



International conference “The Alexandrovo Tomb: 20 Years Later”, Sofia, 11–12 May 2021

Stephan Steingraber ^a

^a Department of Humanities, Third University of Rome, Via Ostiense 234, I-00146 Rome, Italy; stephan.steingraber@uniroma3.it

I was glad and honored to have been invited to participate at the very interesting, stimulating and vivacious conference on the Alexandrovo tomb and its tomb paintings 20 years after its discovery (fig. 1). The event was organized by the National Archaeological Institute with Museum (NAIM-BAS), in partnership with the Balkan Heritage Foundation, Faculty of History at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, the Regional Historical Museum of Haskovo (RHM Haskovo) and 13 Bulgarian colleagues specialized in Thracian culture and art (see <https://alexandrovo-conference2021.naim.bg/>). Particularly active and meritorious in the organization were the “female trio” Julia Valeva, Julia Tzvetkova, Angela Pencheva, with Georgi Nekhrizov. It was for me the third invitation for a conference or congress in Bulgaria – this time unfortunately only in a virtual way (which worked very well anyway) – after the more “intimate” Kazanlak Conference in October 2016 and the International Congress of Thracology in Kazanlak in September 2017 when I could visit for the first time (accompanied by several Bulgarian colleagues as Maria Chichikova and Julia Valeva) the Alexandrovo Tomb (the copy) and the modern Museum built near the tumulus of the famous tomb (fig 2). I really hope that the papers of the two congresses will be soon published! Visiting the impressing Alexandrovo Museum sponsored by the Japanese and participating now at the Conference I remembered with a certain emotion the famous discoverer of the Tomb – the late Georgi Kitov – whom I met almost 24 years ago in 1997 with his excavation team in Shipka near Kazanlak, enjoying his hospitality together with the Japanese photographer Mr. A. Suzuki from Tokyo University and drinking a good bottle of Tuscan wine together.

The first part of this Conference was dedicated mainly to iconographic and art historic aspects, whereas the second part was dealing mostly with problems related to the technique, conservation and restoration of Thracian tomb architecture and painting. The two sections emphasized the interdisciplinary character of the Conference (cf. conference [program https://alexandrovo-conference2021.naim.bg/en/program/](https://alexandrovo-conference2021.naim.bg/en/program/)). Most of the papers were presented by Bulgarian colleagues and specialists of course but thanks to the participation of David Braund (Great Britain), Olga Palagia (Greece), Latife Summerer (Turkey), Antonino Cosentino (Italy), Hariclia Brecoulaki (Greece), Anjo Weichbrodt (Switzerland) and myself (Germany/Italy), the Conference had an international character and was very helpful for a scientific opinion exchange between specialists from different fields (fig. 3). Almost all papers were followed by lively discussions.



Fig. 1. Logo of the Conference
Обр. 1. Лого на конференцията

The number of the painted tombs in Thrace is limited and the Alexandrovo Tomb belongs doubtlessly to the most interesting and important cases offering an almost complete decoration with figural, vegetal and architectural elements and even with a unique graffito and inscription. It dates from the later 4th century BC, which means from the beginning of the Early Hellenistic period, when monumental tomb architecture and tomb painting reached a remarkable and partly new acme not only in Thrace, but also in Macedonia, Crimea, Asia Minor, Alexandria, Southern Italy (Apulia, Campania, Lucania), Southern Etruria and even in Rome, through the use of partly similar partly different decorations and iconographic themes. In spite of a certain number of publications related to many aspects of the Alexandrovo Tomb during the last two decades, it was time after 20 years for a new, up-to-date discussion among specialists.

In the first section of particular interest were the contributions of D. Braund on the figure of the naked hunter with the axe, E. Nankov on the military equipment depicted in the tomb, J. Valeva on the reconstruction of the (unfortunately very badly preserved) funerary banquet scene in the main chamber of the tomb and N. Sharankov on the graffito of the head of a young man in profile and the inscription. Although the idea of a possible “portrait” and signature of an artist was fascinating (and would be unique in Thracian painting), obviously we have to deal here with the head and name of a person perhaps related to a later burial in the tomb and not to the painter-artist. The papers of O. Palagia and L. Summerer offered extremely interesting comparative examples in Macedonia and Asia Minor (Mylasa).

Specially the second section of May 12th was of great interest, with its innovative character demonstrated in the chemical and physical analyses of pigments and binders, Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry, non-destructive photo-documentation, 3D Laser Scanning, geophysical methods of prospection and archaeological surveys. H. Brecolaki presented a very brilliant paper on the scientific investigation and re-visualization with new methods of the famous hunt frieze on the façade of Tomb II (Philip’s Tomb) at Vergina, which is actually the most important heritage of original ancient Greek painting.

I remained particularly impressed by the very challenging but extremely useful project of a systematic data base of all Thracian tombs in Bulgaria (and perhaps in the European part of Turkey too) organized by the Balkan Heritage Foundation and generously funded by J.M. Kaplan Fund (USA). D. Gergova’s final speech was partly a “*cri de coeur*” for the – much needed - restoration and conservation of the Alexandrovo Tomb, which unfortunately is actually in quite bad condition. I am wondering why the responsible Bulgarian National Authorities are not able or not willing to organize as soon as possible the necessary measures for the preservation of this unique Thracian tomb and its decoration, even if this involves co-operating with foreign specialists. It seems to me that, in the former (communist) era, the Bulgarian State – of course for ideological reasons too – was more interested and engaged to preserve its archaeological heritage than nowadays. Let’s hope that this conference and its publication will shake up the Bulgarian authorities and have some positive results!



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Fig. 2. Visit in 2017 at the “Museum Center „Thracian Art in the Eastern Rhodopes“ at the village of Alexandrovo with colleagues from the 13th Congress of Thracology: 1. Participants at the conference; 2–3. Pictures from the exposition – the copy of the Alexandrovo tomb and the official opening of the Center in 2009 by Their Imperial Highnesses Prince and Princess Akishino and the President of Bulgaria Georgi Parvanov (photos S. Steingraber)

Обр. 2. Посещение през 2017 г. на Музеен център „Тракийско изкуство в Източните Родопи“ при с. Александрово с колеги от 13-ия конгрес по тракология: 1. Участници в конференцията; 2–3. Снимки от експозицията – копие на Александровската гробница и официалното откриване на Центъра през 2009 г. от Техни Императорски Височества принц и принцеса Акишино и президента на България Георги Първанов (снимки S. Steingraber)



Fig. 3. Conference opening and closing sessions, 11th–12th May 2021 (photos J. Tzvetkova)
 Обр. 3. Снимки от откриването на конференцията и заключителната сесия, 11–12 май 2021
 (снимки Ю. Цветкова)

At the end of my short report, I would like to remember Mario Torelli – the famous Italian archaeologist, Etruscologist and ancient historian, who passed away last September (2020) in Sicily and who had always a very special interest in Thracian tomb paintings, particularly the Kazanlak World Heritage Tomb. In the last two decades, he had organized several Conferences and Convegni on ancient pre-Roman tomb paintings, focussing specially on the Late Classical and Hellenistic period. *Panta rei* ...