



World Neolithic Congress 2024 (Şanlıurfa, Türkiye) and Bulgarian prehistory in context

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The end of 2024 was rich in scientific fora with programmes referring to some crucial themes in Bulgarian Prehistory and Protohistory. Bulgarian colleagues were invited to contribute and indeed they did, as the examples below show:

- International conference “Social interactions in Mediterranean Prehistory”, held in Barcelona (Spain) on 21–22 October, where two Bulgarian participants presented their research: Malgorzhata Grebska-Kulow and Viktoria Petrova (on site);
- International conference “100 years of the Archaeological museum in Skopje: insights and perspectives”, held in Skopje (North Macedonia) on 25–27 November. There a solid Bulgarian group of scholars was presented: Petar Zidarov, Nikolay Sharankov, Hristo Popov (with team), Nikola Tonkov (with team); Ivo Cholakov (with team), Georhi Nehrizov (with team) (all presenting on site).
- International conference “Eastern Mediterranean Contact Area in Early Prehistory”, held in Belgrade (Serbia) on 6–7 December, where Maria Gurova gave an online presentation of her research.

In the list of important recent fora, the key event was undoubtedly the World Neolithic Congress in Şanlıurfa, Türkiye, held from 4 to 8 November 2024, and it is worth paying due necessary attention to this meeting. The Congress took place in southeastern Anatolia, the area in the northernmost part of the Fertile Crescent, where the birth and first impulses of Neolithisation took place and which is considered the cradle of civilisation.

One fact cannot be overlooked: this Congress was planned for 2023, but the unexpected earthquake disaster in early February 2023 caused great devastation and many victims in this region of southeastern Anatolia. The congress failed, but the strength and energy of the organisers resulted in serious new efforts to rebuild the entire event logistics and to open the door to an exciting, emotional and successful scientific forum that will remain fixed in the memories of all participants (fig. 1). The congress was perfectly organised, starting with a user-friendly website, mobile facilities Stone Mounds (Taş Tepeler) – an app containing the detailed schedule, session and poster programs and abstracts (thus compensating for the lack of an abstract book), attractive pre- and post-congress excursions, smooth arrangements at Harran University (transport and lunches) where all sessions were held simultaneously, and last but not least, very helpful materials and volunteers (fig. 2.1).

The participants (ca 1000 in number) came from all over the world and it was nice to see so many different people sharing the enthusiasm and excitement of being privileged to engage both



Fig. 1. Photo of the Congress participants (courtesy of the organisers)

Обр. 1. Снимка на участниците в конгреса (предоставена от организаторите)

physically and cognitively with the holy land of the cradle of civilization.

The organisers offered us a mixture of a rich and important/relevant scientific programme with irresistible social events and gifts, all together underlining the importance of the place and its immense cultural heritage value. Each participant received a newly published bilingual, lavishly illustrated catalogue of the new exhibition at Şanlıurfa Museum. The inauguration of the exhibition (part of the activity of the Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project) took place after the first day of the Congress, and the participants were honoured to be the first visitors to this very professionally made walk into the region's past. For some of us, the most comprehensive and attractive part was the evidence (in the form of artefacts, reconstructions, audio-video facilities) of the famous Pre-Pottery and Early Neolithic sites (most of them Tepes) such as Göbeklitepe, Karahantepe, Nevalı Çori, etc., whose imposing character was reproduced in the museum halls (figs 2.2–3; 3). An additional bonus for all participants was the free excursion (in the middle of the working days) to selected sites included in the 'Stone Mounds Project' – the so-called Taş Tepeler Group – Göbeklitepe, Karahantepe, Sefertepe, Gürcütepe and Sayburç (figs 4–5).

There were 4 full working days of parallel sessions, each starting with an interesting and valuable keynote lecture. The papers ranged from "Becoming Neolithic" (by P. Bellwood), through the "Neolithic emergence in East and Southeast Asia" (by H. Hung) and "Acknowledging the pioneers of the Neolithic research in Southeast Anatolia" – B. Howe, H. Çambel, R. J. Braidwood, H. Hauptmann, K. Schmidt (by M. Özdoğan, B. Helwig, and J. Peters) ... to "Unpacking the Neolithic" (by M. Zeder).

