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Philip Johan Tabbert von Strahlenberg: An 18th Century Swedish Prisoner's Research in Siberia

This article analyzes the work done by the Swedish prisoner of the Great Northern War Philip Johan Tabbert von Strahlenberg during his stay in Siberia and aimed at exploring ancient and traditional cultures of Western Siberia and the Minusinsk Basin. A brief overview of earlier studies is presented. The conditions of Strahlenberg's work are outlined. His main interests, from his arrival in Siberia's capital until his return to Sweden, concerned the cartography, ethnology, and archaeology of the environs of Tobolsk and of the entire Western Siberia, Minusinsk Basin, and Southern Siberian highlands in particular. Some episodes in Strahlenberg's activities as a researcher and collector are described with a focus on the difficulties he experienced, specifically when collecting ancient artifacts and written documents. Certain results of his research are highlighted. From the modern standpoint, the article examines the significance of Strahlenberg's work for Russian archaeology at the stage when its basis of sources was being formed. His place among the first experts in Western and Southern Siberian ancient and traditional cultures is assessed. The key role in the organization and consolidation of research in the remote fringes of the Russian State in the early 1700s belonged to the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Keywords: *18th century expeditions, early archaeology of Siberia, P.J. Strahlenberg, ancient and traditional cultures, Siberian peoples, history of archaeology, Russian Academy of Sciences.*

Introduction

The first half of the 18th century witnessed a surge of interest in Russia on the part of Western European countries. The active foreign policy of Tsar Peter I was one of several reasons for that. Russia was at war with Sweden; according to various estimates, from 15,000 to 25,000, Swedish citizens were taken prisoners of war (Makarova, 2013: 125). New attempts to build a sea route to China and India through Russian territories were being made (Aleksiev, 1932: 59). These reasons might have triggered the emergence of works on the Russian State, its history, outstanding personalities, and cultural features in the 1720s and 1730s in Europe (Savelieva, 1984: 65).

Another reason was the need for a more detailed study of new, remote regions, which arose in the early 18th century in Russia owing to expansion of the Russian boundaries in the previous century. In order to secure the status of the Russian Empire as maritime power, which it gained during the Northern War, it was important to find a strait between Asia and America. This might have been one of the reasons that Peter I was extremely interested in organizing a research expedition to the eastern outskirts of the country (Grishchev, 2007: 5–6). Shortly before his death on December 23, 1724, Peter issued a decree on organizing the First Kamchatka (First Siberian-Pacific) Expedition. The decrees Peter issued in February 1718 and February 1721 on submitting and selling ancient

items and “curiosities” to the treasury testify to his interest not only in geographical, but also in historical and cultural research on the Russian lands.

The lack of Russian national scholars and knowledge of how to conduct scholarly studies fostered the need to engage various foreign experts in research works. This need drew Russia into the international process of personnel exchange, which was already familiar to European scholarly institutions by that time when Italian scholars worked in France, and German scholars in England. By the early 18th century, scholarly infrastructure already existed in Europe; and French, German, Italian, and other scientific academies had been created. During the “Great Embassy”, Peter visited European museums and scientific societies. He personally knew famous scientists, such as Gottfried Leibniz, Nicolaes Witsen, and others. The creation of the Academy of Sciences in 1724 was intended to demonstrate the desire of the Russian State to take its rightful place among the contemporaneous enlightened countries. Close connection of the Russian Empire with the German states can explain, to some extent, why primarily German scholars were invited to participate in research activities in the newly created Russian Academy of Sciences. In the first twenty years of existence, forty out of fifty academic positions were occupied by the representatives of the German lands, including L.L. Blumentrost, G.S. Bayer, G.F. Miller, and many others (Alekseeva, 2007: 130). Although by the early 19th century, the Germans in the Russian Academy were somewhat pushed out by the representatives of other European states, over 75 % of the Academy’s members were still German professors.

