

OPINION

In the procedure for the defence of a dissertation entitled
**"Technology and society at the end of the second millennium BC in the western
Black Sea. The Late Bronze Age settlement near Durankulak"**

or obtaining the educational and scientific degree PhD

by

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Professional field: 2.2. History and Archaeology

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Member of the Scientific Jury by Order No. 3-PK-61/6.12.2023 of the Rector of NBU

1. General characteristics of the dissertation

Bogdan Athanassov's dissertation "Technology and Society at the End of the Second Millennium BC in the Western Black Sea Region. The Late Bronze Age settlement near Durankulak" is devoted to a poorly and insufficiently studied period in Bulgarian historiography - the end of the Bronze Age and the accompanying cultural processes in the northeast of the cultural-geographical concept of Thrace. The work is organized in two parts - a text part of 363 pages and a graphic part including 32 panels.

The text part is structured in an introductory part (Introduction and Acknowledgements - 10 pages), ten chapters with corresponding sub-chapters representing the logical highlights (1. History of the research and objectives of the work - 64 p., 2. Physico-geographical conditions and palaeoenvironment in the late 2nd millennium BC of the Eastern Balkans and neighbouring regions - 32 p., 3. Archaeological excavations of the Late Bronze Age settlement at Durankulak - 16 p., 4. The large island in Lake Durankulak and the location of the Late Bronze Age settlement - 3 p., 5. Architecture and stratigraphy of the Late Bronze Age settlement at Durankulak - 170 p., 6. Agriculture and pastoralism - 6 p., 7. Ceramics and chronology - 21 p., 8. Small finds - 2 p., 9. Flint objects - 5 p., 10. Objects of metal - 3 p., Conclusion - 5 p.). References cited (pp. 328-349) include 366 publications of which 78 are in Cyrillic). An integral part of the text are 159 images, which cannot be presented as appendices because this would significantly complicate the reading of the text and the follow-up of the conclusions.

The graphic appendix Part 2 "Plates" includes the general plans and position of the structures studied (T. 1-9), as well as the plates with the systematized drawings and images of the ceramic forms, including parallels with Troy VII b1 and b2. The appendices are also linked to the main work, and are referenced in the main text.

The layout is clean, the set of computer pages is legibly presented, far exceeding the accepted standard of 1800 characters, the citation is in bracketed text, which is also the accepted way for the discipline.

2. Content analysis of the candidate's scientific achievements in the submitted dissertation

The presented dissertation has as its main task the processing and publication of the materials from the archaeological investigations in the 1970s and 1980s of the Late Bronze Age structures and relevant materials from the excavations of the multilayered site of Durankulak, conducted at the time by a team led by Henrieta Todorova.

Bogdan Athanassov, of course, does not limit himself to this otherwise very thankless task of working with materials and methods of research from 40 years ago. The present text is a wonderful demonstration of the combined analysis of archaeological, historical, interdisciplinary research (within the field of archaeological science) to achieve the goals and answer the questions posed in the title of the work, but also outlining many new ones. This comes as no surprise to the colleague's familiar style of writing and thinking, but it is a pleasure to follow his (logical and well-reasoned) reflections on the proposed reconstructions, interpretations, and reasoned corrections of site dating that lead to our better understanding and conceptualization of the time of the LBA – EIA in Thrace within the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans.

We cannot disagree with him that "surprisingly little literature has been devoted to the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age in the Eastern Balkans," which contrasts with "the vast amount of research on this subject in the Aegean region and the Eastern Mediterranean" (p. 1). The present work offers a real chance to gradually overcome this lack. Other recently defended such works, such as the dissertation of the colleague Plamen Georgiev on "Settlement system along the middle reaches of the Maritza and Tundzha rivers in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages", defended in 2023 at NAIM-BAS, fit into the problematics of the LBA-EIA transition, albeit with a focus mainly on the subsequent Early Iron Age period.

I would not presume to comment at length on all the chapters of the work within the confines of this brief statement. I cannot, however, fail to mention the author's highly erudite language and fascinating narrative

to guide the reader with ease through perhaps one of the most complex and debated issues of the Late Bronze Age, the thousands of pages of scholarly literature, maintaining a consistently high level of scholarship, handling with ease and competence a heterogeneous source base - written documents of the Hittites, Egyptians or Ovid, palynological studies, radiocarbon dates, or archaeozoology, etc.

