

Brian J. Boeck

## Stone of Contention: Medieval Tmutarakan' As a Measure of Soviet Archeology in the 1950s and 1960s

The medieval Rus' entity of Tmutarakan' has been one of the most enduring objects of scholarly interest since the eighteenth century. It is at the same time one of the most enigmatic topics in early Rus' history.

The famous late nineteenth-century Russian archeologist Aleksandr Spitsyn declared:

“Tmutarakan' is an unknown... the history of Tmutarakan' is so dark and uncertain (*neopredeleenna*) that there are no eager volunteers (*net okhotnikov*) to carry out monographic research on its fate. On this topic one cannot locate materials for learned dissertations.”<sup>1</sup>

More optimistically inclined historians, however, have given Tmutarakan' credit for everything from the origins of the Rus' state, to the Cyrillic alphabet, to the seat of the first Rus' bishop. George Vernadsky was one of the most ambitious historians to propose a wide historical role for Tmutarakan', but he cautiously peppered his references to it with such phrases as “surmise,” “it appears,” “may have,” “one may suppose,” “we may likewise conjecture,” “assume,” and three cases of “presumably.”<sup>2</sup> For the skeptics the evidence is too limited to draw any secure conclusions, while for the optimists it provides the key to unlocking mysteries of the Rus' past.

The scattered medieval textual references to Tmutarakan' do not provide enough information to reconstruct its history in full.<sup>3</sup> The Rus' chronicles only provide a few laconic references to Tmutarakan' and it appears variously as a city, an appanage principality, or a “no man's land” to which renegade princes flee and from which they sometimes return to fight other Rus' princes in the eleventh century. The *Slovo o Polku Igoreve*, an epic about an unsuccessful campaign by Igor Sviatoslavich in the twelfth

---

1 Спицын А. А. Историко-археологические разыскания. *Журнал Министерства народного просвещения*. 1909, январь. С. 79.

2 George Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia*, New Haven, 1948, 31, 34, 56, 60, 67, 68, 77, 78, 257.

3 The reliable evidence in Rus' sources is conveniently summarized in Котляр Н. Ф. Тмутароканские заботы киевских князей. *Норна у источника судьбы. Сборник статей в честь Елены Александровны Мельниковой*. М., 2001. С. 191–196.

century, has several references to Tmutarakan', but its authenticity is contested.<sup>4</sup> The scarcity of textual sources has meant that interpretation, imagination and conjecture have played an inordinate role in discussions of Tmutarakan'.

Tmutarakan' is also one of the oldest problems in the historiography of Rus'. If early debates focused on simply locating Tmutarakan' after centuries of oblivion, the unearthing of a purported medieval Rus'ian stone inscription on the Taman' Peninsula near Crimea in 1792 has spawned a continuous process of debate and contestation about its historical significance.<sup>5</sup> Russian historians have shown considerably more interest in this controversial monument than their Ukrainian colleagues and counterparts. I would submit that this can be explained by the fact that Tmutarakan' has long been part of a discourse of dominance concerned with Russian power in the North Caucasus region. In historiographic terms, all roads to the North Caucasus (including the modern day one to Chechnia) pass through Tmutarakan'.

In the mid-twentieth century, it appeared that the age old problem of Tmutarakan' could be decisively resolved by discoveries in archaeology and ancillary disciplines such as folkloristics, metrology, and epigraphy. In fact, two of the most prominent archeologists and historians of the Soviet era tackled the problem of Tmutarakan' in the nineteen fifties and sixties. Boris Aleksandrovich Rybakov (1908–2001), one of the most influential Russian scholar-bureaucrats of the twentieth century, advanced an optimistic, Great Russian national agenda to demonstrate the importance of Tmutarakan' in early Russian history. Aleksander L'vovich Mongait (1915–1976), an accomplished Marxist archeologist, advocated a skeptical approach towards expansive claims about the Slavic role in the history of this enigmatic entity. This article will survey the dispute between Mongait and Rybakov over Tmutarakan', evaluate their methods of interpreting and presenting evidence, and demonstrate how power prevailed over professionalism within the Soviet archeological establishment of the 1950s and 1960s.

Both scholars seem to have developed an interest in Tmutarakan' in the nineteen forties. Mongait apparently became interested in the topic as a result of his celebrated excavations of Old Riazan'.<sup>6</sup> The Primary chronicle suggested a connection between Riazan' and Tmutarakan' (in 1078 Oleg of Riazan' fled to Tmutarakan') and the eighteenth century historian V. N. Tatishchev had identified Tmutarakan' as Riazan'.<sup>7</sup> B. A. Gorodtsov, a Soviet archeologist, claimed that certain pottery finds in the Kuban'

---

4 For the skeptical view, consult Edward L. Keenan, *Josef Dobrovský and the Origins of the Igor Tale* (Cambridge, 2004). The voluminous literature championing its authenticity is presented effectively in Творогов О. В., ред. *Энциклопедия "Слова о полку Игореве"*, в 5 тт. СПб., 1995.

5 For the process of debate and contention, see my study: A tale of two stones: comparing contested epigraphic artifacts from Kensington, Minnesota and Kievan Rus'. *Festschrift for Thomas Noonan*, Volume II, *Russian history/Histoire Russ* (forthcoming 2005).

6 Монгайт А. Л. *Старая Рязань*. М., 1955.

