

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Petra Tušlová

Roman and Late Antique Pottery from Ancient Thrace, Selected Assemblages from the Yambol District

Submitted in 2020 at the Department of History, Classical Archaeology

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The dissertation presents three separate ceramic assemblages from three different archaeological sites located in the Yambol District in southeastern Bulgaria. The presentations consist of reviews of the archaeological and historical contexts, reviews of relevant bibliographies, and detailed discussion of the pottery assemblages. These are followed by summary conclusions related to the nature and character of the ceramic assemblages as representative of the ceramic ecology in the region during the Roman and Late Antique periods.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation attempts to “make available several pottery assemblages” (p. 20) from the Yambol District for the purpose of expanding “our knowledge about the different pottery classes, types and wares” (p. 20) found in the district, though to what extent and for what purpose remains a little unclear. While the illustrations of the material and the descriptions of the material do provide a vehicle for making the material known, the overall organization and presentation does not facilitate an improved understanding. The most significant obstacle is a lack of a rigorously defined methodology for the approach, the lack of which creates problems with communicating the analytical process. The second most significant obstacle, and one that must be addressed, is a lack of a consistent use of terminology applicable to the study of archaeological ceramics. The terms “pottery classes, types and wares” are not defined and are frequently used interchangeably in the dissertation. As a result, the ambition of presenting the ceramic assemblages as a means to improve our knowledge of the ceramic history of the Yambol District falls short. It remains unclear what the exact aims of the dissertation are. The declaration of the dissertation's goals (section 1.4) is limited to two paragraphs that offer vague, general ambitions, when specifics are needed.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

[Is the argumentation lucid throughout? Is it always clear what the author is attempting to express and why he/she is doing so at specific instances in the text? Is the dissertation clearly structured? Is the dissertation aimed at achieving a clearly set objective and is the author successful in following this objective?]

The general argumentation of the dissertation needs work. The argumentation would be greatly improved by expanding the discussion on overall methodology. The two pages in the introduction that outline a general approach (section 1.2. Pottery description and presentation methodology), provide

some explanation of how the pottery is illustrated and described in the dissertation, but that only deals with an aspect of the non-analytical approach. Likewise, the section on how the assemblage from Yurta-Stroyno was compiled is useful (section 2.1.3), but not a replacement for a detailed presentation of what the overall methodology for the dissertation.

A chapter on the larger methodological approach developed for the study would greatly improve the effectiveness of the presentation of the ceramic material and the meaningfulness of the interpretations and conclusions. Such a chapter would provide an opportunity to explain the intellectual context of the study by explaining what the current problems are in the field of Roman-Late Antique ceramic studies in Bulgaria (something the author articulates on several occasions, but in an unsystematic manner, which makes the observation lose some of its significance). This would allow the author to carefully articulate exactly what the dissertation is going to do in an effort to improve the intellectual landscape. The statement that “the main aim of this thesis is to process and make available several pottery assemblages” (section 1.4, p. 20) does not satisfy this need. By clearly stating what the dissertation intends to do, the chapter on methodology can then become an explanation of how this will happen in the course of the study. Because this is a study dependent on ceramic analysis, the methodology needs to include not only an explanation of the analytical process, but also clear discussions and working definitions of the field-specific terms used throughout. Within the current text, the terms “ware,” “fabric,” “type,” “shape,” and “form” are never defined (nor are, later on, the actual shapes, such as “dish,” “bowl,” or “plate”). From the reader’s perspective, it seems that often terms are used interchangeably. A chapter on the analytical methodology can solve this by have sections dedicated to explaining the meaning of each, how they are used in the dissertation, and the significance of each as an analytical tool. This is especially important if one of the aims of the dissertation is (as it appears to be?) to provide an improved framework for understanding and presenting Roman-Late Antique pottery assemblages in Bulgaria.

Other problems with argumentation can be solved quickly and efficiently by simply maintaining a consistent order or sub-sections and headings. For instance, there is a significant discrepancy between the organization of the two comparable sections on “Red-slipped table ware” (section 2.2) and “Gray ware” (section 2.3). (The discussion on “Red-slipped table ware” is a good example of the confusion cause by a need for consistent terminology, since the use of “ware” is problematically applied.) The clear structure of the “Gray ware” section is not found in the section on “Red-slipped ware”, which makes for difficult navigation. I suspect that part of the problem with the red-slipped section is that the category, as presented, ended up being too large and unwieldy, lacking a clear definition.

