

# ARCHAEOZOOLOGY IN BULGARIA, A HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVIEW



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***Abstract.** The following paper presents the first full review on the archeozoological studies conducted in Bulgaria. Archeozoology is a highly regarded subdiscipline of archaeology, and with the growing development of physicochemical analysis animals remains are a key factor for absolute dating of materials, reconstruction of ancient diets, research of husbandry practices, and the overall relationship between humans and their animals. To carry out studies researchers rely on cross referencing all available regional and chronological data, which requires the incorporation of older studies. In Bulgaria osteological specialists form a small part of the archaeological and zoological community, and while many authors who are currently active upload their publications online, very little information is available on older publications. The materials from older excavations are not always available, as in the past many animal bones were disposed of, after their initial recording. Older publications tend to be spread across multiple conference proceedings, regional museum bulletins, and in the appendix of site monographs. Discovering the articles is problematic, even to active local specialists, as there is not a single place that you can find them referenced. Authors usually reference their own work, or the publication of a more famous site. To solve this problem, the following work presents the first fuller bibliography, which was compiled after personal communication with the active authors, reviews of the annual reports of the archaeological institute, review of library catalogues, and the scientific archive of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The first part presents a short overview of published works, and biographical data on the main researchers.*

***Keywords:** zooarchaeology, historiography, bibliography, osteoarcheology, faunal remains, Bulgaria, sub-fossil, museum collections.*

## Introduction

Archaeozoology is one of the prominent branches of Archaeology. It explores past human-animal interactions through the analysis of recovered archaeological animal remains. Animal bones and pottery make up the bulk of recovered archaeological materials from sites, but to interpret them in a cultural context, a comparative analysis for the period and region is required. As

animal remains were treated as less valuable „mass material“, they were often thrown away after recording or not collected, especially during excavations before the 1960s. While the field of Archaeozoology has now developed far beyond lists of animal remains, the problems regarding the proper way to incorporate data from old publications are standing. The materials from Bulgaria remain widely unknown to the scientific commu-

nity, as many older publications are very difficult to find, and some are not easy to trace even in digital library databases. There is no available online full bibliographic publication, like the ones compiled for Greece (Reese, 1994) and Romania (Bălăşescu et al. 2003). The following paper presents a complete list, alongside some information regarding the main authors, and an overview of the number of publications per period. The bibliographic appendix is divided into parts based on chronological periods (Paleolithic, Neolithic and Chalcolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman period, Middle Ages), with the last part containing articles that discuss either a single species throughout different periods, aDNA research, or methodological works.

### **Archaeozoological research in Bulgaria (an overview of current research)**

In Bulgaria the only current archaeozoological lab is in the National Natural History Museum, which houses a large reference collection. In the National Archaeological Institute with Museum (NAIM-BAS) the discipline is part of the „Interdisciplinary Research department“, established under the name ‘Problem group for interdisciplinary research’, which unites archaeobotanical, archaeozoological, geophysical, GIS, and surveys. Currently there is a separate storage facility for faunal remains, but a larger lab, equipped with a reference collection has yet to be constructed. Outside of Sofia, there is no museum that has employed an archaeozoologist. There used to be a third functioning lab and storage within the natural History department of the Regional museum of the city of Yambol, but it closed in the early 2000s. Many local museums store faunal remains from different excavations, but they are rarely listed in the official inventories.

The discipline is currently not taught in Bulgarian universities, although it is a regular part of the curriculum of Archaeological departments across Europe. This was not always the case, as during the early 20th century faunal analysis was part of the Prehistory course in Sofia University and was lectured by Dr. Rafail Popov (Florova, 1963, pp. 23–95). By the early 2000s there were sporadic lectures by Dr. Lazar Ninov, but the course is currently not active. This has significant-

ly restricted faunal specialists to people with a prior background in veterinary science or zoology, with few archaeologists specializing in the field. While the number of people working with faunal remains in Bulgaria is restricted, the number of publications accumulated during the years is not short.

Most publications feature a faunal list and report related to a certain site, while others are more thematic focusing on a certain animal species. One of the obvious shortcomings is that there is little connection between the publications, as most do not reference a wider range of sites for comparison. This is partly due to the difficulty in acquiring them, as many were published in conference proceedings or local museum bulletins. This has led to a certain ‘isolation’, as studies from international scholars are restricted in the information they possess regarding Bulgarian faunal assemblages.

