

## REVIEW

On the dissertation for award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor

Thesis: SGRAFFITO WARE FROM NORTHEASTERN BULGARIA XIII-XV CENTURIES

Author: Maria Georgieva Pashova, PhD student at NAIM-BAN, Section of Medieval Archaeology

Scientific specialty 2. Humanities; Professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology

Reviewer: Prof. D.Sc. Violeta Evgenieva Nesheva

Maria Georgieva Pashova graduated from St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University in 2009, majoring in archaeology, with a master's degree. The topic of her thesis - The costume based on data from the necropolises in present-day Northern Bulgaria (13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) is related to her specialization in Medieval archaeology under the scientific supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stefka Angelova.

Since 01.10.2012, Maria Pashova is a full-time doctoral student in the Section of Medieval Archaeology of NAIM-BANS, with scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bonni Petrunova. The topic of the dissertation work was changed and confirmed under the title of Sgraffito ware from Northeastern Bulgaria (13<sup>th</sup> - first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century)" by the SMA, the Academic Board and the Director of NAIM - BAS. The PhD student was dismissed with the right to defense by order No. I 1411/05.10.2016.

From October 2015 until now, Maria Pashova has been working as a curator in the Archaeology department of the Regional History Museum in Blagoevgrad.

Her extensive professional qualification in the field of archaeological research is impressive - excavations, field surveys, observations in various places all over the country on medieval as well as prehistoric and antiquity sites, a total of 25 in the period of 2003 – 2021. She was the scientific director of four of them. This practice is an extremely good foundation for any archaeologist, and especially for the medievalists, who at the sites they study often come across cultural layers from different historical eras.

The PhD student also has a number of publications. Two of her papers are related to the dissertation. She has 14 reports in the Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations as a co-author and author. She participated with reports in five national scholarly conferences and in the preparation of two museum exhibitions at a regional level.

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The PhD thesis submitted for defense is composed of a text, a catalogue with accompanying tables, appendices and maps. The text (215 pages in total) consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a list of references (260 cited sources). The Catalogue (total 314 pages) contains 783 samples, presented graphically and in photographs within 99 tables. Added to them are 45 appendices with published specimens, necessary for the reconstruction of the shape and ornamentation of some of the artefacts. Appendix 46 presents a comparative table of the pottery complex characteristic of each individual site. The information is supplemented by 52 maps illustrating the archaeological environment of finding the vessels themselves, as well as the ways of their distribution.

The work fully meets the evaluation criteria laid down in the Regulations for the Terms and Conditions for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and the Occupancy of Academic Positions at the National Archaeological Institute with a Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The topic is undeniably dissertable. It is well known that sgraffito pottery is a vivid product of human thought, activity and life in the Middle Ages and especially in the chronological period of the considered work. It is an emblematic phenomenon that reflects the worldview and ideology of those who created it and the place – their own and of its owners, in the society. It is indicative in important directions, born from the need of our ancestors for civilization and aesthetics, such as the assimilation and development of technological and especially artistic skills and achievements. One of them is, for example, the worldview-psychological effect of the production, in which the language of images is in complete unity and harmony with the language of colours. The sgraffito ware is also a kind of informant about trade connections and roads during the era. Its production is an undoubted sign of urban culture. As an archaeological artefact, if found in a well-dated context, it can be a chronological repère for sites with disturbed stratigraphy.

With European studies beginning at the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. with relatively small in number empirical material at the time, today we face with an innumerable abundance of both material and publications that can overwhelm any specialist. Before my comments on the dissertation, I want to congratulate the PhD student Maria Pashova for daring to engage in the topic, and in a geographical region, in which, in general, the accumulated amount of sgraffito ware is, I would say - almost inversely proportional to its study. All archaeologists know that the work is very labour-intensive, and in museums and funds unknown to the doctoral student until she began, however much she had support from the college, but she did very well. Her bibliographic awareness is excellent, evident from the list of references to the text, for which her good language skills are undoubtedly important.

Here I will make a small clarification - the territory should be designated as *the present-day Northeastern Bulgaria* for obvious reasons.

The construction is successful, logical, allowing comprehensiveness and completeness of the work, and clarity for the reader.

The presentation is streamlined, in tune with the goal and tasks that the doctoral student has set for herself. They are formulated in the Introduction of the dissertation, in which the choice of the topic and the need for its development are justified, the territorial and chronological boundaries of the research, the methodology, and some terminological problems were clarified and an overview of the geopolitical and geographical characteristics of the region was made in the chronological parameters of the topic.

