

MIKHAIL BRONSHTEIN: A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

Sergei Arutyunov

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Moscow. gusaba@iea.ras.ru

The history of intensive archaeological research into ancient Eskimo coastal cultures on the Russian side of Bering Strait started in earnest in 1955. Dorian Sergeev, then a history teacher in the high school in Ureliki (Provideniya Bay), was inspecting ruins of abandoned villages along the northern coast of the Chukchi Peninsula. By accident, Sergeev and his team of amateur archaeology students discovered some ancient Eskimo burials on the slope of Uellen-ney hill, just above the modern village of Uelen.

Sergeev's discovery was not the first archaeological effort on the Chukchi Peninsula (or "Chukotka," as it is known in Russia). Russia's senior archaeologist Sergei I. Rudenko had already conducted his seminal survey of Chukotka coastal sites, including one in Uelen, in 1945, with its results presented in a well-known monograph (Rudenko 1947), later translated into English (Rudenko 1961). Rudenko covered an immense coastal area by his boat survey, but he did not aim at systematic excavation at any one site during his one-summer trip. In terms of the origins of the continuous large-scale studies of the ancient Eskimo sites in Chukotka, multi-year excavations started in 1957 only, as a direct outcome of Sergeev's discovery, by a team of the then-Institute of Ethnography, Russian Academy of Sciences, led by Professor Maxim G. Levin, with the participation of Sergeev and myself. After the untimely demise of Levin in 1963, we continued excavations at Uelen

and subsequently at the nearby site of Ekven, for a number of years until 1974. On a smaller scale, site excavations and coastal surveys were also undertaken in 1956, 1958, and 1963 by another Russian archaeologist, the late Nikolai N. Dikov from the Northeastern Research Institute in Magadan (SVKNII). Dikov excavated a part of the Uelen ancient cemetery and two additional ancient sites, discovered by Sergeev in 1961, Enmynytyn and Chini (Dikov 1974, 1977; in Sergeev's report spelled *Sinin*). Initially, Sergeev had planned to excavate these sites as well, following his work on the Ekven cemetery. However, the Ekven graveyard was so large it remains only partly excavated even by 2006. To be fair, Dikov had expanded his efforts into interior sites of Chukotka and Kamchatka and several decades later, also on the most ancient, pre-Eskimo sites along the southern portion of Chukchi Peninsula.

Levin's research started first in 1957 at the smaller Uelen burial ground which was completely excavated by 1960. However, the Ekven cemetery is at least five times larger and much more complicated in its layout. The decade-long excavations at Ekven led by Sergeev and Arutyunov were completed in 1974, with the last burial excavated that year labeled № 210. Another burial excavated in 1974, Burial 204, and its accompanying grave goods were the most numerous, the richest and most enigmatic among all of the ancient Eskimo burials ever found in Chukotka. The



Fig.5: Mikhail Bronshtein talks to one of the local visitors from the nearby Native town of Uelen. Photographer, Kirill Dneprovsky, 1997.

antiquity of the Uelen and Ekven graveyards extends for more than a millennium, ranging from the early Old Bering Sea culture at the end of the 1st millennium B.C. and the beginning of the 1st millennium A.D. till the final Punuk/Thule period at the beginning of the 2nd millennium A.D. (Dinesman et al. 1999).

From 1976 and until his death in 1984, ill health prevented Sergeev from going to the field, and, consequently, excavations at coastal sites of Chukotka ceased to a great degree for nearly 15 years. However, archaeological surveys did continue on the south and southeastern coast of Chukotka in 1977, 1979, and 1981 through the efforts of a multi-disciplinary team of ethnologists, ethnohistorians, and archaeologists, including Mikhail Chlenov, Igor Krupnik, Sergei Arutyunov, Levon Abrahamian, and others. The highlight of the survey was the monumental, but rapidly eroding site of “Whale Bone Alley,” reportedly occupied during the late prehistoric period. The Chlenov-Krupnik team also recorded and described many other structures and ruins in the coastal zone of Chukotka along the Bering Strait (Arutyunov et al. 1982; Chlenov and Krupnik 1984), but did not perform any significant new excavations.

In any history, either global or local, it is difficult to answer a question (and indeed it is rarely seriously posed), what would have happened, unless... For example, had Napoleon remained unharmed in the battle at the Arcole Bridge, or had not Gorbachev been elected as a general secretary, or if Stalin had not died in March 1953, etc. Still, I dare to suppose, that very probably, many ancient archaeological sites on the eastern coasts of Chukotka would remain unexcavated and unknown today, should not Mikhail Bronshtein have arrived on an incredibly beautiful day in 1982 at the door of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Russian Academy of Sciences (then called simply the Institute of Ethnography) to apply for the Ph.D. program.

Mikhail Bronshtein (commonly known as “Misha” to many of his friends and colleagues) was not quite a novice in Arctic studies when he entered the program at the Institute of Ethnography. By 1982, he had served two years as a high school teacher in the Russian arctic town of Dikson (Dixon), on the shores of the Kara Sea, followed by several years in the administration of the Department of Culture of the Taymyr Autonomous Okrug (District) in the Russian Arctic. The year before, in 1981, he had published his first ethnological

paper, a moving study of the artistry of the traditional Native masks of Northern Asia (Bronshstein 1981). Bronshstein also had had field ethnographic experience among indigenous people of the Taymyr Peninsula. After entering the graduate program at the Institute of Ethnography, he was captivated by the mysterious allure of ancient Eskimo sculpture and ornamentation. He was literally entranced by the riddle of its exquisitely sophisticated art, which, like a lotus rising from the muck of the swamp, paradoxically issues from a seemingly most inappropriate environment, as the Eskimo art originates within a culture, seemingly shunted to the furthest corner of earth, at the utmost extremes of human adaptation and ecology.

