

*This book is dedicated to my teachers,
my parents first among them.*

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

Russian names, places, and titles are transliterated according to the Library of Congress simplified system, which I have modified for surnames of familiar authors (e.g., Leo Tolstoy, Osip Mandelstam, Fyodor Dostoevsky). For certain names, I have used an established variant (e.g., Nicholas Roerich instead of Nikolai Rerikh; Alexandre Benois instead of Aleksandr Benua). In the scholarly apparatus, however, I follow the LOC transliteration system for all citations to authors and titles. Citations in the text and in the apparatus preserve the transliteration systems used by other authors. For the sake of space, the majority of citations from Russian are given only in translation, except in the cases of poetic texts and specific passages from prose works. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. As I explain in greater detail in chapters one and two, I have opted to transliterate the words *baba* or *baby* (as in *kamennaia baba* and *kamennye baby*) in the majority of cases where the term appears, except when the statue in question is clearly gendered feminine, in which case it is translated as "stone woman" or "stone women." I also follow the source text in deciding when to capitalize the word. Throughout, "kurgan" has been preserved.

INTRODUCTION

You drive on for an hour, and another . . . Along the way you come across a silent old man-*kurgan* or stone *baba*, erected God knows when and by whom; a night bird flies noiselessly above the earth, and little by little the legends of the steppe, the tales of travelers you've met, the stories told by nannies from the steppe, everything you've managed to see and to appreciate in your soul come to mind. And then in the chirring of insects, in the suspicious figures and kurgans, in the deep sky, in the moonlight, in the flight of the night bird, in all that you see and hear, the exultation of beauty, youth, the blossoming of vigor, and the passionate thirst for life begin to be apparent: the soul responds to the call of the beautiful, austere native land, and one longs to fly over the steppes with the night bird. And in the exultation of beauty, in the excess of happiness, you feel yearning and anguish, as though the steppe realizes she is alone, that her wealth and inspiration are being wasted on the world, praised in song by no one, necessary to no one; and through the joyful clamor you hear her anguished, hopeless call: Singer, a Singer!

—Anton Chekhov,
“The Steppe” (“Step’”), 1888¹

It was after I read this passage in Anton Chekhov’s “The Steppe” that this book found its subject. What are these objects that loom

¹ Anton Chekhov, “Step’,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 7:46. For my translation, I have drawn several phrases from the classic translation by Constance Garnett. Anton Chekhov, “The Steppe” (1888), in *Anton Chekhov: Early Short Stories, 1883-1888*, ed. Shelby Foote, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 541-42.

before the narrator—this “old man-*kurgan*” and this “stone *baba*” erected “God knows when and by whom”? The narrator perceives the objects—initially inscrutable—as artifacts of unknown origin, and thus of unknown age, but they quickly awaken memories of stories and storytellers, of legends and tales told to him by nannies from the steppe and passing travelers. And then, as the narrator turns from the “suspicious figures” of the statuary and the kurgan (the Russian word of Turkic origin for a burial mound) and toward the steppe itself, other questions arise: What of that vast, austere field, “unsung and unwanted,” denigrated in Russian cultural history as a boundless monotony of unyielding flat space? Had the steppe’s “riches,” such as they were, found their singer?

These questions animate the central aim of this book, which is to trace how these artifacts and this vast and often maligned space became the quintessential objects and the locus for the Russian modernist creation of an indigenous antiquity, or, as it was called at the time, *nasha rodnaia starina*—our native antiquity. Each chapter focuses on exemplary episodes in which the statuary known in Russian as *kamennaia baba*, (alternatively translated in the coming pages as “stone *baba*,” “stone woman,” or “stone statuary”) and the kurgan became objects of sustained aesthetic and archaeological attention. To that end, the chapters narrate how both were transformed into literary and artistic artifacts of Russian modernism, in line with the period’s preoccupation with archaeology, and, in particular, the archaeology of the Eurasian steppe.

While there are precedents for the modernist appropriation of these artifacts—indeed, one great predecessor we have just seen is Chekhov—it was roughly in the first three decades of the twentieth century that the idea of an indigenous antiquity reached its greatest florescence, conceptual coherence, and polemical force. It was during this period that an indigenous antiquity came to constitute a nexus of cultural, political, and aesthetic values, formal features, and behaviors systematically elaborated within modernist artistic and literary practice.

