THE MEZEK SYNDROME

The Celtic chariot burial from the Mal Tepe tomb at Mezek in the Haskovo region of southern Bulgaria is one of the most significant Celtic finds from the Balkans, in terms of the artifacts themselves, and the nature and chronology of the burial.
Sadly, Mezek has also become a symbol of the ‘Mezek Syndrome’ – the political manipulation of archaeological evidence in Bulgaria during and since the communist period (on this manipulation see ‘Behind the Golden Mask’, ‘The Pizos System’ and ‘The Absence of Truth’ articles on this site).

The initial solution to the Mezek ‘problem’ in Bulgaria was, as with many other Celtic artifacts, to simply re-label it as ‘Thracian’. More recently, the chariot fittings and other Celtic material from Mezek have been repeatedly published without any reference to the general archaeological context in the region, leading to an array of absurd conclusions about its origin. This tradition has been kept up in the latest publication by the Thracologist Juli Emilov, and Vincent ‘Disney’ Megaw, who has worked closely with ‘Thracologists’ in Bulgaria since the communist period (Emilov J., Megaw J.V.S. Celts in Thrace? A Re-Examination of the Tomb of Mal Tepe, Mezek with Particular Reference to the La Tène Chariot Fittings. In: Archaeologia Bulgarica XVI, 1 (2012), 1–32).

MEZEK

The Mezek tomb was first excavated by local villagers during the Czarist period at the beginning of the 20th century, and subsequently recorded by the Bulgarian archaeologist, Filov, in 1937 (Филов, Б. Куполните гробници при Мезек. Известия на Българския археологически институт II, София, 1937, 1–107; See also: Велков, И. Разкопки около Мезек и гара Свиленград през 1932–33 година. – Известия на Българския археологически институт II, София, 1937, 117–170; Filov, B. The Beehive Tombs of Mezek – Antiquity XI, Oxford 1937, 300–305).

A few years later the significance of the finds from Mezek were first realized by international experts (Jacobsthal 1941, 1969, 151–152; see also Duval 1977 p. 113–115, fig. 103 – 104, 106; Hodinott 1981, 100, 126–127; Archibald 1998, 126, 287; Megaw 2004; Bouzek 2005, 105) who identified a Celtic chariot burial from the artifacts executed in the distinctive Celtic ‘plastic’ style. Artifacts associated from the Celtic burial at the site include bronze bridle rings (NAIM Sofia inv. no. 6411–6412), a bronze rosette on a stalk (NAIM 6413 no. 6413), a bronze forked ornament featuring mirrored birds of prey (NAIM no. 6418), as well as two sets of gold beads from a harness, and an impressive bronze boar statue (Jacobsthal 1941).
Celtic bronze boar from the Mezek site (Istanbul Archaeological Museum)
Fig. 1a-d. Mal Tepe, Mezek. Four of the five surviving bronze tentets or rein-rings. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia. Photos: Roza Staneva

Fig. 2. Mal Tepe, Mezek. Five rein-rings photographed prior to cleaning in the 1970s. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia. Photos: Roza Staneva

Fig. 3. Mal Tepe, Mezek. Bronze finial from larger rein-ring. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia. Photo: Roza Staneva

(After Emilov/Megaw 2012)
Fig. 4a-b. Mal Tepe, Mezek. Bronze forked fitting. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia. Photos: Roza Stanova

Fig. 5a-c. Mal Tepe, Mezek. Right-angled bronze fitting. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia. Photos: Roza Stanova

Fig. 6. Mal Tepe, Mezek. Bronze forked fitting. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia. Photo: Roza Stanova

(After Emilov/Megaw 2012)
Another attachment from a Celtic chariot, similar in style and function to that from Mezek has recently been found at the Bobata fortress, north of Osmar village in the Shumen region of northeastern Bulgaria. This bronze Celtic chariot fitting (Atanassov 2005: 126, 130, fig. 3) is similar in function to the chariot decorations from Mezek. Two snake-like figures flank an abstract human face in high relief on the bronze plate of the fitting. The findspot of the application is in the territory of a fortified settlement, and dated to the end of the 4th – the 2nd century BC.
Also interesting, from an artistic perspective, is a gold ‘Janus head’ pendant executed in a repossé technique and decorated filigréé and granulation, also found in the Shumen region, and dated to the same period. Executed in the same ‘plastic style’ as the Mezek artifacts, from a morphological and stylistic perspective the closest analogies are the Celtic ‘bead heads’ found among the Celts of central and eastern Europe, examples of which come from sites such as Mangalia, Piscolt and Vác (Rustoiu 2008), as well as from sites in Bulgaria such as Appolonia Pontica (Sozopol), Mogilanska Tumulus (Vratza region), Mavrova Tumulus (Starosel, Plovdiv region), Burgas, Kavarna (Dobruja region), etc. (See ‘Little Glass Men’ article with relevant lit.).
Celtic ‘Face Bead’ from Mogilanska Tumulus (Vratza region, Bulgaria)

The Celtic cult of the head is well documented (see discussion in ‘The Letnitza Treasure’ article) and ‘Janus heads’ are also one of the central motifs on Celtic coinage and other artifacts from the Balkans during this period.

Celtic Silver ‘Janus head’ Tetradrachma, Central Balkans (2nd c. BC)

(See Numismatics section 3)
THE MEZEK SYNDROME

In fact, the secondary burial of Celtic aristocrats in the 3rd / 2nd c. BC in earlier Thraco-Macedonian tombs is part of a pattern common in Thrace during this period. This phenomenon is to be observed, for example, in the so-called ‘Valley of the Thracian Kings’ (see in particular ‘Behind the Golden Mask’ article). These burials, along with the other archaeological and numismatic material from the region of sub-Balkan Thrace, as well as evidence from sites such as Pisteros and Krakra where the destruction of the Thraco-Macedonian fortresses are recorded at the beginning of the 3rd c. BC, provide indisputable proof that the arrival of the Celts marked the end of the period of Thraco-Macedonian cultural and political dominance in the Thracian interior, and the transition to the Thraco-Celtic period which followed it (On the latest evidence of Celtic settlement in sub-Balkan Thrace see ‘The Heart of Thrace’ article).

As mentioned, the subjective presentation of the Mezek chariot burial without reference to the general geo-political and archaeological context in this part of Thrace in the late Iron Age has led to a number of absurd conclusions about its origin, a phenomenon rooted in the ‘Thracology’ which has dominated Bulgarian archaeology since the early 1970’s. Thus, even in recent articles (latest Emilov/Megaw 2012) the extensive archaeological and numismatic evidence of Celtic settlement in sub-Balkan Bulgaria during this period, such as that found at the recent large-scale excavations in the Chirpan Heights area, continues to be ignored.
Literature Cited


