

**Assessment of the bachelor thesis**  
Institute of Classical Archaeology  
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**Thesis author:** Daniel Polívka

**Thesis title:** Kurgans and Burials of the Yamnaya Culture in South-Eastern Bulgaria

**Name of the reviewer:** Dr. Todor Valchev

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The Bachelor thesis of D. Polívka *Kurgans and Burials of the Yamnaya Culture in South-Eastern Bulgaria* has 120 pages: 70 pages of text, 38 illustrations, and 16 tables. It is separated into 13 chapters. The student used 46 publications.

The chapter 1 is an introduction. In chapter 2, the main terms used by the graduate are presented: Yamnaya culture, kurgan and ochre. They are very well explained. In chapter 3, the aim of the thesis is presented: to make an analysis of the graves from the excavated burial mounds in the area of the Middle and Lower courses of the Tundzha River and to try to separate the bringers of the Yamnaya culture from the local “Ezero culture”. The graduate correctly mentions that “the Ezero and Yamnaya burials are not that different from each other” (p. 5) and that he “will operate with a hypothesis, that the presence of ochre might indicate, that the deceased could be regarded as a bearer of the Yamnaya culture” (p. 5). He is right that “we will probably never be able to explain this with certainty, but the sociocultural differentiation is rather tempting” (p. 5). Chapter 4 is “An overview of the Bulgarian Early Bronze Age”. The development of prehistoric cultures in the Upper Thracian Plain is present. Keeping in mind that the graduate is not Bulgarian, I would like to mention a few mistakes:

- Used chronology of dr. Lolita Nicolova, which is almost 30 years old, does not present the current situation. Also, the term “Ezero culture” is old-fashioned and, at the moment, is used only for one of the phases of the Early Bronze Age.
- Some important studies connected with the study area and topic are missing: the book of Ivan Panayotov “Yamnata kultura v balgarskite zemi” (Yamnaya culture in Bulgarian lands), which is the only monographic research connected with this problematic; the volume “Gold and Bronze”, published in 2018; the article of Ilia Iliev “The Pit Grave culture in the lower Tundzha valley”; the articles of Assoc. Prof. Stefan Alexandrov: “Mogilni grobove ot rannata bronzova epoha v Trakia (55 godini po-kasno)” (Early Bronze Age Barrow Graves in Thrace (55 year later), “Bronze Age Barrow Graves in Upper Thrace – Old and New Questions” and “Early and Middle Bronze Age in Bulgaria”.
- The actual chronology of the Late Chalcolithic – Early Bronze Age in the Upper Thracian Plain is following:  
Late Chalcolithic – Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI culture (4500–4300 BC)  
Transition period (4300 – 3500 BC)  
Cernavoda III – Boleráz horizon (3500 – 3200/3100 BC)  
EBA I – phase Ezero A (3200/3100 – 2900 BC)  
EBA II – phase Michalich (2900 – 2500 BC)  
EBA III – phase Sv. Kirilovo (2500 – 2200/2100 BC)

Chapters 5 and 6 present the development of scientific issues related to the Yamnaya culture. In chapter 5, clearly and very correct, 100 years of archaeological researches are presented: starting with the first excavations of Prof. Vasily Gorodtsov in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. – “103 kurgans around the city of Kharkiv” (p. 8) and finishing with the theories of Prof. Marija Gimbutas for the “Kurgan people” and the migrations “which ultimately reshaped the

population, language and culture of the European continent” (p. 10). The graduate is familiar with the research of Prof. David Anthony, too. The chapter will be completed if it was prolonged with discussion of his book “The Horse, the Wheel, and Language”, published in 2007, and his opinion.

Chapter 6 discusses “the Yamnaya-type burial”. It’s mentioned that “ochre is the most significant feature of the Yamnaya burials, which is present either in the form of stain on the body, mainly on the limbs and the head, or as a small lumps found near the body, typically around the head” (p. 12). The graduate is supporting the idea of Prof. Volker Heyd that, as nomads, the bringers of the Yamnaya culture migrated from the Ural Mountain to the Great Hungarian Plain by the route “used by the Mongols, who entered Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 13). At the moment, the theoretical route is accepted by the scholars working with the problems of the Yamnaya culture.

Chapters 7 – 13 present the core of the Bachelor thesis. They are connected with the excavated burial mounds in the Middle and Lower streams of the Tundzha River. First geographic characteristic of the area is presented. I must mention that almost 1/3 of the discussed sites are in the Lower stream of the river. The border between the two areas is near Konevets village, but the geographic characteristics of the areas are the same, so I can accept that chapter 7 is correct and complete.

The chapters, connected with the examined sites, are well organized. They are presented from the North to the South. The graduate says that “this order obviously does not represent any hypothetical age and significance of the kurgans” (p. 16), but we can be sure that this is the real road used by the nomadic tribes. The Tundzha River’s Valley represented a peculiar passage that connects the North Aegean coast with the inner lands of the Balkan Peninsula and the Valley of the Danube River. It was a natural passage for cultural influences in all directions since Early Neolithic.

