of northern Asia. However, as Sergei Stepanovich, never one to mince words, has reminded us, the Kozlov excavations were more of a kind of "treasure hunting," somewhat analogous to what the looters of the tombs did in early centuries. Little attention was given to documenting precisely tomb structure, the position of each artifact, and the territory in the vicinity of the tomb, all of which might reveal important facts about burial ritual and commemoration. And there was much else to be learned if one looked beyond the tombs of the elite.

Sergei Stepanovich was fortunate to begin his professional training at a time when new scientific techniques of analysis in archaeology were being perfected. Significantly, while still an undergraduate, he was involved in laboratory and conservation work; his first regular employment in the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy (now the Institute for the History of Material Culture) was in its laboratory of spectral analysis. His many subsequent achievements in excavations perhaps have obscured the fact that spectral analysis was at the core of his *kandidat* (Ph.D. equivalent) dissertation, supervised by the distinguished specialist in Central Asian archaeology Mikhail Petrovich Griaznov and defended in 1982. Miniaev's substantial 1983 article incorporating his data from analysis of Xiongnu bronzes is a seminal study of how one might approach analyzing regional variation and diachronic change in the Xiongnu polity. (*The Silk Road* had the privilege of publishing a somewhat revised version of it in English in 2016.) Subsequently, in collaboration with other scholars, he turned his attention to such topics as determining the chemical composition of ceramics and identifying the animal

species whose hair was used in Xiongnu textiles. Long interested in the chronology of Xiongnu history, naturally he was one of the first to apply radiocarbon analysis to supplement more traditional kinds of chronological analysis based on tomb structure and artifact distribution. He returned several times to the question of the original home of the Xiongnu, arguing against the view that they emerged in the Ordos region of the bend of the Yellow River and in favor of an origin far to the northeast. As part of that work, he deconstructed the evidence about ethnic groups in the early Chinese narrative histories.¹

While still a student at Leningrad University, he was acquiring significant experience in field work. Antonina Vladimirovna Davydova introduced him to excavation in Transbaikalia where an important focus of those expeditions was not on the excavation of major elite tombs but rather cemeteries with more modest graves and settlement sites. The first two volumes in his *Archaeological Monuments of the Xiongnu* were Davydova's excavation reports on the fort and cemetery at the "proto-city" of Ivolga. The excavations there covered a much higher percentage of the area than normally can be studied at a major archaeological site; the results are still one of the basic reference points for ongoing analysis of Xiongnu society. Sergei Stepanovich then excavated and co-authored with her a study that encompassed another settlement near Dureny. The fifth volume in his series is a monograph publishing the complete excavation he supervised at the Dyrestui Cemetery, a Chinese translation of which is now scheduled.

Until the beginning of the 1970s, there had never been a thorough scientifically based excavation of one of the elite Xiongnu terrace tombs in order to study its structure and the complex of smaller features adjoining it. The pioneering effort at such an investigation was supervised by Prokopii Konovalov in the Sudzha cemetery near Kiakhta, just north of the Mongolian border in 1971-75. However, the looting of the tomb in early times left no spectacular artifacts to attract wide attention, and only short summaries of the work appeared in print.²

Sergei Miniaev's excavation in 1997-2005 of another of the Xiongnu "royal" tombs in Transbaikalia at Tsaram, one of the largest known, not only revealed important details about tomb structure but yielded a good many spectacular artifacts which had escaped the looters. Furthermore, in the same complex were several small burials, which he argued were "sacrificial" ones following a common practice for the elite burial rituals. (As with many questions raised by Xiongnu archaeology, this hypothesis is not universally accepted.) A number of Sergei Stepanovich's articles (some co-authored, published in both Russian and English versions) established the Tsaram excavation as one of the models for future exploration of the major Xiongnu tomb complexes. A posthumous full publication of the results is in preparation.

His last major Xiongnu excavation project (supervised jointly with Nikolai Nikolaev in 2009-2015) was at another Transbaikalia site, Orgoiton, which had first been surveyed by Tal'ko-Gryntsevich. Although badly damaged by looters in early times, as with a number of other elite Xiongnu burials, a dismantled Chinese chariot had been overlaid on the grave in the elite terrace tomb. While there were relatively few other artifacts, study of the tomb structure contributed to the understanding of regional differentiation in the Xiongnu polity.³ The excavation at Orgoiton attracted local media attention in 2012; one can still view some of the short video clips of interviews with Sergei Miniaev in which he responded with admirable clarity to questions about Xiongnu burials and settlement sites, among them that at Ivolga. The videos capture for us a sense of him as a charismatic spokesman for the accomplishments of Russian archaeology on the Xiongnu, confident in his command of the evidence but willing to admit what we don't yet know.

