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## Rescue archaeology in Russia at the turn of the 20th and 21st century

*Why has modern archaeology attracted scoundrels, and still does? I assume it's because archaeological excavations provide opportunity to conceal money, which attracts crooks and all sorts of scoundrels. Entering the ranks of archaeologists, these corrupt men begin to intrigue and build their careers, in every way pushing to the sidelines real archaeologists, who are committed to science rather than profit.*

V.A. Gorodtsov. M. Diaries 2015, vol. 2, p. 239, 1938

### Abstract

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Rescue archaeology in Russia is full of contradictions. The apologetic approach to archaeology focuses solely on vast areas covered by excavations, discoveries and investments of millions. But the reality is more complex than that. This article addresses the transformations that took place in rescue archaeology in the 1980s, during “Perestroika”, and in particular in Moscow.

Not everyone can withstand the temptation of money. Commercial interests have supplanted the Science in many cases, including that of Moscow. In the meantime, in many Old Russian cities (Pskov, Tver, Vladimir, etc.), the works were conducted in an exemplary manner, thanks to pre-existing traditions of research. Authorities’ demands to free land from the burden of archaeological heritage have led to shifting the focus of archaeological exploration now, identifying the boundaries of archaeological monuments became the key objective, a task that remains basically impossible, as said boundaries are of a purely formal nature. Excavations of empty spaces within archaeological sites have become typical for rescue archaeology and form modern “informational noise”.

At the same time, archaeological research carried out on an unprecedented scale, even including the “empty” trenches, provide unique data on spatial and temporal structure of human activity, as exemplified by exploration of the Angara river banks during the construction of the Boguchany Dam.

**Keywords:** rescue archaeology, Old Russian cities, archaeological monuments protection laws

The quote from classic Russian archaeologist that has been used as a motto may be read as a hyperbole, grousing of an old man, whose ambitions weren’t fully satisfied. Regrettably, experiences gained by the author during 30 years of rescue archaeology work show that the words of V.A. Gorodtsov are often proved right and it is necessary to take a closer look at the advantages and disadvantages of works within new rescue archaeology projects for the sake of Archaeology written with a capital “A”.

In the twilight of the USSR’s existence, a legislative base for conducting archaeological research on new rescue archaeology projects was formed by the “Historical and Cultural Monument Protection and Use Act” of 1976 and its 1978 version, adopted as the law of Russian Federation. Under these acts, conducting archaeological

research was, broadly speaking, to be ordered when archaeological objects were put at risk by construction projects. In accordance with the 1976 act, both responsibility and the decision-making power belonged to the state agencies for the protection of historical monuments. However, no clear mechanism has been established for said agencies to examine all construction sites. The agencies themselves had very limited personnel that included virtually no professional archaeologists, and lacked necessary resources to conduct effective control. One could say that key decisions for archaeologists were made on an *ad hoc* basis. The 1976 act created, rather, an opportunity for making decisions to conduct or not to conduct archaeological works but was not an actual starting point. Other essential factors for making the decision included availability of interested parties among

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archaeological community, in particular the existence of organizational structures, permanent thematic or regional expeditions and having academic staff at their disposal. Works conducted in Moscow are a great example of how various decisions were typically made given such situation.

In the end of the 1940s, seven giant skyscrapers were constructed in Moscow, yet no archaeological research took place at their locations. However, at one of the sites – that of the Moscow University at Sparrow Hills (then – Lenin Hills) - important Bronze Age finds (a stone axe with an unfinished drilled hole) have been made by an undefined party and given to the Museum of History and Reconstruction of Moscow. While the eighth building, which should have been erected on the bank of river Moscow in the Zaryadye district, near the Kremlin, hasn't been built, its foundation pit had been dug out, accompanied by archaeological digs of a massive scale. No detailed accounts of how the archaeological works were ordered or financed remained. In practice, these were the first archaeological works of such scale concerning medieval Moscow. Their results were summarized by M.G. Rabinovich in a dissertation, published later as a monograph (Rabinovich 1964). Archaeological worth of that part of Moscow was undeniable. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, when construction of the Rossiya Hotel brought massive construction works to that lot, no major archaeological works were carried out. Attention of the Muscovite expedition led by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, under leadership of newly appointed A.F. Dubynin, was focused on studying Iron Age settlements in Podmoskovye (the area around Moscow) and the city itself was subject of little research (Belenkaya 1972).

Adoption of the 1976 act did in no way influence the situation of archaeological research in Moscow. Members of the Academy's Muscovite expedition have already lost their momentum, while employees of the Museum of History and Reconstruction of Moscow merely recorded the discoveries, rather than lead excavations themselves. One could say that the Brezhnevian Stagnation has been fully reflected in the state of Moscow's archaeology.