7 Монгайт А. Л. *Надпись на камне*. М. 1969. С. 27.

region showed connections with types from Riazan'.<sup>8</sup> Rybakov also seems to have been intrigued by reports that local archeological digs had uncovered "Slavic" features in excavations north of the Caucasus along the Black Sea coast. In a 1950 article on the Ulichii tribe he proposed a possible connection between references in textual sources to fifth-century "Evdusians" (the name Evdusian appeared Slavic to him) and reports that cremation practices in a grave complex near Gelenzhik on the Black Sea Coast showed similarities to Slavic customs.<sup>9</sup>

These parallel interests would take a divergent course in the year 1952 at the famous "Crimean session" of the Academy of Sciences. As Mykhailo Braichevs'kyi relates in his *Ruthenica* article devoted to this archeological discussion, in the post-war period the celebration of all things Russian led local publicists and historians in Crimea to proclaim Achilles a Russian, label Scythia a Russian state, and identify Russians even among the remains of Neanderthal-era hominids.<sup>10</sup> At the Crimean session held in Simferopol' in May 1952 an academic discussion was staged in order to ostensibly reclaim the Crimean past from the dilettantes. According to Braichevs'kyi the "main hero of the session" was Rybakov, who advanced claims that evidence of ancient Slavic settlement could be attested all over the Black Sea region.<sup>11</sup> Rybakov is reported to have publicly declared: "We can trace the infiltration (*proniknovenie*) of Slavs in Crimea and Taman' for almost a thousand years prior to the formation of the Tmutarakan' principality."<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the session, Rybakov would promote an ambitious endeavor to appropriate ancient Crimea and adjacent areas of the North Caucasus for Russian history. Tmutarakan' became a keystone used to buttress other, more dubious claims. The very same year, however, Mongait surveyed archeological sites and museum collections in the Kuban' region and found "no characteristics typical of Slavic culture."<sup>13</sup> Because these claims were mutually exclusive, the reputation of each scholar was at stake.

Rybakov soon acquired the resources to test his vision. Buoyed by the success of his extensive study of ancient "Russian" handicrafts (1948) and his Stalin prize, Rybakov became a leading figure in the Soviet archeological establishment.<sup>14</sup> His willingness to pander to Stalin era ideology and Great Russian chauvinism to a large extent help to explain his meteoric rise from a senior research position in the mid-forties to head of In-

---

8 Монгайт А. Л. Некоторые средневековые археологические памятники Северо-Западного Кавказа. *СА*. 1955. XXIII. С. 321. The full Gorodtsov excavation reports were apparently never published.

9 Рыбаков Б. А. Уличи. *КСИИМК*. 1950. XXXV, С. 15.

10 Брайчевський М. Кримська сесія 1952 року. *Ruthenica*, I. 2002. С. 177–78.

11 Ibidem.

12 Гадло А. В. Проблема Приазовской Руси как тема русской историографии. *СРНО*, 2002. 4 (152). С. 28.

13 Монгайт А. Л. Некоторые средневековые археологические памятники Северо-Западного Кавказа. С. 340.

14 For a biographical sketch, see Плетнева С. А., Николаева Т. В., ред. Б. А. Рыбаков. М., 1978. For his acclaimed early work, consult Рыбаков Б. А. *Ремесло Древней Руси*. М., 1948.

stitute for the History of Material Culture in Moscow (1951) to director of the Institute of Archeology in (1956).<sup>15</sup>

A popular article published by Rybakov in 1954 in a journal devoted to the Slavs provides the most substantial and accessible published evidence of his optimistic agenda for re-covering the history of Tmutarakan'.<sup>16</sup> In this publication he launched an ambitious effort to convince readers of the continuous existence of Slavic settlements in the northern Black Sea region from the third century A. D. to the emergence of Tmutarakan' as a "Russian" principality in the tenth century. To do this he wove a slender thread of his own conjectures together with authentic, but creatively interpreted, testimonies from Byzantine and Arab historians. He confidently declared: "Tmutarakan' played an important role in the development of Russian culture and [exerted] beneficial (*blagotvornoe*) influence on the peoples of the North Caucasus."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, according to him it was a rich, prosperous, Russian (*russkii*) city. This putative cultural center and great metropolis was destroyed by the Mongols in 1223, but in the eighteenth century general A. V. Suvorov was able to "liberate this ancient Russian land and once again join it to the rest of Russia (*priobshchit' k ostal'noi Rossii*)."<sup>18</sup> This unsubtle attempt to appropriate the Kievan past and construct an even earlier Slavic pre-history consisted primarily of a series of bold assertions not backed up by either evidence or detailed explanations. Rybakov had announced an ambitious agenda to demonstrate the "huge historical role" of Tmutarakan', but the controversial textual evidence alone could not support such grand conclusions. Only archeology could reveal the contours of such a submerged past.

Mongait also expressed the hope that archaeology might solve many age old problems in the history of Tmutarakan'. In 1955 he even acknowledged the extreme importance of the excavations being carried out by his colleague:

The Taman' archeological expedition of the IIMK, headed by B. A. Rybakov, must solve one of the most complicated problems of Russian history. This is not only the problem of Tmutarakan' and the questions surrounding the history, culture and life of this town, but also the much wider problem of south-eastern Rus' as a whole. In reality was Tmutrakan' just one city, a southern fore-post of

---

15 The chronology of Rybakov's rise is based on Плетнева С. А., Николаева Т. В., ред. Б. А. Рыбаков. The assessment of his rise is mine. For a classic study of the emerging Stalinist approach to the Russian past, consult Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York, 1946). David Brandenberger's recent book provides an excellent treatment of the Russian component of Stalinist culture. See *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, 2002).

