Archaeological collections from Argentina in the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) Russian Academy of Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In the history of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) there are 10 archaeological collections from Argentina. The items are chronologically diverse and were collected at geographically different sites in Salta, Jujuy, Buenos Aires, Río Negro, La Pampa, and Chubut provinces. The majority of the materials were collected in the early twentieth century. There are two small but important archaeological collections from sites in Northwest Argentina: La Paya and Pucara de Tilcara. The materials for Kunstkamera were obtained by A.V. Frič, J.B. Ambrosetti, F. Ameghino, A. Hrdlička, C. Izrastsov and G. Kumanskii.

Keywords: Argentina; Museum collections; Frič; Ambrosetti; Archaeology.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS) there are 10 archaeological collections from Argentina (Dmitrenko 2016a). Though these collections were received in Kunstkamera over a hundred years ago, their origins, formation and materials they include have never been the objects of a special study. These collections presents a selection of archaeological stone, bone, and wooden implements as well as ceramics, and represent some of the most important materials for Argentine archaeology at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Whereas none of these collections has a full set of materials found at an exact site, they include important artifacts of different Argentine archaeological cultures (Figure 1).

THE COLLECTIONS: A REVIEW

Patagonia

In 1909, Kunstkamera received the first Argentinian collection represented by stone industry from Río Negro province. It was completed by the Czech scientist, traveler and biologist Alberto Vojtěch Frič. In September of 1908, the senior ethnographer of Kunstkamera Leo Sternberg took part in the XVI International Congress of Americanists in Vienna, Austria. During the congress, Sternberg met A. Frič.
According to museum documentation (especially photo album collection № NVF-92), A. Frič brought the collections № 1370 and № 1392 from his third trip to South America, when he visited Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in 1907-1908. A. Borodatova also mentioned these dates researching the work of Frič. He excavated Brazilian sambaqui around Antonin city in October of 1906 and returned to Prague in August 1908 (Borodatova 1996: 292). In this case, these collections were formed between the beginning of 1907 and August of 1908. The circumstances of material’s gathering for collection № 1370 are not clear. Did he excavate the site? What kind of site was it? Was it collected from one or several complexes? Frič also sent a card catalog in German that Kunstkamera scientist Sarra Sternberg used to create a collection register in Russian. Much to our regret, today we cannot find Frič catalog and have only the register.

The collection № 1370 comprised 247 archaeological artifacts from the Río Negro province “sandhills”. With that collection, Frič also sent three craniums, which were moved to the MAE Anthropological Department (Figure 2). The skulls were later registered in the Department of Anthropology in the MAE and can be found there today as a collection № 5149-3-5. Today, the collection contains 286 objects: stone tools (arrowheads, boleadoras, mortars, grinders, and axes), clay tube, and iron nails.

The second archaeological stone tools collection produced by Frič was registered as № 1371A (today № 1392). It came from General Acha city in La Pampa province and includes 27 stone tools: grindstones, axes, flint tools, and one stone spindle.

The collection № 2231 arrived to the museum among those sent by the Museo Etnográfico “Juan B. Ambrosetti” (Universidad de Buenos Aires) in 1913,
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Kunstkamera received the collection of ceramics from the Ambrosetti excavations in 1909 from the sites La Paya, La Poma, Payogasta, and Pucará de Tilcara (provinces of Salta and Jujuy). In this collection, that included 105 vessels, only two large urns were from the Pucará de Tilcara excavations. But as early as 1910, the museum received an extensive collection from this site (Dmitrenko 2016b). According to the archive documentation, Sternberg sent in exchange: 1) two reindeer skins with horns to reconstruct animal mounts; 2) a head of Samojede; 3) the complete costume of Samojede with a belt; 4) a parade sled with cover; 5) a pique to guide the reindeer; 6) two reindeer harnesses; 7) a model of a reindeer harness (SPbB ARAS, F. 142 Op. 1 (do 1918 g.) ed. hr. 59, L.21). Ambrosetti wrote in reply that Kunstkamera objects took an important place in the Universidad de Buenos Aires museum exposition (SPbB ARAS, F.282, Op. 2, ed. hr. 11, L. 20).

