Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology https://be-ja.org
Българско е-Списание за Археология ISSN: 1314-5088

vol. 14.1, 2024, 159–163

Article history:
Submitted 30 April 2024
Accepted 14 May 2024
Available online 20 June 2024

News / Отзиви

International Conference “Researches of Ancient Thrace between traditionality and modernity: theoretical aspects and scientific methodology”, 11th–13th April 2024, Sofia, Bulgaria

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From the beginning of the 20th c., the history and archaeology of ancient Thrace have been the focus of scholarly attention. The International conference “Researches of Ancient Thrace between Traditionality and Modernity: Theoretical Aspects and Scientific Methodology” took place in Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” for three days (Thursday to Saturday), from the 11th to the 13th of April 2024 (fig.1). Dilyana Boteva and Julia Tzvetkova organized the event within the framework of the “Measuring Ancient Thrace” project[1], supported by the Bulgarian Scientific Fund[2] and the International Ancient Coins Counterfeits Scientific Network. The conference was designed to promote scholarly debates on approaches to the study of Antiquity (and Ancient Thrace in particular), bringing together traditional disciplines of history, archaeology, numismatics and epigraphy with modern archaeometric research and advances in the digital humanities.

The forum took place in the Conference Hall at Sofia University and was attended by 70 researchers from 9 countries, who presented 38 presentations grouped into ten sessions and two workshops (fig. 2). There were plenary lectures at the beginning of each section. The working language was English.

After the official opening and welcome address by the organisers, the conference proceedings started with two sessions, focused on ancient history. Peter Delev (Sofia University) provided an extensive review of the history of ancient Thrace in the books of both ancient and modern authors. The eminent historian outlined changes in the perspectives on the subject and examined the “constructions of a glorious past”, which have frequently bordered on pseudo-science, creating modern myths about the ancient Thracians. His “plea for a revisionist trend in Thracian studies” and a reassessment of the traditional approach was followed by Dilyana Boteva (Sofia University), who managed to spur a discussion on the nature of ancient sources by scrutinizing information from Thucydides. The topic of the emergence of the “early state” and how the chiefdom concept was applied to studies on societies in Antiquity and Early Medieval times was addressed by Tsvetelin Stepanov (Sofia University). In the concluding presentation of the initial session, Alienor Rufin Solas (Lorrain University) managed to illustrate the idea that exploration of ancient Thracians provides a “field for methodological

1 Measuring Ancient Thrace Project (№ КП-06-Н50/3, 30.11.2020).

2 Bulgarian Scientific Fund, International Scientific Forums Program (№ КР-06-MNF/44, 19.12.2023).

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Fig. 1. Official poster of the conference
Обр. 1. Постер на конференцията

experimentation and epistemological reflection".

The second session of the panel on ancient history opened with a mind-stimulating lecture by Athanasios Sideris (Charles University), entitled "Treasuring the Ostentatious Past. Sensationalism, Historical Figures and Identity Claims". A renowned expert of Classical and Hellenistic silverware, he explored the practice of treasuring precious metal artifacts in the Greek world and the circulation of valuables in ancient Thrace and Macedonia. Multiple examples successfully demonstrated the conclusion that in modern times, these luxurious artifacts often become a source of national pride and serve in the creation of entirely fictional "parallel antiquity". It is worth noting its definition as a "dangerous amalgamation of ignorance, sciolism, pretence, populism, sexism and nationalism". After the presentation on the Balkan race for shining ancient silverware in claiming identities for various past communities, Franziska van Buren (KU Leuven) turned the attention to the depths of Classical scholarship by discussing a narrative, attributed to Aristotle by Tertullian about a myth which blended the Greek Kronos with the Thracian Zalmoxis. Still dealing with ancient myths, Ivo Topalilov (Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology – BAS) examined the legendary beginnings of the Hellenic apoikiai and their oikistes in Thrace.

