

## Forum

### **Veritable Records vs. Censored History of the Serindica Laboratory at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS**

Alexander ZORIN (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Alla SIZOVA (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich; École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris)

#### **Introductory Note**

The Asiatic Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences was created in 1818 from a collection of Asia-related books, manuscripts and coins within the academy. It was initially founded by Count Sergei Semenovich Uvarov (1786–1855), who was president of the academy from 1818 to 1855, then minister of education from 1834 to 1849, and to whom Russia owes the foundation of numerous educational institutions, museums and libraries. In the course of its history, the museum focused more and more on books and manuscripts and transferred other artefacts to other institutions. The museum was renamed and reorganised several times, and its present incarnation, the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (Institut vostochnykh rukopisei), celebrated its 200th anniversary in 2018<sup>1</sup>, while its umbrella organization, the Russian Academy of Sciences, had its 300th anniversary this year. From the very beginning, both institutions were geared towards international cooperation, which is already evident from the names of the museum's directors (such as Frähn, Dorn, Radloff and Oldenburg), who were world-renowned and internationally recognized. In the field of Serindia research, cooperation was particularly necessary, as the collections (often text fragments) are distributed worldwide. The impetus for such research originally came from Russian colleagues such as Klementz and Radloff and led, for example, to Berlin becoming a center for study in this field, where scholars such as F. W. K. Müller were engaged in deciphering manuscripts. As is widely known, the results of the international experts were so sensational that the history of Central Asia had to be rewritten. Despite all the drastic political and military events and associated setbacks, the cooperation has developed extremely positively, and it is reminiscent of the historical ideal of a

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1 *Aziatskii Muzei – Institut vostochnykh rukopisej RAN. Putevoditel'*. Red. I. F. Popova. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoj literatury 2018. 894 pp. ISBN 9785-9907945-9-7

republic of scholars. The open exchange of information, trust in the expertise and reliability of colleagues and mutual appreciation among the staff still constitute the essential foundation for progress in academic research.

May the esteemed Russian colleagues therefore not regard it as “interference” but rather as a sign of appreciation of their work, should their foreign partners also observe current developments closely and critically with the wish that cooperation may continue smoothly!

Hartmut Walravens, Berlin

This paper serves as a response to an essay by Safarali Shomakhmadov, “Five Years of the Serindica Laboratory in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS: Results and Prospects”, which was published in *Written Monuments of the Orient* 9.2(18), 2023, pp. 122–127. ([wmo.orientalstudies.ru/pdf/2023/2/WMO\\_v.9\\_2\\_18\\_2023\\_08.pdf](http://wmo.orientalstudies.ru/pdf/2023/2/WMO_v.9_2_18_2023_08.pdf))

Our response addresses both academic and moral concerns. It is important to recognize that academics, like all individuals, are subject to moral considerations, although standards may vary across societies and historical periods. Moreover, individuals may act differently depending on the circumstances they face. For example, many scholars in the Soviet Union during the 1930s adhered to the dictates of the oppressive regime, vilifying those labeled as ‘people’s enemies’ and attempting to erase their names from history. However, these ‘enemies’ were later acknowledged as innocent victims of political terror, with the most eminent among them being celebrated as heroes of science. We might have thought that such practices of erasure would remain in the remote past. Even pragmatically, it seems self-evident that any attempts of this kind, in the modern world, are doomed to be futile.