16 This paragraph is based upon Рыбаков Б. А. Древние славяне в Причерноморье. *Славяне*. 1954. № 2. С. 22–26. Similar ideas were expressed in a talk given at the Institute of Material Culture, see *Вопросы истории*. 1954. № 8. С. 103. For more on the struggle for control of Soviet archeology in the early fifties, see Конопатский А. К. *Прошлого великий следопыт (Академик А. П. Окладников: страницы биографии)*. Новосибирск, 2001. С. 186–188.

17 Рыбаков Б. А. Древние славяне в Причерноморье. С. 24.

18 *Ibidem*, 24.

the east Slavs, a trading emporium, or was it an expansive region populated by Slavs?<sup>19</sup>

As is evident from the quote, he considered the alternative of a more limited, and hence less glorious, historical role for Tmutarakan'. In spite of his professed faith that answers would be forthcoming, he would have to wait nearly a decade for answers and was ultimately unsatisfied with ones that emerged.

After extensive excavations were undertaken between 1952 and 1955 to uncover medieval layers at Taman', only one truly unexplained mystery remains in the history of Tmutarakan'. Why were the excavation reports never published? By 1956 Rybakov obviously had the power and influence to put into print his views on a whole range of topics, but concerning his pet project of Tmutarakan' he was uncharacteristically tight-lipped. His entire published output on a place that he personally excavated and that he had himself explicitly promoted as playing a "huge historical role" amounted to a few conference abstracts, a four-page popular article, and some newspaper articles. None of these forums demanded any of the footnotes, photographs, or technical documentation required for the dissemination of archeological evidence. Therefore Rybakov's academic silence is perhaps his most important statement about Tmutarakan'. The empirical evidence he discovered seems to have deflated virtually all of his inflated claims about Tmutarakan'.

Support for this conclusion came to light in the form of a slender academic volume (with a small print run) published in 1963 and dedicated to the ceramics and glass materials uncovered during the excavations of Taman'/Tmutarakan'.<sup>20</sup> In a very brief preface to the volume, Rybakov mentioned that his excavations had uncovered, among other things, the foundations of a church built by Mstislav in 1023 and a fortress wall. Although he pledged to publish the evidence for these discoveries in a second volume, it never appeared.

The contents of this first volume made it painfully clear that the excavations had failed to find any substantial evidence of Slavic settlement before the tenth century, and thus all of Rybakov's prior speculations about a thousand years of Slavic presence literally had no foundation. Specialists in material culture concluded that even during the Rus' era of the settlement's history the Slavic population of Tmutarakan' was "insignificant."<sup>21</sup> The "Russian" period of Tmutarakan's existence was not a period of flourishing trade, but was actually a period of decline. Although the site was prosperous under Khazar and Byzantine rule, it could be characterized as depopulated (*zapustevshii*) during the period of Rus' rule.<sup>22</sup>

---

19 Монгайт А. Л. Некоторые средневековые археологические памятники Северо-Западного Кавказа. С. 321.

20 Рыбаков Б. А., ред. *Керамика и стекло древней Тмутаракани*. М., 1963.

21 Плетнева С. А. Средневековая керамика Таманского городища. *Керамика и стекло древней Тмутаракани*. С. 68.

22 Плетнева С. А. Средневековая керамика Таманского городища. С. 70, and Манаева Т. И. Поливная керамика Таманского городища. *Керамика и стекло древней Тмутаракани*. С. 94.

When archeology failed to deliver the desired results, the reliability of folklore for recovering an ancient Slavic presence at Tmutarakan' became a point of contention for the two scholars. Rybakov had extended his optimism to folklore already in his 1954 popular article. He had pronounced confidently that the "most ancient Slavic epic about the struggle of the Antes with the Goths and Avars was preserved in later Kabardian tales, which testify to the ancient cultural influence of the Tmutarakan' Rus' on their neighbors."<sup>23</sup> Once again the curious reader would have to wait several years for him to provide either evidence or a more detailed explanation. It was only in a 1963 book entitled *Drevniaia Rus': Skazaniia, byliny, letopisi* that Rybakov revealed his beliefs about how Kabardian oral tradition had supposedly preserved an ancient Slavic epic.

Rybakov had re-discovered the texts of Shora B. Nogmov, a self-trained Kabardian author who in the 1840s wrote a manuscript on Kabardian oral traditions. His works were later edited and posthumously published by others in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rybakov either neglected to acquaint himself with the historiography devoted to this controversial witness to Kabardian oral tradition or he consciously decided not to complicate his argument with contrary assessments. In the late nineteenth century the famous folklorist Vsevelod Miller had impugned the reliability of Nogmov's texts and an important twentieth-century study had also questioned their veracity.<sup>24</sup> But because Nogmov's text promised to lend credibility to Rybakov's pre-conceived notion that the Antes were an east Slavic polity, he accepted Nogmov's texts as genuine.

Dismissing any influence from later Russian sources, Rybakov utilized passages from Nogmov to recover an "Ante epic" that focused on the sixth-century Avar Khan Baikan.<sup>25</sup> Finding that one of Nogmov's texts bore striking similarities to the testimony of Menander the Guardsman, a sixth-century Byzantine historian, Rybakov pronounced "almost complete compatibility" between the two accounts. He further speculated that the Kabardian song originated as a Slavic tale (*skazaniie*) that entered the "Adygei sphere" during "the epoch of the flourishing of the Tmutarakan' principality" in the eleventh century. Such contacts between Slavs and Caucasians could be further demonstrated by the fact that Nogmov also included a song about the single combat between the Kasog leader Rededia and Rus'ian prince Mstislav that seemed to confirm details from the Rus' Primary Chronicle.