The desire for change of Gorbachev's perestroika did not exclude archaeology. In 1987, a project of reconstructing Moscow's historical centre emerged. 30-year old Sergey Chernov (son of Russian physicist Zarem Chernov and Brazilian historian Satva Brondao) became the new head of the Muscovite archaeological expedition. Small-scale, routine excavations in the courtyard of the V. I. Lenin Museum on the Red

Square (after 1991, its building was given to the State Historical Museum) have unexpectedly grown in size into a nearly national-level project. Redevelopment of the historical driveway, leading to the Red Square in front of the Kremlin, has been noticed by archaeologists working nearby. Their strenuous efforts had not only stopped the construction and launched massive-scale excavations (Fig. 1), but have also formed the basis for new regulation. The excavations in the Historical Driveway, in which hundreds of soldiers and Muscovite volunteers participated, turned out to be particularly successful and scientifically fruitful. The 17th century road, foundations of the gates to the Kitay-gorod area, wooden moorings at the Neglinnaya river, dated to 1538, 13th-15th century screws – archaeological finds literally sprang from the ground. The first birch bark manuscript in Moscow was found and type and chronological scale of 12th-16th century Muscovite ceramics was developed (Muscovite Ceramics 1991; Chernov 1997).

A chance meeting of S. Z. Chernov and L. N. Zaykov, the head of the city committee of the communist party appeared to be of clue importance. Party authorities of Moscow (L. N. Zaykov, a member of the Politburo - Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union - was the first secretary at the time, having succeeded B. N. Yeltsin) took responsibility for the excavations, extending them until September 14, despite the pressure to have a bridge constructed in the area in time for the November 11 parade (Chernov 1989). City authorities declared archaeology a part of the municipal economy. As a result, the city council (then called executive soviet committee) adopted a special resolution (1988) making construction projects within Moscow's city centre conditional upon a mandatory permit from a scientific authority - the archaeological institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. By a mutual decision of Moscow's executive soviet committee and the presidium of Russian Academy of Sciences, a specialized Moscow Archaeology Committee was established (1989). It was entirely unprecedented (incidentally, it was contradictory to the 1976 act, as control has been given not to monument protection authorities, but rather an academic faculty). It bears mentioning that the organizational system of archaeological works in the USSR/Russia retained numerous "relics of the past", present since its inception in Imperial Russia. Archaeological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (since 1991 - Archaeological Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences) was responsible for issuing archaeological excavation permits up until 2009, just as the Imperial



**Fig. 1.** Excavations in Moscow. (1-3) at Romanov Palace (former Moscow University building), 2003, (4) at Historical Driveway, 1988. 1-2 photo by N. Krenke 2003; 4 - photo by S. Chernov 1988

Archaeological Committee had done before 1917. After 2009, this “omission” was rectified and the permitting rights were awarded to state authorities – currently the Ministry of Culture of Russian Federation.

The archaeological trenches blocked access to the Red Square, leading to cancelling the tank parade! In a symbolic way, archaeology (not quite unwittingly) became an instrument of democracy and pacifism. However, the situation visibly changed very soon afterwards.

#### ■ **ECONOMY-POLITICAL ASPECT**

Rescue archaeology expeditions of the 1930s-1980s did not bring wealth to their participants. Archaeologists, forced to spend many months in the field, earned a fixed wage. Their economic benefit came mostly from not having to buy their own food while on the expedition. It also bears mentioning that archaeologist’ salary in the 1980s ranged from 105 roubles (for junior researchers without an advanced degree) to 400 roubles (senior researcher, PhD), which - taking into account the real purchasing power - was up to 10 times more than the 2017 salary for this category of employees.

Since 1987, legal circumstances have changed fundamentally, allowing for private entrepreneurship

– initially in the form of cooperative movement. It soon became apparent that there’s little incentive to lead archaeological research via financially unresponsive structures of state agencies. It was much more effective, from a financial perspective, to sign contracts between intermediary organizations-cooperatives (later - limited liability companies, etc.). It was a true point of no return – opening vastly different opportunities: to earn money in order to maintain a relatively decent standard of living and invest the remainder in science (organizing expeditions, publications), or to spend it all on oneself and give practically nothing to science. Naturally, a wide spectrum of stances has also existed in-between these two opposite poles. Occurrences of various PR actions replacing actual scientific activity became typical and, at times, illustrated books were of little to no scientific value were published, full of confused information, numerous forgeries and sometimes even plagiarisms.

