by Dr. Volodymyr Mezentsev
Special to The Ukrainian Weekly

TORONTO – Last summer, the Canada-Ukraine archaeological expedition conducted its annual field research in the town of Baturyn, Chernihiv oblast. Prof. Zenon Kohut, director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) and an eminent historian and expert in the Hetman era, heads this project. Dr. Orest Popovych, president of the Shevchenko Scientific Society of America (NTSH-A), is its patron and academic adviser. Dr. Volodymyr Kovalenko (University of Chernihiv) leads the archaeological expedition in Baturyn, while Dr. Volodymyr Mezentsev (CIUS, Toronto) is its associate leader and the executive director of this project from the Canadian side. A notable historian of Kyivan Rus’, Prof. Martin Dimnik of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (PIMS) at the University of Toronto, participates in the investigations of medieval Baturyn.

In all, 152 students and scholars from universities and museums of Chernihiv, Kyiv, Nizhyn, Hlukhiv, Sumy, Romny, Putyly, Lviv (Ukraine), Toronto and Edmonton (Canada) took part in the 2009 expedition.

From 1669 to 1708, Baturyn was the capital of the Kozak Hetmanate and the seat of distinguished Hetman Ivan Mazepa (1687-1709). During this time, it rivaled Kyiv and Chernihiv, the oldest and largest cities in central Ukraine. Baturyn’s upswing was disrupted when Tsar Peter I brutally suppressed Mazepa’s rebellion for independence of the Hetmanate from Muscovy.

In 1708, the Russian army reinforced by the Kalmyk horde seized and burned Baturyn and its palatial residence. Mazepa took the sword for his independence and fled to the West where he was invited from Kyiv to Baturyn. In 17th-18th century the site of Mazepa’s residence in Honcharivka (1692, following the completion of architectural and archaeological research on its predecessor, which was destroyed Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in 1692, following the completion of architectural and archaeological research on its predecessors, which were buried there. Last summer, our expedition unearthed 65 graves of townsmen and women were buried there. Last summer, our expedition uncovered 65 graves of townspeople from the 17th-18th centuries at this graveyard. Four contained casualties of this attack. These were the skeletal remains of a middle-aged man and woman, a youth and a female with fractures and musket bullet holes in their skulls. The skulls of women and a child bearing bullet holes were also found at this cemetery, as well as in the Resurrection Church graveyard in the fortress citadel in 2001 and 2008.

The archaeological discoveries in Baturyn and its unique moulding on ceramics executed in shallow relief and polychrome glazing techniques and dated reliably to about 1700. The ornate facade plaques and stove tiles of Honcharivka palaces are remarkable pieces of Ukrainian elite applied and heraldic arts. In their ornamentation, some influences of the early modern decorative ceramics of Lithuania and Belarus are evident.

Specialists believe that such plaques and kakhi were fashioned by the best artisans of the Kozak state whom Mazepa invited from Kyiv to Baturyn. In 17th-18th century central Ukraine, Kyiv, Chernihiv and Baturyn (before 1708) were the leading centres of glazed ceramic production.

Former President Viktor Yushchenko had decreed to rebuild Mazepa’s palatial complex in Honcharivka, as well as the destroyed Cathedral of the Holy Trinity erected by the hetman in Baturyn around 1692, following the completion of architectural and archaeological research on its predecessors. The world financial crisis, however, put the realization of these costly reconstructions on hold.

Excavations in 2008-2009 of the Trinity Cathedral’s cemetery within the former fortress established that some victims of the 1708 onslaught on Baturyn were buried there. Last summer, our expedition uncovered 65 graves of townspeople from the 17th-18th centuries at this graveyard. Four contained casualties of this attack. These were the skeletal remains of a middle-aged man and woman, a youth and a female with fractures and musket bullet holes in their skulls. The skulls of women and a child bearing bullet holes were also found at this cemetery, as well as in the Resurrection Church graveyard in the fortress citadel in 2001 and 2008.

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Frontal and lateral (longitudinal) facades of the main palace of Mazepa residence in Honcharivka, the suburb of Baturyn (before 1700). Reconstructions by V. Mezentsev, drawings by S. Dmytryienko, 2010.


