

REPORT

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

on the PhD thesis for awarding the educational and scientific degree of DOCTOR on the topic of *Sgraffito ware from Northeastern Bulgaria (13th - the first half of the 15th century)* of Maria Georgieva Pashova - full-time PhD student in Medieval Archeology in the Section of Medieval Archeology of NAIM at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, with scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bonni Petrunova.

Scholarly biography

M. Pashova completed her higher education in 2009 at the Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski, specialty Archaeology, where she obtained a master's degree. From 2012 to 2021, she was a full-time PhD student at the Section of Medieval Archeology at the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In the course of her scholarly development, M. Pashova has gained considerable field experience as an archaeologist, participating in numerous archaeological surveys at various sites in the country in terms of nature and chronology, and she has independently led 4 archaeological field surveys. Evidence of the achieved scholarly development of the doctoral student are the already published 9 academic articles and announcements. They reflect M. Pashova's interests in the culture of Medieval Byzantium and Bulgaria and her field work as an archaeologist. Her participation in 5 academic conferences also made an impression on the focus of the doctoral student on the topic of her dissertation.

PhD Thesis

Undoubtedly, the proposed topic of the PhD thesis is significant and interesting. Chronologically and territorially, it covers an important transition zone in terms of culture, in which the Byzantine influence plays a vital role, especially with regard to the material considered in the dissertation – sgraffito pottery. The volume and differences in the quality and quantity of the source base taken into account - materials from archaeological studied sites in today's North-Eastern Bulgaria, suggest a more generalized approach, which M. Pashova has partially adopted as a leading one. The selected territory is an appropriate base for such a regional study. It remains certainly unclear the exclusion of some of the main centers of North-Eastern Bulgaria such as Cherven and those that are now in Romanian territory in Dobrudja, but this was probably provoked by the huge material and the obvious proximity of this town production to the artistic pottery of Tarnovo. With the processing of 783 vessels and representative fragments, detailed and informatively displayed in the Catalogue of the dissertation, M. Pashova has made an indisputable personal contribution. It is important to emphasize that although on the same topic has been written before, M. Pashova has managed to deal with it, demonstrating deep knowledge and understanding of its essence. In addition, she has presented a text demonstrating an already established scholarly writing style in a language grammatically correct. My personal opinion is

that in the future publication of the work, it is desirable that the highly information-rich text should receive a more readable version.

The PhD thesis is composed of a text, a catalogue with accompanying tables, appendices and maps. The text part contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography with 260 cited sources. This part is 215 pages in total. The catalogue includes 783 specimens within 314 pages. The vessels are presented graphically and with photos in 99 tables. 46 appendices with published specimens and a comparative table of the ceramic complex are added to the illustrative material. The information is supplemented by 52 maps that illustrate the archaeological environment of the materials and the routes of their distribution.

The Introduction of the dissertation has a classic structure and content. In it, the subject of the study, the objectives, the tasks, the territorial and chronological boundaries of the study are well laid out and defended. The attempt to link changes in ceramic fashion with global historical events and changes in the region's economy is also felicitous. The introduction also presents the subjective problems accompanying the work on the topic. They reflect the state of research and the subsequent storage of the ceramic material in some of the relevant centers, which undoubtedly influence the scholarly process.

The first chapter, classically entitled as *Historiography*, presents the source base and academic studies on the subject. This is done with great comprehensiveness and understanding, making this part of the dissertation the most complete bibliographical and scholarly reference to sgraffito pottery in the Middle Ages that I know of. The presentation of the foreign and Bulgarian historiography on the subject shows that the PhD student has familiarized herself not only with the basic but also with the specialized studies on specific problems and has taken advantage of. At certain points, the too detailed and punctual presentation of foreign language literature is obviously caused by M. Pashova's desire to show the scholarly grounds for her chosen approach in classifying and typologizing the material.

The second chapter is the largest in volume and actually forms the basis of the dissertation work. It is here that the doctoral student has derived the main principles for classification and typology, taking technology as the guiding characteristic - clay, glaze, decoration technique, type of ornamentation. I must emphasize that I do not object to the classification groups proposed by the PhD student. The attempt to link the material from Bulgaria with scholarly research and the groups defined in Byzantine ceramology is obvious and to a large extent logical for the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, which was directly influenced by Byzantine culture. Perhaps, however, the scheme would not work so well in the interior influenced by the Tarnovo production center, a fact also noted by M. Pashova. Notwithstanding, it should also be taken into account that these are conditional and somewhat artificially separated groups, through which to get to know the material. The argumentation, the description of the characteristic features and the chronology of the individual groups are presented in detail. However, sometimes the "overflow" of data prevents the text from appearing synthesized. A problem that could be fixed in reworking the text

for future publication. Either way, the PhD student was faced with the difficult task of proposing a classification scheme for heterogeneous material, comparing it to its counterpart, which also lacks a unified scheme, but rather has a working terminology accumulated over time.