This line of argument had been anticipated by Mongait already in 1955 and provoked a critical response. Although intrigued by the fact that Nogmov's narrative contained information about ancient events, Mongait suggested that Nogmov had read N. M. Karamzin's history of Russia (published between 1816 and 1829) and might

---

23 Рыбаков Б. А. Древние славяне в Причерноморье. С. 24.

24 Brian J. Voeck, Probing Parity Between History and Oral Tradition: Putting Shora Nogmov's *History of the Adygei People* in its Place. *Central Asian Survey*, 1998. 17(2), 322.

25 This paragraph is based on Рыбаков Б. А. *Древняя Русь. Сказания, былины, летописи*. М., 1963. С. 19–22.

have included information taken from books and chronicles in his work.<sup>26</sup> In a footnote he mentioned Soviet orientalist L. I. Lavrov's conclusion that Adygei folklore preserved no memory of the legendary eleventh-century warrior Rededia. He concluded that even if Nogmov's information derived from oral tradition, it would be difficult to establish precisely when testimony about Slavs entered North Caucasian folklore. In 1963, he once again argued that, in lieu of precise evidence, any suggestion that Kabardian folklore had preserved memory of the Antes was based upon supposition.<sup>27</sup> While Mongait concluded that very little was known about Nogmov's sources, he was willing to accept the possibility that Tmutarakan' could have been a conduit through which Slavic traditions entered North Caucasian folklore. Mongait's skeptical note did not even merit a footnote in Rybakov's 1963 study.

Neither Rybakov nor Mongait followed up on the possibility that Nogmov's ancient folklore could in fact be nineteenth-century fakelore. In a 1998 article I demonstrated that in Nogmov's history there are over 25 cases of direct, unacknowledged borrowing from Karamzin that are represented as examples of Kabardian oral tradition.<sup>28</sup> Textual parallels demonstrate conclusively that the entire section on Avar Khan Baikan derives from Karamzin. The section on Rededia and Mstislav, the other link to Tmutarakan', was also borrowed from Karamzin and reworked by Nogmov. Rybakov was in fact correct that Nogmov's texts have Slavic origins, but his chronology was mistaken by over 800 years. In spite of the fact that the speculative approach has been discredited, it has recently been re-embraced by scholars in southern Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Although folklore could be faulted because it was not set in stone, the same could not be said of another critical source: The Stone of Tmutarakan'.

This famous inscription on a slab of marble was discovered in August 1792 on the Taman' peninsula.<sup>30</sup> Its inscription reads: "In the year 6576 [1068] in the 6th indiction Prince Gleb measured the sea over the ice from T'mutorokan' to K'rchev 14000 sazhen." Almost immediately after its discovery, its authenticity began to be questioned and a continuous process of contestation has marked the cultural biography of this monument. This curious inscription consisting of just over sixty characters has

---

26 Монгайт А. Л. Некоторые средневековые археологические памятники Северо-Западного Кавказа. С. 328–329.

27 Монгайт А. Л. О границах Тмутараканского княжества в XI в. *Проблемы общественно-политической истории России и славянских стран*. М., 1963. С. 57.

28 Brian J. Boeck, Probing Parity Between History and Oral Tradition: Putting Shora Nogmov's *History of the Adygei People* in its Place, 319–336. See especially the appendices.

29 The fact that I published my conclusions about Nogmov in Russian does not seem to have influenced the situation. See В. М. Вовк [В. Воеск] Заимствования из Карамзина в «Истории Адъгейского народа» Ш. Б. Ногмова. *Итоги фольклорно-этнографических исследований этнических культур Кубани за 1996 год*. Краснодар, 1997. For the speculative approach, see Голованова С. А., Виноградов В. Б. Тмутараканско-касожские связи конца X века в фольклорном отражении. *СРИО*, 2002. 4 (152). С. 197–184 and Джамихов К. Ф. Тмутаракань и ранние летописные сюжеты о касогах. *Ibidem*, 185–192.

30 The most extensive treatment to date appears in Захаров В. А. Заметки о Тмутараканском камне. *СРИО*, 2002. 4 (152). С. 154–178. The most recent technical study of the inscription is Медынцева А. А. *Тмутараканский камень*. М., 1979.

generated over sixty works devoted to its authenticity.<sup>31</sup> But Rybakov consistently downplayed all doubts about the authenticity of the Stone.

In 1949, Rybakov put the Stone of Tmutarakan' at the center of his study of ancient Russian weights and measures.<sup>32</sup> Employing the inscription on the Stone, Rybakov advanced the idea that a Tmutarakan' *sazhen'* (a *sazhen'* is a unit of measurement similar to the English fathom) existed in Rus'. Without mentioning any of the controversy surrounding the Stone, Rybakov used the text of its inscription to postulate a new unit of measurement. But in order to ascertain its modern equivalent, he needed to figure out a medieval measure of the distance from Tmutarakan' (modern Taman') to Korchev (modern Kerch). The Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus had recorded that the straits of Taman' measured 18 miles. Since shorelines could have changed considerably over the centuries, for Rybakov this medieval measurement was preferable to a modern one. Using a nineteenth-century calculation by P. G. Butkov suggesting that 18 Byzantine miles equaled 21,199 meters, he divided it by 14,000 (the distance in *sazhens* on the stone) to calculate that the Tmutarakan' *sazhen'* was equal to 151.42 centimeters. Yet again one encounters the problem of non-transparency. Rybakov does not state the evidence upon which Butkov (his source) based his calculation of Byzantine miles. Consequently, Rybakov's conclusion depends entirely upon whether or not his secondary source provides an accurate approximation of a Byzantine mile.

