



### THREE MONTHS IN WIKO ALEXANDER VERLINSKY

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My *Bericht* consists of three parts: first my impressions of the Institute, then some results of and future perspectives on my own work and, last, some meditations born from both this work and the extraordinary environment in which I was happy to spend three Autumn-Winter months of 2010.

First of all, my praise for the Wiko people. I'll start with the library with its head Sonja Grund, since all Fellows beyond a doubt found its work admirable: from the variety (and unpredictability) of subjects the Fellows deal with, the wonderful idea arose to combine the basic reference works in main fields of research with the admirably rapid inter-library loan service (with such tools as the *Subito* service that delivers any paper not attainable through journal databases in PDF format) – the realized dream of a lazy scholar who prefers to work without leaving his office. Many other services are probably best praised by noting that they were constantly active and rarely noticeable; my few contacts with the computer people, the housing service, the financial service etc. were invariably pleasant and effective. It goes without saying that I enjoyed the society of old friends with whom my institute has cherished contacts for years – Joachim Nettelbeck, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Joachim Domnick, Katharina Biegger, Uta Benner, Francisco Martinez – who helped variously and constantly, and it was both fascinating and useful to observe them doing their everyday work. I admired the elegance with which Luca Giuliani combines his director duties (which entail *inter alia* competent participation in the working seminars of different groups) with his own engaged scholarly work in the field of ancient art and archaeology. Effective academic management is still *in statu nascendi* in Russia, and here Wiko provides incomparable possibilities of acquiring know-how in the effective organizing of scholarly life in all its aspects – from schools and *Kindergarten* up to seminars. The Wiko model cannot be applied directly to my own institute in St. Petersburg, the Bibliotheca Classica Petropolitana, which is much smaller and specialized in the narrow field of Classical Antiquity, with the emphasis on philology, but including history, arts and philosophy as well: at the BiCl, the scholarly staff is permanent, but is also engaged in teaching and research at the University, the Academy of Sciences, and the Gymnasium. Still, there are many inspiring lessons to be learned from Wiko's respect for individual scholarly work, its logistics, and its humanistic spirit.

At the Wiko I worked on papers connected with my general project (which I conventionally label) "Plato's views of the origin of culture and their impact on later thinkers". I was able to complete two of them, on theology and the periodization of cosmic and human history in Plato's later dialogues, and they are now published.<sup>1</sup> Another, a long

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1 "The Cosmic Cycle in the Statesman Myth. Part II." *Hyperboreus* 15:2 (2009) [2011]: 221–250; "Theology and Relative Dates of the *Timaeus* and the *Statesman*." *Hyperboreus* 16/17 (2010/11) [2011] = *Variante Loquella: Alexandro Gavrilov Septuagenario*, 326–343.

paper on Aristotle's condensed and almost cryptographic sketch of the development of knowledge and sciences in the opening of the *Metaphysics*, which occupied me during my stay in Berlin, still awaits completion. Aristotle's concise style demands attentive reading, and the task of a philologist who is engaged in the history of philosophy, as I am, is to interpret again this classic text, but also, very often, to release it from the burdensome misinterpretations of earlier philologists, for example from the view that it is a garbled text that consists of several pieces written in different periods of Aristotle's life and possibly even written by someone other than Aristotle himself. I tried to show that this search for inconsistencies has misled some fine philologists and philosophers: the text we have is not only one of the most elegant and well-built in the corpus: provided that we read it as an integral one, it also sheds light on an unnoticed aspect of Aristotle's theory, his explanation of what the historical prerequisites for the emergence of theoretical sciences should be. Contrary to the view that Aristotle's explanation is that the necessary requirement is the appearance of a leisure class, such as the Egyptian priests, the text shows that the more fundamental factor (which has been almost completely neglected by the commentators) is the continuous, probably centuries-long, development of the crafts and arts that equip mankind with what Aristotle calls the embellishments of life, presumably meaning the products of the fine arts, but also those products of necessary crafts that are refined enough to be used for more than solely utilitarian purposes, such as beautiful clothes, houses etc. According to Aristotle, the continuous encouragement of these half-utilitarian and half-non-utilitarian activities and the competition between their representatives teaches the society to esteem intellectual achievements not because of their utilitarian value, but for themselves, and this paves the way to the future encouraging of theoretical, purely non-utilitarian activities when the immanent progress of knowledge makes the appearance of theoretical knowledge possible. My general proposal is that although Aristotle's view of this development is in general correctly defined as teleological (this definition is true in the sense that he admits the limitedness of every stage of development and, in all probability, the limitedness of scientific progress on the whole), this label does not do justice to the complexity of his explanation, which is not only the most elaborate, in spite of its concision, in classical times, but also the only one, as far as I know, that approximates the complexity of the explanation of the rise of Greek science proposed by my late teacher Alexander Zaicev.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Alexander Zaicev. *Das griechische Wunder: Die Entstehung der griechischen Zivilisation*. Constance, 1993.

