Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology https://be-ja.org
Българско е-Списание за Археология ISSN: 1314-5088

vol. 13.1, 2023, 295–300

Article history:
Submitted 25 November 2023
Accepted 5 December 2023
Available online 22 December 2023

News / Отзиви

International Conference "Traceology in St. Petersburg. The 50th anniversary of the founding of the S.A. Semenov Laboratory", 3–5 October 2023, St. Petersburg, Russia

Olga Lozovskaya [a]*, Ignacio Clemente-Conte [b], Maria Gurova [c]

[a] Laboratory for Experimental Traceology, Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, 191186 St. Petersburg, 18 Dvortsovaya Nab., Russia; olozamostje@gmail.com

[b] Archaeology of Social Dynamics, CSIC–Milá y Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities, 08001 Barcelona, 15 Egipcíaques Str., Spain; ignacio@imf.csic.es

[c] Prehistory Department, National Institute of Archaeology and Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2 Saborna Str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria; gurova.maria@gmail.com

* corresponding author

The experimental-traceological method of ancient artefact studies was born and developed in St. Petersburg (at that time Leningrad) between 1930 and 1950. Its founder Sergei Aristarhovich Semenov was a scientist in the Department of Palaeolithic and Neolithic and in the Laboratory of Archaeological Technology, both at the National Academy for the History of Material Culture, which subsequently survived several changes of name and affiliation to become the actual Institute for the History of Material Culture at the Russian Academy of Sciences (IHMC–RAS).

Semenov worked in the conditions of creative and productive scientific research, at the beginning mostly alone. Semenov's seminal monograph "Prehistoric Technology" was published in 1957 and succeeded in promoting his innovative approach to studying, interpreting and learning about prehistoric times. The book was translated into English as "Prehistoric Technology: An Experimental Study of the Oldest Tools and Artefacts from Traces of Manufacture and Wear" in 1964, and went through to several editions, thus becoming a magical cognitive key to understanding processes and phenomena in the past.

In 1957 the first student and successor of Semenov appeared – Galina F. Korobkova. In early 1960 V.E. Shchelinsky joined this innovative discipline and contributed much to improving the traceological method. The first postgraduate students began their scientific careers, attracted by the challenges and prospects of the new research agenda. In 1973 (when Semenov had his 75th birthday) the Laboratory for Experimental Traceology (LET – so named at Shchelinsky's suggestion) was officially institutionalised with a formal certificate from Moscow. From that moment on, a remarkably intensive development of the discipline began. Semenov's students and loyal followers played an important role in this development: G.F. Korobkova, V.E. Shchelinsky, A.K. Filippov, A.E. Matiukhin, N.N. Skakun, etc.

These 50 years since the foundation of LET have changed the scientific world. Today it is unthinkable to imagine a serious and relevant scientific study of the past without data verification by

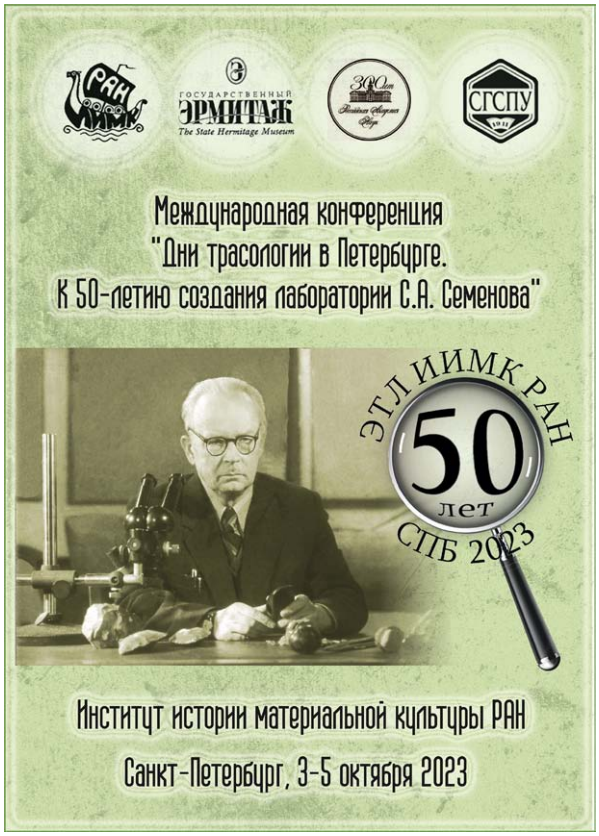

Fig. 1. Poster of the conference
Обр. 1. Постер на конференцията

experimental and/or traceological/wear/functional analyses. Many of the solid and large scientific centres in the world have laboratories and technical equipment that guarantee the correct analysis of archaeological artefacts (fig. 1).

