



Drama – Merdzhumekia: the German archaeological field-school in Bulgaria

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Abstract

The prehistoric settlement mound of Merdzhumekia was situated near the village of Drama in the Tundzha Municipality, Yambol District, Bulgaria. It has been completely excavated in the course of a Bulgarian-German project that ran from 1983 to 2005, undertaken by Sofia University 'Sv. Kliment Ohridski' in Bulgaria and Saarland University in Germany and directed by Professors Jan Lichardus, Lyudmil Getov, Alexandar Fol and the archaeologist Iliya Iliev. The aim of this report is to present the system used by the German scholars, which permitted students to participate in all aspects of the project: the archaeological excavations, graphic documentation and processing of ceramic materials and finds. During this international project, more than 150 students, PhD candidates and University assistants from Bulgaria, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Luxembourg participated in research. One of them was the star of the present jubilee, Professor Volker Heyd.

Keywords: Drama, excavations, field school, Volker Heyd

25.1 Drama archaeological project

From 1983 to 2005, a Bulgarian-German team conducted archaeological excavations in the area around the village of Drama at Yambol Municipality, Bulgaria. The aim of the international project was the comprehensive investigation of one settlement mound, or the full reconstruction of the settlement and the connection of its inhabitants with other contemporary settlements in the Upper Thracian Valley and the Balkan Peninsula. The project was jointly hosted by Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' from Bulgaria and Saarland University from Germany, and directed by Professors Jan Lichardus, Lyudmil Getov, Alexandar Fol, Fransoa Bertemes, and the archaeologist Iliya Iliev.

The expedition undertook a comprehensive investigation of the prehistoric settlement mound called Merdzhumekya near the village of Drama. The site had impressive dimensions, having a diameter of 160 × 120 m at the base of the mound, and a height of six meters. The mound was inhabited during the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (5200–4350 BC), and a total number of 90 dwellings dating to both periods was investigated. During the last phase of the Early Bronze Age (2500–2200/2100 BC), a ritual ditch was dug on top of the mound (Lichardus et al. 2000: 13, 17–96).



Figure 1. Professor Jan Lichardus discussed prehistoric pottery with future professors Volker Heyd and Peter Biehl as students. Photo Regional Historical Museum, Yambol.

In addition to the settlement mound, the international team also explored the open-air settlement in Gerena and determined that it was settled during the Late Neolithic (5500–4900 BC). At the site of Kajryaka, the team excavated a flat Roman necropolis with inhumations and cremations (1st–3rd centuries AD), pits from the Late Bronze Age to the Late Iron Age (16th–1st centuries BC), and a Thra-

cian sanctuary (6th century BC–1st century AD). Systematic field surveys complemented the excavations at Merdzhumekya, Gerena and Kajryaka, and helped to complete the archaeological map of the Yambol region and the Drama micro-region (Lichardus et al. 2000: 97–166).

25.2 Drama field school

From its beginning the project had been planned as a field school. Students had been assigned to three groups. The first one worked on-site, examining the settlement mound, necropolis or the open-air settlement, as well as sometimes participating in field surveys. While working at these sites, students learnt how to supervise groups of workers to excavate one area (10 × 10 m) correctly. At the same time, they documented their findings every day. Students learnt how to write a field diary as well as how to draw and photograph different situations on the site. The archaeological sites in Drama enabled students to learn how to excavate and document correctly a variety of site types, including houses, pits and graves. Every participating student worked on the

archaeological site for a duration of two or three weeks (Lichardus et al. 2000: 203–208).

The second group of students worked with pottery, which was the main chronological and cultural indicator in our research project. An essential part of the education was processing the ceramics from houses and pits. Students searched for matching fragments and restored vessels, studied the forms and decora-



Figure 2. Professor Volker Heyd processing the ceramics in Drama. Photo Regional Historical Museum, Yambol.



Figure 3. Archaeological excavations are not only fieldwork. Professor Volker Heyd enjoying the nightlife in Bulgaria. Photo Regional Historical Museum, Yambol.

tions of ceramic vessels from the Prehistoric and Roman periods, and also learnt how to systematise and make the quantitative analyses of the ceramic material. All students worked with pottery for about a week (Lichardus et al. 2000: 210–215).

The third group of students documented the archaeological artefacts, or how to describe, draw and photograph different tools and objects. One of the most important phases of education in this group was learning how to draw pottery vessels and single fragments. Students became familiar with the basic techniques for drawing different parts of each vessel and different kinds of decorations. Every student stayed in this group for two weeks (Lichardus et al. 2000: 205–206).

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The field school thus ran for six weeks every year. During this period, students acquired all the basic skills and knowledge required to lead archaeological excavations. They learnt how to excavate settlement mounds, open-air sites and necropolises, and also how to lead field surveys. All participants learnt how to document effectively using field diaries as well as drawings and photographs of different situations on the site, how to describe and record different artefacts and ceramics. From 1983 to 2005 more than 150 students, PhD candidates and university assistants from Bulgaria, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Luxemburg participated in the field school at the village of Drama. Some of these students are now leading archaeologists in Bulgaria, Germany and Finland.