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The amazing Dr Kouznetsov

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Here is a story to strike a chill of anxiety into the hearts of editors and their peer-reviewers. Do we, should we, need we check our submissions with greater rigour?

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It is rare in scientific fraud to find a repeat offender. Once exposed, the perpetrator usually slinks off into oblivion. Yet the case of a low-level Russian microbiologist, working in the Moscow City Station for Sanitation and Epidemiology, reveals an extraordinary resilience: he was able to put himself in the international limelight no less than three times, twice even after being discovered *in flagrante delicto*. His final act was a spectacular fraud performed on a prominent British journal, involving false claims about archaeological samples not from some remote corner of the former Soviet Union, but from the Republic of Ireland.

The international career of Dimitri Kouznetsov began as a creationist with claims of ‘scientific’ evidence against a facet of Darwinian evolution. He had become a Baptist and linked up with creationists in Europe and the US; he then managed to get an article published in a respected peer-reviewed scientific journal, the *International Journal of Neuroscience* (Kouznetsov 1989), then published by Gordon & Breach Science Publishers of New York. The article dealt with mRNAs isolated from wild timber voles, and had the following subtitle: *‘A new criticism to a modern molecular-genetic concept of biological evolution.’* The article was highly technical, and appeared to be well-researched and presented. One would have thought that, in view of what was clearly a highly significant (if true) and certainly controversial claim, the article might have been subjected to close scrutiny prior to publication. It apparently was not, and it was only the interest of a Swedish scientist a few years later that brought to light numerous false claims, in the form of non-existent references which were cited to build Kouznetsov’s argument. Prof. Dan Larhammar of Uppsala University wrote to the journal (Larhammar 1994) pointing out the following false citations:

- An article supposedly published in *Upsala* [sic] *University Research Reports*: no such journal could be identified, nor were the authors known to Uppsala University.
- An article in *Allergologica Acta*: a journal named *Acta Allergologica* exists but the article was not found therein.
- Articles in *Immunochemical and Immunocytological Methods*; *International Journal of Applied Immunology and Immunochemistry*; *Biotechnologica Acta*; *Comparative Biochemistry, Biophysics and Genetics*; *Methods and Approaches in Clinical Chemistry and Immunochemistry*; *Scandinavian Archives of Molecular Pathology* – no such journals could be found.

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The publication of Prof. Larhammar's letter was a shock to the organisations that had embraced Kouznetsov as a rising star in the ranks of creationist 'scientists'. He was subsequently disowned by the European, American and Australian creationist organisations. A tempest in a teacup, one might think, and apart from the embarrassment caused to the journal there was no impact on mainstream science. In most cases that would have been the end of it. *'Those guilty of scientific fraud are banished for perpetuity from the corridors of science in a blaze of publicity'* (Plimer 1994: 253).

However, with the financial assistance of a wealthy French creationist, Kouznetsov had been pursuing other lines – attempting to disprove the carbon-dating of the Turin Shroud and developing an alternative method of dating old textiles. In 1994 he succeeded in publishing a technical paper in *Analytical Chemistry* (Kouznetsov *et al.* 1994), and two modified versions were later published in other journals (Kouznetsov *et al.* 1996a, c). Also in 1994, Kouznetsov sent me a copy of one of his unpublished papers along with a handwritten letter with lots of doodles and funny-looking characters drawn in the margins. He seemed to have a good command of the physics and chemistry behind radiocarbon dating, and seemed to have identified potential problems in the dating of the Turin relic. At that time no one in Shroud circles except his financial patron knew of his creationist background. His affiliation, and that of his co-author Andrey Ivanov, was given in the paper he sent me as *'Laboratory of Physico-Chemical Research Methods, Moscow State Center for Sanitation and Ecology Studies'*. In the *Analytical Chemistry* paper a few months later the affiliation of the two had changed to *'S.A. Sedov Biopolymer Research Laboratories'*. A potential problem, not noticed by me at the time, was that both these 'laboratories' had the same address.

His success in the archaeological arena was an article (Kouznetsov *et al.* 1996b) in *Journal of Archaeological Science* published at that time by Academic Press. He and his co-authors made the argument that the church fire of 1532 had enriched the Shroud's ^{14}C content, and they produced experimental data that appeared to have replicated the process. Although a strong rebuttal from scientists at the Arizona radiocarbon lab (Jull *et al.* 1996) was published in the same issue of the journal, the work by Kouznetsov and his collaborators seemed an important breakthrough for those who held out for the Shroud's authenticity. For the next year Kouznetsov was the toast of the Shroud world, especially in Italy and the USA, with numerous lecture tours and consultation visits. Then everything began to unravel; there were persistent rumours of Kouznetsov's raising large amounts of money for various projects then failing to answer enquiries. By late 1997 a black cloud had developed over his name, and it burst in December when he was arrested in Danbury, Connecticut on charges of attempting to pass stolen cheques. He spent several months in custody, then was assigned to a rehabilitation programme but returned to Russia without fulfilling its requirements. Like his brief star appearance as a creationist, Kouznetsov's second career as a 'sindonologist' (Shroud researcher) ended abruptly in disgrace.

Around this time, an Italian sceptic, Gian Marco Rinaldi (2002; English summary in Polidoro 2004), began what was to be an exhaustive investigation into Kouznetsov's work. Following the lead provided by Prof. Larhammar, Rinaldi began examining the citations and other factual claims made in the peer-reviewed articles. He found that once again certain of the references were false, and furthermore that all of the samples of ancient textiles Kouznetsov and co-authors claimed to have obtained from various museums in

the former Soviet Union could not be substantiated. Of the 14 samples described, all but one had supposedly come from six museums in Russia, the Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The name and city for each museum are given, but not the street address; the names of the directors or curators were given in the acknowledgements. Despite repeated efforts, Rinaldi was not able to verify the existence of any of these museums or personnel; several Russian and Ukrainian museum people that he corresponded with believed that they did not exist. The Russian AMS ¹⁴C lab that Kouznetsov (1996b: 121) claimed dated his samples also was found to be non-existent. Rinaldi concluded later that, without the samples and the AMS lab, the experiments could not have been carried out as reported and thus were fabricated.