Baturyn convinced some Russian historians to accept in 2008 the fact that the town’s civilian population, irrespective of sex and age, was massacred by tsarist troops in 1708.

While excavating these graves and Mazepa’s villa, archaeologists unearthed a gilt copper icon of St. Nicholas, a product of the Kyivan Cave Monastery; an iron cannon apparently from the Trinity Cathedral; five silver and copper Polish coins, a fragment of an expensive wine cap made of Venetian glass with an engraved flower pattern, a refined imported tableware of the hetman, and a carved bone ornament of the Kyivan Cave Monastery; an iron decorative detail of a church chandelier; a gilt copper icon of St. Nicholas, a treasure from the Trinity Cathedral; and button of local manufacture used by the hetman.

Archaeologists unearthed a gilt bronze surmount of a sabre fashioned in the shape of lion head, a gilt cypress neck cross framed in silver with a relief of the Crucifixion, and a fragment of an expensive wine cap made of Venetian glass with an engraved flower pattern, a refined imported tableware of the hetman, and a carved bone ornament of the Kyivan Cave Monastery; an iron decorative detail of a church chandelier; a gilt copper icon of St. Nicholas, a treasure from the Trinity Cathedral; and button of local manufacture used by the hetman.

For 10 years, the Kowalsky Program for the Study of Eastern Ukraine at CIUS, NTSh-A, and PIMS have cosponsored the archaeological and historical research of Baturyn. Annual subsidies for this project and publication of its findings are contributed by the Marusia Onyshchuk and Ivanko Khark Memorial Endowment Fund at CIUS, established by Petro Malofij of Edmonton; the Ukrainian Studies Fund at Harvard University, directed by Dr. Roman Procyk; the Prometheus Foundation, headed by Maria Szkambura, and the Budischnitz Credit Union Foundation in Toronto; and the Help to Ukraine Fund in Montreal, headed by Bohdan Babiak.

The League of Ukrainian Canadians (President Dr. Oleh Romanushyn), the League of Ukrainian Canadian Women (headed by Chrystyna Bidiak), the Ukrainica Research Institute (President Orest Stciw), the Ukrainian National Federation and the Ukrainian Credit Union (UNF President and UCU CEO Taras Pidzamecky), the Olzhych Foundation (headed by Mykola Plawiu), the Council on Cultural Affairs of the Ukrainian World Congress (headed by Anna Kisil), as well as the Ukrainian American Association of University Professors (President Dr. Lubomyr Wynar) supported investigations of the hetman capital with grants in 2009.

Regrettably, owing to the global financial crises, academic sponsors have reduced their funding of the Baturyn project, while the Ukrainian government has completely suspended it. Therefore, our excavations in Baturyn this summer and dissemination of its results in publications and lectures would essentially depend on donors’ support.

Benefactors who wish to assist the continuation of archaeological, historical, and architectural study of Mazepa’s capital are kindly invited to send donations to: Prof. Zenon Kohut, Director, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 430 Pembina Hall, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2H8 (telephone 780-492-2973; e-mail, zenon.kohut@ualberta.ca). Please make checks payable to: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, Memo: Baturyn Project. Tax receipts will be issued to all donors in the United States and Canada. Organizations, foundations, companies and private donors supporting this undertaking will be gratefully acknowledged in related publications and public lectures.

For more information or with any questions about the Baturyn archaeological project, readers may contact the author of this article: Dr. Volodymyr Mezentsev, 100 High Park Ave., Apt. 808, Toronto, ON, M6P 2S2; telephone, 416-766-1408; e-mail, v.mezentsev@utoronto.ca.

Upon request, readers can receive the DVD disk with his richly illustrated lecture on the 2008 excavations and architectural reconstructions in Baturyn and commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the tragic destruction of Mazepa capital presented for Kontaki TV Network of Toronto (45 min. in Ukrainian), as well as a documentary film on the history and culture of Baturyn during the Kozak era and the 2001-2002 excavations (28 min. in Ukrainian or English). Both DVD disks and VHS-NTSC videocassettes with this film are available for purchase.

The researchers of Baturyn thank kindly the Ukrainian communities in the United States and Canada for their generous continuous support of this project, which will be vital after the last presidential election in Ukraine.