All burial mounds are well presented. Chapters start with the locations of the sites and continue with publications, dimensions, detailed descriptions of the graves, and the chronological interpretation of the mound. I would like to mark the most important omissions and mistakes:

- The burial mound near Popovo village, excavated in 2007 by Daniela Agre, is missing.
- In chapter 9.2.1, the graduate made the wrong translation of the Bulgarian texts and dates the Early Bronze Age necropolis near Bereketska mogila, Stara Zagora District, to the “Eneolithic” (pp. 21, 22). This leads to wrong conclusions. He is not native-speaking Bulgarian, so I will ignore this mistake.
- The supervisor of the excavated burial mounds near Straldzha town (chapter 11.1) and Zimnitsa village (chapter 11.2) is Assoc. Prof. Stefan Alexandrov not dr. Stefan Bakardzhiev. The references for both sites are wrong.
- In chapter 11.4.2.1, connected with the burial mound Mogila 1, the graduate wrongly dates the burials to “Yamnaya variant of Ezero A”. According to the excavator, Ilia Iliev, these are graves of the bringers of the Yamnaya culture, and the graves were made during the Early Bronze Age I – phase Ezero A, which is 3200/3100 – 2900 BC.
- In chapter 11.6.2, connected with the burial mound near Boyanovo village and marked as “Boyanovo 1”, for grave № 20, the graduate writes that “the suggested dating is a bit more problematic as she is hypothesized to be from the Late Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age and thus pre-Yamnaya” (p. 50). According to the excavator, Ilia Iliev, the grave is dated to the Early Bronze Age.
- In the chapter 11.6.2.2, Second construction phase of burial mound Boyanovo 1, the graduate mixed the graves. They are presented neither chronologically nor by the number of their excavations. I would recommend this chapter be separated into three

parts: 1<sup>st</sup> – Early Bronze Age graves dug in an already existing burial mound; 2<sup>nd</sup> – graves from the Middle/Late Bronze Age (lack of C14 dates cannot determine correctly their chronology); 3<sup>rd</sup> – grave № 3 from the Late Antiquity.

- The graduate dates the graves № 2 – 4 from the burial mound Boyanovo 3 generally to the Bronze Age (p. 54 and p. 56), while the excavators and C14 date them to the second phase of the Early Bronze Age (4212±24 BP or 2898 – 2697 BC)
- During presentation of the sites, the graduate is mixing the names of the burial mounds, the names of the localities, and the names of the villages. I would recommend using only the names of the villages and, after that, the names of the site (if it exists). This is also recommended for Fig. 11.
- On 22 paragraphs (pp. 18, 21, 24, 25, 33, 34, 36, 44, 45, 50, 52, 53, 55, 58, and 64) the references are missing.
- In the entire text, the graduate used “AC” instead of “BC” for the dates.

In chapter 13, the graduate presents his conclusion about the Early Bronze Age burial mounds in the Middle and Lower streams of the Tundzha River. He correctly mentions “that most of them were located on elevated hills” (p. 66), “in a close vicinity to the river banks” (p. 66), and “have been continuously used throughout the rest of the Bronze Age” (p. 66), and even later.

The graduate supports the idea that erecting burial mounds is custom, accepted by the local population in the Upper Thracian Plain after their contacts with the bringers of the Yamnaya culture. I would like to mention that in the region are excavated: flat extramural burials with inhumation; intramural burials with inhumations and cremations in urns; burial mounds with inhumations, cremations, and bi-ritual burials. All of them are dated to the Early Bronze Age. The burial rites are one of the most conservative elements of material culture, and even at the moment, they show lots of archaisms. Also, erecting a burial mound is a privilege reserved for a certain group of the population.

The graduate accepts that “there is one aspect, which seems to differentiate the burials in all the kurgans – ochre” (p. 68) and that “the ochre is the only plausible way to determining a Yamnaya grave” (p. 68) from the other “local” Early Bronze Age grave. This can be accepted as a good marker for separating burial rites, but it raises following questions: are the bringers of the Yamnaya culture a compact group or like later nomadic tribes (Huns, Avars, Mongols, etc.), is this a group of relatively close tribes but with some differences (rites and rituals) between them? If the grandfather migrated and settled in the Tundzha River Valley, is the grandson already “local”?

The typical burial mounds of the Yamnaya culture were erected in Bulgaria for at least 500 years (started in the last centuries of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC and continued during the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC). It seems that the characteristic features of these burials did not change during this time span, which indicates that not just one single migration was involved.

In a conclusion, I would like to say that the bachelor thesis is well structured and that it is connected with one of the actual archaeological topics: the transformation of Europe in the beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. Unfortunately, it was fast written, with many omissions and mistakes and even a few contradictions. Also, it raises more questions than answers.

At the end, I would like to congratulate Daniel Polívka for having the courage to work with this complicated international problem and to write in English, knowing that he can have a referee who is familiar with the topic in the area. Taking into consideration all written, I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest its evaluation as good (3).



Dr. Todor Valchev

In Yambol, 03/06/2024