TREBENISHTÉ
THE FORTUNES OF AN UNUSUAL EXCAVATION

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER
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With a contribution by Rastko Vasić

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PREFACE

One of the most astonishing find places of classical antiquity was discovered in 1918 near the village of Trebenishte, in what is now the Republic of Macedonia. This was part of a necropolis dating from the end of the sixth century B.C. The contents of the tombs included a unique assemblage of decorated bronze vessels imported from Greece. I became interested in these findings during my studies of the archaic bronze industry of Sparta and Corinth. For that reason I studied in 1997 the originals, now kept in the museums of Belgrade and Sofia. A series of favourable circumstances made it possible for me to visit the find place itself two years later, and to gain an impression of the environment and of some other finds from similar necropoleis in the same region. I thought it useful to describe my experiences for those interested in the subject and in the unusual history of the excavations of the necropolis near Trebenishte.

I want to thank my son, Michael Stibbe, who, first as a Second Secretary of the Dutch Embassy in Belgrade and later as the First Secretary of the Dutch Embassy in Skopje, helped me contact the local authorities and gain their permission to study the bronzes in their custody. Special thanks are also due to Dr. Dragi Mitrevski, Director of the Museum of Macedonia at Skopje, and to Mr. Pasko Kuzman, Director of the Museum.

1 The official name is: “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. Its capital is Skopje.
2 See STIBBE, The Sons of Hephaistos, passim.
3 In March 1999, shortly before the outbreak of the Kosovo conflict between NATO and Yugoslavia, I had the pleasure of visiting, in the company of Drs. Heinz Aufrecht and my son, the excavations and museums at Vergina, Pella, Edessa, Florina, Heraklea Lynkestis, Bitola, Ochrid and, of course, Trebenishte and Skopje.
um at Ochrid and a known poet, for their kind help and hospitality during my visit to Ochrid and the site of the excavations near Trebenishte. I would also like to thank Dr. Katharina Hristova for her helpful mediation. She was kind enough to open the temporarily closed museum of Bitola and its storerooms for me. Last but not least I must thank Dr. Rastko Vasić from the Archaeological Institute in Belgrade for his pleasant co-operation and his contribution to this book. My studies greatly benefited from his inside knowledge of many of the issues connected with the necropolis near Trebenishte. In Chapter IX he summarises the results of the important excavations at Novi Pazar, Atenica and Pilatovići in central Yugoslavia. These constitute indispensable links on the inland bronze route to the north.
INTRODUCTION

Scientific excavations are generally undertaken to discover something about the past which lies hidden beneath the earth. And sometimes it is not merely the results of the excavations themselves, but also the history of the digging process itself, which is of interest. In the case of the excavations of the necropolis near Trebenishte this history has several interesting aspects which will be revealed and explained in this book. So far there have been four rather brief periods of excavation with long intervals in between. After the initial discovery, in 1918, digging was not resumed until 1930, some twelve years later, and continued for three years in three short campaigns. Twenty-one years later, in 1953/4, two seasons of control and continuation of the dig followed. Then, almost twenty years later; in 1972, the latest campaign of which we know took place. Despite all this extensive research, parts of the necropolis near Trebenishte remain unexplored today. Hence we do not know how many graves still lie beneath the soil, how far the necropolis extended, and what people, and from where, are buried there. Many further questions also remain unanswered.

This story and these questions might not arouse much interest if the finds from these graves were significant simply for local history. But in fact these finds are of general interest, some having even an exceptional and unique value. As a result these excavations have become well-known, and an extensive literature has grown up around them. The history of the excavations themselves, however, remains obscure, partly because of the political and other circumstances under which they were carried out, and partly because their publication is incomplete or almost inaccessible. Reports published after World War II are particularly difficult to consult - these were written in the Mace-

During the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 and World War I, when Bulgaria sided with the Central Powers because Germany had promised to give Macedonia to it, Bulgarian troops occupied the Ochrid region (fig. 1). In 1918 some of these troops were restoring the road leading from Ochrid to the north, when by mere chance they came across an ancient necropolis near the villages of Gorenci and Trebenishte. On their own initiative, with the assistance of some workmen, these soldiers excavated five tombs. After some time the rich contents were sent to the museum authorities at Sofia. Once the war was over the Bulgarians, having chosen the losing side, had to return most of Macedonia, including the Ochrid region, to Yugoslavia. This was the start of the troubled history of one of the most exciting and important excavations in this region.

