Nikolay Yakovlevich Merpert, an outstanding representative of the older generation of Russian archeologists, passed away on January 29th, 2012. Selflessly serving the cause of scholarship during more than fifty years, Nikolay Yakovlevich significantly contributed to the study of such global problems as the Indo-European homeland, the transition from hunting-gathering to an agricultural economy, the identification of cattle breeding strategies, the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age of the steppe zone of Eurasia, the interaction of sedentary agricultural societies with mobile pastoralists, and many more. He was awarded official titles such as Distinguished Scientist of the Russian Federation, Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute, Foreign Honorary Member of the Institute of Thracology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He will be remembered not only as a great scholar but also as a person, who generously shared his knowledge and experience with others with natural goodwill and encyclopedic erudition.

N. Ya. Merpert was born on November 26th 1922 in Moscow into a family of civil servants (his father was an engineer-economist, and his mother was a health care worker). He became interested in archeology and ancient history while still in middle school, and took part in an archaeological expedition for the first time at the age of thirteen. In 1940, after finishing high school, he was drafted into the army. During the most difficult first months of WWII for the USSR, N. Ya. Merpert was fighting on the North-Western Front, where he was wounded four times. His military awards included a number of medals and the second-degree Order of the Great Patriotic War.

In March 1942 N. Ya. Merpert was discharged for disability. He returned to Moscow and was accepted as a student...
student in the Faculty of History of Moscow State University. In 1942-43 N. Ya. Merpert took part in the excavations of Slavic burial mounds in the Moscow region, while in 1944 he worked on Scythian sites in Nikopolis in the area of Dnepropetrovsk. The main specialization of N. Ya. Merpert in his student years was Classical Archaeology.

In 1945 N. Ya. Merpert graduated with honors from Moscow State University and began his graduate work at the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (now the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences). He took part in the excavations of Novgorod in 1947, and the first excavations of Genghis Khan's capital at Karakorum in 1948-49. Later N. Ya. became one of the authors of the monograph “Ancient Mongolian towns” (1965). In 1949 he became a staff member of same Institute, where he spent the rest of his working life.

In 1950 N. Ya. Merpert brilliantly defended his Ph.D. thesis “Upper Saltovo” (the Saltov culture). In the same year he was appointed to the Kuibyshev expedition of the Institute under the direction of A. P. Smirnov. Excavating on the banks of the Volga in the area to be submerged under the Kuibyshev reservoir he examined hundreds of kurgan graves and a number of Bronze Age settlements mostly belonging to the Timber-grave (Srubna) culture. From then on research on the Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures of the Eurasian steppe zone became one of the main directions of N. Ya. Merpert’s work. Thus he managed to analyze and summarize an enormous amount of materials on the Pit Grave (Yamna) culture that had been accumulated by Russian archaeologists by the middle of the 20th century and he identified local variants within this culture. Furthermore, he pronounced himself on the genesis, periodization, economy, and social relations of population groups associated with this archaeological culture. In 1959 he met Marija Gimbutas at an international symposium where both scholars gave talks on the controversial aspects of the Pit Grave culture. Henceforth for more than 30 years, until Marija Gimbutas’ death in 1994, they remained true friends and partners in the research of Indo-European problems.

In 1968 N. Ya. Merpert successfully defended his
habilitation thesis “The prehistory of the population of the Eastern European steppe zone (3rd - early 2nd millennium BC)”. The thesis was eventually published as a Russian language monograph “The oldest pastoralists between the Volga and the Urals” (1974), which was widely acclaimed and has still not lost its significance. In 1981 N. Ya. Merpert prepared a section on the cultural and historical processes in the south of the USSR and Eurasian steppes for the volume on the “Chalcolithic USSR”.

Constantly expanding his range of academic interests, in late 50s/early 60s N. Ya. Merpert turned to the archaeological cultures of the North Caucasus, Balkans and the Middle East. In 1961-63 he took part in the first Soviet archaeological expedition to Egypt examining the sites of 3rd-2nd millennium BC to be submerged in connection with the construction of the Aswan dam. The materials of his research were published in the volume “Ancient Nubia” in 1964.

In 1963 N. Ya. Merpert was appointed the head of a joint Soviet-Bulgarian expedition investigating archaeological sites of Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Bulgaria, and continued to guide the expedition for the next 30 years. The results of this research were published in international sources. Merpert’s work in Bulgaria led to the formation of his concept of a circumpontic homeland for the Indo-Europeans. In 1976 he published the Russian language monograph “Ethno-cultural changes in the Balkans on the verge of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age: Ethnogenesis of the peoples of the Balkans and the Northern Black Sea”. For his contributions to the archaeology of Bulgaria N. Ya. Merpert was awarded with the First Degree Order of St. Cyril and Methodius and the Grand Medal of St. Kliment of Ohrid.

In the later part of his career N. Ya. Merpert combined field work in Bulgaria and the Northern Caucasus with excavations in Iraq (1967-85) and Syria (1989-2002). The work of the Russian expedition to Mesopotamia focused on the Sinjar Valley, situated close to the border with Turkey in the Northern Euphrates region. The expedition investigated the main phases of cultural and historical development of Northern Mesopotamia, including the emergence of agriculture, cattle breeding,

N. Ya. Merpert played a key role in training several generations of Russian archaeologists. He was the author of more than 400 scholarly publications and 12 monographs. He was a board member of several academic periodicals, including “Soviet Archaeology”, “Russian Archaeology”, “Journal of Ancient History”, and “Antiquity”.

In 2012 the Russian and international archaeological community were preparing to celebrate the 90th birthday of a Patriarch of Russian Archaeology. Unfortunately, he did not live to see his jubilee. We have been left with an exceptional scholarly legacy of a beloved teacher, warmth in our hearts from communicating with him, and his remarkable Russian language memoirs “From the Past so far and so close: Memoirs of an Archaeologist” (Moscow, 2011).

Below is a list of N. Ya. Merpert’s major publications on Indo-European matters in English:


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