The La Paya site collection was registered as Nº 1481 in 1910. The first time La Paya was mentioned was in a report of Dr. Ten Kate, who in 1893, found an urn containing a child skeleton at the territory of the ancient site (Ten Kate 1893). In 1902, Ambrosetti made a publication about a number of archaeological objects from tombs he found in ruins known by natives as Puerta de la Paya (Ambrosetti 1902). The first excavations in La Paya were organized in 1906 and performed by Mario Guido and Salvador Debenedetti, under Ambrosetti's supervision. Excavations were funded by the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (Universidad de Buenos Aires). In 1907, and between January and February of 1908, the focus of the excavation was the necropolis, and the work was headed by S. Debenedetti and by Ambrosetti himself (Ambrosetti 1907: 11).

The La Paya site collection included stone implements from different prehistoric Patagonian sites. Expedition numbers were listed in the J. Ambrosetti collection bill in register Nº 2228. Only one row described the material: “Colección de objetos de piedra de los paraderos prehistóricos”. It consists of arrowheads, scrappers, and one flint tool looking like a knife.

The last collection Nº 7566 entered Kunstkamera in October 2013. It includes stone implements collected by Georgy Kumanskii on the ground surface around Lake Colhué Huapi in the province of Chubut. This collection was gathered during the 1960s. It is composed of 23 objects: five boleadoras (of different shape), two flint tools (knifes) formed with retouch, and 16 flint arrowheads.

Northwestern Argentina


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As a result of the La Paya excavations, the Museo Etnográfico of the Universidad de Buenos Aires obtained about 1228 objects (Sprovieri 2013: 61, 193 Table 2). Parts of the collection were sent later to different museums around the world (including Kunstkamera) in
The Kunstkamera register mentions only 55 vessels that reached Saint-Petersburg unbroken, while others were received in fragments. Most of them were restored later. Currently, the collection includes 85 vessels. The rest of the material was registered as N° 6741 in 1975, among which there are ceramics from different regions of South and Central America, without museum inventory numbers. Ambrosetti’s field numbers and inventory list helped successfully identify several vessels, originally part of the collection N° 1481.

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The MAE collection includes only ceramics that were selected to show the variety of material from the La Paya complex. There are numerous types of pottery found at the La Paya site, and even rare items imported or stylized crafts from local manufactures. For example, pseudo apodos (aribaloid), ornitomorphic plates (plato pato) and “foot” vessels (ollitas de pie), called by Ambrosetti as “the Peruvian type” ceramics (Inka Provincial ceramics in modern researches) (Sprovieri 2013: 149-150). Most of the MAE collection is composed of black polished and painted pucos. Other materials are funeral urns, libation vessels, painted vessels with vast gullet and asymmetrical vessels (Figure 3). Some of the vessels lost their excavation numbers. Most of them belonged to another Calchaquí site complex - La Poma, upstream the Calchaquí River, 56 km to the north from La Paya.

The collection N° 1800 presented Omaguaca’s materials from the Pucará de Tilcara site (Quebrada de Humahuaca, Jujuy province). Systematical excavations at the site began in 1908 and were headed by J. Ambrosetti and S. Debenedetti (Zaburlín 2009). This work was carried out in the framework of the IV archaeological expedition of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1909-1910 (Zaburlín and Otero 2014). In this expedition, archaeologists collected thousands of artifacts for the Museo Etnográfico of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. After Ambrosetti’s death in 1917, the work at the site was continued by Salvador Debenedetti. There are not many publications about the materials found at the excavations during Ambrosetti’s lifetime (Ambrosetti, 1912). They are presented most completely in the Debenedetti’s monograph, including materials of his later excavations in Pucará de Tilcara in 1918, 1928 and 1929 (Debenedetti 1930).

