

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Thoma Iv. Thomov, New Bulgarian University,

on a dissertation for awarding an educational and scientific degree of DOCTOR on the topic:
THE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM IN MELNIK REGION IN THE 11th – 17th CENTURIES

with author Metodi Zlatkov

The report is based on a dissertation presented by the doctoral student in volume of 358 pages, including 42 figures. It is structured in an introduction, four chapters with relevant subsections, conclusion with the contributions and bibliography, covering 581 titles in Cyrillic and 171 in Latin. In general, the dissertation is with a good graphic design.

The work, based on excellently mastered source material and skillful research approach, sets several main goals. The **Introduction** presents in summarized type the problem situation, the main research thesis, the goal, the subject and the object of research, as well as the specific research tasks. The topic is clearly formulated and is a part of the major areas: settlement archeology, settlement investigation and historical geography. The work focuses on the need for such a study due to the thirty-year long hiatus of the lack of monograph on the Middle Struma region in the Middle Ages. The main goal of the author is to propose a reconstruction of the settlement system in a geographically separated region between the ridges of the Pirin and Maleshevska Mountains, the gorges of the Struma, Rupel and Kresna Rivers, without the area of the town of Petrich, in the different time stages and to trace its development, as well as the way of functioning. The set wide chronological framework, between the 11th – 17th c. is justified by the need to follow as fully as possible the stages of development of the settlement system, as well as to detect the changes or their absence.

Although the research is interdisciplinary and is grounded on a wide variety of tools, the selection is made with skills and meets the goals and objectives. In this connection, I must point out the cartographic method, without which such a study would be unsatisfactory, but with Zlatkov it is fully taken advantage of, helping to analyze and visualize the spatial dimensions of the available data and to present the development of the settlement system. As soon as the tasks are set, a vision of comprehensiveness in such a study is shown, which is not limited to a critical review of sources and academic literature, definition of theoretical approach and terminology, physical - geographical overview and its role, study of historical processes leading to administrative and political changes, but is supplemented by the identification of the main settlement units, categorization and study of individual micro-regions, tracing of the road network before the mid 19th c. and an attempt to explain the accumulated empirical data.

Next, and in a similar work requiring a study of the settlement system, some of the most serious methodological difficulties are related to the classification and establishment of adequate

terminology. Here, too, the author handles convincingly, defending with arguments the definitions adopted by him for the main settlement categories.

In **Chapter One** of the dissertation the author examines exhaustively and in retrospect the historical and historical-geographical studies, together with the archeological and field surveys, traces the discovered artifacts and local lore works concerning the region defined by him. Attention is also paid to the written sources from different epochs, which are presented with the necessary precision and comprehensiveness.

The next **Chapter Two** is dedicated to the history of Melnik region, derived and inseparable from the history of the center of the region - the town of Melnik, which is formed and largely dependent on the political events in this central part of the Balkans. The administrative and political changes during the different historical periods between the 11th and 17th c. are skillfully presented. The author makes convincingly important clarifications regarding dates for key moments in the local history, as well as defines the perimeter of the urban territory of Melnik, using the settlement network. An attempt has been made to determine the ethnicity of Melnik during the 11th – 17th c. with the correct finding of a dominant Bulgarian character, then, after 1205, changed in favour of the Greek element, although the population remained Bulgarian, for which the author cites the local toponymy as a main proof. Using the Ottoman tax registers, the author manages to outline quite accurately the boundaries of the separate administrative units (nahiyas) and to find that changes in the administrative boundaries of nahiya Melnik from the 15th to the 19th c. were minimal and more significant dynamics in this regard occurred only in the second half of the 19th c.

The following **Chapter Three** is devoted to the settlement system in Melnik region in the 11th – 17th c. A particularly important and contributing point in this chapter is the detailed analysis of nineteen assumptions for the identification of villages in the Melnik region for the period of 11th – 14th c. As one of the merits of the presented work it can be pointed out that out of 11 known medieval villages in Melnik region, 9 have been identified by the author with villages that still exist today despite the difficulties. The conclusion reached is that there is approximately 82% sustainability of the settlement network in the region from the 14th c. to the present day. By the way, the duplication of the field searches with the other available data allows the author more security in the reconstruction of the settlement system. In the end, the important conclusion is reached about the availability of data for 61 villages and four fortresses in the region of Melnik in the 11th – 14th c., which is a very good result compared to other Bulgarian regions. During the Ottoman period the author achieved even greater precision - from a total of 107 toponyms with a proposed location for 105, which allows him to make an extremely accurate settlement picture for the period of the 16th c., as well as to trace changes in the number and religious affiliation of the population. Paragraph 3 of this chapter should also be highlighted here, which focuses on six micro-regional studies for individual areas (of the town of Sandanski and the villages of Ilindentsi, Sklave, Kulata, Leshnitsa and Polenitsa) in the Melnik region. They are sample case studies in which the information for each area is transmitted through a unified model, which aims

to standardize the available geographical, archaeological, written and linguistic data and their summarization.

