

The Alexander the First collection of the Lausanne Museum

Elena L. Minina

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E.L. Minina, Vernadsky State Geological Museum, Mokhovaya 11, bldg. 2, Moscow 103009, Russia (mel@sgm.ru).

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Study of written sources in archives sometimes allows to restore the history of collections. A good example is the Alexander the First collection. In 1819, de la Harpe had sent an Etruscan vase to Alexander I as a gift, and had received a collection of Russian minerals in return. Alexander's collection, totaling 1031 samples according to the catalogue of 1874, consists of five sections: salts, stones, metals, combustible minerals, and rocks. The collection of Russian minerals presented by Alexander the First in 1820 to La Harpe is completely preserved to the present day and is exhibited at the Lausanne Natural History Museum.

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Introduction

Unique samples and mineralogical collections presented by members of the Russian imperial family are stored in many of the oldest mineralogical museums of Russia and Europe. For example, the collection of the sister of Alexander the First, Alexandra Pavlovna (1783-1801), is stored in the Budapest Natural History Museum (Papp, 1991).

The study of written sources in archives sometimes allows to restore the history of collections. A good example is a rather significant collection of minerals received as a gift from the Emperor Alexander the First (Fig.1) in 1819 exhibited at the Lausanne Natural History Museum. Alexander the First had presented this mineral collection to his old friend Frederick de la Harpe, who was his tutor and instructor in childhood.

Invited to Russia by the Empress Katherine the Great in 1783 as a tutor and instructor of the grand dukes, de la Harpe (Fig. 2) managed to become not only the teacher, but also a close friend of Alexander. Remaining the tutor of the successor until 1795, de La Harpe strongly influenced Alexander. Leaving Russia, de la Harpe, at the request of Alexander, made "Guidelines", in which he stated the sights and principles of state government.

Having returned home, de la Harpe was engaged in natural sciences, particularly in chemistry and mineralogy. He closely cooperated with prominent scientists, including René Haüy. He was concerned with the state of affairs in the Swiss Academy of



Fig. 1. Grand Duke Alexander Pavlovich, about 1790, unknown painter (Anonymus, 2002).

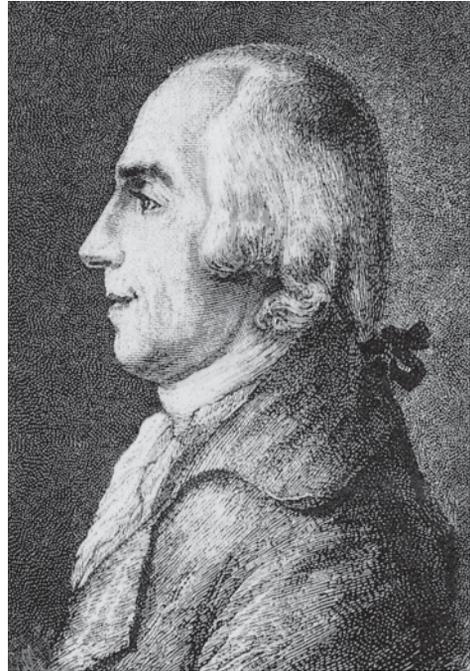


Fig. 2. The portrait of La Harpe (Troiat, 2003).

Sciences and in a letter to Alexander I (1805) he wrote "... The Academy does not have neither stock, nor collections related to the natural history; Russia is so rich in minerals that it would be praiseworthy to share with us a small part of the redundant, we shall be very grateful, and in turn, we would collect that is in our mountains. I recognize that my desire will not seem to you as of the category of which cannot be executed" (Meisser, 1998). This was his first request to Alexander I regarding the transfer of a collection of Russian minerals. Fourteen years passed, but de la Harpe had not lost hope to receive a collection of Russian minerals and in 1819 he had sent a gift to Alexander I, an Etruscan vase, notifying the Emperor by a letter. The description of this vase and a drawing made by the Minister of Finance, Count Guriev, is kept in the Russian State Historical Archive (RSHA, Fund 519, Inventory 1, File 893, list 25; Fig. 3).

Rome, April 10, 1819.

The vase, which I had the honor to speak to you about, was sent by the sea: here is its description.

I dare to address to Your Imperial Majesty with the letter to forward this parcel, being careful. The post seal is put on the packing. I hope that it will come in a good condition. The captain has put it in the cabin. I am pleased to think that this Italian souvenir will decorate your study. Sincerely and devotedly yours. On the 14th we plan to visit de la Harpe.

