



## Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi

*September 23, 1929-December 23, 2013*

Just before Christmas 2013 the shocking news spread, that our friend and colleague Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi, after a brief illness, passed away in the night from 22nd to the 23rd December.

Born on the 23rd September 1929, as son of Iannis and Athena Sarianidi, a family of Pontos-Greek origin, who had emigrated to Tashkent in 1920, he began his studies in the city of his birth at one of the best universities for archaeology in what was then the Soviet Union. With B. A. Litvinskii, M. E. Masson, A. A. Semenov and V. A. Shishkin as teachers, who created a veritable Central Asian school of archaeology, he graduated in 1952 and began working in the Historical Museum Samarkand. Since 1954 he was engaged in Moscow at the Institute for the History of Material Culture (Институт Истории Материальной Культуры). From 1959 up to his retiring in 2003 he worked in the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. During retirement he lived in Moscow and in Greece, in close contact with his three daughters.

Already as a student, and later in the frame of the South-Turkmenistan Interdisciplinary Archaeological Expedition (Южно-Туркменистанской Археологической Комплексной Экспедиции – ЮТАКЭ), he participated in many excavations, among which, for example, Yaz Depe, Merv, Meshed-Misriana, Nisa, Sultan-Kala, Takhirbai and Togolok.

As early as 1959 he himself headed excavations on different sites of the Chalcolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age in Turkmenistan (Kopet-Dagh foreland and Margiana), many of which had been discovered by him, especially in the area of the inland delta of the river Murghab. The better known sites are Geoksyur, Togolok and Ulug Depe, whose exploration will remain associated with his name. One of his most important excavations in Turkmenistan is Gonur Depe, where he headed research from 1974 until his death.

Shortly after the beginning of communist rule in Afghanistan in 1978 Viktor Sarianidi was also engaged in archaeological studies there, mainly in the northern part of the country. It was he, who excavated large urban settlements of the Bronze Age there, amongst which especially Dashly 3 will again remain tied to his name. Of his work in Afghanistan, however, his success during the excavations at Tillya Tepe is probably even more well-known, where, besides Early Iron Age layers, he uncovered several very richly furnished Royal burials, the extraordinarily artistic materials of which have become known as the “Bactrian Gold”, achieving worldwide fame.

His realisation of the cultural coherence of the Bronze Age between the foreland of the Kopet-Dagh, Margiana and Bactria (North-Afghanistan, South-Uzbekistan, parts of Tadjikistan) led to the concept of the “Bactro-Margiana Archaeological Complex”, coined by him and still generally used (abbreviated as “ВМАС”, also known as “Namazga VI”, “Sapalli culture” [a component part] or “Oxus Civilization”).

It is impossible here to fully appreciate all the extraordinary achievements of V. I. Sarianidi, which have briefly been indicated above. His publications, well over 30 books and hundreds of articles, will not be listed here either.<sup>1</sup> Many countries worldwide have honoured him for his work and results. In the transformation period of the Perestroika he was recognized by the Soviet Union as “Veteran of Labour” and in Russia he also received the medal of the 850-year Jubilee of Moscow. In Afghanistan he had already been awarded the Jamad ad-Din al-Afghani Prize, the highest possible decoration in culture. For his outstanding merits to Turkmenistan he received many honours, among them the “Golden Chain of the President”, the medal for “Great Commitment for Independent Turkmenistan”, the Magtymguly Prize and was distinguished as honorary member of the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan. It was also in Turkmenistan that he repeatedly won the competition “Türkmeniň Altyn asyry”, tendered by the president. He always remained devoted to Greece, the cultural home of his family, and was decorated there with the “Golden Cross of Honour”, as well as with honours from the Cretan University, the community of the Pontos-Greeks of Thessaloniki and Athens, the Greek Anthropological Society, as well as with the “Golden Wreath” of the Pontos-Community in Thessaloniki.

Only whoever met Viktor personally or could work with him had the possibility to become acquainted with and to appreciate his human features. Certainly a complex personality and well aware of his own distinction, he required high motivation from his collaborators. Some colleagues considered him a “nonstop archaeologist”, and it is perfectly true, from my own experience, that he was always prepared to discuss archaeological topics. For his last project, pursued over many years, he always had a great vision in mind, and could not be deterred by criticism or bureaucratic obstacles. In this respect he was one of the few archaeologists, who unconditionally sacrificed everything to their dream and to a vision, including his own property and financial resources. In spite of this he himself always remained modest and was constantly open and to the point in discussions, often very self-critical. Many times one could experience that some of his workers, who told about private worries, were helped discretely and without any pre-requisites. Several weddings

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1 An overview of the most important publications of V. I. Sarianidi may be found in the internet on the pages of the Margiana-Expedition: <http://www.margiana.su/index.php/publications.html> (partly downloadable as PDF files) and a list of publications is published there under: [http://www.margiana.su/publication/sarianidi/bibliografy\\_Sarianidi.pdf](http://www.margiana.su/publication/sarianidi/bibliografy_Sarianidi.pdf) (both last accessed in May 2014).

amongst his Turkmen collaborators were made possible by his help and, as far as the means were available, he always gave his support in the most various problems. He knew the families of all his workers, including grandparents and grandchildren, without ever being embarrassed to have to ask for names. Each visitor, and there were many, was asked about the health and wellbeing of the family and relatives. V. I. Sarianidi will remain in the memory of his workers as “Adamchilik”, in Turkmen roughly meaning “humaneness” in the whole breadth of the concept. This was also true for periods long past, for it was especially the people from his time in Afghanistan, whom he remembered, while scientific questions about his excavations there were often answered by “... that is too long past...”.

It may be considered as the highest achievement for an archaeologist, if his name is unforgettably connected to an important or even reference site – this is not only the multiple case for V. I. Sarianidi (Geoksyur, Gonur Depe, Dashly, Tillya Tepe, Togolok and others), but he has even discovered and outlined a whole new civilization, which will persist independently by its cultural characteristics beside the Indus-Culture or Mesopotamia – the BMAC mentioned above.

Whoever was lucky enough to know Sarianidi personally or to work with him, will remember him as a very knowledgeable colleague, who remained mentally active far into high age, and who always remained open to founded critique and new ideas in scientific discussion.

However, besides that, and personally much more impressive, was his deep humaneness, generosity and permanent helpfulness, which cannot be replaced and will remain in our memory. The sorrow over the passing away of the “Lion of the Desert”, as he was often lovingly and respectfully called in allusion to his fearlessness as well as to his well-groomed hairstyle, will surely last for a long time.

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