

Questions of the Necropolis at the Village of Orsoya, near the Town of Lom

by Svetlina Ganeva

During the second half of the 2nd millenium BC directly along both banks of the Danube river within the area between the Tissa - Drava rivers (to the West) and Jiu - Ogosta - Iskar (to the East) develops a peculiar culture, featured by a specific decoration of various geometric ornaments, inlaid with white material on most objects (vessels, religious articles and idolatrous plastic art). Also the cremation ritual is well evidenced as in the necropoleis known to us until today.

The inlaid technique is widely represented on the objects from the settlements and necropoleis. Also the Inlaid Pottery Culture along the Lower Danube reflects precisely the characteristic features and the unity of the cultural-historical development of the tribes in this region. It is one of the most interesting cultures of the second half of the 2nd millenium BC known on the territory of Southeastern Europe. Its bearers had dwelled in a narrow strip along both banks of the Danube River. Evidently they had been related directly to this important waterway.

The most significant investigated settlements and necropoleis are from one to twelve kilometers away from the Danube River. In this respect the Inlaid Pottery Culture is a unique cultural-historical phenomenon in the development of the cultures during the Late Bronze Age in the Lower Danube area and in Southeastern Europe. If Crete and Ancient Greece were the first maritime civilizations, we can assume that there existed here "a fluvial civilization", in the opinion of Alexander Bonev (as he notes in his studies on the subject). Also he makes analogy with the Egyptian culture developed along the Nile River¹. But in this case

the Inlaid Pottery Culture has its strategically meaning. It promotes the Mycenaean influence and forms the link between Southeastern Europe on the one hand and on the other Central and Western Europe.

These processes play considerable role in forming the Thracian culture at the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st millenium BC.

As a territory this culture includes the following settlements known to us at Grad area (v. Usia), at Livade area (v. Mala Vrbica), at Obala area and necropoleis at Jhuto Brdo (v. Golubac), at Dubovac, at villages Belegish, Ritopek, Pesak, Klichevac, Dupljaja - on Serbian territory.

In Romania – settlement near Ostrovul Corbului and necropoleis near Cârna, Ostrovul Mare, Gârla Mare and Balta Verde are discovered. In Bulgarian lands besides the necropolis at Orsoya there are necropoleis discovered at the v. Ostrov (Vratsa district) where the shapes of the urns are the same but without ornaments². Also there are necropoleis at Archar, Novo Selo, Koutevo, Vruh, Makresh and settlement at Baley (Vidin district). Concerning the necropolis at v. Dolno Linevo (Montana district) the sondage excavations made by Al. Bonev in 1979 did not locate the archaeological site³.

¹ Bonev 1996, 193; Bonev 1999b, 19.

² That is why I doubt whether it might belong to the Inlaid Pottery Culture.

³ V. Mikov has mentioned it in his studies (Mikov 1970, 52) but nor the sounding excavations made by Al. Bonev in 1979, neither the terrain study made by G. Alexandrov and Al. Bonev in 1989 prove the existence of the necropolis. For this information I am very thankful to my academic tutor Dr. Al. Bonev.

The chronological position of the Inlaid Pottery Culture is precisely investigated by Vl. Dumitrescu in his studies on Cârna necropolis. He dates Cârna in B - C period by Reineke or in 1600 - 1100 BC⁴. Later on Al. Bonev proves that Cârna and Orsoya, as being among the richest finds of ceramics of this type, are synchronous because of the types of vessels and ornamental motives which constitute a single entity and dates Orsoya necropolis a little bit later – at the end of 15th century BC - 1100 BC⁵. I still support entirely the opinion of Al. Bonev having in mind his systematic and comprehensive research on the problem.

This culture came to light in 1890 when the Serbian archaeologist M. Valtrovič publishes the announcement for an accidentally discovered clay vessel-kantharos – its sides inlaid with spirals of white material⁶. Afterwards “gradually” on the territory of Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria discoveries of necropoleis and settlements were made and various materials published⁷.

Bulgarian scientist V. Mikov for the first time calls this culture “Inlaid Pottery Culture”⁸. Two sites are excavated in our country: Orsoya necropolis and Baley settlement.

The excavations of Orsoya necropolis started in 1969 and I would like to dwell upon it in particular as being one of the richest finds of this type of ceramics. Also the archaeological situation covers the fundamental part of the problems connected with the growth of the Inlaid Pottery Culture. The territory of necropolis is about 6200 m² and it is orientated southeast - northwest along the river bank and is 30 km away from the town of Lom on the right side of the

Danube River in a marshland, flooded by the swelled river. Three hundred and forty three burials with cremation and five of later period with inhumation also huge quantities and numerous varieties of ceramic objects inlaid with white material have been discovered.

In 1974 Trayko Filipov has published the finds of the Orsoya necropolis⁹. During the ‘70s archaeological excavations have been made at the settlement of Baley (Vidin district) under the direction of R. Katincharov and A. Iotsova. There are some publications only in *Annuals of the Archaeological Institute in Bulgaria*¹⁰. Scientists as H. Todorova, B. Nikolov, Iv. Panajotov, D. Valcheva, T. Shalganova, G. Georgiev touch some questions in their articles connected with Inlaid Pottery Culture¹¹.