This is why the two of us were so surprised to find that the newly published account of the history of the Serindica Laboratory followed exactly the same shameful practice with regard to the names of three people: Olga Lundysheva, Anna Turanskaya, and Alla Sizova. The three all worked at this laboratory, with Lundysheva having been a key figure who initiated its creation. Lundysheva and Turanskaya left the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the RAS (hereafter referred to as the IOM RAS) at the end of 2021 due to an internal conflict,<sup>2</sup> and Sizova left in the middle of 2022 for reasons connected with matters of civil digni-

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2 The conflict was connected with the decision of the IOM’s director, Prof. Irina Popova, to appoint their longstanding opponent, Mr. Kirill Bogdanov, as the head of the laboratory. This will be mentioned again below, but Bogdanov’s academic biography is peculiar and deserves some attention. He studied Khmer philology at Leningrad State University, graduating in 1988. Subsequently, he pursued doctoral studies at the Leningrad/St Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS (now IOM RAS). However, in the 1990s, he left both the institute and the field of Khmer studies. He returned to the institute in

ty. An intentional omission of their names from the record amounts to a falsification of history, one of the most severe transgressions in the world of academia. In this instance, a moral transgression is inseparable from an academic one. With that said, we can focus on the positive side of our task: rectifying our colleague's academic error by presenting a more reliable account of the laboratory's history, thus dismantling Shomakhmadov's attempt to obscure the contributions of the three individuals who are no longer affiliated with the IOM RAS. To this effect, we intend to focus on the initial three-year period of the laboratory's work. Our account will primarily be based on its official records and the research plans accepted by the IOM RAS's authorities, and we will keep it rather brief to avoid boring the reader with technical details.

The Serindica Laboratory became part of the New Laboratories project commissioned by the Russian government in May of 2018. The idea of applying for this program was suggested by Olga Lundysheva, who had dealt with the manuscripts from Eastern Turkestan written in Brahmic scripts for several years, and the IOM's director, Irina Popova, supported it. As a result, the laboratory was established in late 2018 as a subdivision of IOM RAS's Department of Manuscripts and Documents.

From the very beginning, the laboratory consisted of young scholars, including Olga Lundysheva active in the field of Tocharian, Sanskrit, and Uyghur studies; Anna Turanskaya and Mark Kozintsev in Uyghur studies; Elena Tanonova, Safarali Shomakhmadov, and Artiom Mesheznikov in Sanskritology; Alla Sizova in Tibetan studies; and Kristina Korosteleva as the conservator.

The primary objective was to update the cataloging and research processes for the Serindia Collection, which has a highly intricate structure and encompasses numerous sub-collections in multiple languages (Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tocharian A, Tocharian B (Kuchean), Khotan Saka, Sogdian, Middle Persian (Pahlavi), Old Uyghur, Chinese, and Tibetan, among others). The collection consists of more than 6,800 items, most of which are fragments.

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the late 2000s and soon resumed doctoral studies, this time as a student of the Tangut language at the beginner's level. Eventually, he became the curator of the IOM's esteemed Tangut collection without completing his PhD. In his fifteen years as a researcher of Tangut literature, he has presented three Tangut texts in his papers, while several others of his papers have explored the history of research on the collection. Since 2022, he has been the official head of the Serindica Laboratory. It is worth adding that in 2010, he ventured to compile an overview of the Tibetan texts from Khara-Khoto preserved at the IOM RAS, without consulting any professional Tibetologists (regrettably, the overview was published in *Pismennye pamyatniki Vostoka*, 2(13), pp. 263–271). While working with this colleague at the same institution, the authors encountered certain difficulties in finding sufficiently delicate wording to characterize the entirely dilettante essay he wrote to document the history of this collection nine years later (published in *Written Monuments of the Orient*, 2, 2019, pp. 3–18).

These manuscripts were acquired or found in the territory of Eastern Turkestan, also known as Serindia. Expeditions and individuals repeatedly replenished the collection of the Asiatic Museum (the antecedent of the IOM) in the prerevolutionary period, with the last major accession having been registered at the time when S. E. Malov (1880–1957) returned from his second voyage to Eastern and Central China (1913–1915). The few later acquisitions include the famous Sanskrit manuscript from Bairam-Ali (also known as the Merv manuscript), which was excavated in 1966.

