

IN MEMORIAM: ALEKSANDR IVANOVICH SAKSA (11 AUG 1951–14 AUG 2022)

A sad message arrived on August 15, the annual “Day of the Archaeologist” in Russia. Aleksandr Ivanovich Saksa had passed away. We truly miss the leading expert in the early history of Karelia and senior research fellow at the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg (ИИМК РАН).

Aleksandr Saksa – better known as Aleksanteri, Sasha, Santtu or Santeri among his friends in Finland – was born in Petrozavodsk. His Finnish-speaking family was from Ingermanland and belonged to the Ingrian Finns (more precisely, *savakot*). Their small farm, located in the village of Gorki (Korkka) in the municipality of Gubanitsy, was dear to Aleksandr Saksa throughout his adult life. The farm’s old smoke sauna and peaceful garden gave a nice contrast to his busy life that never lacked surprises.

Quoting Saksa’s own words: “*My interest in archaeology started when we school-boys from the village of Korkka in Kupanitsa, Ingermanland, during our summer vacation sometime in the mid-1960s, set out to excavate a kurgan or burial mound near the village, which according to the story belonged to a “Swedish warrior”. Our aim was to find a real sword, because the usual World War II weapons obtained from battlefields in the forests were no longer enough for the boys. – Nothing was found in the burial mound, but the matter itself continued to bother me.*” (Saksa 1998, 11.)

SAKSA’S EARLY CAREER

Aleksandr Saksa had his first lessons in archaeology in the Faculty of History at Leningrad State University in 1973. His most prominent teachers were Abram D. Stolyar, Gleb S. Lebedev and Anatolij N. Kirpichnikov. As a student, Saksa participated in archaeological excavations



Aleksandr Saksa. Photo: Christian Carpelan.

led by Kirpichnikov inside Käkisalmi Fortress (Корела; Kexholm).

In 1978, Saksa was given the position of an aspirant at the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Archaeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences (ЛЮИА АН СССР, later ИИМК РАН). The bilingual and talented young researcher was welcomed to the Sector (now Department) of Slavic and Finnic archaeology.

The Soviet-Finnish working group in the field of archaeology had been established within the framework of the Committee for Cooperation in the Fields of Science and Technology between the USSR and Finland in 1969. Within a few years, a visiting research fellow exchange programme and cross-border symposia were launched. Aleksandr Saksa joined the network as a young scholar and as the fast-learning Russian–Finnish–Russian interpreter.

It was seemingly an easy choice for Saksa to direct his scholarly attention towards Karelia. Since 1945, there had not been but very minimal

archaeological activity in the annexed Karelian parishes – and no access to non-Soviet citizens.

In the beginning, Saksa followed the footsteps of the Finnish “grand old man” Theodor Schvindt (1851–1917). He wished to revisit the Iron Age and Early Medieval sites that Finnish archaeologists had explored many decades ago. The relevant, valuable archive for him was in Helsinki: he needed the copies of the excavation reports by Finnish colleagues of the former generation and maps drawn by them in the field. Saksa received great help from the National Board of Antiquities (later named The Finnish Heritage Agency).

Saksa’s first survey in 1978 was a success: a number of Iron Age and Early Medieval sites in Kaukola, Räisälä, Sakkola and the Käkisalmi rural municipality were found, recorded, photographed and marked on maps. After a promising start, Saksa extended his surveys to the coast of the Lake Ladoga in Hiitola and Kurkijoki, and to numerous other places in the Karelian Isthmus. He discovered previously unknown Crusade Period and Early Medieval settlement sites, sacrificial mounds, cup stones and other features of archeological interest. The early history of Karelia became the topic for Saksa’s candidate dissertation that he completed in 1984 (corresponding to a licentiate academic degree in Finland).

THE KÄKISALMI EXPEDITION AND OTHER PROJECTS

The Priozersk (Käkisalmi) archaeological expedition was led by Aleksandr Saksa for two decades (1978–1997). The project carried out excavations at the Iron Age and Early Medieval settlements in Sakkola (site: Lapinlahti / Ольховка), Räisälä (site: Hovinsaari / Большой полуостров) and Kurkijoki (site: Kuuppala). In the last-mentioned case, even Early Metal Period and Stone Age layers were discovered. The Priozersk expedition also studied ancient hillforts, such as Lopotti, Hämeenlahti and Rantalinnamäki in the parish of Kurkijoki.

Political turbulences occurred and global disbalances changed, including glasnost, perestroika, the opening of the Iron Curtain. Finally, a door opened for Finnish archaeologists to join an archaeological excursion and take part

in a short field work in the Karelian Isthmus in 1988. Aleksandr Saksa proudly guided the visitors at different legendary archaeological sites, the memory of which was not forgotten. On the other hand, many of the former Karelian villages were gone. But, as Saksa put it, “Finnish houses are strong even if in ruins”.