Fig. 1. The acropolis, the town and the lake of Ochrid, to the south of Trebenishte. Photo: R. Kamilof.
Excavations have often been interrupted and had their continuation hampered by political circumstances\(^2\), but it is surely exceptional for laymen and archaeologists from three different nations to be involved, as happened at Trebenishte, and for their finds to end up in three different museums\(^3\).

The aim of this book is to clarify this story and facilitate access to the problems connected with it. It is intended for all those who are interested in the past and would like to look to the future of a project which remains full of promise.

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\(\text{FIG. 2. A princely tomb in the necropolis of Trebenishte. Photo: Mustakov. After Filow 2, fig. 2.}\)

\(^2\) See e.g. the history of the German excavations on Samos and the fortunes of the finds from there: STIBBE 1997, 27-29 and id. 1998, 103f.

\(^3\) For the present whereabouts of those finds see below, Appendix (p. 137-140).
CHAPTER I
THE EXCAVATIONS OF 1918

The necropolis near Trebenishte was discovered accidentally towards the end of World War I, when Bulgarian soldiers, stationed at Ochrid, were repairing the road leading from Ochrid to the north (Fig. 24)¹. Five “princely graves” were excavated by these soldiers and workmen in May 1918. Reporting was rather confused, since no archaeologist was present during that first stage of the excavations. Two months later, in July 1918, an experienced high school teacher took over and excavated two further princely tombs. The finds were later taken to the National Museum in Sofia, where they remain today.

The first archaeologist to be involved was Bogdan D. Filow, who ten years later published an extensive report on the results of the excavations of the seven tombs (Filow 1927). However, instead of solving the problems which originated from the work of the laymen, Filow added his own contribution to the confusion already existing, as will be shown below. Nevertheless his publication of the finds remains fundamental.

In order to explain what happened in a more systematic way, it may be useful to introduce the people involved. To make quotation easier, each person is assigned his own letter:

A and B: Mr. Ilia Atzev (A) and Mr. Nikola Darkev (B) were responsible for the workman (“Arbeitsaufseher”, Filow 1927, 1). They carefully (“sorgfältig”, Filow 1927, 1) assembled the objects found in the first tomb discovered, on May 20, 1918. Between then and May 30, they excavated one more tomb under the supervision of Mr. C and Mr. D, and, after May 23, three more tombs without any supervision (Filow 1927, 1).

C: Mr. Eftim Sprostanov, an official from the district of Ochrid ("Kreishauptmann von Ochrid", Filow 1927, 1), who visited the site on May 20 or 21, 1918 and reported two days after the discovery, on May 22, to the National Museum authorities in Sofia. On May 27, this same man notified the same authorities of the discovery of a second tomb on May 23 (these reports should be preserved in the archives of the National Museum).

D: Mr. Mustakov, a lieutenant-colonel of the general headquarters ("Generalstabsoyerst", Filow 1927, 1), who, together with Mr. C, went to visit the excavation of the second tomb on May 23. A photograph of the tomb was offered by him to Filow, who published it (Filow 1927, 2 Fig. 2, here Fig. 2). But Mustakov, who was particularly interested in the finds, left the scene soon afterwards (Filow 1927, 1).