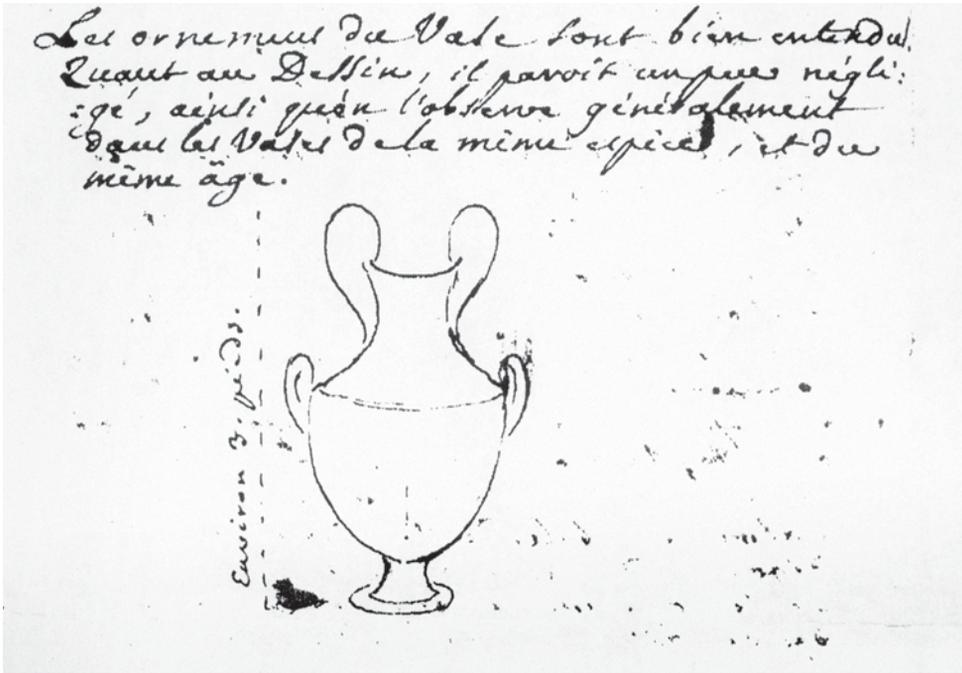


Fig. 3. The description of Etruscan vase. (RSHA, Fund 519, Inventory 1, File 893, list 25).

The Etruscan vase

It had been found near Naples. It was broken, but by the diligence of a competent archeologist, who supervised the excavation, it was restored by pasting together separate antique fragments; the basis of the vase was made anew. Its height is about 1 m and the form is graceful.

By the proportions, dimensions and place of find, it is attributed to the type of Etruscan vase, found in big valleys. In its top part, on the front side, Apollo with lyre is represented; nearby a person is extending a wreath to him as a victory symbol. As he does not have wings, he cannot be considered as a deity. He may be one of those who were present at the dispute between Apollo and Marcius, and should participate in the decision of dispute. Bearded Marcius, completely demolished, is placed below.

The winged deity playing with a fallow deer at a small altar is on the vase neck. Probably, the artist wanted to eulogize Phoebus, the winner, patron of arts and god of hunting. On the other side, the artist has represented another plot, that of naked Orestus, who lost his clothes. Above at the left, is a deity with a torch. Near Orestus is suffering Piladus. The vase is decorated with a little bit negligent ornament, which is usual for vases of this type and age."

It was not possible to establish its current whereabouts.

The collection

Alexander I gave the order to collect as soon as possible a complete collection of Russian minerals. From the letter of the Chief of General Staff of His Imperial Majesty Prince P.M. Volkonsky to the Minister of Finance D.A. Guriev of May 1, 1819; "his Imperial Majesty, wishing to thank Mr. La Harpe, has ordered to prepare a complete assembly of our minerals for their supply to him..." (RSHA, Fund 37, Inventory 11, File 135).

On May 12, 1819, the Director of the Department of Mining and Salt, Evgraf Mechnikov, sent a letter to the Committee of Mining Military School with the order to immediately draw up a complete collection of Russian minerals, and in October 1819 the Mining Military School already reported on the readiness of collection. "The assembly of 791 samples is nowadays prepared by the Mining Military School, partially from minerals collected by the state expedition, sent due to funds of Mining Department, and partially purchased from individuals not to ruin the collection actually necessary for the Mining School... The resulted collection costs 5 thousand roubles" (letter of E. Mechnikov to the Emperor Alexander the First; RSHA. Fund 37, Inventory 11, File 135).