In the following field seasons, a few excavations were carried out in bilateral Soviet-Finnish cooperation. The studies of the Käkisalmi Fortress (1989–1990, 1992–1993) and the burial ground of Suotniemi (Яркое) in Käkisalmi (1991) were conducted in the multidisciplinary fashion with Saksa as the director. The questions were set and analyses made from the viewpoints of archaeology, geology, paleoecology, botanical studies, dendrochronology and ¹⁴C-dating. On the fortified island of Käkisalmi, the oldest wooden constructions were dated to the early 13th century and Viking Age and Merovingian Period artefacts were found. Correspondingly, a few finds at the Crusade Period cemetery site in Suotniemi dated to the earlier Iron Age periods.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Saksa completed his PhD studies at the University of Joensuu, Finland. He defended his doctoral thesis on the settlement history of Iron Age Karelia in 1998 (Saksa 1998). Later, he held the position of associate professor at the Department of History and Geography at the University of Eastern Finland (Joensuu). Preliminary plans for a teaching program in archaeology were also made, but due to financial reasons, they were not made reality there (yet).

The co-operation with Aleksandr Saksa was of crucial importance for the University of Helsinki for the planning of archaeological surveys in the Karelian Isthmus. Any project plans would not even have been realistic without his thorough knowledge of the area. The first field excursion took place in summer 1998 with Saksa as the guide.

Between 1999 and 2003, there was a team of archaeologists from the University of Helsinki in the field in the Karelian Isthmus every year. From the Russian side, new researchers joined the team. Surveys in the parishes of Räisälä, Kaukola, Kurkijoki, Johannes, Koivisto and Kuolemajärvi and a seminar excavation at the Mesolithic and Neolithic dwelling site of Juoksemajärvi in Räisälä were good training

both for the Finnish students and their teachers. Moreover, mutual learning took place: the precise methods applied for field survey by the Finns were well worth considering by colleagues from St Petersburg. A special volume of the Finnish publication series *Iskos* summarised the manifold results of the five seasons of co-operation (Iskos 16, 2008).

Saksa was also invited to participate in the research projects of the Museum of Lahti and worked together with them in Jääski, Kirvu and a few other places in the Karelian Isthmus.

THE VYBORG EXPEDITION

The year 1998 was a turning point in Saksa's career. He became the leader of the new archaeological expedition in Vyborg and opened a test excavation at the foot of the Ratushnaya Tower (Raaitorni) of the medieval town wall. From the Finnish point of view, the site was extremely interesting. The Department of Archaeology at the University of Turku was an important partner for Saksa for many years to follow.

To summarise, the significant result of the Vyborg expedition was the discovery of relatively thick cultural layers and well-preserved wooden constructions that date from the 14th to 18th centuries. Similar observations had been reported by the Finnish town architect Otto-Iivari Meurman before the World War II, but only on a very limited scale. According to the Soviet archaeologist Vyacheslav A. Tyulenev, there would not be much "Swedish" to find in Vyborg.

Thanks to Saksa and his team, we now know that in the medieval find material, there are leather shoes, wooden and clay vessels, drinking glasses, iron knives and silver coins, fishing gear and items made of bone. The apparent similarities with corresponding finds from a few Swedish towns or German trade goods in Reval (Tallinn) speak for a lively medieval harbor in the Gulf of Vyborg and urban life inside the 15th century town wall.

Saksa found it very important that residents of the town became aware of its history and he invited young persons to work on excavations. For administrative reasons, the expedition left the layers and walls on the Vyborg castle island for other researchers to explore.

The Vyborg expedition would not have led to much progress without the long and fruitful co-operation with the Foundation for Karelian Culture (Karjalaisen Kulttuurin Edistämissäätiö) in Joensuu. From the Russian side, a major source of financial support was Gazprom Neft.

Excursions to maritime contexts became possible for Saksa in co-operation with the expedition of the Russian Geographical Society. Small-scale excavations were conducted on the islands Lavansaari (Мощный остров) and Tytärsaari (Большой Тютере) in the Gulf of Finland.

Year after year, Saksa strived hard for the long-term protection of cultural heritage in Vyborg. The level of interest was very modest from the side of the local and regional administrations in the beginning. Nevertheless, Aleksandr Saksa's remarkable diplomatic skills led him to success. The public interest towards archaeology and early history gradually increased. Officials expressed their changing attitudes and agreements were signed that favored a few developments in heritage management.

