

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT REPORT ON  
THE ACADEMIC STAND OF Dr. KRASSIMIR PETROV LESHTAKOV  
CANDIDATE FOR A PROFESSORSHIP OF PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY  
IN St KLIMENT OHRIDSKI UNIVERSITY OF SOFIA

NOTE : Numbers refer to those denoted in the list of publications provided by the candidate

I have known Dr. Krassimir P. Leshtakov since the early 1990's, at first through his publications and then meeting him in the various occasions of academic encounters. In earlier years he was mainly reputed for his work on the Early Bronze Age cultures of Bulgaria, we were not only referring to his papers, but more significantly consulting him on the problems that we had been facing in assessing the Early Bronze Age cultures of Thrace; however later, through his work in the Maritsa basin, he also proved to be an expert on the earlier periods, mainly in the initial stages of neolithization. I have highly benefited by having the opportunity to meet Dr. Leshtakov on a number of occasions, both in Turkey and as well in Bulgaria and to discuss on the pottery assemblages of Thrace; I had been always impressed by the profundity of his expertise and academic enthusiasm, being open to share his knowledge and to scrutiny in understanding details. I feel justified to note that Dr. Leshtakov is one of the few colleagues, who during his academic career was both active in the field but at the same time prolific in publishing his findings and ideas. His publications always stand out as being comprehensive, presenting the materials with clear descriptions, however not as just descriptive catalogues but always contextualizing the results. Much of our present-day cultural sequencing of the region depends on his work.

Even though he had studied and published various Bronze Age assemblages of Bulgaria, his publication of the Galabovo material stands out as a groundbreaking undertaking in presenting concrete evidence on long-distance trade interaction between southern Anatolia and Thrace, an issue that had not been considered previously. He had presented his ideas in contextualising the Galabovo material first in 1993 in his article No. 29, which was later further elaborated in 2002 in another

paper (No. 40). In this respect Dr. Leshtakov's insight and courage in pointing to an early trade route originating from the northern Levant and terminating in Western Thrace needs to be acknowledged, a point of view which at that time seemed as a fantasy; with his extensive knowledge he was able to detect alien components and to define their sources of origin. It was only later that our excavations at the Early Bronze Age site of Kanlıgeçit in Eastern Thrace revealed undeniable concrete evidence in support of Dr. Leshtakov's hypothesis.

Until his work, Bronze Age cultures along the Black Sea littoral were practically an unknown entity; likewise our work on the Turkish side along the Black Sea coast had not revealed any concrete results. In this respect, his publication of the material from Urdoviza in 1994 (No. 30) and of Debel't in 1995 (No. 32) had provided the initial insight of maritime Early Bronze Age assemblages. This work had provided a new insight to the ongoing discussions on the interaction among Aegean-Anatolian and Pontic Bronze Age cultures, as it was during those years that Prof. Dr. Manfred Korfmann had presented his theory on the "Expansion of the Maritime Trojan Culture"; here it is worth noting that most of the evidence on Trojan connections were based on the random presence of *depas* and some anchor forms. The material discussed in Dr. Leshtakov's paper provides further evidence that makes possible to carry on the discussion with a new insight.

During our work in Eastern Thrace we had been encountering a very distinct type of pottery assemblage for which, not being able to find analogous assemblages, we had suggested with reservations a date in the late 5<sup>th</sup> Millennium BC. In our efforts to find similar assemblages, we had been communicating with a number of colleagues in the Balkans, however with no positive results. Dr. Leshtakov, after seeing the material, based on his extensive knowledge not only confirmed our dating, but also pointed to his work at Dervish Odcağ that had revealed a similar material published in paper No. 36. Since then, Dr. Leshtakov's paper had been the main point of reference to us; in this respect it is also worth noting that since then we had no other feedback from other colleagues.

It would be an understatement to consider Dr. Leshtakov's work solely as descriptive; even though he has competently published with all the necessary details the material recovered in his excavations and surveys, he also stands out in contextualizing cultural entities, not only from the point of chronology but as well of technological aspects. In this respect, his papers of 1996 (No. 33), of 2000 (No. 38) and particularly No. 42 of 2004 have been most implemental in developing a basic understanding of the Bronze Age cultural sequence in Thrace. A more updated presentation of his views on the Bronze Age cultures of the Southern Balkans has been published in 2014 (No. 53).

