



## Book Reviews

### **THE TUNDZHA REGIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT: SURFACE SURVEY, PALAEOECOLOGY, AND ASSOCIATED STUDIES IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHEAST BULGARIA, 2009–2015 FINAL REPORT BY SHAWN A. ROSS, ADELA SOBOTKOVA, JULIA TZVETKOVA, GEORGI NEKHRIZOV AND SIMON CONNOR**

*Oxbow Books. 2018. 261pp, 80 B&W figs, 13 colour figs, 39 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-78925-054-1, £60.00*

If reviews had to be completed in a single line, like a PhD in mathematics, the line for the present volume would be 'This has never been done before in Bulgaria'. To appreciate the real significance of this investigation, the reader should be aware of the state of archaeological research in Bulgaria, currently dominated by developer-led projects, with research projects overwhelmingly preoccupied with limited single-site excavations. In contrast, the Tundza River Archaeological Project (henceforth 'TRAP') is a multi-scale interdisciplinary high-tech field survey covering over 100 km<sup>2</sup>. Hidden in the acknowledgements, but still the second sentence of the book, is the main obstacle for anyone tempted to do field survey in Bulgaria: '.... to convince colleagues about the benefits of survey....' (p.xv). One should not be deceived by the current increasing diversification of archaeological practice in Bulgaria when, back in 2009, the initiation of such a project would have been a high-risk enterprise. It is very revealing that the main Bulgarian partners, who are the editors and authors of this volume, are well-known for their long-term interest in the surveying and mapping of archaeological sites. The latter also explains the choice of the two study areas which is more an artefact of the open mind of the people involved rather than a carefully planned sampling strategy. This is a compliment, not a criticism, for the selected study areas are interesting and rewarding in themselves.

The 21-chapter volume can best be described as a mixture of reports and analyses. It contains examples of archaeological science, landscape archaeology, discussions of taphonomy and palaeo-ecology, which, although mainstream approaches, were a novelty in Bulgarian archaeology at that time and are just starting to gather pace. Of course, there were previous palaeo-environmental studies, interdisciplinary investigations and field surveys in Bulgaria, but they were never integrated in a similar manner on such a scale. This is a milestone in Bulgarian field survey that hopefully will inspire many future applications.

The book is divided into four parts. The first four chapters act as an introduction – providing project autobiography; presenting objectives, methods, challenges and successes; giving a potted history of the (un)popularity of these approaches alongside a broader account of local survey practices; detailing the nuts and bolts of the fieldwork; and finishing with an archaeological science ‘manual’ of sorts. Parts two and three are the surveys proper in the two study areas – the Kazanlak valley in the upper Tundza basin (Chapters 5 to 10) and the Yambol study areas in the middle Tundza basin (Chapters 11 to 16). They have a mirror structure of introducing the environment and the archaeology of the area, followed by a palaeo-environmental chapter (soil survey in Kazanluk, pollen investigations in Yambol) and finishing off with three chapters presenting the core results of the fieldwork and their discussion. The last part consists of five spin-offs of the main TRAP project that are a disparate set but nonetheless interesting and important studies, some helping to build a baseline and/or reference collection (eg, the palaeo-dietary analysis of Bronze Age human remains in Chapter 17), others presenting excavation reports (eg, the exemplary investigations of a multi-functional upland site in Chapter 19). We are also informed that there are further stand-alone articles devoted to hypothesis-testing, while it is crucial to note the constant references to an online digital archive. Since the authors put a huge emphasis on the availability of raw data for facilitating various engagements with the dataset, it is regrettable that, by the time this review was submitted, the archive was still *forthcoming*.

