BULGARO-RUSSIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
IN THE BALKANS

N.YA. MERPERT

A joint archaeological program involving Bulgarian and Russian researchers in the Upper Thrace Valley (Southern Bulgaria) began in 1961. The main objects of survey work and excavations carried out by an expedition organized by the Academies of Sciences of the two countries were prehistoric tells containing successively Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze Age and, in some cases, Early Iron Age strata. These should be ranked among the most important archaeological monuments of not just the Balkan peninsula but of the whole continent, as they provide a model for reconstructing the relative chronology of the most ancient period of European history and assist us in understanding the principal outlines of its cultural and ethnic development.

The first stage of the expedition's work ran from 1961 to 1975. During these years several survey programs were completed which involved the exploration of dozens of ancient settlements between Burgas and Staraya Zagora. Their main attention, however, was given to regular excavations of a multi-strata tell by the village of Ezero near the town of Nova Zagora. The excavations were directed by Professors K. Mikov and G. Georgiev, representing the Bulgarian side, and by the author of this article. In 1970 a special team directed by E.N. Chernykh was created within the framework of the expedition, with the aim of studying metallurgy and mining in ancient Bulgaria.

All the materials recovered by the expedition have been published, so that it will be enough to present here a very brief summary of the main results of its work.

We should note first of all that the principal aim in investigating the tells was to uncover Early Bronze Age strata connected with a very significant cultural transformation which spread all over South-Eastern Europe in the second half of the 4th-beginning of the 3rd mill. B.C. These strata had earlier been studied with less thoroughness than those of the Neolithic or Chalcolithic periods, while the materials recovered from them were less numerous and informative and certainly less well documented. Consequently, there was no internal chronology for the Early Bronze Age in Thrace nor any classification of the principal groups of the material from this period, not to mention a historical interpretation.

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That was one of the reasons why the tell by the village of Ezero was chosen to be the main subject of the excavations of the joint expedition: earlier investigations carried out by Bulgarian archaeologists had recorded here significant Bronze Age strata overlying earlier ones.

Ezero belongs to a group of medium-sized tells: its foundation is about 200 m. in diameter, the thickness of its cultural layers 10 m., the first four meters dating to the Bronze Age period. The two main tasks of the investigations were: 1) To uncover the Bronze Age stratum over the widest possible area, to identify the main building periods corresponding to the active periods of habitation of several successive settlements, and to distinguish the characteristic features of each of these periods. 2) To produce a general stratification both of the site’s cultural layers, while identifying every stratum, and of the boundaries of each context forming the site, and so to help reveal the principal turning points in its history.

To accomplish these tasks three trenches were initiated in the central, south-western and north-eastern parts of the tell, a total excavated area of over 3300 sq.m. Special stratigraphic trenches revealed that certain settlements founded there not later than the Middle Neolithic period had been in existence for long enough time to occupy the entire area of the mound’s foundation. Their remains formed no less than seven horizons with buildings and objects characteristic of the Karanovo III culture overlying earlier Neolithic strata, which are now almost completely covered by underground water. The rise in the water level had considerably reduced the habitable area of the settlement by the end of the Neolithic period. The same limitations contained the successive Chalcolithic settlements represented by seven cultural strata belonging to cultures Karanovo V and Karanovo VI. This situation persisted till the very beginning of the Bronze Age. By that time, however, the climate had become dryer and this allowed a new expansion of the settlement’s area. It now reached the size of its Neolithic predecessors. This explains why on the slopes of the mound, which were not occupied during the Chalcolithic period, the Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age strata are separated only by a tiny amorphous layer, while in the central area we find a 3 m. thick Chalcolithic stratum between them.

Within the 4 m. thick stratum of the Early Bronze age thirteen building levels have been distinguished which documenting a prolonged period of uninterrupted development. These are all distinguished by their inner cultural continuity which makes them markedly different from the preceding Chalcolithic stratum.

From the very beginning the Bronze Age settlement was encircled by a wall with a stone foundation. At the time corresponding to horizons VI and V, i.e. after the settlement had expanded down towards the foot of the mound, a new outer ring of stone walls was constructed. Its gates were arranged at the car-