The statuary and the kurgan were the remarkable, if embattled, sources of that native antiquity. Some formidable obstacles stood

in the way of their promotion to the cultural stature of art, among the most prominent being their uncertain provenance. Along with the frequent denigration of their formal features, the questions of who made the statuary and who buried whom in the kurgans had generated endless speculation from at least the end of the eighteenth century.² But this ambiguity of origins and cultural affiliations became fertile ground for the imagination. And each imaginative act brought to bear upon these artifacts made their transvaluation into antiquities all the more polemical. This meant, in turn, that they also served as arenas for the contention over literary tradition, aesthetic values, cultural identities, and ideologies.

The Russian modernist creation of a native antiquity mounted, then, a significant challenge to the old cultural verities by opposing them with a new conception of Russian identity, landscape, and arts and letters. What enabled the modernists to accomplish this task were the shifting aesthetic and cultural values of modernism itself. To deem these artifacts aesthetically or culturally valuable, and to designate their makers as precursors to the modernists' own experience of modernity or as idealized archaic artists, revealed Russian modernism's departures from such things as the normative concepts of neoclassical beauty or civilizational ideals rooted in settled communities like cities. This antiquity, furthermore, challenged prevailing attitudes and prejudices about Russia's absent or dubious cultural patrimony, which had kept steppe artifacts and the steppe itself—that grandest of all margins—languishing as mere curiosities or as testaments to a cultural void, obscured not only by sediment but by cultural ideologies and poetic commonplaces. In the modernist imaginary, the discovery and new valuation of these artifacts meant that the steppe could no longer be deemed a continent-ocean devoid of culture, depth, and, in some accounts,

² General histories of archaeology in Russia that have been of particular value to the pages to come include: G. A. Fedorov-Davydov, *Kurgany, idoly, monet* (Moscow: Nauka, 1968); A. A. Formozov, *Ocherki po istorii russkoi arkheologii* (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1961); G. S. Lebedev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi arkheologii, 1700-1917 gg.* (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo S.-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 1992); I. V. Tunkina, *Russkaia nauka o klassicheskikh drevnostiakh iuga Rossii (XVIII–seredina XIX v.)* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2002). Studies on specific topics or types of archaeology are cited in subsequent chapters.

time itself. Instead, modernists found in this space the site of their antiquity. Russian history and culture, for them, was forged out of, and sometimes ripped apart by, this conjunction of the deep past and the present within the steppe. The episodes examined in the pages to come mark a turning inward into the vast space of Eurasia to find “riches” in the form of kurgans, stone *babas*, Scythian artifacts, and Eurasian necropolises. It was a turning inward that broadened the sources relevant to Russian modernist arts and letters and the very idea of Russian cultural identity.

i. Archaic Mirrors

The propensity of modernists to find in archaeology not only an expanded world of objects but also models of temporality, of the psyche, and aesthetics prevailed throughout the early twentieth century on an international scale.³ The Russian modernist period itself furnishes us with its own vivid account of the modernist encounter with archaeology by the poet and art critic Maksimilian Voloshin. In his essay “Archaism in Russian Painting (Roerich, Bogaevskii, Bakst),” published in the leading journal *Apollon* in 1909,⁴ Voloshin locates the Russian turn toward the archaic within a broader European tendency that emerged in response to new archaeological discoveries:

The dream of the archaic is the last and most cherished dream of the art of our time, which looked into all historical epochs with such inquisitiveness, searching within them for what was rare, heady, and secretly similar to it. . . . Like a multifaceted mirror, artists and poets spun world history, in order to see in each facet a fragment of their own particular face. The love for the archaic

³ For an overview of archaeology’s influence on various disciplines, see Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴ Maksimilian Voloshin, “Arkhaizm v russkoi zhivopisi (Rerikh, Bogaevskii, Bakst),” *Apollon*, no. 1 (1909): 43–53; reprinted in *Liki tvorchestva* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 274–81. All future citations will be to the latter edition and given in the text. For more on the concept of “archaism” in Russian modernism, see Irina Shevelenko, “Modernizm kak arkhaizm: Natsionalizm, russkii stil’ i arkhaiziruiushchaia estetika v russkom modernizme,” *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 56 (2005): 141–83.

was created by the discoveries of archaeological excavations at the end of the nineteenth century. (275)