Due to the fact that the collection existed as a set of subcollections for a long time, it lacked a unified call number system, which significantly complicated curatorial work. Given its considerable qualitative diversity, researchers focused on individual collections, primarily according to linguistic characteristics, rather than on the entire collection. A comprehensive inventory of all items in the collection was initiated by M. I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya (1933–2021), the then head of the Department of Manuscripts and Documents, in the 2000s.

Despite the significant portion of the collection having been previously researched by scholars, there was a clear need to organize the existing knowledge about the collection systematically and to examine the items that had yet to be published. A logical approach to achieving this was the implementation of a digital database.

In his review, when referring to the topic of a digital database, Shomakhmadov points out that “the main challenge lies in the difficult task faced by the Laboratory team to develop universal criteria for describing different manuscript collections” (p. 124). The present tense used here is noteworthy. The reader may think that these criteria had not been developed during the previous five years in which the laboratory existed. As the database editor until 2022, Sizova can attest that she and Turanskaya did develop such criteria during the laboratory’s *first* year of existence, although they were subject to continual improvement. Fortunately, these criteria were documented in the paper titled “Serindia Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS: Modern Methods of Cataloguing”, authored by Lundysheva and Turanskaya and published in *Digital Orientalia*, 2021, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 8–19 (in Russian).

Between 2019 and 2020, the Serindica Laboratory compiled a bilingual (English and Russian) database for manuscript materials in Sanskrit, Old Uyghur, Tibetan, and Tocharian. Additionally, a system for a Sanskrit dictionary connected to manuscript materials was introduced. Lundysheva designed the dictionary’s architecture, while Mesheznikov was in charge of data entry. Enhancements to the database records included the attachment of miniature images of the restored items and high-quality photographs of manuscripts. Moreover, the laboratory compiled a bibliography of publications, providing laboratory staff with access to a newly created digital library. Korosteleva restored a total of 649 items, with Sizova packaging the restored fragments in new, specialized containers for long-term storage. A significant preservation effort involved the protective copying of pre-restoration materials,

covering 5869 items. This task was undertaken by Sizova, Turanskaya, and Kozintsev, with Mesheznikov managing the comprehensive records of all protective copies.

One of the major results of the first three years of the laboratory's existence is characterized by Shomakhmadov in the following passage: "More than 60 articles were published during the five years of the Laboratory's work."<sup>3</sup> In addition, the first volume of "The Catalogue of the Old Uyghur Manuscripts and Blockprints in the Serindia Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS" was published (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 2021). The Catalogue includes fragments in the Old Uyghur language studied by Russian and international scholars over the past 100 years. The Catalogue is the first published volume with the Old Uyghur fragments from the Serindia Collection. It is a compilation of all the information scattered in various publications that are often difficult to access" (p. 126). It is fascinating, in its own way, to observe how the author of the quoted passage has (or his editors have) managed to discuss the book without acknowledging the individuals who completed this significant international project.

We would like to remind the editors of *Written Monuments of the Orient* how the books should be referred to in professional journals. The correct bibliographic reference to this

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3 Considering that a tally of the articles should only count publications related to the materials of the Serindia Collection, excluding abstracts and reviews, it is difficult to understand how Shomakhmadov arrived at this figure, even if we retroactively add publications by new members of the laboratory. In any case, the papers written by the three scholars whose names were omitted from his overview constitute no less than a third of the total number of articles published. Here is a list of their publications in English alone: Lundyshva O. "A Fragment of a Tocharian B Text Concerning the Conversion of "Uruvilva-Kāśyapa", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, no. 1(11), 2020, pp. 56–70; Lundyshva O. "Tocharian B Manuscripts in the Berezovsky Collection (2): Five More Fragments", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, no. 2(10), 2019, pp. 49–78; Lundyshva O., Maue D., Wille K. "Miscellanea in the Brāhmī Script from the Berezovsky and Krotkov Collections (IOM, RAS) with an Appendix: BΦ-4190", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, vol. 7, no. 2(14), 2021, pp. 3–106; Lundyshva O., Turanskaya A. "Brāhmī glosses of the Uyghur Blockprint of Sitātapatrā Dhāraṇī Kept in the IOM, RAS", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, 1(9) 2019, pp. 12–23; Lundyshva O., Turanskaya A. "Old Uyghur Fragments in the Serindia Collection: Provenance, Acquisition and Processing", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, vol. 6, no. 2(12), 2020, p. 43–64; Sizova A. "Tibetan Manuscript on Birchbark from the Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts RAS", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 55, Juillet 2020. P. 462–474; Turanskaya A. "An Old Uyghur Manuscript Fragment Dedicated to Caitya Veneration", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, vol. 8, no. 1(15), 2022, pp. 27–37; and Turanskaya A., Cengiz A. K. "Old Uyghur Blockprint of Sitātapatrā Dhāraṇī in the Serindia Collection of the IOM, RAS", *Written Monuments of the Orient*, no. 2(10), 2019, pp. 19–38.

