

# *The Problem of the Discontinuity in Classical and Hellenistic Eastern Macedonia*

---

Marjan JOVANOVIĆ

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy  
Skopje, Macedonia

The century-long Macedonian archaeological and historical research denote the eastern part of the territory of modern-day Macedonia as Paeonian territory as far as the Classical and Hellenistic periods. The current international discourse holds the same opinion.<sup>1</sup>

All research on this topic is based mainly on Classical, written sources, while not much attention is paid to the factual archaeological situation and the material remnants that appear from this territory. If we take into consideration the contemporary written accounts and the plethora of archaeological settlement locations and burial grounds found along the riverbeds of the Vardar and the Bregalnica, then we can certainly argue that the Eastern part of modern-day Macedonia was Paeonian. Yet, the archaeological image of the Classical and Hellenistic periods is quite different.

The river valley of the Bregalnica, as well as the highlands of Eastern Macedonia, which was densely populated during the Iron Age, contains an almost complete discontinuity of material evidence from the period of the Early Antiquity (i.e., the pre-Roman period.) This fact leads to a more cautious determination of this territory as Paeonian in the period between the V century BC and the Roman conquest. The lack of archaeological material is noticeable even during the period of the Roman Republic, so this discontinuity is extended chronologically for two additional centuries, to the I century AD. Then, after a break of seven centuries, many archaeological remnants dating from the Roman Imperial period appear on this territory.

---

<sup>1</sup> KACAROV G., 1921; MITREVSKI D., 1997; PETROVA E., 1999.

One must question the reasons that triggered this lack of archaeological material for such a long period of time.

One possible answer is the insufficient archaeological research carried out in this area. Although we cannot state that the area was researched archaeologically on a more profound level, several landscape archaeology surveys were carried out, as well as some full-scale, systematic excavations along the valley of the Bregalnica. It is quite remarkable that none of these surveys and excavations yielded any significant archaeological remnants dating to the Early Antiquity.

The very valley of the Bregalnica, which was densely populated during the whole period of the Iron Age, as confirmed by the numerous Iron Age necropolises, offers only several hoards and fortuitous discoveries of coins that circulated during the Early Antiquity.<sup>2</sup> This leads to the logical conclusion that the valley of the Bregalnica was used as a natural communication route during this same period. Nonetheless, this only emphasizes the absence of settlements and necropolises from the V century BC to the I century AD.<sup>3</sup>

The only significant archaeological site from this period is the fortified settlement on the site of Gradište, in the vicinity of the village of Knežje, identified as the Classical Bylazora, the most northern Paeonian city.<sup>4</sup> Yet, by no means can Bylazora be the missing link. Due to its location, this city most probably had greater communication with the region of modern-day Skopje, where many material remnants dating to the period of the Early Antiquity were discovered.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason for the absence of archaeological material belonging to the Early Antiquity in modern-day Eastern Macedonia can be pinpointed to the current events of the time (e.g., a military campaign), which led to the whole region being deserted by its population.

We can look in the accounts corresponding to this period so as to find this particular event. The campaign of the Thracian chieftain Sitalces, who crossed the uninhabited Mt. Kerkinos in the V century BC, is mentio-

---

<sup>2</sup> MITREVSKI D., 1990: 59-77; SANEV V., 1978; MIKULCIC I., 1961:47-64.

<sup>3</sup> MIKULCIC I., 1963:197-203.

<sup>4</sup> MIKULCIC I., 1976: 149-164.

<sup>5</sup> MIKULCIC I. & SOKOLOVSKA V., 1990: 79-92; SOKOLOVSKA V., 1975: 231-243.

ned in the contemporary accounts;<sup>6</sup> however, this can hardly be connected with the valley of the Bregalnica or possibly with its upper stream, or its springhead in the mountains of Maleševski Planini. Another well-recorded event is the campaign of the Celts in 279 BC.<sup>7</sup> Yet, this event occurred far too late to be considered the reason for the depopulation of Eastern Macedonia in the V and IV century BC. Was there another event of a military nature that the contemporary authors were not aware of, or was it simply not considered to be important enough to be mentioned in their accounts? This is a question that may never be answered.