It is unclear when Mongait began studying the stone of Tmutarakan', but he eventually formed the opinion that it did not measure up and was thus unreliable for history of metrology. In his 1967 study of the Stone, Mongait disputed the very existence of the Tmutarakan' *sazhen'*. "It cannot be found," he emphasized, "in Russian sources."<sup>33</sup> In his view, the only evidence in favor of the possibility of the existence of such a *sazhen'* is the inscription on the Tmutarakan' stone. The matter was further complicated by the fact that modern scholars do not know precisely how much a Byzantine mile measured. "In a word," Mongait concluded, "the distance recorded on the stone is unknown."<sup>34</sup>

Mongait argued that the existence of a short *sazhen'* was inextricably linked to the authenticity of the Tmutarakan' inscription, but this was not necessarily the case. In fact, in 1949 Rybakov had provided another medieval example, albeit a rather late one, that seemed to confirm the existence of a smaller *sazhen'*. In 1389 the Rus' pilgrim Ignatius of Smolensk reported measurements for the width of the 40 windows in the drum of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and had recorded his figures in *sazhens*.<sup>35</sup> Employing the version of the narrative in the sixteenth-century Nikon chronicle, which reads "v shyrinu imeakhu so stolpom po 2 sazheni," Rybakov derived the size of

31 Захаров В. А. Заметки о Тмутараканском камне. С. 154. 175–178.

32 Рыбаков Б. А. Русские системы мер длины XI–XV вв. *Советская этнография*. 1949. № 1. С. 76–77.

33 Монгайт А. Л. *Надпись на камне*. С. 98.

34 *Ibidem*, 99.

35 George P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. (Washington D. C., 1984), 96–97, 232–233.



a *sazhen*’ from a modern measurement of the same windows.<sup>36</sup> Since he held the windows to be roughly 300 centimeters across, he arrived at a figure of ca. 150 centimeters for the *sazhen*’.

In this case Rybakov appeared to be more empirical than Mongait, whose skepticism made him doubt the value of the existing evidence. So who in fact went to farther links to find the truth? Upon scrutiny, Rybakov’s Tmutarakan’ *sazhen*’ appears to be a product of his own metrological manipulations.

The best modern estimate of a Byzantine mile would appear to undermine Rybakov’s argument. Erich Schilbach posits it as varying between 1312 and 1404 meters.<sup>37</sup> Multiplied by the eighteen mile measurement given by Constantine Porphyrogenitus would yield a distance of between 23,616 and 25,272 meters, a figure significantly higher than the nineteenth-century estimate (21,199) used by Rybakov. Applying Rybakov’s method of calculation to this number would, therefore, generate a *sazhen*’ of 168–180 centimeters. It is critical to note that the median between these is precisely the distance of the *mernaia*, or regular, *sazhen*’.<sup>38</sup> Thus it is highly probable that the Stone provides no evidence for the existence of a special 150 centimeter *sazhen*’.

Rybakov’s second clear-cut example also shows evidence of methodological shortcomings. Instead of consulting the earliest available copies of the Ignatius text, he used a sixteenth-century version. To complicate matters even further, he used an approximate modern measurement of the windows in Hagia Sofia. A seemingly more precise measurement provided by George Majeska suggests that the windows averaged 270 centimeters rather than the 300 centimeters of Rybakov’s un-named source.<sup>39</sup> Taking Majeska’s measurement together with Rybakov’s textual source would yield a diminutive *sazhen*’ of only 135 centimeters.

A reading from earlier manuscripts, in which Ignatius states “*merikh okno so stolpom po dve sazheni bez dvu piadei*,” further dissolves confidence in Rybakov’s rock solid conclusions.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, Majeska’s figure of 270 centimeters when paired with the original reading of Ignatius would indeed yield a *sazhen*’ of between 153 and 160 centimeters. This depends of course upon how one calculates the distance of a *piad*’. But what do we know about the *piad*’? Evidently, not much independently of our

36 Рыбаков Б. А. Русские системы мер длины XI–XV вв. С. 77.

37 E. Schilbach, “Milion,” Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 1991), vol. 2, 1373.

38 He seems to have realized this in later publications. In a late article on measuring instruments of Novgorod he derived a “straight *sazhen*” of 152.76 centimeters from the regular *sazhen*’ by means of geometric formula. He also admitted that even the purported church of Mstislav in Taman’/Tmutarakan’ appears to have been constructed using the regular (176.4 cm), rather than the Tmutarakan’, *sazhen*’. The regular *sazhen*’ appears to derive from Byzantine *orgyia*, which also measured 176.4 cm. Thus, Rybakov seems to have established that Russian measures may derive from Byzantium without actually saying so! Rybakov, B. A. The Measuring Instrument of Novgorod Architects in the Early 13th century. *Social Sciences* (Moscow, 1974), vol. 5, No. 1, 108–111.

39 G. Majeska, Op. cit., 233.

40 Ibidem, 96–97.

conceptions of the *sazhen*'.<sup>41</sup> Paradoxically, Rybakov may have been right about the existence of a shorter *sazhen*' even if his method of obtaining it was wrong. Thus a shorter *sazhen*' may have existed in post-Kievan Rus' of Ignatius, but the inscription on the Tmutarakan' stone contributes very little to the problem of medieval measures because it can only speak through the medium of modern interpreters.

