

Chapter XIV

Drama–Merdžumekja: A Southeast Bulgarian Monument of the European Culture Heritage and Its Publication

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20 YEARS OF EXCAVATION AT DRAMA-MERDŽUMEKJA: THE MAIN RESULTS

The archaeologists, when excavating, find themselves in a dilemma: they have to dig up from above, but should understand from below. They discover the life cycle of a site always “downside up,” first the latest, and in the end the first. But understanding history means to recognize in the first the origins of the latest, in other words, to comprehend the causal relationships in order to be able to explain the reason why the one arose from the other. Understanding the life cycle of a site means, first of all, to chronologically divide the finds and features as accurately as possible. It is only on the basis of a reliable chronological sequence, progressively from one period to the other, that the causal, coherent developments can be described or, in a case they are lacking, the gaps in the cultural sequence. Many years or even decades may pass from the first spade cut,

until the archaeologists find themselves in this position.

Let us take as an illustration of this the excavations at Tell Merdžumekja and its surroundings near Drama, southeast Bulgaria¹. Covering an area of less than 20,000 m², Drama-Merdžumekja is one of the smaller tells in southeast Europe, and its five occupation periods don’t demonstrate an especially long sequence². Nevertheless, it took 20 years to the German-Bulgarian excavation team directed by the late Jan Lichardus and the late Alexander Fol, to completely dig up the sites whose life cycles are still only outlined here.

Thanks to the enterprising perseverance of the German excavation director Jan Lichardus as well as to the participation of many archaeologists and more than 110 German and Bulgarian students, and to the diligence of the excavation labourers, we now know that, after a hesitant beginnings in the middle Neolithic, a densely built up permanent settlement was created in the late Neolithic, on a small natural hill on the outskirts of a river valley. This period is referred as Karanovo V in

Thrace and according to the 14C dates, belongs to the fifth millennium cal BC. Certain sporadic finds and features indicate that people had settled down for the first time on the hill in the Karanovo IV period. Pottery sherds of the Karanovo IVb period were recovered from a palisade ditch in the northwestern part of the tell as well as from a pit in its southwestern part, and were scattered in other areas. Pottery sherds of the following Karanovo IVc phase were rare as well. Remains of house structures from that time, however, have not been found at Merdžumekja.

The Middle Neolithic Settlement (Karanovo III-IV)

Before that, however, there existed a settlement barely 300 m south of Merdžumekja, in the Gerena locality (now a meadow), on the bank of the Kalnitsa River. Only a part of this site could be excavated, and only to the point where the water-table hindered excavation to greater depths³. We also know for sure that this flat site was occupied for a longer period of time and that it already existed in the Karanovo III period, but we cannot define exactly when it had been created. It is certain, indeed, that the lowest layer excavated is virgin soil. Several pits, however, had been dug up in the virgin sand by the first occupants of the site; these pits contained animal bones and pottery sherds from the classical Karanovo III period as well as several other pottery shapes representing an earlier stage of the Karanovo III or Karanovo II period. We refer to the earliest occupation evidence at this site as Gerena A. Just like the later settlements of Gerena B and Gerena C, Gerena A dates back to the 6th millennium BC.

The Gerena B phase consists of two construction layers. The lowest construction layer Gerena B1 yielded the remains of four houses built at the ground level. When these had already been ruined, three new houses were constructed; two of them were also built at the ground level whereas the third one had a sunken floor. Diagnostic pottery

vessels and sherds date both building layers to the Karanovo IIIb phase. After the end of the Gerena B2 construction level, the settlement was deserted and ca. 20 cm earth layer covered the collapsed wattle-and-daub walls of the houses.

Only after this layer had been formed, the site was resettled. The remains of two houses were excavated close to each other, also having sunken floors. Their walls had been burned and destroyed by fire, and they could thus be so easily distinguished from the surrounding deposit that it was possible to measure their height, which amounted to 2.40 m. The ceramic assemblages of both these Gerena C houses clearly differ in shapes and decoration from the ones of the Gerena B phase. They already belong to the Karanovo IV period and represent the Karanovo IVa phase.

After the end of Gerena C, these settlements were abandoned forever. We can only guess why people were forced to leave this area. It is possible that a climate change led to frequent inundations or to a rise of the water table. To answer this question, archaeologists cooperate with physical geographers who evaluate the evidence of climate history acquired from the analyses of soil samples, as well as with palaeozoologists who draw conclusions about the biotope and thus indirectly about the climate from the wild fauna.

The Late Neolithic Settlement (Karanovo V)

Between the end of Gerena site and the beginning of human activities at Merdžumekja, there must have passed a certain period of time, because, as stated above, the earliest finds at Merdžumekja only date back to the Karanovo IVb phase. However, a constant use of this area or even the creation of an organized settlement on the hill could be proven neither for this phase nor for the next Karanovo IVc phase. An organized, densely built-up village⁴ existed at Merdžumekja only in the Karanovo V period; a ring ditch separated it from the outside world (Figure 1).

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