In watching the videos, I was struck by his insistence that while the scientific work of archaeologists is essential for our understanding of the past, also of great importance is to make the results widely known to a broad audience, where nowadays there is substantial public interest in learning about that history. One thinks back here to the fact that for many years, he maintained a unique website about Xiongnu archaeology, and a number of his articles were aimed at distilling his experience and impressive knowledge of that subject for a wider audience. One of the photos we have used here was

captioned appropriately on its Buriat website: “The experienced scholar shares with youth his scientific erudition.” (The Russian word here, *bagazh* [~erudition], can be construed in both its literal and figurative sense...). We know that like many serious scholars, Sergei Stepanovich could be quite stubborn in defending his conclusions. Reputedly, he did not suffer fools lightly, which did not always endear him to some colleagues. But he was passionate about sharing his knowledge.

I met Sergei only once when, by invitation of our project director, he visited briefly to observe our excavation in western Mongolia near Khovd in 2007. Unlike some of his Russian colleagues who have had major projects in Mongolia, he but once excavated a Xiongnu burial there, even though he kept well informed of all the recent work on Xiongnu sites and followed as well related excavations in China. We barely talked at Khovd, since he spent his time at the terrace tomb we were opening, while I was busy at one or another of the peripheral features. Our subsequent interaction over the years thus was at a distance, corresponding about the articles of his which I was happy to translate, or his responding to my queries always graciously and promptly. My memory is of an intense but warm and generous person, whose scholarly achievements will stand the test of time.

— Daniel C. Waugh
University of Washington (Seattle)

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Maiia Tarasovna Kashuba of the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg for sharing the obituary she co-authored with Vadim Andreevich Alëkshin (published in *Arkheologicheskii vestnik* 27 (2020): 439-440). I have drawn on it here for a number of details about Sergei Stepanovich's career. The informational website *Rodnoe selo*, out of Ulan-Ude, is the source of the photographs, which it published (<http://selorodnoe.ru/album/show/id3635435/>) in a short communication, “Orgoiton-2012,” on 5 August 2012. William Honeychurch and Bryan Miller shared with me their memories of Sergei Stepanovich and kindly read through my text prior to its finalization. Responsibility for its content and accuracy rests entirely with me.

Selected bibliography of publications by Sergei Miniaev

Books

Miniaev, S. S. *Dyrestuiskii mogil'nik / Derestuj Burial Ground*. Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu, ed. by S. S. Miniaev, vyp. 3. Sankt-Peterburg: Evropeiskii dom / “Aziatika”, 1998. 233 pp.

Davydova, A. V., and S. S. Miniaev. *Kompleks arkheologicheskikh pamiatnikov u sela Dureny / Archaeological Sites Near Dureny Village*. Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu, ed. by S. S. Miniaev, vyp. 5. Sankt-Peterburg: “Aziatika”, 2003. 164 pp.

_____. *Khudozhestvennaia bronza Siunnu. Novye otkrytiia v Rossii / The Xiongnu Decorative Bronzes. New Discoveries in Russia*. Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu, vyp. 6. Sankt-Peterburg: “Gamas”, 2008. 120 pp. (text in Russian and in English).

Tal'ko-Gryntsevich, Iu. D. *Materialy k paleoetnologii Zabaikal'ia*. Ed. by S. S. Miniaev. Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu, vyp. 4. Sankt-Peterburg: “Aziatika”, 1999. 123 pp.

Davydova, A. V. *Ivolginskii arkheologicheskii kompleks, T. 1. Ivolginskoe gorodishche / The Ivolga Archaeological Complex. Pt. 1. The Ivolga Fortress*. Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu, ed. by S. S. Miniaev, vyp. 1. Sankt-Peterburg: “Aziatika”, 1995. [286] pp.