The section on epigraphy and linguistics encompassed the third and fourth sessions, scheduled on the first day of the conference. Mirena Slavova (Sofia University) analysed the corpus of non-Greek names in the epigraphic evidence from Apollonia Pontica to "measure the otherness" in the Milesian apoikia during the Classical period. The plenary presentation revealed various models of integration of non-Greek individuals (by mixed marriages, influx of small artisans and wage labourers), which left their mark in the available archaeological and epigraphic data from the West Pontic city. The second plenary lecture was by Nikolay Sharankov (Sofia University) on old and new ap-



Fig. 2. Conference participants
Обр. 2. Участниците в конференцията

proaches to epigraphy. Sharing his experience in the digitization of the inscriptions of ancient Thrace and discussing key issues in the large-scale use of digital technologies in epigraphy, he also turned attention to inscriptions as material objects. In the last presentation of the session Maria Gabriella Parissaki (National Hellenic Research Foundation) focused on some Thracian ethnonyms attested in both literary and epigraphic sources. Examining variations in their forms showed cases of anachronism, as well as the difficulties in making history from and through names.

The fourth session included three presentations on the modern application of databases in the study of ancient names and texts. Stefano Magnani (Università degli Studi di Udine) explained the concept of the ongoing project with Onur Türkay and Ergün Lafli (Dokuz Eylül University of Izmir) in the creation of a database to collect onomastics of Thracian or Thraco-Bithynian origins, documented in Greek and Latin inscriptions in the territory of ancient Bithynia. Dimitar Iliev (Sofia University) demonstrated the modus opperandi of the Telamon database (of Ancient Greek inscriptions from Bulgaria) and the use of the Telamon template, methodology and tools in the forthcoming Tituli database of Latin inscriptions. Kristiyan Simeonov (Sofia University) showed the potential of an inventive information extraction algorithm to create a valuable resource for a more efficient linguistic analysis and exploration of the knowledge concerning ancient Thrace in the works of Pliny the Elder.

The second day, and the archaeology section of the conference, opened with a plenary lecture by Despina Tsiafaki (Athena Research Center) on the employment of digital tools in the study of ancient Thrace. Using as examples the accomplishments of the AtticPot research project (about the diffusion of Attic pottery in ancient Thrace), as well as other initiatives on myths, sites and rivers in Aegean Thrace, the Greek archaeologist discussed the repositories and spatial technology for accumulating new knowledge. In the same vein, Veronika Sossau (Universität Basel) reviewed the

advantages of using open digital web-based data management systems, which help to organize and structure data, as well as provide tools for geographical visualization, spatial and network analysis. They also enable researchers to contribute to open and fair research by making newly acquired data accessible to future research projects. The plenary presentation on the iconographic concepts of sculptural works revealed extensive networks in the Archaic and Classical periods beyond specific regions and the need to study a large amount of information. In the same session Adela Sobotkova (Aarhus University) examined the archaeological landscapes in the Middle Tundzha River watershed by exploring visibility, intervisibility and topographical prominence of burial mounds, followed by Magelon Bastide (École française d'Athènes) with a contribution on the archaeological evidence of precolonial settlement at Thasos, probably connected to mineral exploitation.

The sixth session began with a presentation by Emil Nankov (National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS) on a granite block with visible traces of two Greek letters, discovered during the 2023 archaeological excavations at the site of Adzhiyska vodenitsa, commonly identified as emporion Pistiros. The investigation of the inscribed stone provided an excellent example of how to corroborate information acquired by traditional archaeological research with the application of modern technologies (a photogrameteric digital model). Daniela Stoyanova (Sofia University) examined the archaeological data of the basileia in Seuthopolis and suggested a plausible reconstruction of the monumental building, correcting mistakes in previous studies. Stefan Alexandrov (National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS) shared some reflections on the functionalism in Bulgarian archaeological school during the last 50 years. The last presentation of the sixth session by Dimitar Bayrakov (History Museum – Velingrad) entitled "Surface survey for settlement pattern analysis: the case study of Velingrad in the light of the data on the sanctuary of Dionysus", was probably the most controversial communication at the conference. The report on the results of over 15 years of systematic field surveys in Chepinsko and the Northwestern Rhodopes does not raise objections. Their cult interpretation in relation to the enigmatic "great sanctuary of Dionysos in Thrace" illustrated the mechanism of modern myth creation and fictional parallel antiquity discussed earlier at the conference.