E: Mr. Karl Schkorpil, a high school teacher ("Gymnasial-professor" Filow 1927, I and 1) from Warna (on the Black Sea coast!) was an experienced excavator. On behalf of the National Museum in Sofia he came to Trebenishte at the start of July 1918 and excavated two more tombs. He collaborated with Mr. F. during the preparation of the publication of the finds by the latter. His main contribution, apart from the information about his two graves (numbers VI and VII in Filow's publication), was a series of seven drawings of the plans of all the graves, including their contents (Filow 1927, Figs. 3-9). The drawings of the first five graves in the series (Filow's numbers I-V, here Figs. 3-7) were based on oral information from the excavators, Mr. A and Mr. B.

F: Dr. Bogdan D. Filow was a professor of archaeology at the university of Sofia and director of the Bulgarian Archaeological Institute. He published tombs I-VII from Trebenishte on behalf of the National Museum at Sofia, in 1927. He states that he based his work mainly on information from Mr. E ("Die weiter unten gegebene Darstellung der Lage und Beschaffenheit der Gräber beruht hauptsächlich auf dem Berichte Schkorpils" - Filow 1927, VII). Although he published Mr. E's drawings (Filow 1927, Figs. 3-7), he also dismissed them, because the drawings of graves I-V, excavated by Mr. A and Mr. B, were based on their oral information and did not agree with the two reports sent by Mr. C to the National Museum. So Filow simultaneously used and dismissed his main source. This, of course, did not contribute to the clarity of his picture.

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2 The second tomb apparently became no. III in the drawings of Mr. E (Filow 1927, fig. 5) and no. I in the numbering of Filow himself (see his fig. 2).
Filow’s main argument against the evidence offered by Mr. E, and based on the information from Mr. A and Mr. B, was Mr. D’s photograph on which, he believed, tomb no. I was visible. Filow maintained that the list of objects given by Mr. C in his report to the National Museum in Sofia was perfectly mirrored by the photograph (Filow, 6).

As will be shown below, Filow’s approach and the conclusions need to be checked and revised. But whatever the outcome of this revision, we can agree with Filow (p. 7) that the problems are limited to tombs I-V, and that the descriptions and drawings of tombs VI and VII, excavated by Mr. E, should at least be considered trustworthy.

The reliability of Filow’s publication

As stated above, the picture of the excavation, and especially of the attribution of certain finds to certain tombs as offered by Filow, is rather confusing. This confusion is not only due to the adventurous circumstances of the discovery and the excavation, but also to the choices made by Filow himself. By declaring the unpublished reports of Mr. C, who was, after all, only a incidental visitor and an absolute layman, more trustworthy than the oral reports of Mr. A and Mr. B (also laymen, but as the excavators, much closer to the facts), he may possibly have made a mistake. The possible mistake becomes apparent if one considers that Mr. E, whose reporting of his own excavations of tombs VI and VII was accepted as reliable by Filow himself, also made up the reports of the excavations of tombs I-V. His drawings of those tombs (published by Filow, Figs. 3-7, here Figs. 3-7) were based on the information of Mr. A and Mr. B, whose treatment of the finds was labelled accurate (“sorgfältig”) by Filow himself (p. 1).

So, for us at least, there are convincing arguments for considering the information from Mr. A, Mr. B and Mr. E to be more reliable than that from the isolated and unknown Mr. C. There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that Mr. C’s descriptions of shapes is more trustworthy than those of the excavators Mr. A and Mr. B. It seems that the confidence put by Filow in the two reports of Mr. C is based particularly on the photograph supplied by Mr. D (here Fig. 2).

When we examine this photograph closely (Filow 1927, 2, Fig. 2), it is not difficult to recognize the handle with gorgoneion and the hydria to which this handle belongs on the right, in front of the spade. This hy-
The obvious conclusion to draw is that the photograph and the drawing are correct in representing (part of) tomb III, and that Filow is wrong in believing that the photograph shows (part of) tomb I.