To pay tribute and respect to the first specialised LET, the laboratory of S.A. Semenov, who made a huge contribution to the world of archaeological science, and to evaluate the role of the traceological method in modern research, an international conference was held in St. Petersburg on 3–5 October. This jubilee forum was organised by the current members of the LET and took place in the beautiful conference Oak Hall of the New Michael Palace, where the Institute for the History of Material Culture is located. The event brought together scholars from 10 different countries, 9 of them foreign, represented by the following institutions and cities Argentina (Ushuaia); Belarus (Minsk); Bulgaria (NAIM–BAS, Sofia); China (Changchun); France (Paris, Aix-Marseille, Toulouse); Germany (Tübingen); Italy (Pisa, Ferrara, Trento, Bologna); Republic of North Macedonia (Kočani); Spain (Barcelona, Zaragoza, Santander). Many leading scientific institutions in Russia were also present: Novosibirsk (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (Siberian Branch of RAS); St. Petersburg (hosting IHMC–RAS as well as the Hermitage Museum and the Peter the Great' Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography–RAS); Moscow (Institute of Archaeology–RAS); Ekaterinburg (Institute of History and Archaeology–Ural Branch of RAS); Kazan (Institute of Archaeology of the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences); Yakutsk (Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)); Omsk (State University); Samara (State Pedagogical University); Voronezh (State Pedagogical University); Tyumen (State University), etc. (fig. 2).

The main themes/topics of the conference were focused on the technology of different productions of various materials in the past; the relationship between tool form and function; the correlation between experimental samples and archaeological finds; the production, fashioning and use of different raw materials such as bone, antler, stone, metal; the use and technology of prehistoric art – from

1

2

Fig. 2. 1. The team of the Laboratory for Experimental Traceology;
2. Participants of the Conference (photo D. Shehirev, D. Fedorova)
Обр. 2. 1. Екипът на Лабораторията за експериментална трасология;
2. Участници в конференцията (снимки Д. Шехирев, Д. Фьодорова)

Fig. 3. Moments of the conference in the Oak Hall of the Institute for the History of Material Culture St. Petersburg (photo archive of the organizing committee)
Обр. 3. Моменти от конференцията, проведена в Дъбовата зала на Института за история на материалната култура в С. Петербург (фотоархив на конференцията)

imposing rock art to precious personal objects; pottery in the context of technological and functional analyses; the interactivity of technological and cultural traditions in diachronic and (trans)regional perspective, etc.

The conference was intended to be an international forum with a significant number of foreign scholars, some of whom were directly linked to the LET and its history. The accepted languages were Russian and English. Unfortunately, real life imposed its unexpected (some of them unavoidable) limitations and restrictions, and the number of foreigners participating in the conference online was greatly reduced. The planned simultaneous translation was replaced by automatic translation based on Microsoft Translator – available to all participants via Zoom and in person. It is noteworthy that the conference ran very smoothly without any technical problems, which is quite rare in cases of online and hybrid forums (fig. 3).

A total of 52 papers were presented, divided into the following topics:

- Modern approaches to traceology and their scientific potential – 3 papers;

- The role of traceology in functional and technological studies of archaeological materials. Ancient technologies and their evolution. Reconstruction of activities and subsistence in fisher-gatherer settlements – 17 papers;

- Experimental and archaeological tools, wear comparability and identification criteria – 9 papers;

