

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Deyan Sashkov Rabovyanov - NAIM at BAS

on the dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree of DOCTOR on the topic of *The settlement system of Melnik region in the 11th - 17th century* by Metodi Dimitrov Zlatkov – full-time PhD student in Medieval Archaeology in the Section of Medieval Archaeology of NAIM at BAS, with supervisor Prof. Dr. Violeta Nesheva

Scholarly biography

M. Zlatkov graduated in 2009 at St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, in specialty of Archeology, where he obtained a master's degree. From 2010 to 2021 he was a full-time PhD student at the Section of Medieval Archaeology at NAIM at BAS. In the course of his scholarly development M. Zlatkov has gained significant field experience as an archaeologist, participating in many archaeological excavations of various in nature and chronology sites in the country, and has independently conducted 6 archaeological explorations - rescue excavations and field surveys. The latter are of great importance for the realization of his dissertation, as they cover the territories considered in it and information from them directly participates in the work of the doctoral student. The proofs of the completed scholarly development of the doctoral student are the already published 12 articles and studies of a contribution nature. They reflect the interests of M. Zlatkov to the culture of Medieval Byzantium and Bulgaria. The doctoral student's publications must be accompanied by 14 reports in the series of *Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations*, reflecting his field work as an archaeologist. His participation in 14 scholarly conferences, some of them with international participation, as well as his involvement in the project of *Advanced Research Infrastructure for Archaeological Dataset Networking in Europe (ARIADNE)* are also impressive.

Dissertation

The chosen topic for the dissertation is appropriate with its many complex questions, which the PhD student is expected to answer. Solving them became a challenge, provoking him to employ methods not typical for Bulgaria, such as retrogressive and retrospective ones. The selected area is an apt basis for such a micro-regional study. With the inclusion of information from his own field research and from previously unconsidered sources of various nature, M. Zlatkov has an indisputable personal contribution. It is important to emphasize that although this topic has been written on before, M. Zlatkov has managed to deal with it, demonstrating in-depth knowledge and understanding of its character. In addition, he presented a text revealing an already established scientific style of writing and literate and grammatically correct language.

The dissertation consists of two parts - Text and Illustrations. The text is composed of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a list of cited literature from 631 cited sources. This

section has a total of 358 pages. The illustrative part of 117 pages presents 143 maps and images, and five tables.

The Introduction to the dissertation has a classical construction and content. In it, the subject of the research, the goals, the tasks and the territorial and chronological boundaries of the topic are well presented and arguably defended. Attention is also paid to the terminological problems for the definition of the main settlement units of the period, as well as to the nature of the study itself and to what extent it is mesoregional or microregional. The retrogressive and retrospective methods employed by M. Zlatkov as the main ones in the research are explained and defended briefly and with arguments. Furthermore, the introduction demonstrates that the PhD student is very familiar with both the physical and geographical features of the area and its toponymy, including in a historical plan, which is particularly important for the success of such a topic.

The first chapter presents the source base and works on the topic. This is done extremely comprehensively and with understanding, which makes this part of the dissertation the most complete bibliographic and scholarly reference for Melnik in the Middle Ages available so far. I consider it appropriate to present the new material accumulated after Boris Tsvetkov's research, which, so to speak, "justifies" the redevelopment of the topic. It was important to me that I also saw an analysis of the limitations in the results of field surveys, an information that has been overexposed lately. M. Zlatkov has managed to protect himself from this mistake.

The second chapter presents Melnik on the political map of the Balkans in the 11th – 17th centuries. It is characterized by conciseness, but a density of the text and M. Zlatkov can be congratulated for the synthesis of available historical information. In this essentially introductory text, he puts important accents on the topic of the dissertation concerning the historical toponymy and the problem of the scope of the territory of Melnik. It is no coincidence that the volume of this chapter is not small. Although not archaeological in nature, it represents the "groundwork" for the study of Melnik in the 11th – 17th c.