The last **Chapter Four** considers the road network in Melnik region. Anyone who on any occasion encountered the road network during the Medieval period inevitably has found a lack of data on the grounds of which to establish the ancient routes. In this situation, the author takes advantage of the maximum number of specific points or "hard points" in the landscape, through which to outline sections of the road. The sections between the 'hard points' for which no precise data are available he defines as 'transport areas'. The essence of such an approach is that if there are more "hard points", the "transport areas" will be shorter and thus they can be reconstructed with high accuracy, as well as the entire ancient bed of the road. Of course, the "new" things are useful, but they should be approached with extreme caution and always emphasize the hypothetical nature of the end result, without it becoming an established fact! By this method, the main road to the Aegean Sea along the Struma Valley should pass with the least resistance through the Kresna Gorge, next to the river, but in reality it goes to the left, along the ridge. I say this because the author has protected himself from the excessive overconfidence in "modern toys" and relied on classical methods, but most importantly - he walked around the field. Along with this he masters skillfully and analyzes the data that comes from the landscape, written sources (ancient, medieval, ottoman, from foreign travelers and various descriptions of the traditional road network from the second half of the 19th - the early 20th c.), old maps of various scales, archeological data obtained through excavations, field surveys and other non-destructive methods and finally, from toponyms. All the collected information M. Zlatkov has imposed on top of each other through the retrospective and retrogressive method, in order to finally get an idea as close as possible to reality about the old road network. The result gives him the opportunity to do categorization of the roads, which it divides into three categories - primary or main supraregional roads (Rupel - Kresna and Nevrokop - Melnik - Petrich), secondary supraregional roads and local roads. The common feature between the first two categories is that they cross a large part or the whole region and connect it with the neighboring ones. The difference between them is in the level of usability and the difficulty of the terrain.

The **Conclusion** contains a summary of the most significant results of the study. The conclusions are well related to the problems posed in the chapters of the dissertation. It is stated that the most significant point is the questioning of the boundaries of the urban area of Melnik in the period of the 11th – 15th c. and their delineation. The author uses data from various written and archaeological sources, which he interprets with the help of the retrogressive method and builds a model according to which he determines the center and its periphery, i.e. the town of Melnik with the surrounding villages and their neighborhoods. In other words, he not only confirms B. Tsvetkov's conclusion about the lack of collapse in the settlement network between the 13th – 14th and 15th – 16th centuries, but driven by the desire to get as close as possible to the historical reality makes an attempt to determine the secondary centers after Melnik or the micro-settlement model and to characterize the separate units in it through the Ottoman registers from

the 16th c. By the way, it is the Registers that enable M. Zlatkov to trace the internal dynamics not only of the settlement, but also of the demographic development and to come to the conclusion that there was a decrease of the population in a number of settlements. However, the author notes the existence of a large degree of continuity in the settlement development from the 12th – 14th to the 19th c.

The results of the dissertation research are presented in two author's articles and five co-authored scientific publications.

The abstract of the dissertation as form, volume and content meets the regulatory requirements.

To the general merits of the dissertation presented I would refer the excellent factual and methodological awareness and competence; the demonstrated ability for conceptualization, the ability to structure, systematize and summarize effectively, as well as the skillful handling of details of the analysis, which in many cases are used as additional arguments to the theses; clear, analytical style of presentation: factual argumentation and logical substantiation of the conclusions; the correctness in quoting; tightness and consistency of the representation.

In addition, having dealt in detail with the Struma region, I must point out a few things that need to be emphasized. First of all, the combination of data from written sources for the period of 15th – 16th c. with those of archeology from 11th – 14th c., something rare in the field of the archaeological guild. This approach helps the author for the first time in the Bulgarian Medieval archaeology to trace the historical processes and their impact on the Melnik region during the Middle Ages and to make a convincing reconstruction of the urban territory of Melnik in the period of the 11th – 17th c. Next, Zlatkov derives data on 60 villages and four fortresses in the region of Melnik in the 12th – 14th c. and identifies almost all the settlements in nahia Melnik mentioned in the Ottoman registers from the 16th c. Thirdly, his prolific work with six separate micro-regions at area level should be highlighted. Finally, the reconstructions of the primary and secondary roads from the old road network, which functioned with small changes from Antiquity to the 19th c. Here I should add as a contribution the appendices to the dissertation, especially the maps.

In short, the PhD student has achieved a result that neither the Viennese group, working on *Tabula Impreii Byzantini* (from which a volume including Struma is expected for 30 years) nor Mihailo Popovic himself, head of the Balkans section of TIB, claiming to be a "connoisseur" of the region of Struma and Strumeshnitsa! This gives me reason to recommend the publication of this dissertation after its adaptation to a monograph.

I have the following remarks to the dissertation presented in this way, which refer to: the part concerning the Klyuch (Kleidion) (66 p.), where the author does not agree with other scholars' opinions, but remains only with the expression of "disagreement"; for the campaign of Theodore II Laskaris in 1254, the article should also be taken into account: Th. Thomov, Who was the

Eponym of the Village with the Enigmatic Name of Kondofrej in the Valley of the Strymon? 3PBI LI (2014) 135-150; for the transcription of Ostrovo (note 150, 116 p.), where the incorrect proposal of M. Popovic has been accepted!

The above findings are insignificant in nature and do not derogate my positive assessment of the dissertation. In general, Metodi Zlatkov has successfully coped with the basic requirement for a doctoral student - to show that he is able to conduct research, that he has the appropriate capacity to perform research tasks. He presents an in-depth dissertation in which approaches the problem in many ways.

My personal impressions of the doctoral student confirm my belief that he has the potential for successful professional realization in the field of research. He graduated from St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University with a bachelor's and master's degree in archaeology and continued his development as an assistant at the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He reveals remarkable diligence and systematicity in the preparation of his dissertation, plus will and initiative in the search for additional opportunities for professional development and enhancement of their competencies through participation in a number of scientific forums at home and abroad. He masters good communication and computer skills, a sense of responsibility, teamwork capacity, creativity and a clear interest in research.

The above gives me reason to confidently give my **POSITIVE** assessment and to recommend to the esteemed Academic Board to award the assistant Metodi Dimitrov Zlatkov the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in professional field 2.2. History and Archeology, field of higher education 2. Humanities.

November 3, 2021

Sofia

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