

NATALIA V. FEDOROVA (1949–2024)

With the untimely passing of Russian archaeologist Dr. Natalia Viktorovna Fedorova on 1 December 2024, the Arctic research community lost a dear and trusted colleague, and the field of Siberian/Russian Arctic archaeology is missing one of its internationally renowned figures and most accomplished practitioners (Fig. 1). She was 75.

Natalia Fedorova was trained as an archaeologist/historian at the Ural University in Yekaterinburg, Russia (then called Sverdlovsk) and entered the PhD program in history at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg in 1979. In 1984, she defended her thesis on early medieval contacts between West Siberia and Central/Near Asia from archaeological data. She returned to work as a researcher at the Institute of History and Archaeology in Yekaterinburg as an expert on medieval bronzes and, generally, on early Indigenous cultures of Western Siberia. She skillfully combined field archaeology with museum and collection studies by excavating sites, organizing exhibits of ancient bronzes, and publishing academic papers and exhibit catalogues. By the early 1990s, she had expanded her interests farther north, from the steppe and forest landscapes of South Siberia to the Lower Ob' River and the Yamal Peninsula (Kosinskaya and Fedorova, 1994), where we crossed paths more than 30 years ago.

Natalia literally stormed into the field of circumpolar studies in 1994 and 1995 with the start of the Smithsonian Living Yamal program, a joint effort to document Indigenous Nenets heritage and heritage resources on the Yamal Peninsula in Arctic Siberia. It was spearheaded by the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center and co-funded by Amoco Eurasia (American oil company) and Nadymgazprom (Russian oil company). The three-year (1994–97) research, survey, publication, and exhibit venture was conducted jointly with several colleagues in Russia, including Natalia Fedorova as an expert in Yamal archaeology. A fortuitous meeting in Salekhard, the capital of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area (Russian, *okrug*), in late 1994 created strong bonds of partnership and friendship. The following summer, Natalia collaborated with Fitzhugh and his American companions on the first of several trips to Yamal that eventually evolved into a series of joint surveys and site excavations, followed by co-authored papers and a collective monograph, *Ushedshie v kholmy* (Fedorova et al., 1998).

A typical field season during these years (if there is anything typical in Arctic fieldwork), such as the one in summer 1996, was divided into two sections of three weeks each. First, an archaeological survey was conducted by boat and helicopter along the shores of the Lower Ob' River and its tributaries. This was followed by three more weeks of intensive excavation at the Yarte-6 site on the Yuribei River, farther northward at 68° N. Natalia was in her prime, full of energy, adventure, and ready to debate



FIG. 1. Natalia Fedorova during an archaeological field survey on the Lower Ob' River, Yamal, summer 1996. Photo: Bruce C. Forbes.

all subjects at length, including new perspectives and methods brought by her Western partners. She quickly became an enthusiastic supporter of the study of vegetation of ancient archaeological sites in Yamal, as had been done previously in Arctic Canada (Forbes, 1996). This dedication to interdisciplinary scholarship, with both her Russian and foreign partners, manifested in her unwavering support of international research teamwork for decades to come. She praised the value of such partnership in her original and authoritative Russian paper overviewing 25 years of joint research in Yamal (Fedorova 2016). She also used the partnership as a launching pad for a new level of collaborative work in the Arctic by leading this process from her research area in Yamal and West Siberia.

By that time, Natalia already had an experienced team, and she put it into practice with her Western partners, exploring the sites of the so-called (by none other than Norwegian Gutorm Gjessing, Russian Valerii Chernetsov, and Swede Carl-Axel Moberg) ancient Eskimo-like walrus hunters of the Kara Sea coast. Natalia, with her Russian training in historical links between West Siberia and Central Asia, was looking for ancient North-South connections,