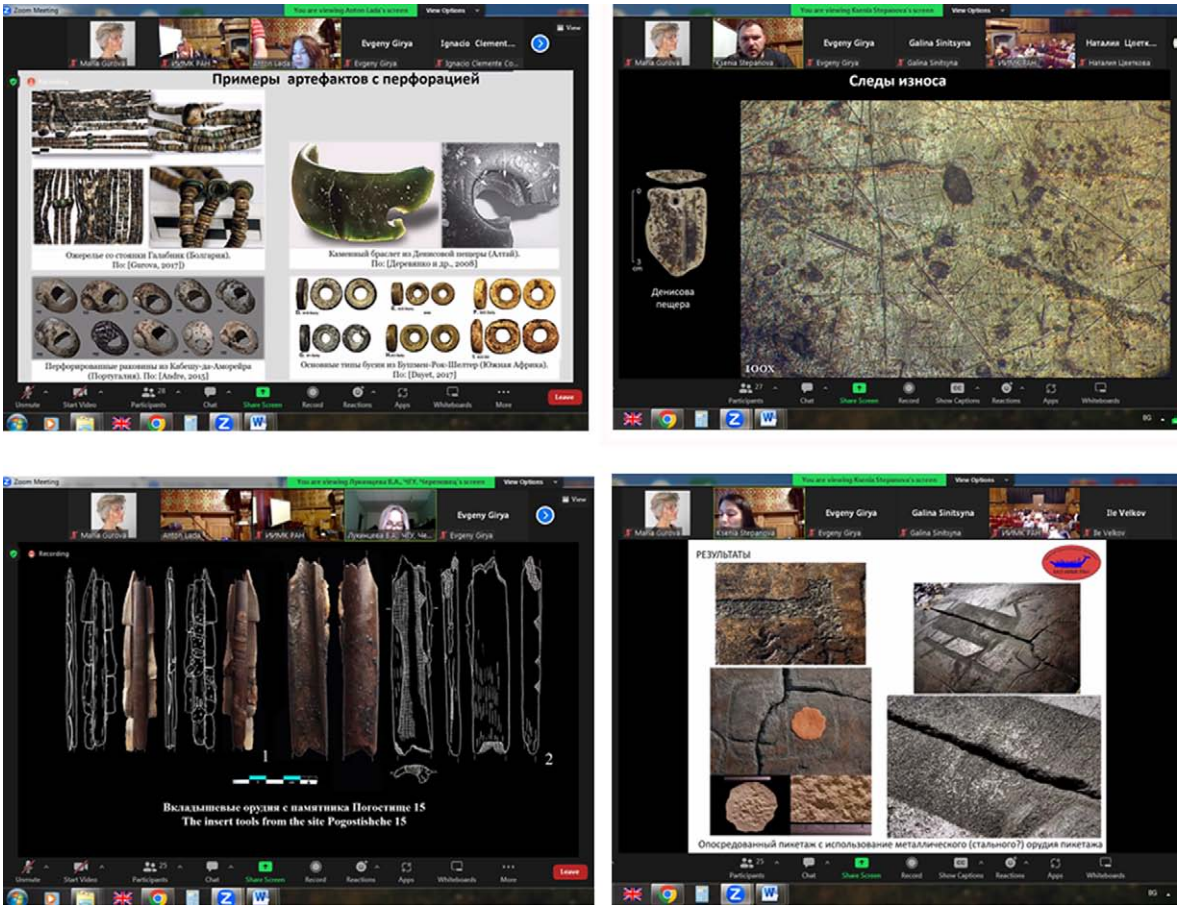

Fig. 4. Moments of the online running papers (photo archive of the organizing committee)
Обр. 4. Моменти от онлайн представянето на доклади (фотоархив на конференцията)

- Form and function of stone and organic tools. Purpose and use – 1 paper;
- Processing techniques and uses of bones as cultural and chronological markers – 4 papers;
- Approaches to the reconstruction of composite tools and weapons – 1 paper;
- Traceology and technology of prehistoric art. From rock art to personal adornment – 4 papers;
- Tools for making ceramics, technological and wear traces – 7 papers;
- Morphological vs. traceological features in the analysis of wear. Functional concepts in the classification of archaeological artefacts – 1 paper;
- Ethno-traceological studies – 4 papers.

The papers presented clearly and convincingly showed that all directions of the traceological method of research have developed and evolved: from the choice and use of raw materials; through technological stigmata of artefact production and typological variability of the tools used; to traces of transport and post-depositional surface modifications. Thus, the presentations opened a scientific window looking temporally from 2 million years ago (Early Palaeolithic sites on the coast of the Sea of Azov) to the present, and territorially – from Yakutsk (in Siberia) to Ushuaia in the southernmost Argentine lands. Each presentation was followed by a lively short discussion, which kept the interest of the Collegium in the various topics and challenges of the discipline of traceology alive (fig. 4). These spontaneous questions and comments found their logical conclusion in the final discussion with the main speakers V.E Shchelinsky, E. Gyria, O. Lozovskaya, N. Skakun and I. Clemente-Conte.

What can be said about the conference? Undoubtedly, from a human and professional point of view, the conference would have been more successful and more representative if more foreign colleagues from this sufficiently narrow and highly specialised method of research had looked at the event through a professional rather than a political prism. Such an option would certainly lead to increased representativeness and potential for serious debate on a several challenging problems in everyday empirical practice and theoretical interpretative issues.

To keep traceology vital, efficient, fully scientifically acceptable and respectful, let's not forget that Semenov did not overestimate the purely functional connotation of an artefact, to the detriment of the whole range of technological stigmata accessible through microscopic research. To maintain the high level of our research, we should be very careful and precise in using the appropriate terminology; try to consider each artefact in its complexity, which often includes poly-functionality and many techonomic interventions and modifications; keep in contact with colleagues to exchange experiences and data; think and practice science more in the option of interactivity and collaboration, especially in the field of experimentation. The future will tell whether the positive issues of this event will produce positive results, at least for the participants in the hybrid format in which this conference was held.