Given the controversy over the length of a *sazhen*', it is surprising that neither Rybakov nor Mongait established whether or not long linear distances were actually measured in *sazhens* in Kievan Rus'. The twelfth-century pilgrimage narrative of Hegumen Daniil provides abundant examples of units of measurement for linear distances. Out of over 130 instances in which units of measurement of linear distance are recorded, the *versta* appears to be the only unit used for measuring distances between geographic landmarks such as cities, lakes, and other features of the built and natural landscape.<sup>42</sup> *Sazhens* were used in over twenty cases to describe short distances between places located very close to one another (roughly corresponding to current usage of yards or meters) i. e. places within the same general area, architectural ensemble, church, etc.<sup>43</sup> This pattern seems to also apply to the translation of Josephus Flavius, which may or may not have been made in Kievan Rus' depending upon which authority one trusts.<sup>44</sup> There is, however, a precedent for measuring large segments of space in thousands of *sazhens* in the Sofiia I Chronicle. Here we find a measurement of "5000 and 400 and 30 and 3 *sazhens*."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, this example cannot be tested, since it refers to the Tower of Babel, a structure whose existence is even less certain than the authenticity of the Tmutarakan' stone.

Following the suggestion of Spitsyn, Mongait intimated that the ancient act of measuring the Straits of Taman' may have served as the starting point for forgery of the Stone.<sup>46</sup> Can it be a coincidence that precisely the same two points, Tmutarakan' and Kerch (Bospor), occur in both a Byzantine text and on the stone? There is no question that the text of Constantine Porphyrogenitus was available in late eighteenth-century Russia, but Spitsyn discounted his own suggestion due to the fact that "a forger would have taken the contemporary *sazhen*', and would have been discovered immediately."<sup>47</sup> Is this in fact the case? Can the 14,000 *sazhens* on the inscription be explained solely in terms of eighteenth century knowledge (or perceptions) of medieval metrology? I would argue yes. It is not essential to resort to complex arguments about Byzantine metrology, conduct tortuous discussions about the actual distance of

41 Шостин Н. А. *Очерки истории русской метрологии XI–XII вв.* М., 1975. С. 27.

42 Consult Igumen Daniil, Wallfahrtsbericht. *Slavische Propylaen* 26 (Munich, 1970).

43 For specific references to *sazhens*, see *ibid*: 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 31, 33–6, 38, 42, 45, 55, 63, 71. 200 appears to be the largest number.

44 For the text, consult Мешерский Н. А., ред. *История иудейской войны Иосифа Флавия в древнеславянском переводе.* М., 1958.

45 ПСРЛ 5: 82.

46 Монгайт А. Л. *Надпись на камне.* С. 104.

47 Спицын А. А. Тмутараканский камень. *Записки Отделения русской и славянской археологии Российского археологического общества.* СПб., 1915. С. 123.

the strait in the year 1068, or construct suppositions about the specific points at which Gleb's surveyors began and ended their journey across the ice.

An eighteenth-century forger could have located in Tatishchev's history both the precise passage from Porphyrogenitus referring to eighteen miles, as well as a suggestion that a Biblical mile is the same as a Russian *poprishche* (equivalent to the *versta*).<sup>48</sup> Using Leontii Magnitzkii's mathematical treatise, which was widely used as a textbook in eighteenth-century Russia, a forger could have inferred, whether or not correctly is immaterial, that miles are a category like *versts* and that a *versta* was divided into 750 *sazhens*.<sup>49</sup> Multiplying 18 by 750 yields a figure of 13,500 *sazhens*. Although this is close enough to the number on the stone to speak for itself, uncertainty about conversion may have convinced him to round up to the nearest whole number. Alternatively, the number might have been rounded up in order to occupy less space on the face of the inscription (2 characters rather than three). Hence metrology can be manipulated to speak just as easily for forgery as Rybakov's self-constructed Tmutarakan' *sazhen*' could be made to speak for authenticity.

Up to this point we have seen various examples of how Rybakov only chose to pursue pieces of evidence that could serve as convenient stepping stones towards his pre-conceived conclusion about Tmutarakan'. He does not seem to have considered alternate, but equally plausible, interpretations of his evidence. But did he do so consciously or carelessly? He clearly knew that the Stone was controversial, yet he rarely communicated this to his audience. He contributed to the canonization of the Stone by backing it with the full weight of his academic authority. After all, he was referred to as "Tsar Boris" by his non-Muscovite colleagues because of his autocratic tendencies over archeology.<sup>50</sup>

Rybakov unequivocally endorsed the authenticity of the Stone of Tmutarakan' by including it in his 1963 compendium of dated Russian epigraphic monuments and inscriptions. While noting that the monument "initiated the study of Russian epigraphy" he failed to mention the controversy that has surrounded the stone since the eighteenth century.<sup>51</sup> He had clearly read Spitsyn, who had published in 1915 the most thorough skeptical evaluation of the stone to that point, but he appears to have consciously suppressed discussion of doubts about the inscription's authenticity. In incorporating the monument into his reference work, he failed to warn readers of the possibility that a key, early inscription may be built on shifting sand not solid rock.

Rybakov's conscious decision to conceal past controversy may have even been provoked by Mongait's skepticism. Mongait gave a talk in the Institute of Archeology in 1963 claiming that the Stone of Tmutarakan' was a forgery. A recently published letter reveals that Rybakov heard the talk just before delivering his *Russkie Nadpisi* to

48 Татищев В. Н. *История российская*. I. 1768. С. 185.

49 Магницкий Леонтий. *Арифметика, сиречь наука числительное*. М., 1703. (Т)

50 Конопатский А. К. *Прошлого великий следопыт (Академик А. П. Окладников: страницы биографии)*. С. 22, 422.