Misha Bronshstein spent a considerable amount of time in the completion of his Ph.D. dissertation, which can be ascribed to his extreme insistence on painstaking analysis and his well-developed sense of academic responsibility (which I may fully attest as his thesis supervisor). With a magnifying glass in hand, he spent endless hours studying every ornamented piece in Sergeev's Uelen and Ekven collections stored at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology (MAE, *Kunstkammer*) in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. Bronshstein further examined hundreds of ancient Eskimo objects in the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM) in St. Petersburg, as well as many stored in the museums of Novosibirsk, Magadan, and Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka. All in all, Bronshstein surely examined more than a thousand items, as well as all the innumerable photos and drawings of the ancient Eskimo ivories published outside Russia. Consequently, Bronshstein successfully distinguished several minor sub-cultural and allegedly sub-ethnic divisions from the general body of ancient Eskimo culture and also proposed a consistent and detailed system for classifying and periodizing prehistoric Eskimo art, described in his Ph.D. dissertation that he defended in 1991 (Bronshstein 1991).

Just four years before, in 1987, Bronshstein's life was dramatically changed by the decision to resume excavation at Ekven—the locale that would become the focus of his activities for the next 15 years. By that time, thirty years had passed following the onset of Levin's excavations at Uelen in 1957 and more than twenty-five years since the start of work at Ekven by Sergeev-Arutyunov's team. Initially, archaeologist Tamerlan Gabuyev was Bronshstein's principal partner, responsible for the professional and logistical aspects of the long-term excavations. After Gabuyev's departure, Kirill A. Dneprovsky, another experienced field archaeologist assumed that role of partner. Nonetheless, the intellectual soul of the renewed Ekven enterprise and its energetic motor was, and mostly remained Misha Bronshstein.

The 1987 excavations at Ekven were supported by the State Museum of Oriental Art (SMOA, in Russian: *Gosudarstvennyi Muzei iskusstv narodov Vostoka*) in Moscow, continuing for more than fifteen years. Eventually, the SMOA operation became an international venture with scholars and students from Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Switzerland, and other countries taking part in diverse aspects of excavation at the settlement site and object analysis. In addition, colleagues from other Russian research institutions joined forces, including the Regional Museum in Anadyr, the local capital of Chukotka. Until the participation of the international team in 1995, the principal effort had centered upon the Ekven cemetery, the focus of the efforts in the 1960s and the 1970s. Other smaller sites were also investigated along the Russian Bering Strait coast, from Provideniya Bay to Uelen and northward (see Dneprovsky, *this issue*). Initially, the most important task facing Russian and international researchers involved coordinating excavation methodology, and logistics, especially aligning the excavation grid, employed by Sergeev's team in 1961–1963, with the squares opened by the new project. On that first expedition in 1987, I was the only person with life memories of the old excavations at Ekven and Uelen, literally “passing the torch” once lit by Levin and Sergeev to the next generation. With this, the new era in long-term archaeological studies of the ancient cultures of Chukotka was started by Misha and his colleagues; they continue it up to this day.

Since 1987, efforts at Ekven have been undertaken nearly every year. The SMOA team first concentrated on new excavations of additional burials at the multi-layer, multi-component ancient cemetery (or, rather, several cemeteries) of Ekven. Subsequently, more effort was diverted into reconnaissance surveys of the coastal areas adjacent to the principal Ekven burial sites. In addition, since 1995, the international team of archaeologists focused on the systematic excavations of the nearby ancient village that contains several subterranean houses. The excavation of houses requires uncovering large areas; consequently, the archaeological enterprise is more complicated and labor-intensive. Nonetheless, the effort within houses yielded impressive discoveries and some truly outstanding results.

A major profound shift in archaeological research has also occurred in the disposition of collections. Unlike the earlier excavations of the 1960s and 1970s, a substantial portion of the excavated site materials (after careful conservation procedures) is now deposited at the Regional Museum in Anadyr; while many objects still join the earlier collections of the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow, which remains the main sponsor of excavations. As a result of the efforts of more than 15 years, the SMOA now conserves one of the world's finest collections of

ancient Eskimo objects of culture and art. This collection, in its quality, size, and thorough documentation, is quite comparable to Sergeev's collections from the earlier years at Ekven and Uelen archived at the *Kunstkammer* (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology) in St. Petersburg; the latter also constitutes one of the world's finest holdings of Eskimo antiquities, with international significance for the study of the history of ancient maritime adaptations in the Bering Sea area.

The SMOA collection has served as a basis for several outstanding exhibits, both in Russian museums and abroad, attracting considerable public interest in the Bering Sea prehistory and ancient art. Several exhibits were accompanied by the production of colorful and exquisite catalogues (e.g., Leskov and Müller-Beck 1993), and other publications, opening many beautiful objects of ancient Eskimo art to an even larger mass audience.

Misha Bronshtein has contributed much to the popularization of the Eskimo and, generally, of Chukotka Native history and culture. His numerous popular articles, catalogues, and exhibits portray the heroic endeavors of the Native people of Chukotka and of their ancestors who managed to attain the highest levels of artistic and spiritual achievements in the most unfavorable conditions, at the very edge of human habitation in the Arctic. Many of Bronshtein's publications have appeared in Western languages, including French, English, and German. This recognition provides evidence of the high stature of Bronshtein's contribution to Eskimology that is widely acknowledged among his Russian colleagues, as well as within the northern research community. The dedication of this special issue to Misha Bronshtein reflects that high esteem and is a true acknowledgement of his accomplishments.

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