The authors are very well aware of the advantages and shortcomings of surface surveys, from practical flexibilities in the field to alternating or combining qualitative and quantitative criteria to interpretative challenges of representativity. They also have an excellent command of different statistical methods and techniques, such as Ripley’s K analysis, Nearest Neighbour analysis and Dewar modelling, to mention just a few. All formal modelling and results are graphically illustrated and explained, although at times the text could be very dense and perhaps a bit challenging for non-specialists or non-native speakers. The environmental chapters are heavily front-loaded with techniques, method and jargon, with little archaeological implications to follow. However, the patient reader will be rewarded with appropriate integration of palaeo-environmental data in the discussions of site dynamics. There is a slight repetition and an overlap between chapters to reiterate some points – perhaps because the authors were targeting stand-alone chapters. The lack of a concluding chapter is puzzling, perhaps partially justified by the various ‘wrap-ups’ spread among the chapters.

Depending where one sits in the lengthy, on-going debate about what surface surveys can and cannot do, you will either fully embrace the outcomes of this research, or like me will fully appreciate the enormity and importance of the fieldwork but remain sceptical on certain methodological and interpretive aspects. For example, while I was impressed with the take on

contemporaneity through the application of Dewar's model (Chapters 9 and 15), I remained unconvinced that treating sites as points (dots on maps) (Chapters 10 and 16) will put people in the picture. That is why there is a lot of talk about palaeo-environment but not of antecedent landscapes. Furthermore, decreasing number of sites and shrinking aggregated area are interpreted as 'indicating population decline' (p.168)! Here it is worth reminding the reader that the evidence for such a claim is what are colloquially called 'dirty sherds'. What decreases is the number and size of **sherd scatters**, NOT the number of people!!! To be fair to TRAP authors, such a criticism is valid for all surveys and I remain unconvinced overall that the number and area of sherd scatters are reliable proxies for the number of people. They are, in my view, proxies for human activity and patterns for site nucleation and dispersion.

There are also some minor and major inconsistencies that, given the scrutiny this volume will undergo, had best been avoided. One minor inconsistency concerns the otherwise excellent discussion of burial mounds that are refreshingly not viewed in terms of wealth and architecture but distribution density, size variation, land-use location, etc. Although the authors themselves point out that 'The temporal aspect is moot' (p.67) and later brilliantly demonstrate this finding with the excavation of three mounds in the Yambol area (Chapter 17), they uncritically revert to the much preferred terminology in Bulgarian archaeology by referring to Gorno Sahrane cluster in the Kazanluk area containing approximately 400 mounds as a 'necropolis'. More often than not, necropolises are perceived as chronologically consistent and single-phased (eg, prehistoric, Roman, etc.) and it would have been helpful to disentangle possible spatial continuity from possible temporal proximity.

A major inconsistency arises from the research questions asked and the explanatory framework chosen to address them. The carefully worded research aims were for the most part achieved by the project. There is, however, a tension between some of the objectives eg, aim 4: 'to assess.... interactions between complex societies' and aim 5: 'to evaluate and explain....' and statements spread across the volume such as on p.95. '....I characterize, rather than explain, spatial patterns in Kazanluk'. Such tensions stem from the authors' own admission of taking a processualist approach, strongly 'method-oriented, rather than problem-oriented' (p.8), and the practical impossibility of separating data from interpretation. That may explain the tacking between cautionary tales (eg, on p.107 'evidence from other sources is essential to link site-size territory firmly to social and political hierarchy') and over-interpretation (eg, on p.106 'the relationship between parent and daughter communities grow more tenuous, leading each community to develop its own identity and political independence'). The unfortunate outcome of the preferred explanatory mode is that people are still conspicuously missing.

There is no doubt that, with over 100 km<sup>2</sup> covered, over 100 surface concentrations and over 800 burial mounds registered, analysed and digitally recorded, TRAP has done a huge job and most of it well. It combines the best local tradition of regional studies with multi-aspect, modern technology-based discussion of archaeological patterns in relation to natural processes that will have a huge impact on future archaeological studies as well as cultural resource management. It also convincingly demonstrates that the limiting factor of 'only 1% diagnostic sherds', should not dishearten but encourage multifaceted, multi-scalar and open-minded attempts to glimpse the past.

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Review submitted: January 2019

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