51 Рыбаков Б. А. *Русские датированные надписи XI–XIII веков*. М., 1964. С. 16–17.

the publisher, but nonetheless he decided not to make any changes to his text, not even to add an asterisk or footnote warning potential readers that distinguished scholars had expressed doubts about the Stone.<sup>52</sup>

The fact that Rybakov was familiar with Mongait's research is demonstrated by his statement to D. S. Likhachev in a letter dated July 2, 1963 that "Mongait did not contribute anything new [*nichego novogo... Mongait ne dal*] and did not put forward any new argumentation."<sup>53</sup> In Rybakov's summary, Mongait's argument appeared simplistic:

Catherine II wanted to prove the ancient adherence [of Tmutarakan'] to Russian lands and an obsequious courtier, relying on the enterprising and opportunistic (*pronyrlyvkh*) atamans of the Black sea Cossack Host, concocted a stencil (*sostriapal trafaret*) with a text about Gleb. The stencil was sent from Petersburg to Taman', was glued to the first slab they came across and the inscription was carved using the stencil. Then it was "found" by Anton Golovaty.<sup>54</sup>

Rybakov confided to D. S. Likhachev that he considered the paper to be "weak and strange."<sup>55</sup> He does not appear to have ever subsequently addressed Mongait's argument in print, not deigning to dignify his opponent with a response.

He also worked behind the scenes to make sure that Mongait did not have access to print. Rybakov's general disdain for and desire to suppress dissent is demonstrated by the active role he played in the scholarly trammeling of A. A. Zimin in 1963.<sup>56</sup> Aleksandr Nekrich, a personal friend of Mongait, declared that Rybakov "created obstacles" in publishing for Mongait, who was his opponent in the Institute of Archeology.<sup>57</sup> It is telling that Mongait was only able to publish his study of the Tmutarakan' stone in a popular book devoted to the study of epigraphy.

The evidence adduced in Mongait's study demonstrates that he had clearly read most of the previous studies of the stone, and he even included references to Spitsyn's comprehensive study and recent skeptical appraisals of the Igor Tale. He conducted a thorough independent examination of every feature of the stone from its paleographic evidence to the circumstances of its discovery, and concluded that it was a forgery.<sup>58</sup> He could not declare this directly in a popular publication, so he left the reader with an equivocal impression.

52 Лихачев Д. С. К истории спора о подлинности "Слова о полку Игореве". *Русская литература*, 1994. № 2. С. 250.

53 Ibidem.

54 Ibidem.

55 Ibidem.

56 Ibidem, 250, 260–261. Ibidem, No. 3, 226–227. See also the discussion in Кобрин В. Б. *Кому ты опасен, историк*. М., 1992.

57 Aleksandr Nekrich, *Forsake Fear: Memoirs of a Historian* (Boston, 1991), 262.

58 This is evident from the narrative. Unfortunately, the text was published without a bibliography or footnotes. I have been able to trace virtually of all of Mongait's references back to the sources and believe them to be reliable.

Mongait's study was the first to demonstrate that the inscription could have been concocted in the eighteenth century. He even composed a statement of accusation (*obvinitel'nyi akt*), which utilized considerable new information to argue for an eighteenth-century context.<sup>59</sup> The stone, which documents Prince Gleb's surveying activities across the straits of Taman' to Crimea, surfaced precisely at a time when Russia was completing the annexation of Crimea and when Empress Catherine II was dabbling in medieval Russian history. The Black Sea Cossacks, essentially a creation of Potemkin, were petitioning the court for Taman' in 1791–1792. He had promised them Taman' in 1788, but died in fall 1791 leaving “all his promises hanging in the air.” According to Mongait, the text could have been created in Petersburg and sent to Taman' with a Cossack surveying expedition in summer 1792. There it could have been inscribed on the marble slab and subsequently “discovered.” Curiously, the discovery of the stone coincides with the arrival of the Cossacks at Taman' in late summer 1792.

The response of Soviet reviewers to Mongait's book was highly negative. One reviewer concluded that since Mongait was unable to “refute even a single of the objections” expressed by colleagues during a discussion of his research in 1963, he decided to present his findings in the form of detective story and search for support among millions of non-specialists.<sup>60</sup> A team of reviewers concluded that the only thing fake about the Stone of Tmutarakan' was Mongait's suspicions and took him to task for his unpatriotic skepticism: : “the constant (*postoiannie*) references to such notions as patriotism, national consciousness and others alongside, and in connection with, terms such as fakes and forgeries looks rather strange.”<sup>61</sup> This accusation of lack of patriotism (read failure to promote Great Russian chauvinism) seems to have been a familiar charge against Rybakov's opponents in the sixties.<sup>62</sup> It is fascinating to see the double-standard that was developed to protect “gullible” popular readers. Rybakov's unsubstantiated, but “patriotic,” assertions were apparently appropriate for a popular audience, but professional probing and critical questioning were not.

It is also remarkable that Rybakov's unpublished assessment of Mongait's work on the Stone in 1963 (“*nichego novogo... Mongait ne dal*”) is echoed in subsequent published studies.<sup>63</sup> It is repeated verbatim (“*A. L. Mongait ne dal nichego novogo...*”) on page 282 of the Kuz'min review of 1969. The statement was paraphrased on page 13 of the 1979 Medyntseva monograph (“*A. L. Mongait ne privel nikakikh novykh faktov...*”), then repeated verbatim from Medyntseva in the in article on the Stone in volume 5 of the 1995 Russian encyclopedia of the *Slovo o Polku Igoreve*.

In 1969 (and once again in 2002) V. A. Zakharov based his defense of the stone's authenticity on a clear misreading of Mongait's text. He stated:

59 Монгайт А. Л. *Надпись на камне*. С. 31–33.

60 Кузьмин А. Г. Существует ли проблема Тмутараканского камня? *СА*. 1969. № 3. С. 278, 283.

61 Кудрявцев И., Тиганова Л., Тихомиров М. Поддельные сомнения. *Молодая гвардия*. 1970. № 1. С. 296.