All of these fictions pale in comparison to the spectacular fraud that Kouznetsov still had up his sleeve. In November 1998 he submitted an article to the renowned if rather staid journal *Studies in Conservation*, edited by the International Institute for Conservation and published by James & James Science Publishers, both headquartered in London. In this article with highly technical language and impressive-looking science, Kouznetsov (2000: 118) invented samples of archaeological textiles from Ireland. This is the description of samples verbatim as it appeared in the article:

Textile Samples: Light gray (non-dyed), clean-looking and well-preserved small portions of different linen burials (10-12g) were acquired, after being stylistically dated, from the following sources:

Sample #1 – AD 640; burial: Scanlan Mor, ruler of Ossory; excavated in Ballyknockane site at County Limerick, Ireland; donated by the Irish Heritage Foundation, Lanesboro, Ireland.

Sample #2 – AD 680-720, burial: unidentified monk; excavated at the necropolis site of St Domanagart monastery, Slive Donard at Mourne Mountains, Ireland; donated by the Irish Heritage Foundation, Lanesboro, Ireland.

Sample #3 – AD 1110-1135, burial: Liam Doughan, Lord Gillemore; excavated at the Castlegarde site near Pallasgreen, County Limerick, Ireland; donated by Sir Arthur Luttrell, Clogheen, Ireland.

Sample #4 – AD 1585, burial: Garrett Og Fitzgerald, the eleventh Earl of Kildare; St Brigid's cathedral, Kildare, Ireland; donated by Prof. Sean Laoghaire, Westmeath College of Arts, Westmeath, Ireland.

One would have thought that such an impressive array of linen samples from Irish sites would have warranted verification by the journal, especially with one specimen coming from no less a famous personage than one of the Earls of Kildare. A brief enquiry by email or telephone to the National Museum of Ireland or Irish heritage authorities would have sufficed to reveal the amazing audacity of this fraud. All of the samples are bogus; there is no Irish Heritage Foundation of Lanesboro, Ireland, or anywhere else; there is no Sir Arthur Luttrell and no Prof. Sean Laoghaire. The ever-diligent Rinaldi wrote to numerous people in Ireland and none had ever heard of these names. His enquiry to the National Museum of Ireland elicited a response from Mary Cahill, Assistant Keeper in the Irish Antiquities Division. Her instant reaction was that the samples could not exist and *anyone with the least*

familiarity with Irish archaeology would have known immediately that the data presented could not possibly be true' (Cahill pers. comm. 2006). In January 2001 Cahill wrote formally to the International Institute for Conservation:

The burials which [Kouznetsov] describes containing the remains of some named individuals are unknown to Irish archaeology. The institutions and the individuals which he names as having provided the samples do not exist. . . . Excavations at the sites described have not taken place. . . . The author seems to have gone to some trouble to 'identify' sites and names of persons which are clearly Irish in origin but to anyone familiar with the archaeology and history of the country are immediately suspect. . . . Suffice it to say that the information on Ireland given in the article has no basis in truth.

According to information provided to Rinaldi by Irish correspondents, each of the sample descriptions has false information:

1. Scannlan Mor, ruler of Ossory, is briefly mentioned in the *Annals of the Four Masters* as having died in 640, but his grave has never been found. There is a Ballyknockane house in county Limerick, constructed by Michael Scanlan in 1793-94, but this was not in the territory of the ancient domain of Ossory, and there is no known or claimed linkage to the ancient ruler Scannlan Mor some 1100 years earlier.
2. Regarding the St Domanagart monastery, local historians claim no excavation has ever been conducted there.
3. There is no 'Liam Doughan' known to historians, and the title Lord Gillemore (Guillamore) only occurs from 1831.
4. The eleventh Earl of Kildare, known as the 'Wizard Earl,' died in London in 1585 and was indeed buried in the St Brigid's Cathedral in Kildare. The cathedral was severely damaged in the seventeenth century, and many tombs were destroyed. It was reconstructed in the nineteenth century, but neither then nor since has any tomb, headstone or inscription relating to the eleventh Earl ever been discovered in or near the cathedral.

Having suffered such a debacle, the journal would naturally be expected to publish a correction, for the record, but surprisingly, *Studies in Conservation* chose not to do so. By contrast, in subsequent issues of the journal, occasional letters to the editor did appear pointing out minor errors in other articles. Rinaldi also investigated the 14 people acknowledged at the end of Kouznetsov's article. He found that 12 were unknown to eight of the institutions named; two universities did not respond, but their website staff directory did not list the persons in question. Rinaldi communicated his findings to the International Institute of Conservation, but neither he nor Cahill ever received a response.

Kouznetsov's article in *Studies in Conservation* concluded with an author biography giving the following affiliations: '*professor of biochemistry, Nesterova College, University of Moscow and head of SBR Laboratories, Inc.*' The address provided for SBR Laboratories was none other than Kouznetsov's residence. Nesterova College has no connection with the University of Moscow. It is, apparently, a night school.

Despicable as these kinds of fraud are, there is a certain 'bottom feeder' function that they provide, calling attention to flaws in the procedures of science publishing. That Kouznetsov

could pull off such an amazing con on a prominent peer-reviewed journal clearly illustrates the need for fact-checking and background-checking of potential contributors, even if it adds time to the review process, especially when important claims are made. Failure to do so can obviously result in considerable embarrassment to the editor and publisher.

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