whereas her American and European colleagues were all too happy to explore the ideas of circumpolar cultures and the Old World-New World exchange. All were anxious to discover what could be learned from the 1930s excavations by pioneering Russians Vassilii Adrianov and Valerii Chernetsov at Ust'-Polui and Tiutei-Sale sites, respectively. The former was mostly unknown in the West, whereas the latter—cited from a French abstract to a Russian paper of 1935—made its way to all classical writings on ancient circumpolar cultures (Fitzhugh, 1997). Any naïveté about Russian archaeological field methods was soon disabused by the rigour of Natalia's seasoned crew as they picked their way through permafrost ice wedges at the edge of crumbling sea cliffs. Yes, there were lots of walrus bones to be found at Tiutei-Sale—but these animals were being caught by ancient caribou/wild reindeer hunters with no idea of Eskimo-style toggling harpoons.

Even more surprise came from the 1996–97 work at the Ust'-Polui site, where Natalia conducted a master class in the field of ritual archaeology for her Western colleagues. Most of the amazing finds Chernetsov discovered in the 1940s and 1950s—and Natalia was recovering 50 years later—were then interpreted as sacrificial materials deposited to honour ancient gods and animal spirits, not to satisfy people's worldly needs. The education continued as the joint team explored other Yamal sites, such as Zelenyi Yar (Green Ravine) on the Lower Polui River, where we found Iron Age mummies preserved with their clothing in copper shrouds (Fedorova et al., 2005). That first survey of 1997 led to two phases of intensive excavations from 1999 to 2002 and again from 2013 to 2017. The latter produced a joint study of ancient DNA by the teams from the Institute of Molecular and Cellular Biology (Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences) and the Seoul National University, South Korea (Slepchenko et al., 2019, 2023).

During the same Living Yamal program period (1994–98), Natalia served as a key collaborator on the international exhibition *Arktis/Antarktis* in Bonn, Germany, and as a contributor to its bilingual exhibit catalogue, *Zhivoi Yamal/Living Yamal* (Fedorova, 1998 in Krupnik and Narinskaya, 1998). She was a Smithsonian international fellow in 1998/99, a contributor to the collection volume for the U.S. National Park Service, *Northern Ethnographic Landscapes: Perspectives from Circumpolar Nations* (Fedorova, 2005), and a partner on several other joint ventures. She worked tirelessly with local authorities, year after year, to secure official access to the Yamal Peninsula and nearby areas for field studies on topics including archaeology, zooarchaeology, Nenets herding practices, animal domestication, ancient DNA, the social and ecological impacts of hydrocarbon extraction, modern climate change, and extreme weather events. Many of her foreign colleagues remain forever grateful to her for providing the utterly essential support and administrative backup that allowed them to conduct research in Yamal for almost 30 years, until Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 put all collaborations on hold.

About 2000, Natalia moved her home base from the esteemed academic institution in Yekaterinburg to the Yamal Museum and Exhibit Center, a research unit in the town of Salekhard, the capital of Yamal Area, at the Arctic Circle. There she led a small archaeological division and served briefly as the unit academic deputy director. She felt at ease staying close to her cherished sites in Yamal, including the famous Iron Age Ust'-Polui mound located within the city limits, which she excavated for over three decades (Fedorova, 2005, 2017). She transformed that local research unit into a world-connected space with broad circumpolar links. A dedicated global soul, she launched from there a new annual publications series, the *Arkheologia Arktiki* (Archaeology of the Arctic), a string of international circumpolar collections that she edited; no. 8, the last issue, was released in 2023. By that time, Natalia was already in ill health. For that series, she welcomed joint papers written by authors from Russia, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and other nations. The papers were translated into Russian, but all volumes featured English title pages, extensive summaries, abstracts, and had Western editorial board members, spreading the message of collaboration and acquainting colleagues with recent highlights in circumpolar research.

In November 2017, using her diplomatic skills, administrative prowess, and oil money from the Yamal Area administration, Natalia organized and hosted a major international conference on Arctic archaeology in Salekhard (Fig. 2). It was the circumpolar Arctic at its best, as about 70 scholars from research institutions across Russia talked and mingled with their colleagues from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Finland, Sweden, Germany, and Norway. For a more modest second conference in 2022, which she also organized, the stream of foreign speakers was much reduced; the events are now on hold because of global geopolitics and the passing of its passionate hostess.

