

## REVIEW

on a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree of Doctor

Topic: The settlement system of Melnik in the XI - XVII century.

Author: Metodi Dimitrov Zlatkov, PhD student at NAIM - BAS, Department of Medieval Archaeology

Scientific field 2. Humanities

Professional field 2.2 History and Archaeology

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Violeta Evgenieva Nesheva

Metodi Dimitrov Zlatkov graduated in Archaeology at St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University with an educational qualification degree of Master. His diploma work is on the topic of Villages in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century on the territory of today's Central, Southern and Southeastern Bulgaria, which is indicative of his interest since his student years in the study of settlement systems.

In 2009-2013 he was a full-time PhD student at NAIM, Department of Medieval Archaeology. Since 02.08.2013 he has been working in NAIM, DMA. He masters a wide professional qualification in the field archeological researches - excavations, field surveys, observations in different places all over the country, both of Medieval sites and of Prehistoric and Antiquity ones, in total over 40 during the period of 2002 -2020. This practice is an extremely good basis for any archaeologist, especially for the medievalists, who often encounter cultural strata from different historical ages on the sites they study. Among the research related to his dissertation are excavations - in Melnik, as a member of a team, and field surveys in the Blagoevgrad region, as a director and deputy director. As a scholarly supervisor of the doctoral student, I would like to point out that he has a very thorough, I would say enviable for a young specialist theoretical training, which is constantly improving, not only in archaeology but also in related sciences, as one can see in his dissertation. He has also produced a number of publications - articles (8) and studies (3), independently and in co-authorship, issued by renowned editions, in Bulgarian and English, annotations in the catalogue of an exhibition, and popular science book (co-authorship). Two of his studies are related to the dissertation - on the town of Sandanski (both in Bulgarian and English) and on Polenitsa. 14 reports in the series of *Archaeological Discoveries and Studies* belong to him personally or in co-authorship. Also - participation in a number of national and international conferences with reports. He also develops active museum activity (participation in the preparation of 3 exhibitions). He participates in the international research and educational project of ARIADNE.

It is noteworthy that some of his publications have been repeatedly cited in studies of various scholars - historians, archaeologists, etc., which is a good sign of his academic competence and

quality. All this activity outlines the PhD student as a very active and promising young archaeologist and is a guarantee for a successful academic career in the future.

The dissertation presented for defense consists of two parts - text and illustrations. The text - 358 pages, contains an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography with 631 titles in Cyrillic, Latin and Greek. The illustrations include 143 maps and figures and five tables covering 117 pages.

I must immediately say that Metodi Zlatkov took into account almost all the remarks made to him during the internal discussion of the dissertation at an extended meeting of the SAA in NAIM on 16.08.2021, at which he was admitted to defend his doctoral thesis, confirmed by decision of the Academic Board.

The work fully meets the evaluation criteria set out in the Regulations on the terms and conditions for obtaining scientific degrees and holding academic positions at the National Archaeological Institute with a museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The **topic** is undoubtedly dissertable and attractive to scientists, both Bulgarians and foreigners. It is especially relevant in recent times and this is reasonably associated on the one hand with the published a number of unknown until 30 years ago documents from the Athos archives and Ottoman registers, and on the other - with new data from archaeological research in the region, stimulated by the intensified work on the preparation of Tabula Imperii Byzantini in the part for the Balkans. The idea of the TIB Project and the way in which the collection of information is postulated are accepted by M. Zlatkov as a standard, which is why in his dissertation he strives to follow them, but critically and in accordance with the scale of his research.

The **construction** is successful, logical, allowing comprehensiveness and completeness of development, and clarity for the reader. The **presentation** is well-built, in line with the purpose and tasks set by the doctoral student. They are formulated in the Introduction to the dissertation, which justifies the choice of topic and the need for its development, defines the territorial and chronological boundaries of the study, methodology, specifies some terminological problems and makes a physical-geographical description of the region. The aim is "to create the most objective possible reconstruction of the settlement system in the studied spatial and chronological framework, through its reasoned outlining in different time stages and tracking its development and mode of operation." Even here the administrative-political aspect stands out as a leading point in the study of the settlement system. Its center Melnik is considered reasonably, in balance with the villages that are the focus of the presentation.