As for the scientific programme, there were 46 sessions running in parallel, grouped in two blocks: Global perspective on the Neolithic (G – 22 sessions); Regional Neolithic (R – 23 sessions) and a general session "Recent finds, recent recoveries" (P – papers plus poster presentation). More than 60 posters were available via the mobile application. Numerous topics shed light on the multifaceted research agenda on the 'global' Neolithic. The query in block G included themes varying from traditional (spread of farming and herding, treating dead bodies, architecture, art and symbolism), to the challenging and promising (landscape archaeology, geological and tectonic impacts on



Fig. 2. Poster of the Congress in the spacious campus of the Harran University (1); Details of Şanlıurfa Museum exhibition (2–3) (photos M. Gurova)

Обр. 2. Плакат на конгреса в просторния кампус на Университета Харан (1); детайли от експозицията в музея в Шанлъурфа (2–3) (снимки М. Гюрова)



Fig. 3. Göbeklitepe monumental reconstruction in the Museum halls (photos M. Gurova)
Обр. 3. Монументалното представяне на Гьобекли тепе в залите на музея (снимки М. Гюрова)

Neolithic societies, biomolecular and stable isotope research proxies, settlement and population dynamics). It should be emphasized that in this thematic block more global (in space and time) reviews/overviews and regional studies were included, and especially in the session (G03) on foraging and food production in a supra-regional/global perspective.

Thematic block R dealt mainly with Neolithisation and the Neolithic research agenda on a narrower scale but with many special approaches, comparative and diachronic studies and case studies from different parts of Asia and Europe with a focus on different regions: Southwest Asia and Anatolia (12 sessions); Eurasia, Central and East Asia (5 sessions); Southeast Europe (4 sessions), Mediterranean (1 session) and Caucasus (1 session). Three sessions of this thematic block concerned the territory of Bulgaria and neighbouring regions – R14–16 – where most of the Bulgarian contributors presented (*vide infra*). All 3 sessions provided a pleasant and positive atmosphere for sharing and discussing the contributions. My personal experience, however, suggest that the session R14 succeeded in (re)creating that peculiar friendly and stimulating atmosphere, so characteristic of the traditional Neolithic seminars led by M. Budja, who acted as the main organiser of this session. The schedule was strictly adhered to, and all papers (by slots) were subjected to questions/comments and discussion, an opportunity that some sessions missed due to schedule disruptions.

Bulgarian prehistorians participated in 5 sessions with a total of 11 papers (*vide infra*). It is noteworthy that there was a Bulgarian co-organiser in the session R16 – T. Dzhanfezova.

Sessions R14–16 (followed by the author) hosted 8 papers covering a wide thematic repertoire which can be summarised as follows:

- Adaptation as decision making and strategy in the Neolithisation pathways was addressed by T. Dzhanfezova through pottery-making in Balkan habitats of the newcomers from Anatolia; the adaptive mechanisms reflecting on the supply of stone raw material were the topic of Gatsov &;

- The palimpsest of the 'regional Neolithic' was the subject of several papers. Nikolova & presented two important sites in the Middle Maritsa Valley (Yabalkovo and Nova Nadezhda) within the framework of complex social networks and environmental proxies. The expected introduction of a new series of AMS dates from Nova Nadezhda gave us a new hope (the settlement's name in Bulgarian) that additional light will be shed on the timeframe and paths of Neolithisation in Bulgarian Thrace. A conceptual view of the Early Neolithic along the Struma and Mesta rivers was offered by M. Grebska-Kulow on the basis of a comparison between several settlements functioning almost simultaneously, showing significant differences in material culture and thus suggesting multi-directional interactions between themselves and sites from neighbouring regions (e.g. Pelagonia). An intriguing case study of a newly discovered site in northwestern Bulgaria – Sinagovtsi – was presented by P. Zidarov &. The finds from the sites were subjected to multi-disciplinary analyses, which (all together) will allow aDNA and stable isotope results to be compared/confronted with burial practices and dietary signals from faunal analysis. An impressive obsidian blade (exotic among the prehistoric assemblages in Bulgaria) completes the spectrum of finds involved in the multi-proxy analysis procedure. As case studies of extraordinary discoveries, the Late Neolithic ritual complexes from Lyubimec-DB 2 and Kapitan Andreevo were presented by Tsaneva &. The impressive anthropomorphic representations revealed the sophisticated imagery and skills as an aspect of the spiritual and artistic sphere of communal life;