The MAE collection from Pucará de Tilcara reached Saint-Petersburg in 1910. Ambrosetti’s letter to Sternberg, dated September 30th 1910, and concerning the Pucará de Tilcara collections transportation from Buenos Aires to Saint-Petersburg, remains catalogued as SPbB ARAS: F.282, Op.1, D.179, L.39. He also mentioned that these ceramics were quite different to those from the Calchaqui valley he had sent earlier. All these items came from the Pucará de Tilcara tombs, but there is no information about when they were excavated. Still, most of this collection does have field numbers which can give us an opportunity to ascertain the place and time of origin due to description of materials in Ambrosetti’s manuscript (Zaburlín and Otero 2014). The collection includes 144 items. There is also a letter from Ambrosetti to Sternberg with a collection register in french with a list of objects and their field numbers. In his letter, Ambrosetti states that he had sent a catalog of items which MAE had already received.

Figure 3. Different ceramic forms presented in Kunstkamera collection 1. – libation vessel; 2.- asymmetric vessel; 3. – funeral urn (MAE RAS depository).
The list includes 150 objects and 20 skulls, as follows: 45 ceramic vessels, 44 stone tools, 29 bone tools, one shell (genus Pecten), six copper pieces, 13 objects made of wood (including two wooden tablets), a piece of obsidian, a few pieces of red ochre, an amulet made of root, malachite beads, seed beads, nuts with drilled shucks and remnants of burnt corn ear (Figure 4).

Sternberg also noted in the register that several numbers have not reached Saint-Petersburg. Twenty deformed skulls from Tilcara graves were also sent along with the collection. The skulls were later registered in the Department of Anthropology of the MAE as collection Nº 5148-1-20. Ambrosetti wrote in the letter that skulls had traditional calchaquí deformation.

One last collection from northwestern Argentina included only one calchaquí vessel registered as Nº 2376, dated September 1914. It was delivered by the Rector of the Holy Trinity Church in Buenos Aires and the Secretary of the Department of Russian diplomatic mission in Buenos Aires, Constantin Izrastsov.

**Province of Buenos Aires**

The collection Nº 2229 has three parts - A, B and B. It also arrived to the MAE as the result of an exchange with the Museo Etnográfico of the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1913 with other six ethnographical collections (Nº 2228, 2230, 2231, 2232, 2233, 2234).

We begin the record of these collections with part 2229B. It includes 60 stone tools from the province of Buenos Aires which arrived to Kunstkamera in 1913. Ambrosetti wrote in the collection list: “Serie de 60 espécimenes [sic] representantes de la “Nouvelle industrie lithique (pierre fendue)” del doctor don Florentino Ameghino. Se incluye también un folleto con un trabajo explicativo del mismo doctor Ameghino... Estos objetos proceden de Miramar (Sud de la provincia de Buenos Aires). De ellos se ha ocupado también el señor Hrdlitzca [sic] en su informe ya citado”.

The register includes a print article of Florentino Ameghino “Une nouvelle industrie lithique” (Ameghino 1910). The article described the new stone industry discovered near the city of Mar del Plata, but in the collection list Ambrosetti mentioned Miramar, a city located about 45 km south-west. Florentino Ameghino, an Italian-Argentine paleontologist, later took a position as director of the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales Bernardino Rivadavia. He conducted extensive research in order to prove that the place of genesis for prehistoric man was in the Argentine pampas (Podgorny 2015). Ameghino made three research trips to Mar del Plata in order to collect surface material during 1908. As a result, he found “an ancient industry” that was unknown before. According to Ameghino’s 1910 article, stone tools of collection 2229B were found in a middle layer stage of the geological period Ensenaden (L’ensénadéen - Lower and Middle Pleistocene) as well as remains of ancient man Homo pampaeus (Ameghino 1910: 189-192).

The raw materials used for this “new industry” were described as rounded, elongated quartz, porphyry, basalt or phonolite pebbles. This industry presented a
number of pebble flakes of different shape, with and without any traces of human working. Ameghino’s collection in the MAE presents 60 such pebble flakes, 13 of which present signs of secondary processing (Figure 5.1).