While the author correctly observes that the three different assemblages come from archaeologically distinct contexts that require different internal approaches, a more consistent method of presentation would help make them more easily comparable. Again, this is mostly a matter of structure, where each assemblage can follow a similar pattern of how the material is presented and how it is discussed. For instance, the differences between the terms used to present different shapes in the Yurta-Stroyno assemblage compared to the terms used to present different shapes in the Dodoparon assemblage. In both cases the material is organized by shapes (not types), and there is no reason why the names of shapes should be different since shape (dish, bowl, jug, cook pot, etc.) is not specific to time or place. This is another example where a chapter on methodology that includes definitions would be useful.

2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

[Is the author coherent in the use of abbreviations, syntax of bibliographical references, transcriptions of foreign terms, etc.? Are the footnotes formatted correctly? Is the language of the dissertation grammatically correct and free of linguistic infelicities? Is the dissertation visually well-presented, and graphically well-formatted?]

The formal aspects of the dissertation are generally good. Formatting appears consistent and communicable. Language, too, is satisfactory. While there are some grammatical issues, there is nothing egregious that interferes with communication.

At a glance, the dissertation is visually well-presented. The maps, figures, and plates are of good quality. However, reading the text and making use of the illustrations reveals some user-based problems. The tables were somewhat problematic in their organization, placement, and references in the text. It was not always immediately clear to which table the text was referring. A similar problem is found with the figures and plates. The sequencing of figures and plates was kept internal to each category of pottery (Red-slipped vs Gray ware) with the result that there are several Fig. 1 and Plate 1, distinguished by the prefix of TW, GW, CW, HM, Amphorae, etc. This makes jumping from text to illustrations less user-friendly whereas a sequential numbering that runs throughout the dissertation would provide an estimate of how far within the illustrations the reader needs to look for the exact item.

3. *Use of sources and/or material*

[Does the author work transparently with secondary sources? Are all relevant sources made use of? Are the primary sources used properly and reference made to their original language wherever appropriate? Are the sources employed in a methodologically correct manner? If the dissertation is based on data collection, is the methodology used for data collection and analysis coherent? Are all the individual steps in data analysis justified and well executed? Is the method of data collection and processing in line with the main research question or hypotheses tested? Does the interpretation of the results proposed by the author follow from the results of the empirical research or sources on which the work relies?]

The author's use of secondary sources is transparent. There is good use of the sources, both as references relevant to identifying parallels in the archaeological record, as well as for critiquing the current state of the field. In this regard, the secondary sources are used well within their specific employment in the dissertation, and though there may be some omissions that may have added to the larger contextual discussion of the ceramic material, the bibliography can easily be expanded when preparing the manuscript for publication.

As addressed above in section III.1, the absence of a dedicated discussion on methodology means there is no way to access the success of the dissertation's employment of standard methodology regarding data collection and analysis.

4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

[Is the dissertation merely a compilation of information, or does the author employ the primary and secondary sources to propose an original, organically formulated contribution to the field?]

The dissertation is not merely a compilation of information. Original contributions to the field are present in the dissertation, but their potential impact remains muted until a more forceful declaration of the study's goals is written. The conclusions (both internal to each assemblage and synthetically) do not provide as powerful interpretations of the analyses as could be presented. They remain, for the most part, summaries of the study results. Interpretive conclusions may become more obvious once the author establishes what the goals are at the beginning; a declaration of "what's at stake" and how the dissertation addresses it.

IV. Questions for the author

In section 2.1.4 (Notes on the following text) you identify the core of the problem with Roman-Late Antique pottery studies in Bulgaria, which is that every site produces its own ceramic typology. You then explain that because there are so many different typologies, you decide to present the Yurta-Stroyno pottery "based on the form similarities of individual vessels within each of the ware class, but no numbering / naming system was given." This makes referencing your work problematic for researching looking to find parallels and comparative assemblages. Would you ever consider developing a robust typology from the rich assemblage from Yurta-Stroyno that can serve a typology that is relevant for the larger region? I am thinking of Andrea Berlin's typology of the plain wares at Tel Anafa, which you cite on a couple of occasions. Berlin's typology, though working with the pottery from Tel Anafa, was constructed to be applicable to Hellenistic sites of all of northern Israel. Much of the work you've done, specifically in finding appropriate parallels for the pottery at Yurta-Stroyno, could be employed to create a typology that is not site-specific, in a similar manner as Berlin's work at Tel Anafa.

I would also recommend Berlin's Tel Anafa publication as a model for discussing methodology and establishing terminology. She is clear, concise, and bibliographically useful regarding theory.

V. Conclusion

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of PASS, with the provision that the author add key elements identified as problematic omission outlined in the report. Specifically, I would like to see a dedicated chapter (or at least a lengthy section in the introduction) that details the goals, methodology, and terminology employed in the dissertation. The addition of such a section/chapter will require revisiting the rest of the text to ensure the terms are used consistently according to their established definitions.

Submitted respectfully,

April 18, 2020

Nicholas Hudson