

## REVIEW

On the PhD thesis of full-time doctoral student Maria Pashova - SGRAFFITO WARE FROM NORTHEASTERN BULGARIA XIII-XV CENTURIES

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The problem of detailed commentary and classified identification of the sgraffito ware from Bulgaria has always stood before Bulgarian researchers. As a result, there are dozens of titles on this extremely eloquent and research-worthy material. They mainly refer to groups originating from excavations at different sites or to individual artefacts from museum collections. Attempts have been made on limited grounds to derive generalizations, which reflect, however, only part of the solution to the problem. In the early 1990s, a special research forum was even held on the already numerous material obtained from the active field works.

Nevertheless, against the background of the achievements of researchers beyond Bulgaria, the contributions of Bulgarian scholars, in my opinion, suffer from the lack of high legitimacy in relation to their works. In the second half, especially in the late 20th and the early 21st century, numerous titles in Greek appeared, and not only by Greek scholars, in which the comparative analysis is based on in-depth knowledge of the matter using far across a large array of artefacts and information. The reason for this is the deliberate specialization of foreign scholars on this type of matter. Against their background, one can really establish a lag of Bulgarian archaeological knowledge in this respect from the international level. Therefore, assigning the above topic for a doctoral dissertation is a completely up-to-date move by the Section for Medieval Archaeology, respectively the Academic Board of NAIM - BAS.

Maria Pashova's thesis is structured in an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion with an attached list of references, catalogue, tables, appendices and maps. The text volume is of 516 pages, and the illustrative part contains 99 tables, 46 appendices and 52 maps. The principle of the text structure provided for two main parts of the study - the first one is dedicated to the characterization of sgraffito pottery as a general cultural phenomenon in the Mediterranean world, and the second - on classification and comparative analysis of the material from Bulgaria.

Before evaluating these two parts of the study, the introductory part, which consists of the Introduction and the First Chapter marked with the usual *Historiography*, should be commented on.

The **Introduction** also contains the standard requirements for any dissertation. I shall not dwell on its content; I shall only note that my main impression is of a precise formulation of the chronological frames, the volume of the material, also the goals and tasks. This last is the most important prerequisite for the success of any research, especially for beginning researchers.

The determination of the territorial framework appears to be a weak point of the staging. The term of *Northeastern Bulgaria* has a different meaning in different publications, in the sense that the definitions cannot always be based on straight lines on the map. The territorial scope proposed in the dissertation cannot explain why Targovishte (the medieval fortress) is within this framework, and Ruse (Cherven), for example, is not... Moreover, attention was paid to this weakness when discussing the topic and plan of the thesis in the Section for Medieval Archaeology. Judging by the characteristics of the material, it would be possible to distinguish the Black Sea zone from the inner one at least approximately 50-60 km from the coastline. Then the dissertation had to repeat the territorial scope of Maria Manolova's habilitation work and not only partially classify the marks characteristic of the interior, but in a subsequent work make a comment on the matter from the interior as well.

The **First Chapter**, i.e., the **Historiography**, traces the history of studies on the matter as a general phenomenon of the *Byzantine cultural circle* very conscientiously. The interest in the subject (matter) dates back to the late 19th and the early 20th century. The first publications are at a very high, in a sense close to the modern level. The greatest connoisseurs of the history of Byzantine culture and Byzantine art in particular dealt with the problem – J. Ebersolt, David Talbot-Rice, Wolfgang Folbah and their followers in more recent times – Charles Morgan, Beate Bollendorf and Veronique Francois. Their works contain fundamental advances in technology, morphology and style of the Byzantine sgraffito-ware, according to which the classification of the pieces is developed and constantly corrected. These are actually the grounds for the evaluation of the Bulgarian vessels and specifically those that are within the scope of the current doctorate. This particular story, in my opinion, Maria Pashova knows very well, and the presentation itself is written with the necessary skill and professionalism.