In the summer of 1819, the Mining Military School (Fig. 4) organized a special expedition, headed by geologist Jacob Mor, which collected 600 samples of minerals. Mor also owned some mines in the Urals and in Siberia. In the Central Urals, near Shaitanka, in 1815, Mor had operated mines, from which was extracted pink tourmaline, greenish quartz and vorobyevite.

Future Academician, lecturer of the Mining Military School, Dmitry Ivanovich Sokolov (1788-1852) was engaged in drawing up the collection catalogue. From the letter of the Commander of the Mining Military School Peter Meder to the Department of Mining and Salt of January 26, 1820: "the Committee of Mining Military School forwards herewith the description in French of that collection of Russian minerals, made by the Chief Inspector of Corps Cabinet Ober-Gitterverwalter of the 8th class Sokolov, and closed by him in 5 boxes under letters L and H, having the honor herewith to inform, that this collection includes: salts – 68 pieces, stones – 354, metals – 411, combustibles – 13, and rocks – 175. Total of 1021, including two complete collections, from those delivered by Mor, each of 300 to 600 pieces ... from the assembly of the Mining Military School and 421 pieces bought from individuals. All the above collection has cost 5000 roubles" (RSHA, Fund 37, Inventory 11, File 135). The expenditure of the Mining Department was compensated by Alexander I.

Shipping of the collection to Switzerland was commissioned to a relative of de la Harpe, merchant Nikolay Betling, who lived in Petersburg, on the English Quay. De la Harpe received the collection of minerals in the summer of 1820. On September 3, 1820, de la Harpe sent to Alexander I a letter of thanks: "Sovereign, I have just received minerals from Russia, which your Imperial Majesty kindly presented to me. My gratitude is still higher, as now I have a possibility to organize the national education on my native land, having placed this collection in our Museum of Natural History, where it will serve for lessons in mineralogy. Such perfect collection should be evaluated as it deserves and I also hope, Sovereign, that you would approve how I shall dispose of it" (Meisser, 1998).

Alexander's collection, totaling 1031 samples according to the catalogue of 1874,



Fig. 4. The Mining Military School (postcard of Mining Institute St. Petersburg).

consists of five sections: salts, stones, metals, combustible minerals and rocks. Samples of the collection represent more than 100 Russian sites, among which deposits of the principal mining regions of Russia prevail, the Urals, Altai and Transbaikalian. The second, most numerous group of samples in the collection refers to "stones". These are basically coloured and ornamental stones, and rock-forming minerals, varieties of quartz, nephrite, garnet, beryl, topaz, tourmaline, lazurite, vesuvianite, staurolite, feldspar, amphibole, pyroxene, and mica.

Quartz varieties are represented by 90 specimens, including amethysts from Olonets and Murzinka (the Urals), rock crystal from Lipovka pegmatites and smoky quartz from the Urals, and some amethyst specimens as aggregates of crystals and geodes from the well-known Volk Island. The collection rather completely represents jaspers from the Urals and Altai; landscape jasper from Orsk, green-black ones from Kundrava and Kalkan, jaspers from Korgon and Revnevaya, lazurite and nephrite from the Baikal area, and gems from the Urals.

A large section of the collection is devoted to ores. It includes ores of iron, copper, silver, lead, zinc, chromium, minerals of titanium, native gold, silver and copper from the major mining regions of that time. Most of the ore collection represents ores from the Urals, among which iron minerals are important; magnetite, hematite, limonite from Neiva, Kushva and Miass mines. Specimens of native copper and copper ores from the Urals (Polevsky, Gumeshevsky, Tur'indky mines) are numerous; native gold from Berezovsk is present. The well-known silver-lead and gold-ore deposits of Altai are widely represented in the collection: Zmeinogorsk (gold, silver, galena), Nikolaev mine (galena, silver, opal), Ridder (silver) and Salair (silver).

One section in the collection is devoted to combustible mineral and organic compounds, covering specimens of coal, combustible slate, peat, and graphite from north-west of Russia. The collection also contains the basic types of rocks from the Urals, Karelia and Baikal regions.

The collection of Russian minerals presented in 1820 to de la Harpe is completely preserved to the present day and is exhibited at the Lausanne Natural History Museum, being the material testimony of connections between Russia and Switzerland.

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