The collection № 2229А from the province of Buenos Aires includes 32 quartzite implements. It is the result of excavations by Aleš Hrdlička. Ambrosetti wrote in the collection list: “Serie de 32 espécímenes [sic] de objetos de piedra de la industria de la cuarcita: de esta industria se ocupe el doctor Hrdlitza en su informe sobre el hombre fossilargentine”. A. Hrdlička (Aleš Hrdlička) was an American anthropologist, founder and first curator of physical anthropology of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History. We can found oblique information about the MAE collection in Hrdlichka’s book (Hrdlička 1912). Between 1899 and 1907, A. Hrdlička was interested in osteological findings of remains identified as ancient man in North America. Later, this conclusion was refuted. In the meantime, R. Lehmann-Nietzsche and Florentino Ameghino made publications about findings of ancient human remains of Pampean period in Argentina. In May 1910, Hrdlička and Bailey Willis arrived to Buenos Aires to study the museum materials, as well as to conduct field survey to find new remains, and stayed for about two months (Hrdlička 1912: III–X).

Argentine scientists Ameghino, Ambrosetti, Lehmann-Nietzsche, Moreno, Outes, and Roth met Hrdlička and Willis with optimists and gave them the opportunity to study any materials they were interested in. The scientists worked in the Museo de la Facultad Filosofía y Letras in Buenos Aires for a few weeks. On May 24th they moved to Mar del Plata, where the most important artifacts were found. The chapter about the stone industry in Hrdlička’s publication was written by Professor William Henry Holmes, archaeologist and chairman of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History. In the chapter “Stone implements of the Argentine littoral”, he noted that all materials were collected at the coast, from Mar del Plata on the northeast to the Rio Negro region on the southeast, a territory about 400 miles long (Hrdlička 1910: 125). The exploration covered the territory from Mar del Plata to Barrancas de los Lobos, in the Laguna de los Padres region, as well as Necochea and Monte Hermoso vicinity.

The total collection included about 1500 items: mortars, pestles, mullers, grooved hammers, discoidal hammers, pitted hammers, anvil-stones, bolas-stones, projectile points, knives, scrapers, axes, drills, and unspecialized blades. The author noted that the book presented merely a preliminary description of the Argentine collection without complex and date attributes, not the final analysis (Hrdlička 1910: 125).

Kunstkamera collection № 2229А was composed while Hrdlička investigated the genesis of the South American human ancestor. The collection presents 32 quartzite and flint objects, 27 of which are tools (Figure 5.2).

The collection № 2229B is composed of pottery vessels fragments. In Ambrosetti’s collection list, it is stated that: “Colección de 80 ejemplares

Figure 5. 1. Stone implements from F. Ameghino collection № 2229B. 2. Stone implements from A. Hrdlička collection № 2229А (MAE RAS depository).
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There was no exact information in the museum documentation about this collection. It included 80 grey-clay and red-clay fragments, 67 of them decorated by different combinations of drag-and-jab ornamentation. Most consists of stamp lines and made by different types of tools.

CONCLUSIONS

This article presents the first results of the study of Argentine archaeological collection’s research in the MAE (Kunstkamera) RAS. Archived materials and original documentation of the Department of Ethnography of America give us a chance to reconstruct the history and describe the composition of these collections. Two collections from the La Paya and Pucará de Tilcara sites deserve special attention for their most complete documentation, considering that they are the only materials related with precisely defined archaeological complexes, providing tangible benefits for their study. Certainly, the further analysis of materials cannot be effective without the study of documentation in the Museo Etnográfico “Juan B. Ambrosetti” and in the Museo de La Plata archives, since the materials in the Kunstkamera collections will have to be compared with similar well-documented collections deposited in institutions from Argentina.

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**NOTES**

1.- Archiving system used by the Saint - Petersburg Branch of the Archive of Russian Academy of Science. Abbreviations: SPbB ARAS - Saint-Petersburg Branch of the Archive of Russian Academy of Science; F. – Fond; L. - List; NVF- Nauchno-vspomogatelnii Fond; Op. – Opis`; Ed. hr. – edinitsa hranenia.