The seventh session certainly deserves the label a "digi-session", as it focused on the transformation of archaeological projects into "digi-projects" with all foreseen ramifications of these endeavours. Lyudmil Vagalinski (National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS) set the stage, highlighting the aim of Deultum to become DigiDeultum by reinterpreting previous scientific knowledge about the Roman colony in a digital environment. Digital Early Iron Age Thrace of Georgi Nekhrizov (National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS) and his team, who investigated Gluhite kamani rock-cut complex since 2008, intend "through digital technologies to achieve a detailed overview of the Early Iron Age in Thrace". Marina Tasaklaki (Ionian University) demonstrated what it really means to integrate technology in archaeological research in the Molyvoti project with the implementation of the iDig application in the field and the web-MTAP app for convenient access to excavation findings and material publications.

The eighth session was devoted to numismatic studies. In the plenary presentation, François de Callataÿ (Université Libre de Bruxelles) examined the potential to study Thracian numismatics in the light of the SILVER website (about die-studies and overstrikes) and to put coin production and coin circulation in Thrace into perspective of the broader landscape of coinages. Valentina Grigorova-Gencheva (Fibank, VUZF) shared the Bulgarian experience in numismatic databases. Ilya Prokopov (South-West University "Neofit Rilski") and Julia Tzvetkova (Sofia University) discussed the importance of integrating geographical localization into the GIS database in the study of coin hoards to boost complex interdisciplinary research. Hristina Ivanova-Anaplioti (University of Zurich) tried "to grasp the invisible" frontier dynamics between Thrace and Macedonia in the Roman Imperial

period by means of digital numismatics in a cross-study of archaeological and coin finds in Heraclea Sintica and Deultum. In the last presentation of the second conference day, Vladislav Zhivkov (National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS) discussed the "Moesian countermarks from the first century AD and their archaeological context". In contrast to dating by coins, detailed analysis of their archaeological context in Almus as well as in a native settlement near Rasovo points to the third quarter of the 1st c. AD as plausible time for the Moesian countermarks (TI CA and AVG).

The third day of the conference included two sessions and two workshops. In the first plenary presentation of the archaeometry section, Almoatzbellah Elshahawi (Egyptian Museum, Conservation Department) shared his results of the technical study and preservation of a group of ancient coins from the Getty Villa Museum. Boyka Zlateva (Sofia University), Deyan Lesigyarski (National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography – BAS) and Julia Tzvetkova (Sofia University) presented the results (p-XRF) analysis of 59 coins, discovered during archaeological investigations in Ada tepe. Marina Tasaklaki (Ionian University) discussed the initial results of analysing 96 silver coins from ancient cities of Aegean Thrace through XRF analysis. In the final presentation of the ninth session, Svenja Simon (Saarland University) shared her observations on granulation and filigree in examination of the Thracian jewellery from the craftsman perspective.

There were two presentations in the tenth session. Deyan Lesigyarski (National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography – BAS) and a dream team of collaborators presented a magnetic and spectroscopic assessment of the provenance and technology of a set of Iron Age clay tiles from south Bulgaria. Maya Nikolova (Septemvri Archaeological Museum "Prof. Mieczysław Domaradzki") provided insights into the art and the techne in the pottery restoration.

The workshop on ancient forgeries was part of the activities of the International Ancient Coins Counterfeits Scientific Network. Beyond any doubt, Almoatzbellah Elshahawi (Egyptian Museum, Conservation Department) was the star on the scene, with an in-depth and amusing presentation on his experience and the scientific methods for detecting counterfeit coinage. Emilia Koleva (RHM – Sofia) also offered a discussion of methodological issues during the restoration process of ancient forgeries from the Adzhiyska vodenitsa archaeological site, commonly identified as emporion Pistiros.

The second workshop was devoted to the results of "Measuring Ancient Thrace" project and the future development of Thracian studies in a digital environment, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity.

Some, like the present reviewer, will remain hesitant to jump ahead into the depths of the new "digi-world", but it seems that is also part of the beauty of Thracian studies – "a field for methodological experimentation and epistemological reflection".