

PERSONALIA

Following the Tracks of “Gold-Guarding Griffins”



On 12 September 2016, Natalia Polosmak, a Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, doctor of historical studies, Chief Researcher at the Bronze Age Department of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and our friend, observed her first jubilee. All her scholarly life has been connected with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (until 1990, the Institute of History, Philology and Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR) and the Bronze Age Department.

N.V. Polosmak was born in Khabarovsk into a military family and owes much to her parents Viktor Ivanovich and Alla Naumovna. They not only inculcated in their daughter the best human qualities but also encouraged her to study, to acquire the knowledge and skills of an archaeologist, the profession that attracted her as early as her school years. She made her first expedition to the Altai as a member of a group of the prominent Russian archaeologist and specialist in Siberian studies, doctor of historical sciences V.A. Mogilnikov, after which she made her final choice of a profession.

In 1973, Doctor Polosmak entered the Humanities Faculty of Novosibirsk State University—in essence, the school of Academician A.P. Okladnikov. After her first

year, she spent four or five months in expeditions each year. Natalia's first instructor was V.I. Molodin, with whom she subsequently connected her own future.

As a student Natalia was actively engaged in scholarly work, participated in student conferences, prepared materials unearthed during the expeditions, and wrote scholarly reports. Already at that time she published several serious articles (e.g., “The Ceramic Assemblage of Krokholevka-4”, in “Ancient Cultures of the Altai and Western Siberia”, Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1978), which are requested by specialists even today. While a student she was given an Archaeological Excavation Permit that enabled her to conduct independent digs.

After graduation, Natalia Polosmak worked under a salvage project of the Institute of Archaeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Leningrad Branch. In 1981, she began graduate studies at that institution, and during her studies conducted independent excavations, primarily at the Tagar cemeteries. Her adviser was Professor V.M. Masson, a prominent Soviet scholar specializing in the archaeology of Central Asia. However, for her dissertation she chose a Siberian topic: “Culture of the Western Baraba Population in the Scytho-Sarmatian Era”. By that time, the focus of Natalia's research shifted toward the archaeology of the Scythian period. Participation in Central Asian expeditions led by Vadim Mikhailovich substantially enriched her knowledge and understanding of field archaeology.

In 1984, the young scholar submitted her dissertation, completing her graduate studies. In 1985, she defended it with distinction at the Institute of Archaeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Leningrad Branch.

In 1985, Natalia Polosmak took up permanent residence in Novosibirsk's Akademgorodok, joining the institute that became her home as a Junior Researcher.

In the 1980s, she continued to explore problems relating to the Early Iron Age of Western Siberia. She published her first monograph “Baraba in the Early Iron Age” (Novosibirsk: Nauka) in 1987 and conducted excavating the complex burial ground Protoka on the middle Tara River. During that period, N.V. Polosmak was drawn to problems concerning the ancient history of the taiga zone of Western Siberia in the Early Iron Age. Together with E.V. Shumakova she prepared an important monograph “Essays in the Semantics of Kulai Art” (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1991). In this book, the approach of A.P. Okladnikov's school is clearly apparent, which

is based on the extensive use of ethnographic data for interpreting archaeological sources. N.V. continues to use this approach in her investigations to this day.

In northwestern Baraba, Doctor Polosmak discovered a remarkable Neolithic site—Protoka, and presented her findings in the monograph “Neolithic Cemeteries of Northern Baraba” (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1989), co-authored with the physical anthropologists T.A. Chikisheva and T.I. Balueva. This work evidences a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of archaeological sources, which has become fundamental for her subsequent studies.

Natalia Polosmak has always been drawn to problems relating to the Scythian age. Her special area of interest was Gorny Altai (the Altai Mountains). During that period, the legendary inhabitants of the region were enigmatic “gold-guarding griffins” associated with the rich Pazyryk culture, known from the excavations by V.V. Radlov, M.P. Gryaznov, S.I. Rudenko, and V.D. Kubarev. The outcome of her studies was the so-called Ukok project that envisioned the search for and conduct of excavations of the Pazyryk burial mounds with permafrost. Already in the first year (1990) of the investigations, the kurgan at Ak-Alakha-1 cemetery, which she had chosen, yielded amazing results. The kurgan contained an undisturbed burial of two Pazyryk individuals. Unique objects dating to 400–300 BC were preserved in the frozen ground: clothing, utensils, trappings of saddle horses, etc. Excavation of the kurgan required special techniques of studying “frozen” burials. A joint Russian-Japanese project “Pazyryk” was launched with a view of excavating burial mounds on the Ukok Plateau. The leading role in implementing it was assigned to Natalia Polosmak. Over the five years, her archaeological team did an enormous work in excavating the largest Pazyryk tumuli on the plateau (see Polosmak N.V. “The Gold-Guarding Griffins...”, Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1994). A genuine triumph awaited her in 1993 when in the ice of a kurgan at Ak-Alakha-3 a female mummy was discovered with strikingly abundant funerary goods (Polosmak N. “A mummy unearthed from the Pastures of Heaven”, *National Geographic*, 1994, vol. 186 (4)).