City council officials were very quick to understand absurdity of the situation, as possible profits were “snatched” from under their nose. In April 1990, Yu. M. Luzhkov took over the position of the chairman





**Fig. 2.** Archaeological works at the Moscow Kremlin, during construction of the Kremlin Palace (1959). Illustrations by E. B. Bergstein

of the executive committee of Moscow Council of People's Deputies from V.T. Saykin. Shortly, issuance of construction permits was assigned to town hall offices, including a special department established for archaeological permits. Commercial interests have fully overtaken Science within Moscow City Council's administration. New archaeological excavations in Moscow's city centre in mid-1990s no longer blocked the passage for tanks and moved to Manezhnaya Square, where until then the largest pro-democracy mass rallies in Moscow had taken place. However, not all of Moscow was administered by the City Council. The city contained areas under direct federal jurisdiction (Kremlin,

Moscow University, some of the museums), as well as those administered by the Russian Orthodox Church (monasteries). As such, these areas formed islands where serious scientific research could take place. Of these, the comprehensive research on the territory of Tsaritsyno museum-reserve (Tsaritsyno Park Archaeology 2008), in the courtyard of former University building (Romanov Palace Archaeology 2009) and in Danilov, Bogoyavlensky (Belyaev 1994) and Ostozhenka street Zachatyevsky monastery (Glazunova 2008; Yelkina 2008), as well as in Moscow's Kremlin (Krenke *et al.*, 2016; Makarov *et al.*, 2017) proved the most fruitful. The latter works were particularly important, as in

1959-1960, presence of major construction works of the Kremlin Palace of Congresses brought very strict restrictions on archaeologists. They were forbidden from making photos and forced to paint watercolours instead (Fig. 2). In effect, only 5% of the foundation pit was properly researched. Archaeological works of 2007 and 2014-16 were conducted at an appropriate level over the entire area.

■ **ARCHAEOLOGICAL “BATTLEGROUND” IN THE 2010S RUSSIA**

Across the vast lands of Russia, from Kaliningrad (Königsberg) to Kamchatka, a wide spectrum of situations occurred that did not fit to the Moscow scheme. Unsurprisingly, the eternal rivals of Moscow – Tver, Pskov, Novgorod, Sankt Petersburg and the contrarian Siberia – stood out among the diverseness.

In the second decade of 21st century, Russian archaeological community faced new amendments to the federal “Cultural Heritage Act” (no.73-Federal Law), first introduced in 2002, that put great restrictions on construction projects in favour of archaeologists. To battle corruption between archaeologists and developers, new intermediaries were introduced. The full chain looked as follows: excavating archaeologist – a planner, developing projects for upcoming archaeological works – a Ministry of Culture – attested expert, assessing validity of said projects – developer. Within this system, archaeological research permits were issued by the Ministry of Culture officials. In practice, salaries of

archaeologists shrank and, with few exceptions (country’s major museums and universities – Hermitage, State Historical Museum, Moscow State University), all archaeologists who wished to remain in the profession were forced to partake in new expeditions. In these circumstances, factors such as morality and traditions of scientific community gained major importance. Economically speaking, it became more advantageous to excavate empty lots with no finds. And in fact, as shown by statistical data, many succumbed to the temptation. The map of “empty” archaeological test-pits across Russia impresses with its scale (Makarov *et al.* 2016).

The advantages of rescue archaeology in Russia are embodied, first and foremost, by old medieval cities such as Pskov, Tver, Novgorod, Tula, Vladimir, and Yaroslavl. Here, strong schools of archaeology existed, carrying on their historical traditions. Academician V. V. Sedov and I. K. Labutina were chief protectors of Pskov’s cultural layers. Their unbreakable perseverance and high moral standards, combined with scientific productivity, pedagogic talent and organizational skills ensured clear success. Today, a generation of V. V. Sedov and I. K. Labutina alumni took up the mantle. Virtually all construction projects in Pskov were accompanied by archaeologists. “Archaeological excavations in Pskov” information system has been established, consisting of a schematised city plan annotated with open excavations, contrasted with a modern general map and with an Excel spreadsheet attached, containing