What Voloshin refers to here as the “dream” or “love” for the archaic finds an echo in what the American critic Guy Davenport would describe, some sixty years later, as the “passion for the archaic,” which he observed in a range of modernists, from James Joyce and Hilda Doolittle, to Vladimir Tatlin and Velimir Khlebnikov.⁵ That passion, Voloshin keenly observes, was also a passion for oneself. His striking metaphor of a “multifaceted mirror” discloses how the present discerns in the past that which is “secretly similar” to it.⁶ Encounters with archaic artifacts transform them into archaic mirrors. Categories such as discovery and rarity are significant here, but so, too, are those of similarity and necessity; the latter categories highlight how archaeological artifacts find their value not from what they introduce into the present, but rather from what they validate and confirm.⁷ As such, some questions that we can

⁵ Guy Davenport, “The Symbol of the Archaic” (1974), in *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1997), 24.

⁶ Voloshin’s insistence on “similarity” and the transformation of artifacts into “multifaceted mirrors,” anticipates several recent scholarly accounts of what was a pan-European concern. See, for example, Cathy Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Theodore Ziolkowski, *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁷ The art historian William Rubin, for instance, has challenged the standard interpretation of the role that “discovery” played in accounts of the aesthetic tendency known as primitivism in Western European art: “the changes in modern art at issue were already under way when vanguard artists first became aware of tribal art. In fact, they became interested in and began to collect primitive objects only because their own explorations had suddenly made such objects relevant to their work. At the outset, then, the interest in tribal sculpture constituted an elective affinity. . . . The ‘discovery’ of African art, one must conclude, took place when, in terms of contemporary developments, it was needed.” William Rubin, “Modern Primitivism: An Introduction,” in *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin, exhibition catalogue, 2 vols. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 10–11. The concept of “affinity” has, in turn, been critiqued on two fronts: critical and political. In art-critical terms, it fails to recognize both morphological and structural influences, which highlight “the principle of semiological arbitrariness and, in consequence, the nonsubstantial character of the sign” rather than mere formal resemblance (Yve-Alain Bois, “Kahnweiler’s Lesson,” in *Painting as Model* [Cambridge, MA: October Books, 1990], 71–75; and for the political critique of “affinity,”

ask in the coming pages, to follow Voloshin's lead, are: What of the present were these artifacts seen to reflect? What did these *archaic mirrors* bring with them?

Voloshin goes on to reveal several other reasons why archaeological discoveries made such an impact on the modernist imagination, while also pointing to a way that we can distinguish the efforts to recuperate a native antiquity from this pan-European concern. On one level, he observes how archaeological discoveries transform what was once thought of as myth into palpable matter:

It seems that the twentieth century, the first year of which coincided with the beginning of Evans's excavations on Crete, is fated to transgress the last borders of our isolated circle of history; to glance already into the other side of the archaic night; to see the crimson sunset of Atlantis. Since the very minute when the eye of a European saw on the wall of the palace of Knossos the representation of the Minoan king in the form of a red-skinned man, with a crown of feathers, reminiscent of the headdress of the North American Indian, the first connection between a secret legend and historical authenticity was established; and the first tangible evidence of the existence of Atlantis was gripped in our hands. (275-76)

Voloshin here anticipates what, in Hugh Kenner's words, members of this generation experienced as "a growing awareness that since about 1870 men had held in their hands the actual objects Homer's sounding words name."⁸ This sense of the thrill generated by archaeology was confirmed by Voloshin: "When the heroic dream of thirty centuries, Troy, became suddenly graspable and material thanks to the excavations at Hissarlik; when the tombs of the Mycenaean kings were opened, and we could palpate the remains of Aeschylus's heroes, and insert our fingers [like those] of Doubting Thomas into the wounds of Agamemnon—it was

see James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 189-214.