Al. Bonev has published systematic and comprehensive studies on the Orsoya necropolis, presenting a detailed classification of the types of ceramics and an analysis of the ornamental system. At the same time he has pointed out to the main problems, a number of which require respective answer¹².

One of the most important questions refers to the origin of the Inlaid Pottery Culture along the Lower Danube River, most probably connected with the problem of the origin of the Funeral Urn Fields Culture in Central and Southeast Europe. It has its trait in the integral development of the early bronze cultures.

The question of the significant growth of the zoomorphous and anthropomorphous plastic arts is also of interest for us: it has characteristic features, but it is without prototype in the development of the culture from the previous epoch in this area between the mouths of the rivers Tissa - Drava and Jiu - Ogosta. It presents higher level of the mythological thinking and craftsmanship as well.

⁴ Dumitrescu 1961, 332.

⁵ Bonev 1988, 49.

⁶ Valtrovič 1890, 110 - 114.

⁷ Vasič 1907, 6 - 43; 1910, 183 - 207; 1911, 55 - 93; Valtrovič 1870, 110 - 114; Chield 1929; Petrovič 1928, 21 - 28; Garashanin 1951, 170 - 272; Trbuhovič 1956-1957, 126 - 141; 1960, 163 - 172; 1966, 153 - 162; Tsermanovič-Kuzmanovič 1960, 185-191; Tasič 1983; Popovič, Mrkobrad 1986, 308 - 313; Dumitrescu 1961; Haensel, Roman 1984; Berciu, Comşa 1949, 251 - 490; Vulpe 1975.

⁸ Mikov 1970, 49.

⁹ Filipov 1976, 9.

¹⁰ Katincharov, Iotsova 1975 - 1985.

¹¹ Panayotov 1985, 69 - 87; 1995, 243 - 252; Panayotov, Valcheva 1989, 5 - 15; Todorova 1985; Shalganova 1993; 1995; Nikolov 1964, 69 - 77; 1978, 19 - 23.

¹² Bonev 1988; 1995, 323 - 338; 1996, 193 - 214; 1999a.

Also deserving attention is the problem of the origin of the so-called “bell-like idols”. In the academic circles it is considered that the origin of these statuettes is connected with the well-known Cretan figurines of the so-called “Goddess with the snakes” in the island of Crete, dated in the late Minoan period¹³. My opinion is that the realistic representation of the Cretan figurines is incompatible with the schematic ones of the Orsoya necropolis. It indicates not a formal typological, but a genetic similarity between these two types, based on an identical function, because in both cases we are faced with figurines of Goddesses or priestesses. I have in mind the identical religious meaning, probably borrowed from Crete.

As a matter of fact the bell-like idols may have different meaning, connected with the war, as the psi-like idols, which are discovered in the Mycenaean necropolis and in the opinion of the Greek archaeologist Mylonas they have been used at the time of war in the battle raised high up¹⁴. My opinion is that the anthropomorphic statuettes are female and related to the cult of the fertility. In this regard the indisputable evidence is the idol of grave No 48 at Orsoya, which represents the figurine of a pregnant woman.

Last but not the least is the question of the connection between the motives, represented in the ornamental system of the Inlaid Pottery Culture and the ornamental motives of the Vulchitrun Golden Treasure. It is most probable that the treasure have been made by local craftsmasters of the same tribes bearers of the Inlaid Pottery Culture. The ornamental system is exceptionally complicated. It shows the strong Aegean influence, and it has not a prototype in the preceding local cultures.

The religious scene in grave No 310 is also interesting, provoking various opinions and interpretations. On a richly decorated “throne” with geometric ornaments is placed a bell-like idol and a boat stands by¹⁵. The question is whether this represents a religious scene or

not? If this burial was connected with the royal cult, why is an anthropomorphous female idol sitting on the “throne”? This relates probably to some beliefs associated with the cult of the king-priest¹⁶.

Now we arrive at the problem related to the historical fate of the tribes bearers of the Inlaid Pottery Culture by the end of the Late Bronze Age, when as a result of the gradual development of the production of iron and the following changes in the relations of production it comes to the considerable ethnical migrations in the Eastern Mediterranean region, known to us as the great Aegean migration of population, in consequence of which the Mycenaean towns and the Hittite empire are abolished. Probably the tribes, bearers of the Inlaid Pottery Culture are involved in this process. The archaeological data shows that they migrate in southeastern direction. As a proof of this we can find elements of the Inlaid Pottery Culture ornamental system in the ceramics of some burial complexes in Rhodopi Mountains¹⁷.

The Inlaid Pottery Culture along the Lower Danube reflects most exactly the nature and the unity of the cultural-historical growth of the tribes in the region subject to our study and appears to be one of the most interesting cultures of the second half of the 2nd millennium BC known in the Southeastern territory of Europe. This phenomenon has had an indisputable contribution to the genesis and development of the cultures during the early Iron Age in the area of lower Danube.

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¹³ Georgiev 1982, 82.

¹⁴ Mylonas 1966, 115.

¹⁵ Filipov 1976, 16.

¹⁶ According to the information which my academic tutor Dr. Al. Bonev has given to me, for which I am very thankful, it is difficult to say what was the initial situation having in mind the marsh-land, flooded by the river.

¹⁷ Kisiov 1996, 227.

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