Interest in Siberian antiquities arose in Europe long before creation of the first scholarly institution in Russia. In the 15th century, a native of Munich, Johann Schiltberger, visited Western Siberia. After his journey, he wrote a book wherein for the first time in Western European literature he cited the word “Ibissibur”. This can be considered the first mention of Siberia (Schiltberger, 1879: 34–36). In this book, Schiltberger briefly described the customs of Siberian people. However, until the 18th century, European interest in Siberia was hardly scholarly. Information often contained many fables, which can be explained by ignorance about the region. The situation substantially changed in the 17th century, after annexation of new lands and the Yermak’s campaign. This period can be viewed as transition from “ignorance to knowledge” (Kitova, 2014: 8), when testimonies ceased to be unfounded and were given by eyewitnesses based on their own impressions.

In the early 18th century, Europe’s interest in the eastern regions of the Russian state took the form of purposeful scholarly study. Europeans who were engaged in gathering information in various fields of knowledge, compiling collections, etc. appeared in Siberia. Thanks

to the efforts of these “pioneers of science”, Russian archaeology has received valuable finds, such as unique items (including those from the excavations of grave-robbers), which were not found during archaeological study of these territories in the subsequent centuries, and could have been irretrievably lost to science had they not been acquired or described by the European travelers. The immigrants from Europe carried out first excavations of archaeological sites in Siberia for scholarly purposes, recorded the ruins of ancient and medieval structures, rock paintings, and stone sculptures, as well as the cultural traditions of the local population before they became transformed by the arrival and settlement of Russians. The results of these studies were published in main European languages, such as German, French, etc., thanks to which new data became available to scholars not only in Russia, but also in Europe. Therefore, the evidence collected in Russia by scholars from Northern and Central Europe is important not only for the history of archaeological research, but also for expanding the knowledge of sources on the ancient and traditional cultures of the peoples of North and Central Asia.

History of research and historiography of the topic

The members of the Second Academic (Great Northern) Expedition had an opportunity to address the materials of P.J. Strahlenberg and analyze them critically. For example, G.F. Miller indicated some errors by his colleague in the designation of geographical names. In addition, he considered erroneous the report of Strahlenberg’s about the spread of the rite of cremation among the population of the Irtysh region. Over two hundred years later, scholars confirmed that the carriers of some cultures in the Upper Irtysh region and Minusinsk Basin had such a tradition of burying the dead; consequently, Strahlenberg was not wrong (Arslanova, 2013: 205–212; Evtyukhova, 1948: 10–11).

P.S. Pallas highly appreciated the work of Strahlenberg. During his travels in Siberia, Pallas complained that the book was delivered to him too late. Since he had a significantly larger number of sources, including those on ancient languages, than Strahlenberg, Pallas, like his predecessor, came to a conclusion about the affinity between the Southern Siberian and Northern European cultural complexes (Belokobylsky, 1986: 22). Citing the data on looting in Southern Siberia, V.V. Radlov referred to the works of Philip Strahlenberg, which mentioned the burials disturbed by grave-robbers (1891: 32–34).

At the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, N.F. Katanov gave a high appraisal of the archaeological studies of Strahlenberg, and proposed “to pay tribute to justice” for the great variety of information about Siberia contained in

the works of scholars of the 18th century. He pointed to the value of the information collected by Philip Strahlenberg concerning languages that had lost their independence by the early 20th century (Katanov, 1903). After a hundred years, the importance of the Strahlenberg's contribution to the study of several language groups, such as Turkic, Mongolian, and Finno-Ugric, was mentioned by L.D. Bondar (2016).

After the Second World War, the activities of German scholars who studied Siberia in the pre-revolutionary period were not appreciated objectively, and there was a tendency to oppose their research to the research of Russian scholars. Personal and academic disagreements between scholars started to be viewed as disagreements between Russians and Germans. A small book by M.G. Novlyanskaya on life and work of Strahlenberg (1966) contains an extensive biographical chapter, which it is not easy to supplement even now, and information on his research activities. The author highly appreciated the Strahlenberg's contribution of to the study of Siberia. According to Novlyanskaya, although the scholar did not have time to publish much after his return to his homeland because of poor health, even “what he did is already enough to range him with those wonderful people who through their work made a valuable contribution to the history of research into our country” (Ibid.: 92).