Since 2013, the finds from town excavations have been on display in the permanent exhibition of the Hermitage-Vyborg Centre, located in the Bastion Pansarilax in the outskirts of the medieval urban area. After Saksa's last field season in the town in 2015, the responsibility was given over to his successors from St Petersburg. Medieval archaeologists from the University of Helsinki last visited Vyborg in 2019 and took a few photos of the collection there. Future co-operation with the archaeological staff of the Castle would be desired.

The latest monograph by Aleksandr Saksa is a thorough description and interpretation of the historical plot Luostarinkatu Street 8 (Выборгская улица) in Vyborg (Saksa 2020). He conducted excavations there for three field seasons and explored the wooden buildings at the foot of the small stone house that today has a roof made of bricks in the medieval German style.

A SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AND FRIEND

In order to get a scientific qualification according to the standards of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Saksa defended his doctoral thesis for the second time in St Petersburg in 2007. The printed publication came out in 2010 (Saksa

2010). Altogether, Saksa published roughly 150 articles and participated in several joint publications.

Saksa was a member of the scientific councils of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a member of the presidium of the regional (St Petersburg) centre of the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (ВООПИиК). His tireless fighting for the preservation of ancient sites of the Karelian Isthmus and the historical Vyborg is appreciated.

Aleksandr Saksa was fluent in Finnish and a frequent participant in scholarly and other events and projects in Finland. Regardless of whether he was invited there as the interpreter or not, he translated – and the translations were diplomatic in character, smoothly adapting to the social context.

The Finnish Antiquarian Society invited Saksa to become a foreign member, and he also was a member of the Finnish Literary Society, the Finnish Society of Church History and the Kalevala Society. He also was a frequent visitor of the Karelian Association in Helsinki as a speaker in public events or a highly appreciated guide on bus tours. The Association awarded him the Pro Carelia badge of merit in 2001. A few other societies for Karelian culture and heritage, too, had Saksa as a sincere friend. His way of telling the past and analysing present phenomena was unique, inspiring and enriched with smart anecdotes.

For decades, Saksa was the member – and a key person in the Soviet-Finnish and later Russian-Finnish working group in the field of archaeology. In this framework, among others, he always met a Finnish colleague with pleasure in Leningrad, later St Petersburg. We remember him standing at the railway station, guiding the guests to their place of accommodation and organising visits to museums, archives and archaeological sites. According to this true gentleman, a female archaeologist should have flowers in her office – thus he would buy her a bunch.

Aleksandr Saksa's sovereign way of navigating through the stormy waters of life was that of an optimistic researcher. Challenges were there to be overcome. "I am curious", he said. "Let's see how the problem will be solved." Insightful

humor often loaded sorrows off from his shoulders and from those in his company. On the other hand, he sometimes was all too helpful and found it inconvenient to say "no" to any request, even at the expense of his own wellbeing.

Aleksandr Saksa's latest co-operation with Finnish scholars was the planning of the project *Europeanisation of Finland and the Karelian Isthmus AD 1100–1600*. The application for finances from the Academy of Finland was successful at last in 2022. For the following four years (2022–2026), the project will focus on fortifications and fortified sites, including the castle and town of Vyborg. In current circumstances, the knowledge about sites on the Russian side mostly rely on printed publications.

There was a philosophic undertone in Sasha's warm and bright, open but still somehow secret personality. In his company, a conversation would always bubble. He was genuinely enthusiastic about scholarly knowledge, such as archaeological discoveries, and willing to share this with everyone – in a learned society or an occasional discussion with a Leningrad taxi driver.

Due to the current Russian political issues, Aleksandr Saksa's Finnish colleagues were unable to follow his last journey from St Petersburg to the Gubanitsy graveyard in person. Our letters of condolence honour the memory of a cordial and benevolent friend.

Pirjo Uino, Associate professor of archaeology,
University of Helsinki, pirjo.uino@kolumbus.fi;
pirjo.uino@helsinki.fi

Mika Lavento, Professor of archaeology,
University of Helsinki, mika.lavento@helsinki.fi

Mervi Suhonen, Archaeologist; a foreign member
of the Vyborg expedition, misuhone@gmail.com

REFERENCES

- Karelian Isthmus – Stone Age Studies in 1998–2003*, 2008. Iskos 16. Helsinki: The Finnish Antiquarian Society.
- Saksa, A. 1998. *Rautakautinen Karjala: Muinais-Karjalan synty ja varhaiskehitys*. Studia Carelica Humanistica 11. Joensuu: Joensuu University Faculty of Humanities.
- Saksa 2010 = Сакса, А. И. 2010. *Древняя Карелия в конце I – начале II тысячелетия н. э.: Происхождение, история и культура населения летописной Карельской земли*. Санкт-Петербург: Нестор-История.
- Saksa 2020* = Сакса, Александр 2020. *Из истории одного Выборгского средневекового дома*. Санкт-Петербург: Арка.