With the proviso that the selected geographical area represents an interesting contact zone between the Black Sea coast and the interior of the Northeast in the Medieval Bulgaria, as the main goal she indicates the highlighting of *characteristic classes of sgraffito pottery that converge or differentiate the two regions in the 13<sup>th</sup> - the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries*. On these grounds, three objectives have been formulated, namely: 1. the definition of local and imported pottery groups; 2. establishing the roads of their distribution; and 3. localization of production centers.

Their realization determines the main tasks in the present research:

- Analyzing and characterizing the collected material;

- Organization and systematization of the research by making the classification and typology based on clear definition criteria. Introduction of appropriate terminology nomenclature. If an already distinguished group is available at an international level – a terminological correlation of the Bulgarian material to it;
- Establishing evidence of production workshops - semi-finished products, production waste, remains of furnaces;
- Locating the materials in an archaeological context and distinguishing the groups chronologically and geographically.

The skillful and precise formulation of goals and tasks suggests that the doctoral student approached the composition and writing of her work with a deep sense. She has sought a way not only to bring to light a rather voluminous and heterogeneous material, to place it in the archaeological context of the settlements in which it was found, but also to relate it terminologically to established groups at the world level and to include it in them, with which to bring to prominence our achievements in archaeology on the subject. They are not few, but for now they are still insufficiently exploitable.

Chapter one – HISTORIOGRAPHY- is accomplished in an exemplary manner. The PhD student took into account the preliminary remarks about redundancy in it and shortened the text by almost half turning it into an engaging read for professionals, students, and amateurs alike. I would recommend this part to be published separately, as a study or a small book, in view of its usefulness, and there to include the abridged text, which is otherwise very valuable. Maria Pashova is the first Bulgarian archaeologist after Sonia Georgieva, who makes the most comprehensive overview of the studies on sgraffito ware both abroad and in our country, with a specific and, in my opinion, correct assessment of the contributions of the relevant scientists.

It is in this chapter that one can see the great progress in research on the subject in a global aspect especially in the last three decades, which indisputably justifies the necessity of including the Bulgarian sgraffito ware from the 13<sup>th</sup> - the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in the context of international terminology and typology. *It is abundantly clear, as the author points out, that the materials from Bulgaria, which combines within its present-day borders all possible regional trends and influences*

*from this period, are of exceptional importance for the overall study of late Byzantine sgraffito pottery.*

Chapter two - CLASSIFICATION AND TYPOLOGY- is basic, the most essential for the dissertation. Here again, the need for clear criteria for defining individual sgraffito groups stands out as well as the lack of a unified terminological nomenclature as a suitable basis for classification and typology. I must emphasize that the PhD student did an excellent job of building a successful scheme in this regard. On the grounds of the previous research, she outlines first of all the main characteristics of sgraffito ware in the 13<sup>th</sup> - first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Then she brings up the technological groups. Their classification is based on the manufacturing technology - clay, moulding, baking, surface treatment, in two stages: 1) according to the nature of the baked clay - composition of the dough, colour (fabric) and moulding technique - thick-walled, thin-walled (texture); 2) according to the treatment of the surface – the slip and the glazes (colour and quality) and the technique of the incised line – fine, shallow, deep, wide, removing some of the slip.

After the primary classification of the main pottery groups, secondary characteristics have been drawn - by the shape of the vessels and the types of ornaments, on the basis of which internal subgroups of pottery can be formed. These subgroups, as Maria Pashova emphasizes, may cover vessel types - similar in shape, size and profiling details (bell-shaped cups or hemispherical bowls) or series uniting products with the same ornamentation.

According to the applied method of defining the ceramic material and in view of the characteristics of the collected material, seven large technological groups of sgraffito ware in the chronological framework of the 13<sup>th</sup> - the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. have been distinguished within the framework of present-day Northeastern Bulgaria: 1) Zeuxippus Ware Family; 2) Pottery with a glossy brown-yellow/green glaze; 3) Standardized sgraffito pottery from the Palaiologian Age; 4) Monochrome sgraffito pottery (13<sup>th</sup> - first half of 15<sup>th</sup> c.); 5) Polychrome sgraffito pottery (13<sup>th</sup> - first half of 15<sup>th</sup> c.); 6) Pottery group of Elaborate Incised Ware (EIW); and 7) Sgraffito pottery with decoration in Palaiologian style. Within each of these pottery groups, the production technology, vessel morphology and typical decoration are described. Issues related to provenance, production, and chronological range are also commented on. It is pointed out that these main groups are not closed, but on

the contrary – they can be supplemented with a view to the continuous replenishment of the materials through new archaeological surveys.