One plausible reason for the depopulation during the Classical and Hellenistic periods is the migration of the people who populated the Iron Age settlements. However, where can a population migrate to from the already impoverished regions, the overexploited ore resources, the lack of constant communication with the main routes, as well as a society with obsolete social relations, living in kinship and tribal communities? By all means, that would be the new fortified city centres along the valley of the Axios: Stenae,<sup>8</sup> Idomene, Doberos,<sup>9</sup> Gortynia,<sup>10</sup> Atalanta, and then Bylazora, a city in the vicinity of the modern-day village of Brazda.<sup>11</sup> All these cities had accumulated various economic resources and offered the people the opportunity to make a living, as well as better protection, due to their strong fortifications.

These cities existed during the Classical and the Hellenistic periods. Their existence came to an end in the I century AD, with the Roman conquest. The question that arises at this moment is what happened with the population of these cities? It most certainly did not completely perish at the hands of the Romans.

This native population (both Paeonian and Macedonian) fled from the Roman invasion, or better put, the cities were depopulated and lost their significance. From the numerous cities, only Stobi would have been prosperous during the Roman Imperial period.

---

<sup>6</sup> PETROVA E., 1999: 10.

<sup>7</sup> PETROVA E., 1999: 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> VUČKOVIĆ-TODOROVIĆ D., 1961: 229-269.

<sup>9</sup> SOKOLOVSKA V., 1986.

<sup>10</sup> MITREVSKI D., 2001.

<sup>11</sup> MIKULCIC I., 1999.

Yet, the mountain slopes offered a natural defence and resources, and as such they were chosen in the formation of smaller settlements. This might be the reason for the numerous settlements and necropolises found on Mt. Ogražden, at the height varying from 1200 to 1400 m, as well as in the highlands of Mt. Plačkovica and in the region of Pijanec.<sup>12</sup>

Personally, I am of the opinion that these people, who lived and were buried in the highlands of Eastern Macedonia, are the descendants of the old, native population. Their migration in the V and IV century BC was triggered by economic reasons. Now, they returned to their old homes or they moved on to even more isolated regions, all due to their need to find a safer place to live.

So, one may say that a discontinuity did not occur in the real sense. Instead, there was migration from one geographical region to another, followed by the return of the same population several centuries later, caused by drastic changes in society.

Where should we look, and where can we find material evidence so as to confirm such an opinion? This material evidence should be sought for in the Classical necropolises, in the grave forms and the burial rites, as well as the material culture with older elements. In the necropolises of Ogražden, Plačkovica and the region of Pijanec,<sup>13</sup> we can see burials in graves in the shape of a circle, which differ greatly in their dimensions and shape from the older, Iron Age forms used by the Paeonians – burials under tumuli.<sup>14</sup> The usage of tumuli is very characteristic for this region. There is another crucial difference – the change of the burial ritual itself. Cremation becomes preferred to over burial. What might have been the cause of such a change?

The answer may be the practicing of bi-ritual burials that occurred in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. I hold the opinion that these bi-ritual burials were not the result of ethnic change, but the very result of the migrations themselves. The autochthonous, urban population, which was in the cultural sense Hellenised and accepted the material culture of the South, accepted the ritual of cremation from the V century AD onward. This chan-

---

<sup>12</sup> JOVANOVIĆ M. & SEKULOVIĆ V., 2007: 121-140; JOVANOVIĆ M., SEKULOVIĆ V. & NACEV T., 2007: 49-59.

<sup>13</sup> JOVANOVIĆ M. & SEKULOVIĆ V., 2007: 135-140.

<sup>14</sup> MITREVIĆ D., 1997: 102-109.

ge of burial rituals was first accepted by the people coming from the highest social circles. The best examples of this are the chamber-tomb near Kōrešnica and the several graves from the site of Gorno Pole, in the vicinity of Mt. Karaorman.<sup>15</sup>

The newly arrived settlers adopt the material culture in a swift manner, but changes in the burial rites occur in a more gradual fashion. At least one generation of newcomers uses the old burial rites, using burial under kin-rendered tumuli. This is abandoned due to the influence of living in an urban environment. Several generations later, cremation is adopted as a burial ritual. This supports that the burial rites are always the most conservative part of a given culture and take the most time to change or be replaced by a new rite.

Thus, the result of this inter-ritual phase is that the necropolises dating from the Classical and Hellenistic periods are bi-ritual.