In 1975, a facsimile edition of Strahlenberg's book *Das Nord- und Ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia* was published. This edition made the materials collected by the researcher more accessible to specialists working on the history of archaeological research of Siberia, as well as on individual archaeological cultures of Western and Southern Siberia (Strahlenberg, 1975). This is all the more important since only a few extracts from the Strahlenberg's materials had been known in Russian before. Unfortunately, to date, his work has not yet been fully translated and published in Russian. However, some materials of Strahlenberg's are still available to the Russian-speaking reader today. In 1985 and 1986, individual chapters of his work were published in Russian in Leningrad (Strahlenberg, 1985, 1986).

The contribution of Philip Strahlenberg to the study of the Tagar culture was mentioned by E.B. Vadetskaya in a historiographic review appearing in the work on the archaeological sites of the Middle Yenisei region (1986: 51).

In his book on the history of studying archaeological sites in Southern Siberia, Y.G. Belokobylsky paid some attention to the scholarly activities of Strahlenberg in connection with the expedition of 1721–1727 led by D.G. Messerschmidt. The author emphasized that these scholars were colleagues and certainly discussed their findings and plans, and thus their ideas can be considered to be the result of joint efforts. However, Strahlenberg stayed in Siberia for a longer time, used a different methodological

approach, and was able to advance “much further in the final results of research” (Belokobylsky, 1986: 10).

In 1989, in his book about the discoverers of the Altai antiquities, M.A. Demin also mentioned the research activities of Strahlenberg and his colleagues in the expedition (1989: 9–10). In the 1980–1990s, the contribution of Philip Strahlenberg to the study of Siberia was noted by the authors of articles on German scholars who visited some sites in that part of Asia (Kulemzin, 1985: 107–108; Kulemzin, Borodkin, 1985: 6–7; Kurochkin, 1999: 9–13).

In the 2000s, the interest of scholars in the history of archaeological research in Siberia, as well as in the role of European scholars in fostering archaeological, ethnographic, and oriental knowledge in Russia, continued to grow. The activities of foreign scholars of Siberia were reflected in articles, conference papers, and in thematic exhibitions (Malysheva, Poznansky, 2000). A report by M.B. Kardaeva on the history of research into the Tomsk petroglyphs, published in 2001, mentions the contribution of Strahlenberg to the study of that site (2001: 430–431).

The work of the Swedish scholar F.R. Martin, published by A.Y. Trufanov, provides some information about the research carried out by the members of the expedition of 1721–1727: for example, about the discovery by Strahlenberg and Messerschmidt of a Chinese mirror with a runic inscription (Martin, 2004: 103, 133–134).

The importance of evidence collected by the expedition of Messerschmidt and Strahlenberg for studying ancient sites in East Kazakhstan was emphasized in the article by D.A. Baitileu, who also pointed out that the activities of these scholars initiated the “whole new era” in the study of this region (2004: 181–182). The article by V.A. Erlikh on research of the Krasnoyarsk Territory, published in 2005, provides some information about research by German scholars of the 18th–19th centuries, including Strahlenberg (2005: 142–145).

In 2000, the author of this article defended a dissertation on the contribution of German scholars to the study of the antiquities of Southern Siberia (Borisenko, 2000). Later, the dissertation was reworked into a book that summarized the study of Southern Siberian antiquities by German scholars of the 18th–19th centuries (Borisenko, Hudiakov, 2005). Later, several articles and study-aids on this issue—in particular, on the contribution of P.J. Strahlenberg to the study of ancient and traditional cultures of Siberia and Central Asia—have been published by the same author (Borisenko, 2007, 2011, 2014a, b).

The article by A.M. Burovsky analyzed scholarly expeditions to Siberia in the 18th century, including those with the participation of German scholars. The author pointed out the encyclopedic nature of the first research expeditions, such as the expeditions of Messerschmidt and Strahlenberg. He also observed that

owing to the large amount of evidence collected, the scholars did not have time to comprehend and publish it fully. As a result, these data had remained unpublished for a long time (and some remain unpublished even today) (Burovsky, 2005: 18–20).

In a publication on the participation of Europeans in organizing academic science in Russia, E.V. Alekseeva mentioned Philip Strahlenberg as a person who “made a great contribution to the exploration and development of territories in our country... who made a great input in studying the Far North of Russia, Trans-Urals, Altai, Far East, and Russian America in the 18th century” (2007: 132).