⁸ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 29.

then that something new opened up in our souls" (275). Part of this haptic thrill was the corroboration of myth by matter, and this thrill can be found in the work of a range of writers throughout the twentieth century. As Seamus Heaney, for example, remarked on the pertinence of the discoveries at the burial mounds of Sutton Hoo: "there is something terrifically corroborating about seeing at Sutton Hoo the actual things mentioned in [*Beowulf*]."⁹

One central dilemma Russian modernist culture faced as it sought to recuperate a "native antiquity," however, was the putative absence of "sounding words" for the objects it valorized. The stone statuary and the kurgans were objects that allegedly corroborated nothing and were corroborated by nothing. In this sense, what the modernists and their precursors do is to provide, at last, the "sounding words" for objects, a process that made them reflect the concerns of the present. To understand which particular cultural ideology may have structured a given work's account of these artifacts, or which discursive framework gave shape to the perceptions of a given writer or artist, we need to reconstitute the network of associations in which the artifact operated and the discourses for which they served as metonyms. But they were only partial mirrors: while writers alleged that these objects lacked a literary past—indeed, that is also a commonplace—these objects came in tow with both a wealth of speculation by archaeologists, ethnographers, and laymen and -women, and with a literary past this book also excavates. Time and again throughout this book, these discourses will refer us to a "native antiquity" and to a range of other "isms" and archaic and cultural "mirrors": nomadism and Scythianism will be among the most prominent, but so, too, will be period discourses on primitivism and archaism. What gives even more force to the modernist reclamation project, however, was not only the projection of contemporary concerns into the deep past, but also the polemical place of antiquity in Russian modernism specifically, and Russian culture generally.

⁹ Jon Pratty, "Sutton Hoo Centre Opened by Seamus Heaney," <http://www.culture24.org.uk/history+%26+heritage/time/art12007>, accessed December 1, 2010. See also Sam Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

ii. Elective Antiquities

This is a book about a group of objects that actually *did* emerge from the ground into the light of day. The objects, as it happens, are not new, but they are radical, which is to say that they appear literally and figuratively at the root level of the civilization that unearths them and provide a fundamental alternative that must be encountered.

—Leonard Barkan,
*Unearthing the Past:
Archaeology and Aesthetics
in the Making of Renaissance
Culture*

When Walter Benjamin observed that, “among all the relations into which modernity enters, its relation to antiquity is critical,”¹⁰ he elevated the kinds of encounters with the archaeological past examined in the chapters to come to a central feature of modernity. But from the perspective of Russian modernity (as a term that names the experience of the post-Petrine period) and Russian modernism (as an overarching category for literary and artistic tendencies from around 1890 to 1930), one question that immediately arises is: *Which* antiquity? For Russian modernists, there were myriad antiquities of different provenance and varying degrees of prestige from which to choose. Some found their models in Greece or Rome, others in Byzantium, still others in Egypt or in pre-Petrine Rus’. Indeed, one way to distinguish these camps, with their different aesthetic values and aspirations, is to identify the elective antiquity, as it were, to which they laid claim and whose legacy they claimed as their heritage.

A native antiquity was but one of the elective antiquities conjured by Russian modernists. The tally of examples is quite vast: Andrei Bely and the Argonauts; Viacheslav Ivanov’s vision of ancient Greece and Rome; Osip Mandelstam’s “Hellenism”;

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 236.

Alexandrian Egypt for Mikhail Kuzmin; the varieties of Scythianism espoused by Ivanov-Razumnik, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Aleksandr Blok.¹¹ What all these choices arguably share is that any affiliation carried along with it a distinct cultural ideology and a certain amount of polemical charge. To select any given past was no less difficult for the “Alexandrian” Kuzmin than it was, say, for the “Eurasian” Khlebnikov (a major figure in the following chapters); to do so entailed aligning Russia with a particular mythological or cultural matrix, and thereby recapitulating the accursed questions of Russian cultural identity. The modernists variously challenged Westernizers and Slavophiles; the pagan, the Orthodox, and the secular; the foreign and the indigenous; and (especially after the Revolution) they positioned themselves between the retrospective impulse to construct a past and the prospective visions of a utopian, technologically oriented future.

To better appreciate what invigorated the Russian modernists’ interest in antiquity in general, and what led them to valorize one particular antiquity over another, we could single out some of the most agonized views of Russian culture. As one cultural mythology powerfully asserts, the reforms of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century forced Russia into a radical present, with no past and no future, and severed the country’s ties with its own autochthonous traditions by forcibly adopting cultural models borrowed from Europe. We might recall how this view, codified by Petr Chaadaev in his *Philosophical Letters* (1829-30) and his later “Apologia of a Madman” (“Apologie d’un Fou,” 1837), took aim at

¹¹ See, for example, Judith Kalb, *Russia’s Rome: Imperial Visions, Messianic Dreams, 1890-1940* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Alexander Lavrov, “Andrei Bely and the Argonauts’ Mythmaking,” in *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 83-121; L.G. Panova, *Russkii Egipet: Aleksandriiskaia poetika Mikhaila Kuzmina* (Moscow: Vodolei, 2006); Michael Wachtel, *Russian Symbolism and Literary Tradition: Goethe, Novalis, and the Poetics of Vyacheslav Ivanov* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995). See also the essays in Boris Gasparov, Robert P. Hughes, and Irina Paperno, eds., *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). The bibliography on Scythianism can be found in chapter eight.