Natalia built an archaeological team and an enduring infrastructure in Salekhard that we hope will be sustained after her passing. She trained students, built collections and museums, and produced reams of historical art and archaeological literature. People she trained and mentored, such as Andrey Gusev, Anna Brusnitsyna, Natalia Aleksashenko, the late Konstantin Oshchepkov, Andrey Plekhanov, and others, are now or were conducting their own surveys and expanding into new domains. Those who continue working in Yamal will be always grateful to the gracious giant on whose shoulders they stand.

Like all creative people, Natalia had her own ideas to which she was staunchly devoted throughout her professional life. The main theme, of course, was the South-North Eurasian connections that connected the boreal forest zone of West Siberia with the trade and manufacturing centres of the southern Ural, the Eurasian steppe, and the urban civilizations of Inner Asia (Fedorova and Gusev, 2019b). Her other beloved concept was the



FIG. 2. Natalia Fedorova, Bill Fitzhugh, Bruno Frohlich, and Kjell-Åke Aronsson examining public display cases in the Yamal Museum and Exhibit Center, Salekhard, 2017. Photo: Bruce C. Forbes

ritual nature of the ancient sites across the Lower Ob' basin and southern Yamal, first and foremost, the Ust'-Polui mound (cf. Fedorova and Gusev, 2019a; although see another interpretation as the iron-smelting center in Gusev and Fedorova, 2017). To that, she added another critical component of her own: the early origin of nomadic reindeer herding in Yamal, based on signs of reindeer domestication and use for transportation at Ust'-Polui. Yet she expanded that evidence to argue for a nomadic lifestyle and regular seasonal moves of ancient herders some 2000 years ago, from the Lower Ob' (Ust'-Polui) to central and northern Yamal, as described in the sources of the 1800s and 1900s (Fedorova, 2006). That idea extended the dawn of the nomadic herding economy in West Siberia some 1500 years into the past, much earlier than anywhere in the circumpolar North. As attractive as it was, the latter concept did not survive scrutiny of later examinations through the lenses

of osteological analysis of reindeer bones at some of the Yamal sites Natalia had excavated (Anderson et al., 2019; Losey et al., 2020; Nomokonova et al., 2020).

Natalia was a trusted friend and a power to reckon with—locally, within the Russian archaeology community, and among her many admirers worldwide. She produced (co-authored, co-edited) more than 170 publications, including several catalogues, collections, monographs, and textbooks. Lively, graceful, warm, and generous, she could be firm and unwavering in her matters of principle. She naturally matched excavations at remote northern sites with her elegant public performances, media interviews, podcasts, and international venues in Salekhard that local administrators generously supported prior to 2022. She was a taskmaster and hard driver, and was, herself, an archaeological treasure that took Chernetsov's genius and Adrianov's sacrifice (he perished in 1936, age 32, at the hands of the Soviet terror machine) to an almost unimaginable level. She did so through skillful politics, management of government bureaucracy, foresighted Indigenous relations, international collaborations, perseverance, and grit. And as for some of her unfulfilled theories, no—the Tiutei-Sale folks managed to hunt walruses just fine on their own, and the Yarte-6 people lived off wild reindeer, not their precious domestic ones!

Not being able to say goodbye to Natalia Fedorova was collateral damage of Putin's ongoing Ukrainian war this past year, along with the estrangement of so many other Russian colleagues and partners whom we came to know following the Crossroads of Continents and the Living Yamal projects of the 1980s and 1990s. Natalia became a dear friend, teacher, and mentor to many, as she steered her Western colleagues gently into the labyrinths of Russian *arkeologiya* (archaeology), heritage preservation, the tough basics of fieldwork in the Russian Arctic, and some bare-knuckle local diplomacy. She was a rare soul that will be deeply missed by so many.

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