A Russian translation of diary entries about the journey of D.G. Messerschmidt and P.J. Tabbert (Strahlenberg) in Southern Siberia from November 1721 to May 1722 was published in 2012. These contain some information about the antiquities and culture of the indigenous population (Messerschmidt, 2012: 25–28, 30, 32, 43, 108, 110, 123, 129, 132).

The scholarly activities of the participants in the first expedition to Siberia have become the subject of research supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR). In 2019, the results of research supported by the Foundation were published by I.V. Tunkina. She introduced new archival materials—fragments of personal correspondence by Strahlenberg, which contained information on the evidence collected during the expedition with Messerschmidt. Tunkina emphasized the importance of these fragments, taking into account the loss of Strahlenberg’s archive during a fire in his house in Stockholm in 1737 (2019: 50).

This historiographic overview shows that interest in the activities, personality, and biography of Philip Johan Strahlenberg during his stay in Russian captivity not only does not decrease, but has been increasing.

Research by Captain P.J. Strahlenberg in Western Siberia

In the 18th century, memoirs, diaries, and descriptions left by the people who under various circumstances ended up in the places they described, were of the greatest interest in Europe. The Swedish prisoners of war (the subjects of Charles XII) a large group of whom lived in Tobolsk, were precisely the people who left such “narratives” (Savelieva, 1984: 66). Some of these people were educated in the German city of Halle and were the students of the well-known Pietist preacher Christoph Eberhard (Winter, 1962: 4). A similar worldview made them more united in Siberian captivity. Such unity was probably expressed in the creation of their own gymnasium, the need for which was quite understandable, since the Swedish diaspora of Tobolsk amounted to over a thousand people with wives

and children (Glavatskaya, Tolvardsen, 2015: 221). This educational institution was attended not only by the Swedish, but also by Russian children.

Philip Johan Tabbert von Strahlenberg (1676–1747) was a member of the Tobolsk community. He participated in the Battle of Poltava, but was captured and sent to Moscow. According to the other version of events mentioned by Martin, the elder brother of P.J. Strahlenberg, the future scholar told him that he was not captured near Poltava. In a letter to G.S. Bayer, Martin wrote that Philip, together with their younger brother, accompanied Charles XII after the defeat and fled from Poltava to Turkey. Soon he was sent on a special mission to Wallachia, and was captured on the way to Suceava (Hoffman, (s.a.)). M.G. Novlyanskaya considered this version to be the most plausible, because it was recorded from the words of Strahlenberg himself. The version on captivity near Poltava was included in the *Genealogical Book of the Swedish Nobility* (*Schwedischen Adelsverzeichnis*) in 1719 in his absence (Novlyanskaya, 1966: 28). After it became known in Moscow that Swedish prisoners of war were preparing to escape, about nine thousand captives, including Strahlenberg, were sent to Siberia from the European part of Russia. In the summer of 1711, he arrived in Tobolsk (Ibid.: 8).

Seven years after returning to his homeland, Strahlenberg published the results of his research that was carried out during his stay in captivity in Siberia (1730). While in Tobolsk, with the support of his compatriots, he periodically traveled outside Tobolsk for a short time, in order to collect information on the geography of the surrounding areas, as well as the history and ethnography of the Siberian peoples. It was not always easy to get such information, because one had to ask the local residents, and they did not really trust the captured foreigner. Nevertheless, Strahlenberg managed to draw up several maps of the Tobolsk area and all of Western Siberia; some of these, unfortunately, were lost (Borisenko, Hudiakov, 2005: 80). According to E. Winter, the active cartographic activities of the prisoners of war were most likely associated to some extent with their desire to improve their living conditions, but mainly with scholarly and educational interests (1962: 7). The author’s assumption about material interest was based on the fact that geographical maps were quite expensive at the time (Grishchev, 2007: 11), and Strahlenberg had to be aware of that. The first copy of the map he compiled was lost during a fire in Tobolsk in 1715. The second copy was confiscated by M.P. Gagarin in 1717, and only the third, probably the most complete, copy was sent to Moscow in 1718. This copy of the map was intended for sale to English merchants (Novlyanskaya, 1966: 31), which indirectly confirms the hypothesis on material interest as a basis for his cartographic activities.