The largest third chapter is one of the indisputable contributing parts of the dissertation. It not only presents the available information - archaeological and of another nature, for the six micro-regions considered in it, but also a summary of the settlement model for the respective historical periods has been made as far as possible. The work done by M. Zlatkov provokes respect, and the model of processing and presentation of the information employed by him can serve as a model for other similar study. The circumstance that the separate parts of the chapter are not the same in volume can be explained having in mind the nature of the territory of the individual micro-regions and the available source base. Given my personal skepticism about the transfer of models from the Ottoman Age back to the Middle Ages, I think that in specific cases some of the conclusions of M. Zlatkov are slightly exaggerated.

In the same chapter an identification of the names mentioned in the sources has been made, in which the personal contribution of the PhD student is traced. Among the disadvantages of the

chapter is that it does not offer a complete reconstruction of the entire settlement network in the region. It is clear that given the long period and the limited nature of the source base, it would be somewhat formal. I should also note that this has been successfully done at the micro-regional level for the different parts of Melnik region. However, a more pronounced summary is missing and could be added. As a recommendation, I can suggest that in a future publication of the work, the PhD student to include in the research Melnik itself, which is also the center of the region in question, despite the considerable amount of literature and summarizing papers about it. In a future publication of the dissertation it would be appropriate for M. Zlatkov to pay more attention to the data from the coin finds from the region.

The fourth chapter, dedicated to the road network in the Melnik region, makes a very good impression with its completeness and integrity. It is methodically sound, uses maximum in volume and type of information, and personal knowledge of the terrain by M. Zlatkov allowed him to make the best analysis of the road network for a region known to me from Bulgaria, without limit to the medieval period. In my mind this chapter is one of the significant contributions of the dissertation.

The Conclusion of the work is short and informative. It is noteworthy that the aim is not a mechanical repetition of the conclusions in the text, but some summary and synthesis would be desirable in the future monographic publication of the dissertation.

The bibliography of the work is impressive and covers 60 pages, testifying positively to the scale and quality of the study. The division into sources different in nature is appropriate and facilitates the search and comparison with the text.

Regarding the Appendices to the dissertation, I can only praise the doctoral student. The map material, which is also the main one among the applications visualizing the work, is informative, as M. Zlatkov has a personal contribution in making a significant part of it. However, in a future publication, it would be appropriate to unify the style. The figures are of a good quality, well selected and arranged and informatively annotated, which facilitates makes the work with easy.

Abstract

The abstract proposed by M. Zlatkov is maximally informative given its short form and satisfactorily illustrates the structure, content and contributions of the dissertation.

Publications

The PhD student has presented two publications directly related to the topic of the dissertation meeting the requirements of the law. Although they cannot be taken into account, it is good to list also all five reports in the series of *Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations*. In them M. Zlatkov is a co-author and they reflect his field research in the territory covered by his dissertation. All publications of the doctoral student are completed academic texts of a contributory nature in terms of solving and illustrating specific problems related to the studied

region of Melnik. Along with the scholarly qualities of M. Zlatkov, they also demonstrate a formed language and style of writing, good literacy and high historical culture, as well as excellent technical skills in terms of shaping and presenting the illustrative pictorial material.

Scholarly and scholarly - applied contributions

The contributions of the dissertation are well presented in the abstract by M. Zlatkov. I have already addressed them in the analysis of the separate chapters above in the report. I will emphasize once again the expressed contribution of the PhD student in the reconstruction of the settlement and road network of Melnik region during the period of the 11th – 17th centuries. The transformation of the dissertation into the most complete and complex source of scholarly information about the considered territory during the Medieval period is not insignificant either.

Conclusion

In its current form, the proposed dissertation work of M. Zlatkov demonstrates completeness and usability, combined with appropriate visual material and offering solutions to important scholarly issues. It is very informative and demonstrates a good synthesis between archaeological data and those obtained from sources of a different nature. The work is written and illustrated in the spirit of modern methods in the study of settlement models and road network. That is why M. Zlatkov has indisputable contributions regarding the reconstruction of the settlement system and the road network in Melnik region between the 11th and 17th centuries.

On this ground, I consider that a work of a high quality has been presented and I propose that the esteemed Academic Board to award Metodi Dimitrov Zlatkov the educational and scientific degree of DOCTOR in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology, field of higher education 2. Humanities.

November 4th 2021

Veliko Tarnovo

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