My work on solving of these puzzles of Aristotle's text and thought started during my stay at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, and it continued in another Institute of Advanced Study, in Wiko. This led inevitably to some thinking about the similarity and difference between Aristotle's concept of the support of theoretical knowledge and the support provided by these modern institutions. Putting aside the specific outdated features of Aristotle's project, such as the caste system, it becomes clear that Aristotle is the main classical predecessor of the modern system of encouraging purely theoretical investigations both by the state and private foundations (let us not forget that the broad and intensive research in Aristotle's own school were supported exclusively by private sponsors). This of course evokes the thought that the purpose of the IASs from their beginning was to support the projects of scientists and scholars who had already proved their excellence in their field, projects that promised a considerable advance in knowledge in a related field, but without any guarantee that they would be successful, not to mention that they need not be useful from the utilitarian point of view. This corresponds to the view Aristotle opts for, as I understand him. The purposes of the IASs remain the same nowadays and one may hope that these institutes will retain this spirit without pressing upon scholars what seems to me a considerable danger in today's humanities – a pseudo-theoretical cover of their projects, which at best is simply spread over the concrete problems they are trying to solve and at worst leads to no content at all.

Having a very limited time at the Wiko, I tried naturally to concentrate on my own work, and I enjoyed these three months free of teaching and administrative duties. I did not attend all the seminars of the Fellows of the Wiko and, in all probability, missed many things that would have been both informative and exciting. Practically all the presentations of papers I attended were excellent; I got a vivid impression of the Fellows and how they do research. I was probably most impressed by Bruce Campbell's paper on the climatic and other environmental causes of the Great Plague. For me as a non-specialist, it was instructive both in regard to the impact of this epidemic on economics and social life and in regard to the new possibilities natural sciences open up for advances in understanding history. I'm not sure that I can use anything from these lessons in my own work, but the indirect influence of such a courageous attempt cannot be predicted. Aside from that, attending seminars definitely broadened my human horizon (for example the paper on dying of cancer in Africa which amazingly reminded me of dying of it in Russia). In general, the practice of forming focus groups at the Wiko seems to me very promising,

and in my view it would be fine to have more of this kind of group also in the field to which I belong – classics and ancient philosophy.

The last but very important experience I brought home from Wiko was the effects of various and numerous conversations. Not only were many Fellows interested in Russia and the Russian language; many also knew much about them; this gives me hope that this interest was not combined either with excessive expectations or with bitter disappointment (which is at bottom the same): that our way to democracy should be very long and difficult could have been firmly predicted twenty years ago, if it were not for the enthusiasm for quickly acquired freedom. Today, in spite of the considerable growth of the wealth of the Russian state, real advance in science and culture is piecemeal and irregular, takes place mainly within relatively small groups and is not easily noticeable: cooperation with Western colleagues did not become less necessary for Russia than it was in the poor and free 90s, when any help at all was of vital importance, but today it takes on more complicated forms. I was happy to find understanding of this among many colleagues – not only from Eastern Europe, where the situation is rapidly beginning to remind me of Russia, but also from countries further to the West. Here Wiko retains extraordinary importance for Russian scholarship.

I returned to the Wiko again on a nice summer day in July 2011, at the time of the farewells, and had the happy opportunity to attend to the last lunches and concerts, with their mixed atmosphere of satisfaction about the year gone, desire to stay longer at Wiko and the sadness of parting. This time we were engaged (with Alexander Gavrilov, a former Fellow of the Wiko, and Denys Keyer, my younger colleague at the BiCl) in compiling the new Application for my institute, which aims to maintain the BiCl's precarious existence for the next five years. Thanks to Wiko for this hearty reception on this new occasion – it is pleasing to think that a new Lycaum exists, with its freedom, independence and fresh sight, open for advances and failures in scholarship.