_____. *Ivolginskii arkheologicheskii kompleks, T. 2. Ivolginskii mogil'nik / The Ivolga Archaeological Complex. Pt. 2. The Ivolga Cemetery*. Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu, ed. by S. S. Miniaev, vyp. 2. Sankt-Peterburg: “Aziatika”, 1996. 176 pp.

Articles published in *The Silk Road* (accessible at: <https://edspace.american.edu/silkroadjournal/issues/>)

Miniaev, Sergei S. “On the Interpretation of Certain Images on Deer Stones,” *The Silk Road* 11 (2013): 54-59.

_____. “Production of Bronze Wares among the Xiongnu,” with a preface by William Honeychurch, *The Silk Road* 14 (2016): 147-165.

_____, and Julia Elikhina. “On the Chronology of the Noyon uul Barrows,” *The Silk Road* 7 (2009): 21-35.

Miniaev, Sergei S., and L[idiia] M. Sakharovskaia. "Investigation of a Xiongnu Royal Tomb Complex in the Tsaraam Valley," *The Silk Road* 4/1 (2006): 46-51.

_____. "Investigation of a Xiongnu Royal Complex in the Tsaraam Valley. Part 2: The Inventory of Barrow No. 7 and the Chronology of the Site," *The Silk Road* 5/1 (2007): 44-56.

Kulikov, V. E., E. Iu. Mednikova, Iu. I. Elikhina, and S. S. Miniaev. "An Experiment in Studying the Felt Carpet from Noyon uul by the Method of Polypolarization," *The Silk Road* 8 (2010): 63-68.

Nikolaev, Nikolai N., and Sergei S. Miniaev. "Orgoiton—A Xiongnu Cemetery in Transbaikalia," *The Silk Road* 14 (2016): 166-167.

Notes

1. See his "Pis'mennye istochniki o rannei istorii Siunnu," *Arkheologicheskie vesti* 21 (2015): 304-327. The text, in Russian and in English, includes references to his most important articles on the problem of Xiongnu origins.
2. Konovalov finally published his excavation report for the terrace tomb No. 54 at Sudzha in 2008, in part under the stimulus of the publication of Miniaev's results from Tsaram. An English translation of Konovalov's book, with some supplementary materials is: P. B. Konovalov. *The Burial Vault of a Xiongnu Prince at Sudzha (Il'movaia pad', Transbaikalia)*, tr. by Daniel C. Waugh; foreword by Ursula Brosseder and Daniel C. Waugh. Bonn Contributions to Asian Archaeology, Vol. 3 (Bonn, 2008). Brosseder co-authored with Konovalov the section on "The Dating of Barrow No. 54 and its Significance." An interesting report on Xiongnu archaeology in Buriatia, with information on recent accomplishments, is P. B. Konovalov et al., "Khunnskaia arkheologiia v Buriatii: istoriia i novyi etap issledovaniia," *Vestnik Buriatskogo nauchnogo tsentra Sibirskogo otdeleniia Rossiiskoi akademii nauk*, 2016, No. 1(21): 9-26.
3. A brief summary of the Orgoiton excavation is in the article we published in *The Silk Road* in 2016. For more details (in Russian) and some good photographs, see N. N. Nikolaev and S. S. Miniaev, "Raboty Tsentral'no-Aziatskoi arkheologicheskoi ekspeditsii na mogil'nike Orgoiton," in *Arkheologicheskii sbornik*, vyp. 41: *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii Evrazii* (Sankt-Peterburg: Gos. Ermitazh, 2017): 143-158; idem., "Nekotorye rezul'taty issledovaniia 'kniazheskogo kurgana' Xunnu na mogil'nike Orgoiton," in *Arkheologicheskii sbornik*, vyp. 42: *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii Evrazii* (Sankt-Peterburg: Gos. Ermitazh, 2019): 110-123. Links to the several videos (all in Russian) are in an article "Gunnskie kurgany Orgoitona," on the website "Vizit Buriatii" (<http://www.visitburyatia.ru/story/item-2145/>, last accessed 15 February 2021). In the first video, Nikolai Nikolaev, shown in the excavation, discusses some of the features. The remaining four videos all are interviews with Sergei Miniaev, on site at Orgoiton, indoors (the clearest, since there is no wind noise—its direct link is <https://youtu.be/Rje-Bnrhr5k>), and on site at Dyrestui and the Baian-under fort.