Chronologically, the biggest number of publications come from articles on Palaeolithic sites, as faunal remains are a significant part of the research. They are followed by Neolithic and Chalcolithic assemblages, as early farming is a topic that intrigues prehistoric archaeologists. The Bronze age assemblages are understudied, as very few sites have their own publication, but this partly due to the problem in research, as very few Bronze age sites are fully published. This trend will probably change in the following years, as more materials from the Bronze age are encountered during commercial construction work. The research of Roman assemblages is also well developed, as many Roman sites are part of international expeditions. These publications are of higher quality, as both local and foreign publications are very detailed, giving information about the species and measurements that can be used for comparative research. The Medieval period is also well documented, as there is a big local interest in both pagan burial complexes with animal sacrifices, and the lifestyle of the inhabitants of fortresses, and villages. Based on quality the publications of the Iron Age assemblages are the most underwhelming. The archaeozoological research has been focused on rich burial complexes with horse sacrifices, while assemblages from settlements are either lacking or presented with preliminary reports (). In the case of Seuthopolis, one

of the most important fully researched fortified settlements of the Early Hellenistic period, the faunal assemblage from the Iron Age and Medieval period were mixed, which has deemed it unfit for comparison (Markov, 1958). Very few publications employ more interdisciplinary methods as stable isotopes, or ancient DNA analysis. The ones that do are part of larger projects due to the cost of the said analysis, but this tendency will probably change for the better in the future. The main problems with many publications are the lack of detail information regarding the archaeological context, element distribution, taphonomy, and metric data. During the last few years, a positive trend can be observed, as many faunal reports have started to be part of the archaeological documentation, which is annually deposited in the scientific archive of the archaeological institute. In these reports the information is often more detailed compared to the publication and can be used for future studies.

a scholar in the natural sciences, alongside an interest in the humanities led to this specialization. He obtained a Phd in Palaeontology in Germany and developed an interest in the Pleistocene. As Pleistocene research flourished in the end of the 19th century with discoveries of more Neanderthal sites, Popov saw an opportunity in examining the unstudied caves of Bulgaria. Upon returning he established an archaeological society in the town of Shumen, which became the foundation of the local museum. The started researching deposits in the caves Mirizlivkata, Bacho Kiro, Devetashkata peshtera, Temnata dupka, and many more. His background helped him identify animal remains and worked bone tools. He established a Prehistory department in 1915 within the then Tsarski Natural History Museum (now the National Natural history museum), as then prehistory was considered part of Palaeontology. In 1929 he became the director of the National Archaeological Museum (Kanev, 1995). His research gradually grew,