Dr. Leshtakov's paper of 2013 (No. 55), presenting a critical assessment of our work at Kanlıgeçit in Eastern Thrace, evidences the prime level of his competence. Even though this paper has been written as a book review, in appraising the results of our work, Dr. Leshtakov has not only presented a conspectus of the cultural setting of the Bronze Age of Thrace but has placed it into the big picture of the Anatolian-Balkan cultural interaction zone. As most other colleagues specialize either on the Balkans or on Anatolia, his coverage of both cultural entities needs to be highly acknowledged.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium Period in Thrace, as is the case for most of the Eastern Balkans, is among the most controversial and poorly understood cultural horizons; various hypothesis have been put forward in this respect ranging from incoming pastoral groups to the arrival of the proto-Thracians. Dr. Leshtakov has, with a significant insight, sorted out these previous considerations and demonstrated the continuity of cultural traditions going from the Early Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age; in this respect his papers of 2009 (No. 47), of 2010 (No. 48) and of 2012 (No. 63) are worth mentioning. The last paper, No. 63, is highly innovative in bringing together material assemblages obtained from the field work together with absolute dates, summarizing his point of view and placing Thrace into the big picture of Southeastern Europe. The pottery assemblages discussed with this paper are also relevant to the ongoing debate on the cultural sequence of northern Turkey, specifically in defining the interaction zone of some controversial assemblages recovered from the Black Sea coastal parts of Central Anatolia.

Dr. Lechtakov's interest in looking at the interaction between Aegean, Anatolia and the Balkans is reflected in his paper published in 2007 (No. 44) by placing the copper ingots that had been recovered in Bulgaria into the general picture. Along with providing a very comprehensive corpus of various types of ox-hide ingots recovered on various occasions in Bulgaria, the bibliographic references of the paper indicate his broad vision and knowledge.

Dr. Leshtakov's undertakings in the catchment area of the Maritsa are worth acknowledging, both for the actual meticulous work done in the field to document and to save cultural heritage, but more for the academic level of publications thus derived. The series, conventionally known as Maritsa-Iztok, stands as the proof of his capacity to publish the results of his field work in a relatively short period of time. His work in the Maritsa basin has provided ample new evidence covering the entire time span from Early Neolithic to the Iron Age. In considering the critical geographic location of the Maritsa valley between the Aegean, the Marmara region and Thrace it is self-evident that the procurement of any data from this region is highly significant. The Maritsa project stands as a well-organized and implemented intensive regional study, not only successfully recovering prehistoric sites but considering them within their environmental setting, being one of the early examples of 'settlement archaeology' in the Balkans, as reflected in the co-authored paper of 2001 (No. 59). It is evident that Maritsa Project developed as a novel regional undertaking under Dr. Leshtakov's initiative, considerably elaborating our knowledge on the cultural sequence and changing settlement patterns with time. Previous to the Maritsa Project, conventional sequencing was solely based on the evidence of two key – sites Karanovo and Ezero; even though both sites revealed long stratigraphic series, it was also evident that there was some lacuna in between some cultural horizons, resulting in uncompromising debates. In this respect, Dr. Leshtakov's work has been highly implemental not only in filling in the missing gaps, but also re-confirming traditional chronological sequence. In this respect, his paper of 1999 (No. 37) highlighting the transitional cultural stage between Karanovo III and IV and assessing the site distribution patterns, is highly informative.

During recent years Dr. Leshtakov has been successfully incorporating archaeometric methods of natural sciences to his research; along with the above mentioned methodologies of settlement archaeology and the establishment of absolute dates, his co-authored paper published in one of the prestigious journals in 2003 (No. 61) is reputed as a groundbreaking collaborative work in developing new methodologies in extracting DNA and recovering genomes from poorly preserved remains. Here, it is worth to note that biogenetic studies in archaeology are one of the most dynamic fields in natural sciences and the above mentioned paper is being extensively cited.

Without doubt, the excavations at Yabalkovo stand out as the prime work of Dr. Leshtakov, not only due to the consequential importance of the findings and the quality of the field methodology but even more so for the excellence achieved in its publication. Even though the Yabalkovo excavations, initiated in 2000 and lasting up to 2012, took place as a rescue project, it has clearly surpassed many long-lasting conventional excavations in the exposing of large areas with uncompromising scrutiny in documentation. In an overall view, the Yabalkovo site, revealing antecedents of the so-called Karanovo I culture evidently predating the earliest cultural level of Karanovo itself, has given an end to the long-lasting debate on the incipient stages of neolithization in Thrace. The evidence of Yabalkovo indicated that what had previously been addressed as Karanovo I culture began a few centuries earlier than at the Karanovo Mound, at about 6100 BC, and continued evolving in the same area. In this respect, it is highly significant that our work at Aşağı Pınar, located in Eastern Thrace, has revealed exactly the same results as Yabalkovo, both sites sharing the same culture and developing parallel being fully aware of each other.