62 V. B. Kobrin relates how he fell victim to similar charges for critical review of Rybakov in the mid-sixties: *Кому ты опасен, историк*. С. 183–184.

63 All works mentioned in this paragraph are cited above.

"Mongait considers it possible that Golovatyi could have received a drawing of the inscription (on paper) and brought (*privezti*) it to Taman', where they selected an appropriate piece of marble and carved the inscription using the model that had been prepared on paper."<sup>64</sup>

This scenario seems to Zakharov to be impossible because the earliest written testimonies concerning the stone date to August-September 1792, while Golovatyi only arrived in Taman in August 1793. Had he bothered to follow Mongait's argument, however, Zakharov would have noticed that Mongait's text reads "the drawing (on paper) could have been sent via Golovatyi [*chez Golovatogo*] to Taman', where Mokei Gulik worked together with surveyors and carvers creating boundary markers."<sup>65</sup> This is an entirely different scenario altogether, one that does not hinge on Golovatyi's personal presence on the scene in Taman' since the Gulik expedition took place in early summer 1792. In spite of Zakharov's declarations to the contrary, there are no contradictions whatsoever in Mongait's chronology.

Sadly, scholarly disagreement about Tmutarakan' became the basis of a personal conflict with life-changing implications. The conflict between these Soviet historical heavyweights over an obscure medieval entity ended in victory for Rybakov. Using his administrative might, he was able to remove Mongait from the editorial board of *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* and the governing council of the Institute of Archeology.<sup>66</sup> When Mongait died, it was even difficult to find a colleague willing to write his official obituary.<sup>67</sup>

This quarter-century long epoch in the lives of two individuals provides a poignant portrait of a particular period in the history of the Soviet scholarly establishment. Rybakov's Great Russian, great power patriotism and political expediency prevailed over Mongait's academic analysis and positivist rigor. In spite of serious methodological flaws in his work, Rybakov was able to maneuver his way to the top of the Soviet archeological establishment. His selective use of evidence and suppression of dissent in the name of promoting a great Russian past helped him to amass power, prestige, and acquire multiple minions through patronage. "Only very few authors would decide to polemicize with the views and scientific methodology of Rybakov," writes V. Kobrin, "and even fewer editors or publishing houses dared to publish criticism of his works."<sup>68</sup> As a committed Marxist and promoter of professional archeology, Mongait was one of those self-selected few. He continued to voice his skepticism until end of the thaw era, insuring that Rybakov's monolithic status in Soviet archeology did not quite become a monopoly.

---

64 Захаров В. А. К вопросу о подлинности Тмутараканского камня. *История СССР*. 1969. № 5. С. 212; Захаров В. А. Заметки о Тмутараканском камне. С. 168.

65 Монгайт А. Л. *Надпись на камне*. С. 32.

66 Формозов А. А. *Русские археологи до и после революции*. М., 1995. С. 84; Aleksandr Nekrich, *Forsake Fear*. 262.

67 Формозов А. А. *Русские археологи до и после революции*. С. 84.

68 Кобрин В. *Кому ты опасен, историк*. С. 183.

Rybakov's frustrated search for a glorious Russian past in Tmutarakan' provides insight into the state of the Soviet archeological establishment of the 1950s and 1960s. The limited pluralism of views prevented outright falsification, but with the commanding heights of scholarship in the hands of Rybakov and his allies he could still set the agenda. Moreover, he could mute dissidents by denying them publication space and prevent their views from entering a grand synthesis of Russian history as Soviet history. If Mongait had not challenged Rybakov's early archeological speculations about Tmutarakan', however, they might have even gained general acceptance.

Tmutarakan' was just a small part of Rybakov's machinations involving medieval history. If this study is any indication, there are numerous other claims scattered throughout Rybakov's massive *oeuvre* do not measure up to scholarly scrutiny.<sup>69</sup> Rybakov's vision of Kievan Rus' as not only a great medieval polity, but also a Great Russian state, has stood the test of time because of its expediency in enabling modern Russians to stake a claim to an expansive ancient past. It is remarkable that Rybakov's late Stalin era synthesis of Russian history was still being assigned to middle school students in the dawn of the Putin era.<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, this independent reexamination of the evidence vindicates the skeptical approach advocated by Mongait. As indicated above, further research along lines first suggested by Mongait has seriously undermined the foundation of Rybakov's optimistic agenda of 1950s. Archeological evidence suggests that here was no great Russian metropolis of Tmutarakan' and no thousand years of continuity. No new monumental, medieval inscriptions in Russian or any other Slavic language have been unearthed at Taman'. The Nogmov texts have proven to be fakelore rather than folklore. The Tmutarakan' *sazhen'* is no more than a product of mistaken calculations. The Stone stands alone, retaining some credibility in Russia. But as this study has demonstrated, even the Stone of Tmutarakan' still remains a stone of contention (*kamen' pretkoveniia*) in ways that «Tsar Boris» (Rybakov) would never have admitted nor fathomed.

DePaul University, Chicago

---

69 For a recent example, see Andrzej Poppe. Introduction to Volume 1. Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'* (Toronto, 1997), lii–liii. Poppe calls Rybakov an archeologist “whose work invariably overflows with conjectures, rarely takes account of the results of research or the exigencies of scholarly method.” This scathing criticism of Rybakov's 1982 publication on Herodotus' visit to Scythia would suggest that his late work was as flawed as his early work.

70 Преображенский А. А., Рыбаков Б. А. *История отечества. Учебник для 6–7 классов общеобразовательных учреждений*. 7-е изд. М., 2001.