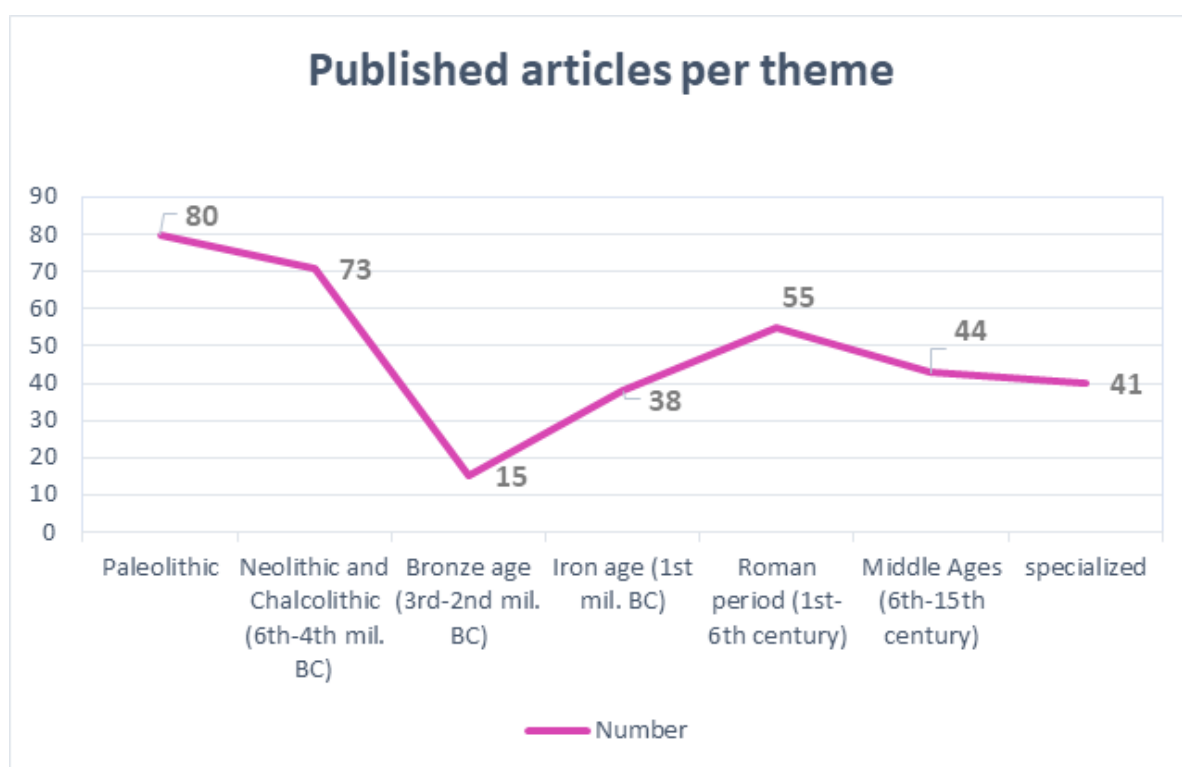


Fig. 1. The number of published archaeozoological articles per theme (made by the author).

### The researchers

Rafail Popov (1876–1940) was the pioneer of archaeozoological research in Bulgaria. He was born in 1876 in the city Tarnovo. His background,

as he started exploring later periods, documenting the Iron Age dog sacrifices of the Goliama mogila, in Sveshtari (Popov, 1936), the animal remains from the Roman and Medieval period in Madara (Popov, 1934; Popov, 1936), and the first study of

archaeological dog morphotypes (Popov, 1932; Popov, 1936). He was ahead of his time regarding the employed methodology, always including detail metric data and the archaeological contexts of the findings. This makes his publication useful to this day. During his lectures in Sofia University, he even developed some methods in craniometry and dental wear analysis (Florova, 1966, p. 23). After his death in 1940 his collection of valuable Pleistocene specimens was donated to the National Natural History Museum where it is stored till this day. Although he lectured students, he did not have a successor and after his death archaeological analysis began to be conducted only by veterinarians and zoologists.

During the 1950s archaeozoological research was conducted sporadically. Notable is the research on prehistoric cattle by the veterinarian Petar Petkov (1928, 1935), and the mentioned publication on the faunal material from Seuthopolis (Markov, 1958). A prominent figure in the late 1950s was the veterinarian Dr. Stefan Ivanov, who recorded the remains from several sites, including the Medieval necropolis of Novi Pazar (Stanchev & Ivanov, 1958), and the old Bulgarian Medieval capital Preslav (Ivanov, 1959). His research was of high quality as all publications contained detailed information regarding species, element representation and metric data. He tutored Dr. Vasil Vasilev, who became the first officially employed faunal specialist in the National Archaeological Institute. Dr. Vasil Vasilev (1929–1982) graduated as a veterinarian in 1951 and became a lecturer in comparative animal anatomy. He was an active member in establishing the 'Problem group for interdisciplinary research' within the National Archaeological institute in 1977 (Vasilev, 1985). He devised methods for calculating the wither height in cattle and distinguishing the remains of bison from cattle (Atanasov, Vasilev & Tsonev, 1980). In 1981 Vasilev defended a PhD thesis in archaeozoology titled 'Osteological and osteometrical comparative analysis of the bone material from Tell Ovcharovo'. Before his death he was granted the title of 'associate professor', but he never got the chance to lecture in the field. He taught Dr. Lazar Ninov, who was latter appointed the position of faunal specialist at the National Archaeological Institute (NAIM–BAN). Dr. Ninov had completed a PhD in veterinary science

in Moscow, and his dissertation examined the comparative skeletal anatomy of wild boar and domestic pigs in neonatal stages (Ninov, 1981). He has published many faunal reports since 1986s. He was the head of the department for 'Interdisciplinary Research' from 2008 until 2012, and the editor-in-chief for the journal 'Interdisciplinarni Izledvania (Interdisciplinary Research)' of the Institute. In 2013 he was appointed the title of associate professor and was in charge of the archaeozoology lab (now 'Osteology storage') in NAIM–BAN. He retired in 2016 and during the spans of his carrier he has published many faunal reports from sites ranging from the Neolithic till the Middle Ages, which are listed in the appendix.

Another scholar, who had established the former archaeozoological lab in the museum in the city of Yambol is Georgi Ribarov. He had completed his formal education in zoology, but since the 1980s he has worked in the field of archaeozoology. He started his carrier in the Natural history department of the Yambol Museum, writing faunal reports for the local sites (Kabile, Yasa tepe, and excavations within the town of Yambol. His notable work focused on some of the earliest domestic horse remains from the underwater Early bronze age site of Urdoviza, near Kiten (Ribarov, 1991). He is also the first archaeozoologist to publish separate papers on molluscs (Ribarov, 1990) and fish remains (Ribarov & Ribarova-Hordulova, 2021). After the closure of the lab of the Yambol Museum, Ribarov donated his collection to the Natural History Museum in Sofia. He is still an active researcher and is currently publishing reports from Medieval and Antique sites.