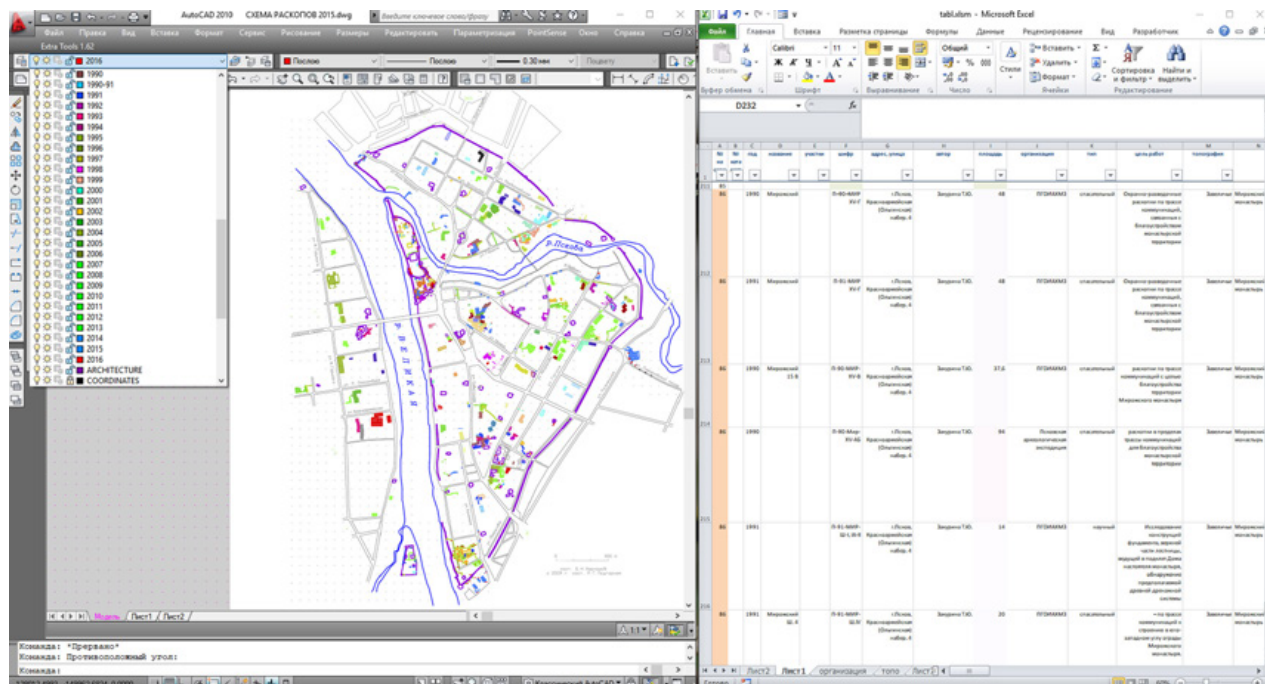


Fig. 3. Website of the “Archaeological excavations in Pskov” information system (author – P. G. Podgornaya, with help of E. B. Koroleva, based on data gathered by B. N. Kharlashov)



key information about the excavations – year, area, author, characteristics of cultural layers (Fig. 3). On one of the most conflict triggering lots in the city centre, at Lenin street, archaeologists managed to hold their ground and were rewarded with a find of 10th century Viking burial chambers (Labutina *et al* 2009).

The total surface of archaeological trenches in Pskov, as of writing, is 36 750 m<sup>2</sup>, including ca. 20 000 m<sup>2</sup> in 21st century.

Archaeological research in Tver is similarly massive. Regarding the surface of trenches and watching briefs, city of Tver is the champion in Russia. Research was carried out on ca. 300 000 m<sup>2</sup>, with additional 100 000 m<sup>2</sup> of watching briefs and test trenches in architectural landmarks.. The key forces driving these works were I. N. Chernykh (Tver Museum) and A. N. Khokhlov (the director of the commercial TNIIR-Center). The competition between these two leaders turned out to be advantageous. Works in Tver stood out for their exceptional attention to detail when it came to rules and practices of preparing archaeological documentation. Occasionally, when reports from Tver were read aloud, it seemed that materials concerning modern history (19th and 20th century) were prepared with excessive thoroughness, however, in accordance with the federal law everything was done properly (anything older than 100 years is considered archaeology).

Novgorod, starting from the 1930s, was seen as a centre of Russian archaeologists-medievalists. Here, during a joint expedition with the Moscow University and Archaeology institute of Russian Academy of Sciences, the methodology of digging through damp (wet?) cultural layers of a Russian medieval town, saturated with relics of wooden constructions, has been established. In 21st century, rescue archaeology has greatly accelerated in Novgorod. Overall, more than 45 000 m<sup>2</sup> were excavated and it bears mentioning that, at times, thickness of cultural layers in Novgorod exceeded 6 meters (Oleynikov *et al.* 2016).

For a relatively long time, archaeology in Vladimir, the capital of Northeastern Ruthenia in 12th-13th centuries, remained in the shadow of research done in other cities. Eventually, in the 1990s, a group of researchers led by Yu. E. Zharnov, made exceptional discoveries (Zharnov 2009). As of writing, researchers in Vladimir covered some 30 000 m<sup>2</sup>, dated its fortifications and revised its historical map (Milovanov, Zelentsova 2014).