The first chapter, titled "History of Research and Objectives of the Work," is not just that. The theoretical concepts of Thomsen, Gordon Child, Renfrew, or Snodgrass are presented there and critically evaluated with due respect, but also in the light of the modern development and state of the science of archaeology, diffusionist, migrationist and evolutionist concepts of the development of cultures, the problems of the distribution of iron, the pre-dating of the strata at Troy VIIb are discussed. Thus, we should agree with the colleague that the LBA and EIA were dynamic times with high mobility, but the only convincing and archaeologically traceable evidence is for the migration of Balkan populations to Troy (VIIb1 and 2 in the 12-11 cent. BC) and from Italy to mainland Greece and the islands to Cyprus in the 13-12 cent. BC, and these are most likely small groups of people who settled as part of mixed households, i.e. cohabiting with the local population, and we cannot see them as the agents of the Mycenaean collapse (p. 60).

Against this background, the development of archaeological research on the LBA-EIA in the Eastern Balkans and Western Black Sea region up to modern times is presented, highlighting the difficulties of interpretation - few sites have been more extensively studied according to modern methodological criteria (to which the author has personally contributed as the leader of a large team in the study of the Bresto site), the thin stratigraphy of the LBA sites, the lack of vertical stratigraphy to trace the stages of the Late LBE, and so on. In this picture, the site of Durankulak appears to be an important benchmark for the northeast of Thrace, and which defines the clearly defined objectives - "a critical processing of the information and data from the excavation of the KBE settlement at Durankulak (p. 63) to allow a proper understanding of the LBA.

Chapter 2, "Geographic conditions ..." is particularly valuable given the critical discussion of the various hypotheses of climate change - the supposed drying and cooling at the end of the CBE and its impact on the dynamics of historical processes. Although it is convenient and easy for us to think and generalize about the causes of the decline of CBE societies as a consequence of natural and climatic adversities, research on the issues does not lead to a clear-cut solution, as pointed out by our colleague Athanassov (p. 72-76) - the dates of climatic changes have been variously placed, there are discrepancies between the written sources for the Levant and Asia Minor (Egyptian and Hittite documents), which fix agricultural scarcities in the 13th century BC, while the palynological profiles - with all their criticisms and conventions - place the cold/drought in the 12th century BC (Kaniewski et al.).

Chapters 3-5 are devoted to the exploration of the Durankulak site. The source material - the extant documentation of the excavations (diaries, summary reports, photographic documentation, graphic sketches) - is presented here, analysed to outline the methods of investigation used and critically examined in the light of the resulting problems and limitations of stratigraphic positioning and contextualisation of the finds. Chapter 5, which is also the body of the thesis (spread over 170 pages), is highly contributory. With great attention to detail, analysis of the available photographic documentation and comparison with general photographs of the site, the previous periodisation of the site has been corrected, reconstructing three rather than four phases within the CBE, recovering the area and types of buildings in these phases of occupation, which are distinguished by their stone plinths, the individual buildings having been located at some distance from each other arranged linearly on the slope formed by a terraced wall.

These observations are not an end in themselves, they are in fact the basis on which to reconstruct conclusions about the organization of society, to compare it with surrounding communities and to delineate underlying processes. I will take the liberty of drawing attention to these very observations: 'The joint construction of terracing walls and defensive structures could create horizontal connections among the inhabitants of a settlement, but it could also contribute to the concentration of power in the hands of individuals, families or lineages (lineage)'; 'for only five settlements on the territory of Bulgaria of this period do we know how the buildings were located in space' (p. 251). In comparison, the Ukrainian Black Sea region (Sabatinivka culture)

illustrates another architectural concept (p. 264-5), a complex agglomeration of buildings, which Athanassov believes can be attributed to "differences in family structures" and may be an illustration of "high social control."

With regard to a rather frequently commented fact about the thinness of the LBA-EIA objects, traditionally perceived as a sign of nomadic, semi-nomadic/transhumant societies, the colleague points out that this cannot be a definite indication, inasmuch as archaeozoological studies have shown in such sites analysed the presence of animal (pig) bones which do not follow seasonal migrations, and accordingly it cannot be argued that the societies in question were those of specialised pastoralists (cf. 270). In his view, "the reasons for the short-lived nature of CBE settlements should not be sought so much in domestic animal husbandry strategies, but rather in the type of agriculture" (p. 291).