The contribution of the Bulgarian researchers on the subject is presented in even more detail, without gaps and correctly. In this case, the PhD student did not allow herself final evaluations regarding the qualities of the individual titles, among which there are not small in number ones devoted to elementary publication of material newly obtained during field research. This, in my opinion, is a good quality of doctoral work, since such publications are also important, at least in introducing new material into scholarly circulation. In her work on the first part, the doctoral student had at her disposal the achievements of the entire community of sgraffito ware researchers. It must be said that she used these achievements to the maximum extent, that is, she mastered the material from a bibliographic point of view, which is one of the main requirements for every PhD student. Moreover, the very nature of the artefacts allows, with a good illustrative part of the publications, to get into the essence of the information they contain, and this increases the objectivity of the evaluations.

The **Second Chapter** presents the classification of the material based on old and modern achievements completely and in detail. There are 7 groups and 7 subgroups - three to the 4th and four to the 5th ones. Each group is precisely and accurately described, and the text is tightly linked to the illustrations. Besides, the exceptional quality of the illustrations - photos, graphics

and their computer replicas - are of great importance for the easy perception of the results of the work. The groups are characterized in detail with the argumentation of the formulations of their discoverers or of the researchers who summarized their qualities. Attention was paid not only to the shape and technology of the vessels, but also to the ornamental arsenal of their decoration. The territorial distribution of each group is quite rightly applied and this is what every archaeologist or art historian with interests in the subject needs. Naturally, the Bulgarian artefacts are also included in the text - the second, very important achievement of the research. Thus the doctoral student has shown her best qualities as an identifier of archaeological material. In this classification, she has skillfully pointed to all the features that summarize the respective groups. Here it is somewhat difficult to separate what in the chapter is a contribution (of the author) development, apart from the careful and legitimate application of the Bulgarian material, which has been done quite partially and relatively unclearly in the Bulgarian publications until now. However, even assuming that the contribution consists only of the latter, I admit that it is a considerable achievement. Finally, in evaluating this chapter, I must note that the text undoubtedly represents a very good reference book not only for professionals, but also for the many lovers of archaeology. In this form, it is ready for releasing without any special additional interventions.

The **Third Chapter** analyzes the Bulgarian material by sites, which are 11 well-known and long-researched urban centers of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. The texts are unequal in volume due to the varying amount of empirical material as well as the varying number of publications. Here, the PhD student faced unsolvable problems – lost artefacts, partially explored centers, publications with weak or not entirely correct information. All these cases, however, are carefully noted by her so that the reader has in mind the coefficient of useful information. For each piece there are notes on the archaeological survey and the location of the sgraffito-ware. Then, in detail, the material is attached to the relevant classification group.

To my surprise, the eleven sites are arranged alphabetically rather than territorially. I think it is more appropriate that the order is from south not north along the coast and then inland. This consideration comes from the difference in the pottery characteristics in the two, let's call them, zones. Thus, the "picture" would become clearer, easier to perceive.

Each of the deposits is considered independently and at first glance sounds as a separate article. There is information on the history of research and the amount of material currently available. In addition, the situation of the site is described, i.e. whether it is in a modern inhabited environment or outside it. Such an approach is extremely useful for the reader, as it concentrates all the information about the deposit, and with a qualified use of all the data, he/she gets clarity about the size of the source base of the study.

The PhD student carefully and accurately "tied" the material from each deposit, regardless of its volume, to the technological-morphological style groups formulated by her in the classification part. I believe that this, perhaps, the most important part of the work, has been done

conscientiously enough and therefore successfully. In fact, the real contribution is in this attachment, with which the Bulgarian material fits into the general picture of the cultural phenomenon of the Byzantine world, designated in short as sgraffito pottery. An attempt has been made in the text for individual sites to establish connections with other production centers. Particularly important in this regard is the abundance of illustrative material. Each mentioned vessel can be seen in a photograph, drawing, and computer replica. On the other hand, this part of the dissertation provides also enough historicism - the monuments (sites) are positioned within the historical environment of the chronological framework.