Since the beginning of the Yabalkovo project, the most significant results were being published by Dr. Leshtakov without delay, thus rapidly made available to the academic world; among them, the paper No. 41 published in 2004 is highly important. With this paper Dr. Leshtakov has convincingly argued that channelled and incised decoration was being practiced since the earliest stages of the Neolithic period, an issue that had been of much controversy previously. The problem lay in

the fact that fine black burnished pottery, either with curvilinear or geometric designs as in the case with fine channelling, had much earlier dates in Anatolia than conventionally offered in the Balkans. Such pottery assemblages were known to be present in Central and Southern Anatolia in association with the so-called Dark Faced Burnished Ware of the Neolithic Period; however in Thrace they were ascribed to a much later cultural horizon conventionally addressed as the period of 'Vincaization'. Yabalkovo and similarly some other sites in northwestern Turkey have now clearly revealed both their early date and that this specific dark coloured pottery was being used together with the red-slipped painted sherds.

Yabalkovo has been a major undertaking of Dr. Leshtakov lasting for over a decade; receiving the Yabalkovo Vol. I published in 2014, I was much impressed to see that the final publications have already begun appearing; what was more impressing was the fact that in preparing the manuscript Dr. Leshtakov has been generously open in bringing in the expertise of scholars from distinct fields of specialisation. As it is, the Yabalkovo volume stands out as one of the most exclusive, well prepared, informative excavation reports, enriched with high quality photographs and illustrations. In spite of being printed with the contributions of various expert scientists, it is evident that all is based on the basic archaeological evidence set by Dr. Leshtakov. In various co-authored excavation reports where the principle investigator had not profoundly laid and presented the archaeological evidence, regardless of the quality of individual contributors, the volume ends up being incomprehensibly disorganised. In this respect Dr. Leshtakov's input, both in orienting his collaborators and incorporating the outcomes of distinct fields, has to be highly acknowledged. In the introductory chapters, covering the background of the study, the history of research, the objectives and the field methodology of the project, state-of-the-art is explicitly presented, placing in due perspective the supplementary contributions of other collaborators. The chapters of natural scientists particularly covering geoarchaeological aspects would otherwise have been unbased assessments.

The main part of the volume focuses on the Early Neolithic Period, where a special emphasis has rightfully been given to the description and to the soil analysis of the Neolithic ditch system. Up to the commencement of Yabalkovo excavations strands

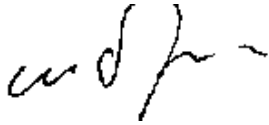
of ditches were being recorded at a number of Early Neolithic sites, both in Turkey and elsewhere. Even though they were apparently different in all their features from those of the Bronze Age ditches, Neolithic ditches were categorized as being insignificant remains. In this respect what has been exposed at Yabalkovo is of consequential significance. It is clear that the excavator had the insight from the beginning to understand the significance of these features, and gave the main focus of the field work to make an unprecedented detailed documentation, not only from the stand of archaeology, but also calling in natural scientists. As evidenced in the Yabalkovo volume, it became clear that the ditch system of the Early Neolithic settlement was the main characteristic of the habitation, having a multiplicity of functions. The ditch system and the nature of its fillings thus became important in featuring the setup of Early Neolithic settlements; this knowledge has been most rewarding, in particular for our own work at Aşağı Pınar in Eastern Thrace.

Among the most informative entities of the Yabalkovo volume is evidently Dr. Leschtakov's chapter on the Early Neolithic pottery assemblage. First of all the author has to be appreciated for the detailed description of the ware categories, supplemented by the typological classification. It is also remarkable that the author has categorized technological aspects implemented in the production of pottery vessels, particularly surface finish and treatment. Explicit specifications denoted throughout this chapter enable to visualize and to assess the material under description. The author has to be congratulated for the systematic classification of the material presented, and also for the quality of excellence of the illustrations.

The chapter on small finds prepared with his co-authorship is an excellent presentation of a rich and varied material recovered in the Neolithic settlement. Among the finds, the flat-bodied figurines are particularly noteworthy, presenting a rich typological variety of the earliest figurative art of the Balkans. Also of significance are the so-called pintaderas and depictions of humans in relief. As in the case with other chapters of the volume, besides descriptions and categorization of the finds, comparative materials from other sites and/or regions have also been given together with relevant bibliographical references.

The chapter on the Bronze Age written by Dr. Leshtakov presents the post-Neolithic occupation phase of the site. In spite of the poor state of preservation of the Bronze Age deposits, the author's competence on this time period draws a comprehensive picture of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium in Thrace. Of high interest is also a clay model of a wheel, evidencing the initial stages of the introduction of wheeled vehicles in Thrace by the later part of the Early Bronze Age. Here we would like to note that similar results have been reached at Kanlıgeçit in Eastern Thrace.

To conclude, Dr. Krassimir Leshtakov is an eminent scholar, well known and reputed, who has made significant contributions to our knowledge on the prehistory not only of Thrace but of the Southern Balkans in general. With his high publication profile, he much deserves to be promoted to professorship at the Faculty of History of St Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia.



Prof. Dr. Mehmet Özdoğan  
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