Of particular value is the analysis of ceramic material in Chapter 7. The surviving material from the excavations is relatively sparse (1044 fragments, 400 of which are subject to quantitative analysis - p. 295). Despite problems with the inability to establish definitively the stratigraphic position of the indicative fragments and vessels, problems with radiocarbon dates from the site (cf. p. 312), stylistic parallels and comparison with known forms from other synchronous sites allow some observations and conclusions to be drawn. Here, I would agree that Type DK-3 of the cantharoid vessels rather belongs to the EIA (p. 306), whatever parallels the colleague is inclined to see.

An important observation is the proposed shift back in time of the starting date of the necropolis at Sboryanovo - to the beginning of the 11th century BC (pp. 48f and 303), well supported by the now generally accepted date for Troy VII b in the period ca. 1200 to ca. 1050 BC.

The chapter "Conclusion" traces the dynamics of societies in Thrace during the LBA: the appearance in the 14th century BC of Mycenaean pottery in the Rhodopes, respectively of "new forms of social behaviour (banquet, symposium)", the 13th century BC of the "new forms of social behaviour (banquet, symposium)", the 13th century BC of the "new forms of social behaviour (banquet, symposium)". - 12th century BC - architectural flowering (with the example of Durankulak), which is traced in the use of stone slabs in the floor lining of some houses, in parallel with the decrease of decorated ceramics). With some reservations, Bogdan Atanasov is inclined to accept the designation of the 12th century BC as a transitional period between the LBA and the EIA. He interprets the peculiarities of the organization of settlement structures observed in the 11th century BC of greater distance between buildings and increasing physical and social distance as evidence of more freedom, i.e. less social control (p. 326).

3. Qualities of the abstract

The abstract reflects correctly the content of the dissertation and meets all the requirements for the preparation of the abstract presentation of the studied topic and the main observations. The listed dissertation contributions reflect objectively the qualities of the research.

4. Approbation of results

The mentioned scientific works - dissertation and articles meet the minimum national requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific field and professional field of the procedure.

There is no plagiarism in the dissertation and research papers submitted under this procedure.

5. Critical comments and recommendations

The text needs careful editing of some grammatical and technical errors: punctuation, swapped/missed letters in the names of authors cited, missing titles in the literature (e.g. Гоцев 1996, 2010 (perhaps the latter is in English?); Gahan, J. J. 1978, 'Ovid: The Poet in Winter,' CJ 73: 198-202), vol. 9.2 is missing, there is only a caption; Ramses 3 on p. 323 is better to be rendered as Ramses III.

As part of the workflow remained on s. 73 "Is Kush Kaya a permanent settlement?" - a very good question that deserves special attention and applies to all the other sites discussed - intensity and duration of occupation.

Despite the arguments put forward, I am not convinced that the 12th century BC can be considered a time of architectural flourishing and prosperity. The adoption of different building techniques with the application of unworked stones for plinths, terracing or flat floor stones is a mark of difference, but it is limited to that, i.e. it is a development rather than necessarily a flowering. I also don't think the Ikea comparison is appropriate, not least because of the hidden (anti?)advertising. Ikea-styles tend to rely more on minimalist design, which is a different aesthetic compared to the lavish kitsch of 1970s and 1980s crystal glasses. Indeed, the lack of decoration and observed simplicity in style can hardly be interpreted unambiguously as mere decadence, but the other aesthetic should still be thought of as implicit "social, technological and value changes" (p. 311).

As someone whose conscious life fell into a period of transition, I am also uncertain about the possible negative connotations regarding the philosophy of the notion "transition" as a less significant period (p. 326). As historians, we know that these phases of transformation, development, assimilation, and adaptation are particularly interesting.

The last opinion is very individual. So are the previous ones mentioned in this section, which should by no means be taken as criticism. They are rather reflections that Bogdan Atanassov's present dissertation text provokes. And it shows that he has fulfilled the tasks and opened the door to the necessary scholarly discussion in Bulgaria about the end of the LAB - the beginning of the EIA.

6. Conclusion

Having acquainted myself with the dissertation presented in the procedure and on the basis of the above, I recommend the scientific jury to award Bogdan Stoyanov Atanassov the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in scientific field 2. Humanities, professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology.

5.03.2024 r.

Sofia

Reviewer:

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/Assoc. Prof. J. Tzvetkova, PhD/