- A more conceptual approach was taken by Chapman & Gaydarska, who focused on genomic research and its implication for the traditional debate on the emergence of agro-pastoral sedentism. The aDNA results strongly support the rejection of only the migration model and only the indigenist model, leaving the interactionist model as the only possibility. The concept of hunter-gatherer-farmer networks based on interactions between the indigenous groups and the newcomers is demonstrated by the exchange of exotic, colourful and shiny objects. It was the only paper that explicitly

suggested the inevitable application of the palaeo-genomic data (based on selected line on evidence as an inductive premise) to all (deductive) trajectories in the multi-faceted Neolithisation discourse. The paper by Gurova & was based on long-term inter-disciplinary research on Balkan flint (with outcrops in central north Bulgaria), emphasizing its emergence and repetition over a large territory, and its co-occurrence with other distinctive socio-cultural traits in the first half of the VI mill. cal BC. This implies the existence of a sophisticated exchange network with a high degree of interaction and suggests that none of the conventional scenarios and paradigms of the Neolithisation of Bulgaria is viable without taking into consideration the BF outcrops and their discovery by the first Neolithic settlers or negotiating access to pre-existing Balkan flint exchange networks.

Turning from the amazing, but temporary congress context to the scientific reality in the Bulgarian prehistoric agenda, I would formulate a general synopsis as follows:

- There are already genetic studies including Bulgarian prehistoric materials and it is reasonable to expect some more conceptual and instructive overview about the Balkan Neolithisation, similar to the one entitled “Unravelling cultural and genetic interactions during the Aegean Neolithisation” and presented by a large team of Turkish colleagues who compared the material culture characteristics with genomic data and observed no correlation, thus assuming a complex process involving demic and cultural exchange. This very challenging trajectory has to be implemented in our research agenda as well, which will undoubtedly reveal the unpackaged elements in the Neolithic package (a statement perfectly formulated many years ago by C. Pèrles);

- The intensive research of the last few years has revealed significant new evidence for Early Neolithic settlements in various landscape and environmental niches, which could certainly be reflected in a more active and timely publication of new series of radiocarbon dates (including in the Excel spreadsheet www.14SEA.org) in order to make them usable and useful in the Neolithisation debate;

- The traditional scenarios of the Bulgarian Neolithic (based mainly on 20th-century pottery studies) are no longer unambiguously supported by the available radiocarbon data (hence the importance of the previous paragraph), and secondly – by the serious analytical research on Balkan flint, which does not lose its reliability and importance and should not be ignored or marginalized;

- There are several promising trajectories in desirable and necessary further research: a consideration of the new radiocarbon dates from sites in northwestern Bulgaria (e.g. Ohoden, Mayor Uzunovo), from Kovachevo (in the Middle Struma Valley) and from Nova Nadezhda (in Bulgarian Thrace). These regions are deeply involved in at least one of the conventional scenarios of the Bulgarian Neolithisation and could play an important role in rethinking the first and successive demic migrations of Neolithic newcomers from their Anatolian homeland and secondary residential colonies along their remarkable agro-pastoral journey.