Under the new law, numerous 18th-19th century palaces and parks in Saint Petersburg and its vicinity became full-fledged archaeological objects. Massive-scale

archaeological excavations took place there, conducted both by state authorities and commercial companies.

In Russia, as was the case elsewhere in Europe, rescue archaeology is “chained” to upcoming transport infrastructure projects – pipelines, roads, fibre optic networks, etc. Motorways are of key importance here, as they require permits for areas that sometime exceed 100 meters in width and, in case of overlapping a monument, require excavation of a relatively large area.

One of the most memorable examples of such works in the past years took place in former East Prussia, on a territory now constituting the Kaliningrad Oblast of Russia. Large-scale excavations began there in 2005 and have been continued to this day (Khokhlov 2013). The territory of Sambia Peninsula is particularly saturated with archaeological objects, yet up until 2005 excavations were mostly limited to graveyards and settlement archaeology had to bide its time. In the early 2000s, trenches covering 1 000 m<sup>2</sup> seemed enormous, but nowadays the area covered reaches tens of thousands of square metres. For example, during one of the latest projects of 2016 on the Sambia Peninsula, Prussian settlement of 2nd-3rd, 7th-10th centuries (Shumnoye-6) was found, covering an area of over 40 000 m<sup>2</sup>. This settlement was located on the right bank of the Aleyka river, some 3.5 km west from the great, eponymous Dolkaim-Kovrovo cemetery. During excavations of such scale, naturally, there was no opportunity to research the topsoil, which was removed mechanically. The researchers’ efforts were focused on studying features sunken in sterile soil (Fig. 4). As a result of researching the most part of the settlement, reconstruction of its layout was made possible.

Excavation and research of the Angara river banks were one of the largest rescue archaeology projects in Russia. They were carried out in preparation for flooding of the Boguchanskaya dam (2007-2012). It was a joint expedition by members of Archaeology and Ethnography institutions of Siberian branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk Universities. Total researched area covered hundreds of thousands of square metres! The researchers were faced with a complex scientific and legal precedent. During prospection survey archaeologists tried to determine boundaries of archaeological sites with some margin in order not to leave places with archaeological relics uninvestigated. Furthermore, it turned out that archaeological features were arranged in irregular clusters down the river, while the officials required the entire area covered by the permit to be excavated. As a result, many trenches were empty. However, it cannot be said that the work



**Fig. 4.** Part of an excavation at Shumnoye-6, a VII-X century Prussian settlement located in the north of Sambia Peninsula (Kaliningrad oblast). Overall acreage of the dig – over 20,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Photo by N. Krenke 2016

has been done in vain. In practice, a unique experiment was conducted with regards to uncovering proofs of human activity along the Angara river over much of its length. The spatial structure of settling the Angara river may be used in the future as a reference model for studying other river valleys.

Other works that bear mentioning were carried out in the “golden storeroom” of Siberia – Tuva republic. Construction of Kyzyl-Kuragino railway and numerous other projects have led to discovery of many archaeological monuments, including those of Bronze Age and Scythian period.

#### ■ “PLUSES” AND “MINUSES” OF RESCUE ARCHAEOLOGY

Finally, we have to return to the question asked at the very beginning of this article. An obvious and important “plus” of rescue excavations is a great multiplication of available archaeological data. At the same time,

the lessened quality of scientific community constitutes a “minus”. Implementation of rescue archaeology projects brought “effective managers” to the forefront, while scholars are being sidelined. In Russia, this is particularly evident; because of low state funding of science almost all archaeologists partake in rescue excavations and remain reliant on leaders of this branch. However, not all is lost. Worst of all, rescue archaeology makes the scientists more reliant on officials, who start to impose their own logic on them. For example, the officials require precise boundaries of archaeological monuments. It’s an understandable wish, as it entails legal and financial consequences. The scientists are required to define said boundaries before imposing archaeological burden on the area (that is, carrying out the digs within the specified boundaries). However, in fact, boundaries of historical monuments are of a purely formal nature, oftentimes barely noticeable and in general not that important from scientific point of view. It is more



important for scientific purposes to define zones, where archaeological finds are concentrated.

Rescue archaeology inevitably creates a lot of informational noise – reports without archaeological content. Finally, it is typical for scientific processing of rescue archaeology projects to remain in the

scientific report stage, never becoming a full-fledged publication.

This enumeration of negative aspects of rescue archaeology is not an attempt to “call it off”, which would be futile. However, it is important to see the weak spots of rescue archaeology to better plan future works.

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