No less important in terms of specifics is the third chapter. The presentation of the archaeological sites which the pottery under study comes from is accomplished well and with understanding. It is understandable and acceptable to employ only part of the materials in the characterization of the pottery from a given center. However, I believe that the conclusions for both individual sites and the area as a whole could be considered sufficiently representative at this stage of the research. I.e. overall, a general picture of sgraffito ware in the region has been successfully created. For a more detailed study, more detailed regional or private studies are needed, which, with few exceptions, are lacking for most of the sites. I must emphasize that the third chapter is also the most contributing to the dissertation work. Significant in this sense are both the presentation and characterization of the pottery complexes by researched sites, as well as the successful attempt to describe the general trends for the territory. Very important is the tracing of the contact between the direct Byzantine presence and influence and the links with the output of the Tarnovo production center, which created transition zones in the inland of the studied territory between Shumen, Madara and Silistra.

The Conclusion is the part of the PhD thesis that needs to be critiqued. Its function is not to mechanically repeat the conclusions in the text, but to summarize and synthesize what has been achieved in the study. Instead, it is designed as a kind of self-reference of contributions. They are not few, and will certainly be appreciated by the readers, but it is least out of place for them to be pointed out by the author herself. It is obvious that this important and concluding part of the work should be revised in the future publication of the dissertation as a monograph.

The work's bibliography is comprehensive, covering 260 publications and testifying positively to the scope and quality of the research.

Regarding the dissertation Appendices, it should be noted that they are of high quality, easy to use and informative. The model designed for the Catalogue is accurate in its presentation of information, correct to the sources of material information, and very valuable in its own as it represents a large amount of pottery. It examines a total of 783 numbers - vessels, parts of them and representative fragments. This informativeness is reflected in its volume of 310 pages. The fact that a large number of the artefacts included in the catalogue are unpublished is an indisputable contribution to the dissertation work. In this way, M. Pashova has circulated a large volume of informative material. Its value is increased by the accompanying combination of photographs and drawings of the studied vessels, which, together with the text, realizes its full publication. It is obvious that the catalogue and the accompanying plates of illustrations are also an indication of the work put in by the PhD student, who deserves respect. The comparative material is also well selected and presented in a practical way – tables with pottery. Informative

and well executed are also the maps presenting the studied sites and the processes of distribution of pottery, which the doctoral student wanted to show.

Abstract

The abstract proposed by M. Pashova is maximally informative given its short form and satisfactorily illustrates the structure, content and contributions of the PhD thesis. A note can be made of its conclusion, which rather addresses the existing problems on the topic, rather than specifically the conclusions of the PhD student on it, which is its main function.

Publications

The PhD student has submitted two publications directly related to the topic of the thesis, which corresponds to the requirements of the Law. They represent completed academic texts with a contributing character in terms of solving and illustrating specific problems related to the study of sgraffito ware. Along with M. Pashova's scholarly qualities, they also demonstrate a well-formed language and style of writing, good literacy and historical culture, as well as excellent technical skills in terms of shaping and presenting illustrative pictorial material.

Academic and applied scholarly contributions

The contributions of the PhD thesis are well presented in the abstract by M. Pashova. I have already addressed them in the analysis of individual chapters above in the report. Once again, I will emphasize the pronounced contribution of the doctoral student in the reconstruction of the pattern of use of sgraffito ware in present-day Northeastern Bulgaria. It is also essential to specify the cases of local production and the attempt to present the spread of sgraffito pottery in connection with the economic and political currents of the age and the region. The transformation of the dissertation work into the most complete and complex source of scholarly information about sgraffito ware from the considered territory for the period between the 13th and 15th centuries is also of significance.

Conclusion

In its current form, M. Pashova's PhD thesis here presented demonstrates completeness and usability combined with very good visual appearance and proposing solutions to important scholarly questions. It is distinguished by great informativeness and demonstrates a suitable synthesis between the archaeological data from Bulgaria and the trends in the development of artistic pottery in the Byzantine cultural circle. The work is written and illustrated in the spirits of modern methods in the study of pottery. Therefore, M. Pashova has made indisputable contributions to the study of sgraffito ware from Northeastern Bulgaria from the period between the 13th and 15th centuries.

On these grounds, I consider that the presented work is of a high quality and I propose to the respected Academic Board that Maria Georgieva Pashova be awarded the educational and

scientific degree of DOCTOR in professional direction 2.2. History and Archaeology, field of higher education 2. Humanities.

August 17th, 2022

Veliko Tarnovo

Assoc. Prof. Dr. D. Rabovyanov