Lundyshva and Turanskaya also took the lead in initiating and organizing two significant international conferences on codicology, held at the IOM RAS in December 2019 and November 2021 (they are mentioned by Shomakhmadov on p. 126, without the names, but he does not provide any names in this paragraph, when writing about later events either).

edition might have been given as follows: Lundyshva O., Turanskaya A., Umemura H. *Catalogue of the Old Uyghur manuscripts and blockprints in the Serindia Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS*. Vol. 1. Ed. by P. Zieme; manuscripts conservation by K. Korosteleva; with forewords by I. F. Popova and T. Hamashita. Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 2021. 386 p., ill.

As a matter of fact, at least five reviews of this catalogue were written by scholars who study old Uyghur texts and history: two in English by Jens Wilkens (Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Lower Saxony) and Fu Ma (Peking University), two in Russian by Pavel Rykin (Institute for Linguistic Studies, RAS) and Vladimir Tishin (Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, Siberian Branch of RAS, Ulan-Ude), and one in Turkish by Tümer Karaayak (Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University).<sup>4</sup> The overall tone of all five reviews is positive. We would like to add that the catalogue has a clear and convenient structure, making it easy to find the necessary information. Its coverage is broad, encompassing various aspects of Old Uyghur studies, with a particular emphasis on Buddhist literature, which includes texts from different traditions.

We would have been happy to share Jens Wilkens' hope "that the highly talented Russian scholars will continue their successful collaboration with the experienced emeriti from Japan and Germany and publish a second catalogue volume soon."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the realization of this plan can hardly be expected in the forthcoming years as the IOM's Laboratory Serindica is currently headed by Mr. Kirill Bogdanov, who spared no effort to block even the first volume from being published. Fortunately, it was already too late to prevent its publication. However, he soon succeeded in forcing his younger and definitely more successful female colleagues out of the institute. For this reason, the work on the second volume of the catalogue that was carried out during 2021 could not be brought to completion. A more considerate approach to managing the laboratory could have saved the digital database project, contributed to the continuation of the Uyghur catalogue's publication, and led to more constructive work with the Serindia materials.

Nevertheless, we sincerely wish good luck to those decent colleagues of ours who continue their studies with various parts of the Serindia collection preserved by the IOM RAS. Their names are properly mentioned in the unfortunate publication that has elicited this response from us.

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4 Wilkens J. *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 75 (2022) 2, pp. 341–345; Fu Ma 付馬. 内陸アジア言語の研究 = *Studies on the Inner Asian Languages*. 2022, 37, pp. 143–152; Rykin P. O. *Orientalistica*. 2022, 5(3), pp. 700–705; Tishin V. V. *Vostok. Afro-Aziatskie obschestva: istoriia i sovremennost*. 2023, 1, pp. 266–270; Karaayak T. *International Journal of Old Uyghur Studies*. 2021, 3/1, pp. 123–142.

5 See p. 344 of his review that was written in 2021 when the future seemed more promising.