As a consequence, not only the drawing of tomb III (here Fig. 5) but also that of tomb I (here Fig. 3) could be reliable. In fact, the catalogue of objects cited by Filow p. 6 from the report of Mr. C, describes some of the objects present in the drawing of tomb I (Fig. 3): a gold mask, a gold plate glove with finger ring, a bronze helmet, a bronze krater which would be the volute-krater from the drawing, a bronze hydria (not present), a large bronze cauldron with tripod, a bronze thymiaterion, a silver drinking horn and a double bronze fibula with a chain. Of this catalogue only the hydria and the thymiaterion could belong to tomb III, witness the photograph on which they are seen together (Filoc 2, Fig 2, here Fig. 2). In the same way as Filow, therefore, but in the opposite direction and with better arguments, we may propose that it was Mr. C who made mistakes and confused the contents of the tombs I and III.

At the end of this survey of the confused reporting on the first five graves from the necropolis near Trebenishte we must admit that, at the present state of our documentation, we can only set one hypothesis against the other and that absolute certainty is beyond reach.

3 This is a rather common type at Trebenishte; see Filow 1927, nos. 74-78 (no. 78 is our example).

4 Filow 1927, 6f. believes this krater, which he recognizes in the unclear remains of a bronze vessel on the photograph Filow 2, Fig. 2, to be the volute krater from tomb I. The prominent volute-handles, however, are not visible on the photograph. As for the thymiaterion on the photograph, see below, note 8.

5 Filow 1927, 6 calls this “eine goldene Hand”.

6 Not the column krater Filow 1927, no. 64, as Filow suggests, but the volute krater Filow 1927, no. 63.

7 Filow 1927, 6 calls this “ein Leuchter aus Bronze”. Cf. the similar example excavated by Vulić in 1932 in tomb X: Vulić 1933a, 179 Fig. 92.

8 The thymiaterion in fact being his only serious argument, because this is shown, together with the hydria, on the photograph Filow 1927, 2 Fig. 2. But would this single piece suffice to dismiss all the other arguments in favour of the reliability of the drawing?
The uneasy feeling which results from such a conclusion may have prompted the Yugoslavian archaeologist Nikola Vučić, in 1930 (three years after the publication of Filow), to re-excavate the first five tombs. Only tombs I and V yielded additional information. In tomb I Vučić discovered among other things the foot of a bronze vessel (Vučić 1932, 38 Fig. 63) which he first identified as simply part of an amphora or an oinochoe. Later he became convinced that this foot must belong to the hydria with a gorgoneion at its handle attachment. Now, if he were right about this and if his tomb I is tomb I of the drawing in Filow 4, Fig 3 (= here Fig. 3), then this could be an argument in favour of Filow’s hypothesis. But unfortunately Vučić fails to state which tomb I he has in mind. So we are left in the dark again, the more so if one realises that the supposed hydria foot could also belong to a tripod vessel of the type illustrated by Filow 1927, 75, Fig. 87 (no. 88) or to another vessel.

After this disappointment over the reporting of the first five graves we may derive comfort from the fact that the final two tombs of the series I-VII, excavated in July 1918 by the experienced high school teacher and co-author of Filow 1927, Karl Schkorpil (our Mr. E), are published skilfully and in a trustworthy manner. The composition of the contents of graves VI and VII is generally in agreement with those of graves I-V, as shown in Mr E’s drawings (here figs. 3-7).

Finally one may ask why we have paid so much attention to the facts and fancies of the 1918 excavations. The answer is: a plea for the reliability of Mr E’s drawings of tombs I-V, as published by Filow, drawings which are important for a better understanding of the necropolis as a whole. We now may look at these drawings with more confidence, even if some doubts about details remain.

Vučić 1932, 37-39. On p. 37 Vučić states that he re-excavated the tombs I-V because they were first excavated by laymen. He expected to find additional objects and was not disappointed in this respect.

Vučić 1933a, 176.