Regarding the physical-geographical characteristics of the region - it is quite detailed, justifying and determining the settlement and life in the region for millennia. To this section it

would be appropriate to include some information from the documents about the "place Melnik" from the 14<sup>th</sup> c., which are analyzed and interpreted in the literature for this town and apply both to it and to its surroundings. The methodology of the otherwise interdisciplinary research is very well argued. For the first time in the Medieval archaeology, the doctoral student introduces the retrogressive method, quite close to the often employed retrospective method, as the main one, especially in field surveys. That is why he presents it in more detail. Some clarifications have been made in terminological problems, such as town, fortress, village, mesoregional or microregional study.

**Chapter 1** discusses the studies and the written sources. The first part analyzes the historical and historical-geographical studies. They are carefully and clearly arranged in several groups - general studies, research of individual settlements and districts, regional historical research. Naturally, most of the publications refer to Melnik. The second part presents systematically and analytically the archaeological studies and data, pointing out that the data have been acquired through archaeological excavations, field surveys and stray finds. The field surveys are characterized as a priority for the work because they give the largest share of archaeological data for the reconstruction of the settlement network. To the known archaeological sites M. Zlatkov adds a very significant new material, part of which he himself acquired through such surveys, as well as new stray finds from museum depots, discovered during various activities by local residents, which increases the number of the settlements by 24%. The PhD student is also based on data from the local history literature on old temples and consecrated places, according to the model of TIB, and in my opinion this is a very true direction to search, because the archaeological practice knows that temples often have an overlap of time as ancient, as well as Christian, in certain cases even Muslim houses of prayer (the so-called tradition of the place of worship). It is interesting that unlike other regions in Bulgaria, so far in Melnik - both in the town and in its territory, there is no known case of conversion of a Christian church into a mosque, which is one of the indicators on the one hand for the weak Ottoman colonization and Islamization in the region, and on the other - for the strong position of the Melnik diocese as one of the bastions of the Constantinople Patriarchate. The Athos monasteries undoubtedly had also an influence in the preservation of Orthodoxy, four of which were owners of monasteries and their treasures from the 14<sup>th</sup> c. until the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> c.

The toponymy, tradition and legends are also a source of information for the study.

In third place the doctoral student has arranged the written sources, which logically should be together with the historical research as it is with the archaeological ones.

They are diverse and grouped chronologically - written sources from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> c., written sources from the Late Middle Ages (centuries should be mentioned in this subtitle), and written sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Accordingly, these are narrative sources and documents - charters, church acts, epigraphic monuments, for the Ottoman registers - tapu tahrir defters for the 15<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> c. and Jizya registers for the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> c. as well as documents and

works from the late Revival Period. It has been pointed out that three more were added to the published registers, found and partially translated especially for the dissertation on the idea of the doctoral student, which I note as his important contribution. The newly published acts of Vatopedi, volume 3 are not included, because they are still not available in our country.

This chapter is a figurative mirror of the doctoral student's high literacy and knowledge of the subject and a model of high morals and academic ethics. I especially emphasize that M. Zlatkov is extremely scrupulous to his previous researchers. He evaluates very fairly and tolerantly the contributions of each of them, including in the review of historiography all the works known at the moment, even those that touch very little on the subject, and even some popular scholarly works. Analyzing them, he takes and expresses his own position, which helps to highlight his contributions. I am especially impressed by the deep respect for Boris Tsvetkov, who has made the greatest contribution so far in the research of the settlement system along the Middle Struma River with his doctoral dissertation (1993, published in 2002), for which I was a scholarly consultant. M. Zlatkov is a worthy successor of his work upgrading and modernizing it with innovative methods.