At present, five copies of Strahlenberg's map are known in Russian archives and libraries (Grishchev, 2007: 8). During the period when his book *Das Nord- und Ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia* was published in various languages, the map was not included in all editions; for example, it was not present in the edition in German language. Some copies of the map were colored (Andreev, 1965: 42). Probably, not all information appearing on the map was gathered by Philip Strahlenberg himself. Personal acquaintance with S.U. Remezov, knowledge of the available European maps where Siberia was indicated, the help of compatriots in collecting information, and certainly his own diligence and interest determined the content of Strahlenberg's map, which has become an object of active interest on the part of the European society (Grishchev, 2007: 18).

By the time Strahlenberg became acquainted with Messerschmidt in 1721, he already had a certain amount of archaeological and ethnographic data at his disposal, which he could share with his future supervisor and expedition colleague. Messerschmidt, with some difficulties, managed to get permission from the Siberian Governor-General, Prince A.M. Cherkassky to include Strahlenberg in the expedition team.

On March 1, 1721, the expedition left Tobolsk. This year, Messerschmidt and Strahlenberg traveled a large part of the routes in Western and Southern Siberia together, and Strahlenberg also made separate trips on the instructions of the head of the expedition. The results of the research of each scholar can be compared, which is very important for identifying the "curiosities" mentioned in the diaries of Messerschmidt.

Acquiring such things was no easy task. For example, learning that the Naryn governor had "an elegant bronze idol, half animal, half man", Strahlenberg repeatedly tried to see this figurine, and referred to the instructions on collecting ancient things that were given to the expedition; but the governor refused, explaining that he wanted to take the thing to Tobolsk himself (Messerschmidt, 1962: 131–132). This item—a Western European aquamanile in the form of a hollow sculpture of a centaur—was indeed later submitted to the *Kunstkamera*. It has not survived; it was probably destroyed during a fire in 1747. However, there is a drawing of it, which has made it possible for modern scholars to identify this item as a product of medieval Western European artisans (Borisenko, Hudiakov, 1999: 40).

An unsuccessful attempt was also made by Strahlenberg to buy from the Tomsk commandant the pages with prayer texts originating in the Dzungarian lamaist monasteries of the Upper Irtysh region. A relatively large number of these texts was collected in the early 18th century by the participants in the campaigns of P. Stupin and I.M. Likharev, and later delivered to Peter I (Borisenko, Hudiakov, 2009: 29; Knyazhetskaya, 1989: 18–23).

Noteworthy is the report by Strahlenberg, dated April 19, 1721, mentioning "various noble Tatar women" who rode through the streets of one Siberian settlement "on horseback, with great pomp and honor. They were dressed in green and red clothes, sat straight on their horses like men, held whips in their hands, and rode at slow pace. They were followed by maids" (see (Messerschmidt, 1962: 90)). Fifty years later, J.G. Georgi published some drawings of Tatar women from various clans, wearing colorful outfits. A Kazan Tatar woman and Kacha women were depicted wearing red outerwear. The former woman was shown in open-fronted clothes with the wrap on the right side. The Kacha women (both married and young girls) were depicted wearing *khalat* robes. The married woman was represented wearing a *khalat* with the wrap on the right side; young girl was wearing an open *khalat* and pants more suitable for "straight" men's horse-riding style, which was mentioned by Strahlenberg (Borisenko, 2012: 45).

In February 1722, the members of the expedition left for Krasnoyarsk. On the banks of the Yenisei River, near the village of Novoseltsevo, the expedition discovered a rock-drawing representing a man and an animal in red paint. The images were located at a height of about 4–5 cubits (180–230 cm) (Messerschmidt, 1962: 181).

Several "monuments"—stone steles with written characters and drawings—were discovered in the vicinity of the Yus-Beltyr yurts. The heights of the steles were about 170 cm; width was about 140 cm, and thickness reached 35 cm. Expedition members guessed that these stelae were border signs for the Yenisei Kirghiz and Chinese. As a confirmation, Strahlenberg cited Chinese records that said that the Chinese border reached the Yenisei River (Ibid.: 298).