Russian history, at its geography—a barren land to match Russia’s barren soul—and at its archaeology:

From time to time *in their diverse excavations, our fanatic Slavacists will, of course, still be able to exhume curios for our museums, for our libraries, but one may doubt if out of the depths of our historical soil they can ever draw something to fill up the emptiness in our souls, something to condense the vacuity in our minds.*¹² (Italics mine.)

When the intellectual historian Mikhail Gershenzon republished these lines in his study of Chaadaev in 1908, he perhaps enabled them to speak again with a special, immediate force to the generation of writers and artists central to this study. In his summary of Chaadaev’s views, Gershenzon added a few choice metaphors of his own. “Such is our present,” he writes:

It is not surprising that our past is like a desert. Everything within it is mute; colorless; cheerless; no enchanting remembrances, no poetic images, no eloquent fragments (*krasnorechivyykh oblomkov*), no monuments inspiring reverence. For all our long lives we have not bequeathed a single idea to humanity; we only perverted ideas, borrowing them from others. And for us, the past is dead. Between it and our present there is not a single connection; what ceases to be present, suddenly falls away from us, disappearing without a trace.¹³

“No eloquent fragments” could have been an alternate—if perhaps inauspicious—title for this book. The Russian land provides no real traces, nor are any traces inscribed in the Russian spirit. The central figures of “*Our Native Antiquity*” might be seen as the spiritual heirs of the *Slavons fanatiques* whom Chaadaev dismisses, inasmuch as they likewise express a deep attraction toward the excavations (which they also sometimes conducted) of these “curios” (*curiosités*)—

¹² Peter Chaadaev, “The Apologia of a Madman,” in *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, trans. Raymond T. McNally (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 206.

¹³ M. O. Gershenzon, *P. Ia. Chaadaev: Zhizn’ i myshlenie* (1908; reprint, The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 84.

or, as the Russian translation of Chaadaev had it, *dikovinki*—that they transvalued and promoted to the cultural stature of art.

What distinguished the Russian modernists from the previous efforts of “fanatic” Slavophiles and any previous enthusiasts of appropriation was their embrace of objects from that alleged void of Eurasia—which meant nothing less than an alignment of Russian culture with figures who were *not* of Slavic origin, with the steppe nomads from the remote and recent past.¹⁴ What, in essence, this means for the strain of Russian modernism examined in this book is that it sought to discover and illuminate new sites in the cultural topography of the Russian Empire in an effort to recast a cultural identity and patrimony. It was out of the disparaged, cheerless stuff they found throughout that vast space that they created a native antiquity, and through it, a bridge over the yawning gap between the past, present, and, in some cases, the future.

But there was another prevailing view, based on a cultural paradigm of rupture, which has served to make the very idea of antiquity not just untenable but effectively unnecessary for the realization of Russia’s cultural aspirations. On the one hand, this paradigm of rupture construes the Christianization of Rus’ in 988, the imposition of the Tatar-Mongol yoke in the fourteenth century, the Petrine reforms in the early eighteenth century, and the Russian Revolution of 1917, as a series of breaks that consigned the past to oblivion. Hence, Russian culture is understood as perpetually subject to upheaval and violent reorientation, and thus the very idea of recuperating a past is not only deemed impossible,¹⁵ but also radically incoherent since one can never be sure that one particular past isn’t just another cultural import or the aftermath of

¹⁴ This is a significant contrast with the previous generation of Slavophiles, who, as David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye argues, “were opposed to Western Modernity, but they did not suggest that Russia was Asian. What they championed instead was Orthodox, Slavic Europe rather than its Romano-German variant” (*Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010], 225).

¹⁵ The locus classicus consolidating this view in twentieth-century criticism is Boris Uspensky and Yuri Lotman’s “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture,” in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, trans. Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

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