The second part of the Third Chapter labeled as "Comparative analysis of regional and supra-regional principle. Centers of Production and Distribution Channels" I rate rather as a conclusion. It does contain an analysis that is important for studying the economic space of the Second Kingdom. On the grounds of the researched material, the PhD student has cautiously graded the centers, the interrelationships, the location of the local (Bulgarian) production and the import from the Byzantine production centers. In fact, this is the main task of such a dissertation - to extract the essence of the analysis and apply its formulations in the context of the development of the Bulgarian Medieval culture, and from there also in the context of the state of the entire society at that time. This part of the PhD thesis is written with a swing unusual for research of such a specific nature. This means that its author has mastered and operates freely, not only with the specific material, but also with the theory that causes its appearance. The text is clear, easy to read and in this form will be very useful not only for archaeological research.

Maria Pashova's **Conclusion** bears the main criticism of her PhD thesis because, in my opinion, instead of presenting certain conclusions (done in the second part of the Third Chapter), she is concerned with evaluating her own achievements. What is in the dissertation and what is not. However, this is the work of the reviews and not of the doctoral student, although there is a similar obligation within the abstract requirements. Indeed, parts of the text that offer important conclusions from the study can be found, but they also have a place in the second part of the Third Chapter.

The **Catalogue** offers an extremely precise description of 783 vessels selected at the judgment of the PhD student. It has been structured in the form of the annotated editions, which are usually compiled for the large international exhibitions of similar matter. Emphasis is placed on the technological description, as the finds are classified according to it. The catalogue numbers are linked to the illustrative tables that the main text also cites. The extraordinary diligence can be appreciated only if one takes into account the volume of the catalogue text of 313 pp., significantly exceeding the main text of the work. I think that only with this part of the doctorate, without taking into account the other merits of the work, Maria Pashova shows that she has mastered the basic principles and skills to process the material, to understand and select the highlights in its study.

The evaluation of the **illustrative material** closely follows the evaluation of the texts presented above. As I have already mentioned, the PhD student has skillfully chosen the best option for sgraffito ware to illustrate her work: photograph – a computerized drawing that contains the image in front and (combined with a section) profile. Images are scaled, well spaced in the appropriate page format. They are readable enough and, with a quality publication, will increase the legitimacy of Bulgarian study on sgraffito pottery before the international community of experts. More importantly, they fulfill their main purpose very well – on an equal footing with textual descriptions to present information about the commented vessel. There is almost no failing to be found in an assessment of the illustrative material, and that is not the purpose of this review... The appendices in which the comparative material is illustrated are not fully adequate in terms of information to the tables, because this depends on the qualities of the publication cited. Nevertheless, the PhD student tried her best to select legible and sufficiently eloquent images to illustrate her thought presented in words. The same applies to the maps, the number of which is completely sufficient to navigate the situation even for this reader who does not have a particularly accurate idea of the historical geography of the space commented through the deposits.

In conclusion, I must say that Maria Pashova's PhD thesis fulfills all the conditions set by the Law and the Regulations for awarding the educational and scientific degree of Doctor. It shows that the author has mastered the matter, both in its natural form and in the form commented on by other authors. She is well versed in not only regional but also supra-regional material identification along with the relevant theory. She knows how to process monuments according to the rules, classify them and extract from them the necessary information in one sense or another. This summarizing work surpasses everything written so far on the sgraffito ware from Bulgaria and bears a completely modern look. It marks the beginning of the classification of this kind of pottery according to the places of production, to which there will certainly be increased attention in the coming years. I hope its appearance on the book market will arouse a justified interest. The notes I have made are of a completely benevolent nature and may be taken into account in the subsequent edition following the defense.

I hereby recommend to the honorable Academic Board of NAIM - BAS to award Maria Pashova the educational and scientific degree of Doctor.

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