Chapter 2 - Melnik on the political map of the Balkans in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century is a historical background of the considered settlement system, which the doctoral student has developed at times in great detail. Here he has an important achievement, which is a very significant contribution to the topic – making a successful attempt to accurately reconstruct the borders of the territory of Melnik region in the administrative units of the various political forces on the Balkans in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> c., under whose rule the region was.

M. Zlatkov traces the ethnicity of the population and the processes of Greekization and Islamization. Both of them were naturally related to political events. Concerning the Greekization one should have in mind that during the Middle Ages Melnik was no exception in comparison with other historical towns on the territory of present-day Bulgaria, which were generally multiethnic centers and in which from the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> c. onwards besides Bulgarians, there were also Romaios, Franks, Jews, Armenians and others. Given the attractiveness of Melnik as a very important strategic center in the heart of the Balkans and in the hinterland of Thessaloniki for every Balkan ruler and the cultural heritage left by most of them, I called it "the town of the family of the Balkan rulers." Although they fought with each other for its possession. Melnik was not a Greek town; the myth of this emerged later, during the Renaissance, with the rise of Panhellenism. Melnik became one of its centers on the Balkans. Then the number of not the pure Greeks, as far as they lived for centuries together with other ethnic groups, mainly Bulgarians, increased, but of the Bulgarians feeling Greeks because of trade privileges and good education in Greek schools. The two resettlements of Romaios in the town - by Tsar Kaloyan in 1205 and by Theodore II Laskaris in 1255 are an indisputable reality, increasing the number of the Romaios community and becoming a prerequisite for the later Hellenization, but it should be borne in mind that they were no exception in the ruling practice during the epoch. In connection with the Filippopolis resettled by Tsar Kaloyan in 1205, I would like to add something. In almost all

studies, there is no doubt that they were Greeks by nationality. Some archeological artifacts (specific construction techniques observed on some sites, as well as red-slip luxury pottery) suggest that there were Armenians among this wave of settlers, and this corresponds to a Greek legend among the old Melnik people about an Armenian nobleman, founder of the Armenia neighborhood that existed in the city until the early 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Chapter 3 - The settlement system in Melnik region in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century is the main one in the dissertation and of course the most contributing. In three sections the author considers successively: Melnik region in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century, Melnik region in the 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century and Settlement life in the separate areas of Melnik region in the Middle Ages. This chapter the best reveals the ability of the PhD student to analyze and synthesize the data, to refine the facts to a degree that can be considered an example in the professional scholarly community. Here another thing stands out - although the dissertation is in its essence a historical-archaeological study, it seems to be more inclined to historical-geographical works. It is clear that the numerous archaeological materials play a smaller role in the study than the written sources, and this is not surprising - it contains less information. In this chapter M. Zlatkov makes a great contribution to the study of the settlement system thanks to the innovative retrogressive method - through later documents to obtain reliable information about the earlier ones. New substantiated identifications have been proposed for most of the settlements.

Thus, a correction has been made to the number of villages in the Melnik region known so far - out of nineteen presumed, eleven remain, 9 of which can be identified with villages that still exist today. And this means 82% sustainability of the settlement network in the region from the 14<sup>th</sup> c. to the present day. When the additional information was superimposed by M. Zlatkov, data were obtained for 61 villages and four fortresses in the region of Melnik in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> c. For the next period he has established that out of a total of 107 toponyms, with a known location were 72, and now he proposes the localization of 105. This allows to make an extremely accurate settlement picture for the 16<sup>th</sup> c., as well as to trace the change in the number and religious affiliation of the population. According to the PhD student, the overall view of the settlement development from the 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> c. shows a great degree of continuity.