The presence of the lid of a krater in tomb V (Filow 1927, 8 fig. 7 no. 25; here fig. 7, not recognized as such by Filow himself) which may belong to the volute krater of tomb I (Filow 1927, 4 Fig. 3; here Fig. 3), has been used as an argument against the reliability of the drawings of Mr. E (see e.g. Schleiffenbaum 1991, 249f., no. V19). But since Filow was unable to recognize the lid as such (he calls it a “tellerartiges Siebgefass”: Filow 1927, 73 no. 72, with P1. XIII, 2; Joffroy 1954, 23 was the first to identify its use and to compare its measurements with those of the krater), it may have been considered as an object in its own right even in antiquity (cf. Stibbe, The Sons of Hephaistos, 66, n. 51).
FIG. 3. Trebenishte, tomb I. After Filow 4, fig. 3.
CONTENTS OF TOMBS I-VII, ACCORDING TO THE DESCRIPTION BY FILOW 1927

GRAB I

1. 4. Bronzehelme (113. 116).
2. Goldene streifenartige Verzierungen (16).
3. Goldene Totenmaske (1).
5. Bronzerädchen (124).
6. Silberner schnurartiger Schmuck (61).
7. Silberner Armring (39).
8. Silberner Draht (60).
11. 13. 15. 16. 17. Silberne Gewandnadeln (50. 42. 50. 45. 50. 48).
13. Silberne Gewandnadel (50).
15. Bruchstücke eines eisernen Schwertes (126).
17. Salbfläschchen aus farbigem Glas (141).
20. Großes Bronzebecken mit Dreifuß (84).
23. Silberne Gewandnadeln (50. 42. 50. 45. 50. 48).
25. Silberne Gewandnadeln (50. 42. 50. 45. 50. 48).
26. Großes Bronzebecken mit Dreifuß (84).
29. Silberner Kantharos (32).
30. Talgklumpen (156).
35. Großes Bronzebecken mit Dreifuß (86).
36. Bronzen Weihrauchgefäß (112).
37. Einfache Bronzeschale (104).
38. Bronzen Weihrauchgefäß (112).
FIG. 4. Trebenishte, tomb II. After Filow 5, fig. 4.
GRAB II

1. Bronzehelm (118).
2. Reste vom Schädel.
3. Eiserne Speerspitze (131).
4a. Glasperlen (145).
4b. Bernsteinperlen (147).
5. Goldener Vogel (C21).
7. Goldene Verzierungen (20).
8. Silberne Gewandnadel (53).
9. Reste eines silbernen Bechers (37).
10. Goldener Stern (23).
12. Silberner schmuckartiger Schmuck (61).
17. Bronzeringe (125).
18. 23. Salbfläschchen aus farbigem Glas (144. 142).
20. Silbernes Hängegerät (57).
27. Reste vom Skelette.
30. Bruchstücke eines bronzenen Kolonettenkraters (67).
31. Bronzekanne mit erhöhtem Ausguß (74).
32. Bruchstücke eines Tongefäßen (155).
33. Eiserner Ring mit langem Griff (135).
34. Bronzene Amphora (71).
FIG. 5. Trebenishte, tomb III. After Filow 6, fig. 5.
GRAB III

1. Bronzehelm (114).
2. Eiserne Speerspitze (131).
4. Goldene Sterne (23).
5a. Glasperlen (145).
5b. Bernsteinperlen (147).
5c. Unregelmäßige Bernsteinperlen (148).
6. 8. Silberne Gewandnadeln (58, 47).
7. Goldener Vogel (21).
8a. Silberner schnurartiger Schmuck (61).
11. 16. Abdrücke goldener Verzierungen (20, 18).
15. Bruchstücke eines eisernen Schwertes (129).
15a. Goldene Rosette (22).
17. Bruchstück eines silbernen Bechers (36).
18. Bruchstücke eines kleinen Gefäßes aus farbigem Glas (144).
20. Teile von einem zerstörten silbernen Gegenstande (59).
22. Bruchstücke einer großen Bronzeschale (500).
23. Bruchstücke eines bronzenen Kolonettenkraters (67).
25. Großes henkelloses Bronzebecken (93).
27. Großes Bronzebecken mit Dreifuß (85).
30. Eiserne Ring (136).