Chapter 3 - CHARACTERISTICS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE POTTERY COMPLEXES OF THE RESEARCHED SITES is particularly important, as it presents, as the doctoral student herself emphasizes, the context of finding the empirical material, a basis for her work on the topic.

Eleven urban centers are arranged alphabetically associated with the Medieval sites from which the considered materials come from - Balchik, Varna, Kavarna, Kaliakra, Kastritsi, Madara, Preslav, Provadia, Silistra, Targovishte, and Shumen. Their location and historical development are described, along with a reference to the archaeological survey and a brief sketch of the ceramic assemblage - what groups of pottery were found at the site and is there any production data. Within the presented medieval towns, three centers have been pointed out with reliably proven production - Silistra, Preslav and Varna. Here I am puzzled by the absence of Cherven among the towns examined, which is definitely in NE Bulgaria.

The second section of the chapter contains many valuable conclusions - 3.2. Comparative analysis according to regional and supra-regional principles. Production centers and distribution channels. I shall quote them verbatim, synthesized and presented by the author, without comment, because they are clearly and accurately formulated:

- The politically decentralized world was connected at the economic level in a continuous flow of trade with the active participation of the Latins and merchants of Venice, Genoa, Pisa, etc. They created numerous colonies on the shores of the Levant, Asia Minor, the Balkans and the Black Sea area. Imported goods enter through these points in exchange for grain, honey, wax and other raw materials. Within this common market, the individual centers also developed their own internal trade network at the micro-regional level.

- The production of sgraffito ware adapted to the new political and economic conditions, but also followed the natural course of its development. It marked a real boom and massiveness related to the purely technological features of development. From the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. onwards, the three-legged grills for baking 33 glazed vessels became widespread to change fundamentally the scale of production.

This circumstance leads to the creation of so many ateliers with their own potentials to meet domestic market needs. These possibilities are well reflected by the variety in the decoration and the general appearance of the vessels.

- The pottery workshops continued to work in the first half of the 15th c., regardless of the political events related to the gradual establishment of Ottoman power on the Balkans.

At the end - in the CONCLUSION, the PhD student points out that her work lays a foundation on which future problematic studies in a wide variety of directions can be built upon, which I completely agree with. I would add that I perceive the detailed essay on NE Bulgaria as an example of development, which could cover through similar monographic works the North-West, South-West and South-East of Bulgaria in its current territorial borders, for the same period - a peak in the achievements of sgraffito production, saturated everywhere thanks to intensive excavations with many movable cultural values of this kind, processed or not, published or not.

The Catalogue and the illustrations to the text can excite approval alone. The illustrations are very valuable; they are for the most part the work of the doctoral student, as her contribution to the research on the subject. However, I consider it necessary to make a brief explanation about the principles of selection of the 783 samples from the museum depots and expositions.

The abstract is a summary of the PhD thesis and meets the requirements established in practice for this type of publication. A Reference for the PhD student's contributions and a List of her publications are also added to it. I believe that she has made a fair personal assessment of the merits of her work, which overlaps with my own. The dissertation, in my opinion, contains the necessary requirements according to the Law, Chapter Two, Art. 6(2) Scientific and applied scientific results, which represent an original contribution to science, with the innovative methods of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I commented on her publications above. Concerning the two, which are on the subject of the considered work, I can say they discuss rarely found decorative motifs in sgraffito pottery - human images. What I would recommend when processing the dissertation for printing is to include a section - wherever and

however the author decides – on the symbolism in the decorative system applied to the pottery she examines.

Based on what has been said so far and my excellent evaluation of the PhD thesis, notwithstanding the few remarks made, I recommend to the respected members of the Academic Board, to its Chairman and to the members of the Academic Board of NAIM-BAS to award Maria Georgieva Pashova the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in scientific specialty 2. Humanities, professional field 2.2 History and Archaeology.

August 28<sup>th</sup> 2022

Sofia

Reviewer:

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