In the next section, sample detailed micro-regional studies (case studies) have been made on 6 separate areas - the town of Sandanski and the villages of Ilindentsi, Sklave, Kulata, Leshnitsa and Polenitsa, demonstrating the potential of the retrogressive method employed. As the doctoral student points out, the information about each area is transmitted through a unified model, which aims to standardize the available geographical, archaeological, written and linguistic data, and their summarization. The creation of this model - an indisputable merit of the doctoral student, was influenced by the developments of TIB, especially by Mihailo Popovic, responsible for the project for the Balkans, to whom, together with the positive assessment M. Zlatkov directs quite in my opinion correct criticism. All six settlements have been studied to the maximum extent possible with the available data and represent independent volumes with a study value of some of them, especially of Sandanski and Ilindentsi, which have formed as micro-regional centers.

The last, fourth chapter is dedicated to the road network in Melnik region. The road system has been completely reconstructed serving as the "backbone" of the settlement system. The Petrich micro-region and its territory are also included. A classification of the individual routes, as well as a very accurate reconstruction of the routes during the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period have been proposed. This chapter also has the value of a work of its own and can be published separately. It contains a lot of data. M. Zlatkov "peeked" personally in every corner of the region, documented it and described the road network as it has not been described so far. Reading, one seems to fall into the past. By the way, this is his approach to the 6 settlements in the third chapter. I have only two minor notes here. A study on the Rhodopes by Todor Spiridonov, which is important for the road network under consideration, has been omitted (*Големият път през Родопите. - Поселишни проучвания, 1992, 1, 7 – 32*). Also - a very important plan of Melnik from 1832 from the Austrian Military Archives in Vienna, which was published first by Nicholas Mutsopoulos (in black and white) and then by me (in colour), with commentary. It holds significant information about the road Nevrokop - Serres, in the section near Melnik, and about the approaches to the city, which were 5 in number, with gates fortified with two towers each. The remains of only three towers are known in three of the approaches, one of which - studied archaeologically, was mentioned by the doctoral student, but without being related to the image on the map. Another gate is mentioned in a commentary by the publishers of one of the Vatopedi documents.

The conclusion is short and clear. It convinces us by presenting and summarizing the results that the research conducted by the doctoral student was necessary not only because of the new empirical material - written sources and archeological data, which became known after the study of the settlement system in the region along the Middle Struma River by Boris Tsvetkov, but also for the updating of the topic. His work is a qualitatively new stage in research on the subject, an innovative form in line with modern academic requirements. This is an entirely new attempt to reconstruct the settlement life in the defined region, which, of course, is based on the achievements of previous researchers.

The bibliography, which covers as many as 60 pages, is very impressive. It is a proof of the excellent knowledge of the doctoral student. It contains two sections - sources (published and unpublished) and studies, respectively in Cyrillic, Latin and Greek. Electronic resources are separated. A list of maps and cards from the Archaeological Map of Bulgaria, some compiled by Metodi Zlatkov is also included. I would say this is a sample bibliography.

The illustrations to the dissertation are very valuable; they are for the most part the work of the doctoral student, his contribution to the research on the topic. Contribution and indisputable merit are the maps, tables, photos and other illustrative materials compiled by him and attached.

The **Abstract** is a summary of the dissertation and fully meets the requirements established in practice for this type of publication. A reference to the PhD student's contributions and a list of his publications, which I discussed at the beginning of this review, are attached to it. I consider

that the doctoral student has made a correct personal assessment of the merits of the work. It overlaps with my assessment set out here. And both publications are a particularly important scholarly contribution to the history of the modern town of Sandanski. I would advise the doctoral student in his future work on the topic to try to find a new important page in it - for the aristocratic land estates in Melnik in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> c.

To what has been said so far, I will add the good, understandable to the reader style and language of the dissertation. Convinced that the few remarks I have made in the review do not in the least interfere with my excellent evaluation of this work, I recommend to the esteemed members of the Academic Board, to its Chairman and to the members of the Academic Board of NAIM-BAS to award Metodi Dimitrov Zlatkov the educational and academic degree of Doctor in the field of science 2. Humanities, professional field 2.2 History and Archaeology.

November 8<sup>th</sup> 2021

Sofia

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. Violeta Nesheva