During the expedition, Strahlenberg and Messerschmidt were able to acquire several items with inscriptions and individual characters. Some of these were described in the book of Strahlenberg's, such as an amulet and a mirror with Arabic inscriptions, which were studied and attributed by G.J. Kehr, one of the first specialists in Eastern numismatics in Europe and author of a two-volume catalog of "Kufic and Jochid" coins (Borisenko, Hudiakov, 2005: 82).

During trips as a part of the expedition of Messerschmidt, Philip Strahlenberg recorded (and later published descriptions of) several stone statues that can be considered classic for the territories where they were discovered. Such finds include the "Tes mighty warrior"—an ancient Turkic stone statue of a male with a runic inscription; it was discovered in January 1722 on the Tes River and was later described by Strahlenberg (1730: Pl. XII). The "Tes mighty warrior" was located in the center of graves arranged in a circle, and was facing west (Messerschmidt, 2012: 32). As was established by I.V. Tunkina and D.G. Savinov, the "Tes mighty warrior"

was the only stone sculpture in the Minusinsk Basin, and made in the Uighur tradition, which can be dated to the 8th–9th centuries (2017: 94).

Before meeting with Messerschmidt, Strahlenberg already had some information about ancient monuments: in particular about the statue of “Kosen-kis” (‘Rabbit-maiden’) in the Minusinsk steppe. The statue was discovered in the interfluvium of the Chernyi and Belyi Iyus Rivers on Lake Astrakhan. The statue was very much revered by the local Kyrgyz, who considered the figure to be female and who were extremely concerned that its head had been broken off. This statue was also known under the name of “Kezen-kys-tash”; it was believed that it embodied the image of a male warrior with a saber and *kaptargak* bag on his belt, a vessel in his hand, a sparse beard, and a mustache “in the Polish style” (Messerschmidt, 1962: 159–160).

Conclusions

The time when Philip Johan Strahlenberg participated in the research expedition of Messerschmidt was marked by success. New information was obtained, artifacts were acquired, and excavations were carried out. After the conclusion of the Treaty of Nystad, all prisoners were allowed to leave Siberia and return to their homeland. Messerschmidt was notified about this at the beginning of 1722. However, Strahlenberg did not immediately leave his colleague, and accompanied him for another four months, which showing him to be a devoted friend and true scholar, who highly valued joint work. At the end of May 1722, together with Karl Schulman, who was a Swedish prisoner of war and expedition artist, Strahlenberg left for Moscow, taking some of the materials and collections of Messerschmidt’s to deliver to St. Petersburg (Messerschmidt, 2012: 72).

Seven years after returning to his homeland, Strahlenberg published his book entitled *Das Nord- und Ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia*. The book described various types of archaeological sites, such as graves, inscriptions, medallions, and obelisks (Strahlenberg, 1730: 360–362). The author divided the graves into soil graves, which were located in a chain, had enclosures, and an earthen mound; and rich and poor graves, which differed in the compositions of their burial goods. Strahlenberg considered all flat items, most of which were mirrors, to be “medallions”, and viewed steles and statues as a part of “obelisks”.

In his work, Philip Strahlenberg offered interpretations of some items, and made suggestions about who might be the authors of various written characters and what were the methods of making ancient artifacts (Ibid.: 362–363). Strahlenberg emphasized that no country in

the world had such rare spiritual values as the Russian State, and one could only regret that their study had not started earlier (Ibid.: 312).

During his eleven-year stay in Siberia, Philip Strahlenberg conducted research in various scholarly fields. Some of the evidence he collected is still relevant for scholarship of today. Undoubtedly, it should be evaluated taking into account the level of knowledge and methodological approaches of the early 18th century. Yet, much of what was collected by Strahlenberg three hundred years ago is of interest to modern scholars in the history of science, archaeology, ethnography, and linguistics even today.

The creation of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1724 had an important effect on organizational capacities for scholarly research on Siberia, its natural resources, and the traditional and ancient cultures of the peoples. Thanks to the consolidating role of the Academy of Sciences, for many years to come, expeditions became the main method of studying new territories, fostering discoveries of new archaeological sites, and gathering new material evidence, which provided material and informative bases of sources for further research on the ancient sites and traditional culture of the peoples of Siberia.

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