From my reading of all the above, at least two concluding observations could be made: i) Bulgarian scholars are active, especially in regional events, and ii) unfortunately we (the same BG scholars and especially those from the leading institution – NAIM–BAS) are not sufficiently proactive to organise a conference with a prehistoric focus by ourselves and here, in Bulgaria: the last ones were held in the distant past in Peshtera 2006 – national, and in Yundola 2009 – international. In the meantime, the archaeological discourse on prehistoric issues has become much richer and multi-faceted, and a wealth of empirical material has been collected requiring deeper contextual and conceptual thinking, reflection and interpretation. I hope that this call will find a ‘fruitful’ reception and will result in a new challenging and eagerly awaited Prehistoric scientific forum in Bulgaria.



Fig. 4. The astonishing Karahantepe during site visit with the significant presence of the actual investigation Director Prof. Necmi Karul (1) and Prof. Mehmet Özdoğan (2) (photos M. Gurova)

Обр. 4. Импазонтното Карахан тепе в реално измерение и в присъствието на настоящия ръководител на проучванията – проф. Нечми Карул (1) и проф. Мехмет Йоздоган (2) (снимки М. Гюрова)



1



2



3

Fig. 5. Pre-pottery sites: 1. Çakmaktepe; 2. Göbeklitepe; 3. Çayönü (photos M. Gurova)
Обр. 5. Предкерамични селища: 1. Чакмак тепе; 2. Гьобекли тепе; 3. Чайоню (снимки М. Гюрова)

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Bulgarian contributors to the World Neolithic Congress program (11 papers presented in 5 sessions):

G24 – Treating dead bodies in the Neolithic: exploring the increasing social complexity (Session organisers: Y. Selim Erdal, F. Le Mort, S. Rottier)

- V. Nikolov, D. Takorova, K. Mcsweeney, N. Atanassova, T. Dyakov – “The lives of the dead: treating dead bodies during the Neolithic in the Central Balkans – a case study from the Sofia plain”;

- K. Bacvarov, N. Nikolova, G. Katsarov, A. Tsurev, K. Mcsweene – “Regional ideologies vs local expressions: the Early Neolithic burial evidence from Nova Nadezhda in Upper Thrace”.

R14 – Regional and inter-regional palimpsests of Neolithization processes: South-eastern Europe (Session organisers: M. Budja, D. Borić, Z. Hofmanová, M. Brami)

- P. Zidarov, Z. Dimitrov – “The Early Neolithic period at Sinagovtsi and its implications for the study of the contacts along the Middle and the Lower Danube”;

- M. Gurova, C. Bonsall – “Balkan Neolithization through the lens of flint supply and distribution”.

R15 – The Neolithic of the Aegean and beyond: supra-regional networks and local communities (Session organisers: A. Reingruber, Z. Derin, E. Özdoğan)

- J. Chapman, B. Gaydarska – “Exotics: kick-starting the earliest hunter-gatherer – farmer networks in Anatolia, the Aegean and the Balkans”;

- I. Gatsov, P. Nedelcheva – “Lithic technologies and the raw material supply as an adaptive strategy in the settlement patterns of Marmara Sea region during 7–6 mill. BC”;

- S. Tsaneva, V. Nikolov, G. Samichkova, V. Petrova – “Late Neolithic pit sanctuaries at Maritsa River bend in northern Thrace”.

R16 – Anatolia and the Balkans during the Neolithization process: connections, similarities and differences (Session organisers: B. Horejs, S. Stefanović, T. Dzhanfezova)

- N. Nikolova, A. Tsurev, K. Bacvarov – “The Early Neolithic of the Middle Maritsa Valley”;

- M. Grebska-Kulow – “The Early Neolithic in south-west Bulgaria; causes and consequences”;

- T. Dzhanfezova – “Flexible habits: the faces of Novelty in the Early Neolithic Eastern Balkan pottery uptake”;

R17 – Early monumentality and social differentiation: transformation in Europe (Session organisers: J. Müller, W. Kirleis, J. P. Brozio)

- N. Nikolova – “Opening the earth: monumentalizing ditch enclosures from the Early Neolithic in the Eastern Balkans”.