Another indication that clearly attests the migration from the rural to the urban settlements and vice-versa is the renewed usage of the old, Iron Age settlements and necropolises in the Roman Period. Such is the case of the tumulus near Orizari, the tumulus of Kula (Konjuh), the tumulus of Sreden Rid – Bigla,<sup>16</sup> near an Iron Age settlement, the three Iron Age tumuli near the necropolis of the modern-day archaeological site Čiflik (Dra-mče), the Iron Age discoveries from the area of Crveno Pole, the Roman tumuli near Radanje, in the vicinity of the Iron Age necropolis of Krivi Dol.<sup>17</sup> Near the site of Orlovi Čuki, several graves dating to the Roman Period have been found, on the location of modern-day Star Karaorman, near Štip.

Although there is a time span of 7-8 centuries between these archaeological discoveries, the homes and the graves of the ancestors were engraved in the collective memory. In the need of a safer place to live and better living conditions, these ancient dwellings are the reason for the return of the descendants of the people who once left them for the very same reasons. The old hearths were re-kindled, the old loci sancti again honoured, as well as the graves of the forefathers.

---

<sup>15</sup> MIKULČIĆ I., 1963: 47-64.

<sup>16</sup> JOVANOVIĆ M., 2006: 129-137.

<sup>17</sup> GARAŠANIN M. & D., 1959: 9-60.

## Bibliography:

- GARAŠANIN M. & D. (1959): "Arheološka iskopavanja u selu Radanje na lokalitetu Krivi Dol", *Zbornik na Štipskiot Narodен Музеј* I, 9-60.
- JOVANOVIĆ M. (2005): "The End of Settlement Life at Vardarski Rid", *Vardarski Rid* I, 315-321, Skopje.
- JOVANOVIĆ M. (2006): "Burials under tumuli during the Roman period in the Valley of river Bregalnica", *Spartakus* II, 129-137, Veliko Trnovo.
- JOVANOVIĆ M. & NACEV T. (1996): „Локалитет Орлова Чука – Тумул III”, *Macedoniae acta archaeologica* 14, 45-55, Skopje.
- JOVANOVIĆ M., SEKULOV V. & NACEV T. (2007): "Crveno Pole, A settlement and necropolis from I–III century AD", *Collection of Works in memory of Jovan Ananiev*, 49-59, Strumica.
- JOVANOVIĆ M. & SEKULOV V. (2007): "Graves with round stone wreaths from the Roman Imperial period in Eastern Macedonia", *Acta Terrae Septemcastrensis* VI.1, 121-140, Sibiu.
- KACAROV G. (1921): *Пеония, принос към старата етнография и история на Македония*, София.
- MIKULČIĆ I. (1961): "Могиле од Орлова Чука кај село Стар Караорман", *Зборник на Штипскиот Народен Музеј* 2, Штип.
- MIKULČIĆ I. (1963): "Pliro-arhajski grobovi iz okoline Štipa", *Starinar* XIII/XIV, 197-209, Beograd.
- MIKULČIĆ I. (1976): "Убикација на Билазора", *Годишен зборник на Филозофски факултет* 2, 149-164, Скопје.
- MIKULČIĆ I. (1999): *Antički gradovi vo Makedonija*, Skopje.
- MIKULČIĆ I. & SOKOLOVSKA V. (1990), "Grobnicata vo Brazda kaj Skopje", *Macedoniae acta archaeologica* 11, 79-92, Skopje.
- MITREVSKI D. (1990): "Куново Чуки кај Оризари – Могила II", *Macedoniae acta archaeologicae* 11, 59-77, Скопје.
- MITREVSKI D. (1997): *Proto-Historical Communities in Macedonia*, Skopje.
- MITREVSKI D. (2001): *The Ancient Macedonian town at Vardarski Rid*, Skopje.
- PETROVA E. (1999): *Paenonia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BC*, Skopje.
- SANEV V. (1978): "Могилите од Куново Чуки кај село Оризари, Кочанско", *Зборник на археолошки музеј* IX, Скопје.
- SOKOLOVSKA V. (1975): "Eden grob od Ždanec", *Zbornik na Arheološki музеј* 6-7, 231-243, Skopje.
- SOKOLOVSKA V. (1986): *Исар–Марвинци и повардарјето во античко време*, Скопје.
- VUČKOVIĆ-TODOROVIĆ D. (1961): "Antička Demir Kapija", *Starinar* XII, 229-269, Beograd.