Doctor Polosmak presented the results of her excavations of Pazyryk mounds in southern Altai Mountains in the monograph “Horsemen of Ukok” (Novosibirsk: INFOLIO-press, 2001), which shortly after publication became a bibliographical rarity. An enlarged edition has now been published in the Republic of Korea. However, Natalia’s primary contribution is not so much the discovery of a series of unique Pazyryk burials on the Ukok Plateau as the organization and conduct of multidisciplinary study of the unearthed artifacts. Diverse and unique data were published in a series of joint monographs (“The Phenomenon of Altai Mummies”, Novosibirsk: Izd. IAE SO RAN, 2000; “The

Population of the Altai Mountains in the Early Iron Age as an Ethno-Cultural Phenomenon”, Novosibirsk: Izd. SO RAN, 2003). In 1997, Natalia Polosmak defended her doctoral dissertation titled “Pazyryk Culture: A Reconstruction of Worldview and Mythological Concepts”.

Issues relating to Pazyryk culture are continually within her eyeshot. Her important achievements in that area include the monograph “Costume and Textiles of the Pazyryk People of Altai (4th–3rd centuries BC)”, co-authored with L.L. Barkova and analyzing the fabrics from the elite Pazyryk tumuli of central Altai Mountains and Ukok (Novosibirsk: INFOLIO-press, 2011).

Natalia’s works on the Altai are highly appraised by both the scholarly community and the nation. In 2004, N.V. Polosmak was awarded the State Prize in science and new technologies for the discovery and excavation of the unique 600–300 BC Pazyryk tumuli in the Altai Mountains.

In 2001, N.V. Polosmak was elected a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

A stage of no less importance in Natalia Polosmak’s career are the excavations of the Xiongnu elite burial ground at Noin-Ula, northern Mongolia. Artifacts recovered there by Petr Kozlov’s expedition in the 1920s and published by K. Trever and S.I. Rudenko were augmented by new finds (high-quality decorative fabrics, Greco-Roman and Chinese plaques, a Chinese chariot, etc.). Natalia conducted a technically faultless examination of three huge tumuli, removing stones and cutting through the frozen ground by hand layer by layer in a stepwise fashion, even when the burial chamber was twenty meters beneath the surface, as in tumulus 20. Importantly, the finds were published without delay (see Polosmak N.V., Bogranov E.S., Tseveendorj D. “Tumulus 20 at Noin-Ula”, Novosibirsk: INFOLIO-press, 2011; Polosmak N.V., Bogdanov E.S. “The Sudzuke Tumuli, Noin-Ula, Mongolia”, Novosibirsk: INFOLIO-press, 2015). These studies earned for her the National Prize for the preservation of Russia’s archaeological heritage, “The Patrimony of Generations”.

Natalia Polosmak regularly takes part in international and all-Russian conferences with papers, which unfailingly arise interest among her colleagues. As a scholar she is held in exceptionally high repute. She holds grants from major Russian and international scholarly foundations. Natalia has authored more than 200 works, which have been published in Russia, Austria, Belgium, Germany, China, Korea, Mongolia, the USA, France, Switzerland, Japan, and elsewhere.

Doctor Polosmak successfully combines scholarly and pedagogical activities. She gives special courses at her home university in Novosibirsk, and oversees the preparation of graduate and undergraduate students. Natalia Polosmak is a member of the Scientific Council

and the Dissertation Committee of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her scholarly and organizational activities have been repeatedly recognized with certificates of honor from the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

In 2009, N.V. Polosmak was honored with a commendation from the President of the Russian Federation “For longstanding efforts in the implementation of state policy for youth in science and education, and in support of young scholars and specialists”.

One of Natalia’s characteristics is the drive to find something to pursue every day. She cannot conceive of doing without expeditions, at times extreme ones,

and always achieves brilliant results. At present, she is working with Indian colleagues on a project to study the Kushan civilization in Kashmir.

Natalia Polosmak is at the height of her powers and scholarly creative abilities. We, her colleagues and friends at the Bronze Age Department of the Novosibirsk Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, wish her health and success in producing original work, brilliant discoveries in the field and at her desk.

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