### **The scholars at the National Natural history museum Sofia**

The National Natural History Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Science has become one of the pillars of archaeozoological research. Apart from storing valuable collections of subfossil remains, and having a fully functional reference bone collection, its scholars have produced many publications in the field. Research was carried out by paleontologists: Professor Nikolai Spassov, who specialized in fossil mammals, Vasil Popov

(small mammals), and prof. Zlatozar Boev, a paleo-ornithologist. Their older work has focused mainly on assemblages from the Pleistocene. Prof. Spassov in collaboration with Dr. Nikolai Iliev, he former director of the Agricultural museum in Sofia, have published over 17 articles on faunal remains from archaeological sites from the Neolithic (Spassov & Iliev, 1994; Spassov & Iliev, 2001; Spassov & Iliev, 2002; Spassov & Iliev, 2007; Spassov & Iliev, 2014; Spassov & Iliev, 2020) to the Medieval period (Iliev, 1994). Professor Zlatozar Boev has currently authored over 80 articles, including various faunal reports on both avian and mammalian remains, past distributions of now endangered species, and co-written a book on aurochs (Boev & Boev, 2018). He has also authored a review on published Bulgarian Pleistocene and Holocene animal remains (Boev, 2023). A prominent young scholar of the museum is Dr. Nadezhda Karastoyanova, who completed her PhD thesis in 2018 on a comparative study on hunting and husbandry during the Late Neolithic and Late Chalcolithic periods in Eastern Bulgaria (Karastoyanova, 2018). She is currently the curator of the archeozoological mammalian collection and is actively publishing papers ().

### Foreign faunal specialists in Bulgaria

A number of foreign scholars have worked on Bulgarian faunal assemblages starting from the 80s. While The Iron curtain was in no doubt restricting for foreign projects, a small number of international excavations were carried out. They include a German-Bulgarian collaborations on the eponymic prehistoric mound Karanovo (1984–1992), and a British-Bulgarian excavation in the Roman city Nicopolis ad Istrum (1985–1991). In both cases the faunal remains were analyzed by foreign scholars. In the case of Karanovo, they were published by Sandor Bökönyi (1993). In Nicopolis ad Istrum the remains were analyzed by the then young scholar Mark Beech from the university of Sheffield, who spend several months from 1985-1997 working in Bulgaria (Beech, 1998; Poulter & Beech, 2007). During his time in Bulgaria, Dr. Beech exchanged research with both the scholars of the Natural History Museum, and Dr. Ninov. After leaving Eastern Europe, he donated his collection of Bulgarian and So-

viet archeozoological publications to the library of the museum of Sheffield<sup>1</sup>. After the fall of the regime in 1989 it became much more accessible for foreign scholars to work with archeozoological materials. One of the famous scholars who has worked with faunal remains from Bulgaria is Laszlo Bartosiewicz. His first work was on the remains from the Roman fort Iatrus, situated on the Danubian limes (Bartosiewicz & Choyke, 1995). He conducted seminars in New Bulgarian university and taught some students, including Dr. Karastoyanova. From the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century more international scholars have engaged with materials from Bulgaria. A second publication on material from Iatrus was made by Norbert Benecke (Benecke, 2007). The British team in the Classical and Hellenistic site of Emporium Pistiros were joined in the early 2000s by Dr. Sue Stallibras from the University of Liverpool, who evaluated the materials, published preliminary reports and an article on the ritual deposition practices in a well (Stallibras, 2007, Stallibras, 2013; Stallibras, 2018). Other scholars who have worked in Bulgaria, which notably include Beate Cupere, who analyzed various materials from the Iron Age, and published the remains from the mining site of Ada tepe (Nikov et al., 2018). In the last few years some larger collaborations have incorporated stable isotope analysis (Balasse et al., 2020; De Groene et al., 2019). In 2020 the American archaeologist John Gorczyk became the first foreigner to complete a doctorate on material from Bulgaria. His dissertation was titled 'Fields of Care: Placing Animal-Human Communities in the Early Neolithic of the Sofia Basin, Bulgaria' and was successfully defended in Cornell university (Gorczyk, 2020). John as also authored multiple articles on Bulgarian prehistoric animal assemblages (Gorczyk, 2022; Bacvarov, & Gorczyk, 2017; Bacvarov, & Gorczyk, 2018). Few Bulgarians are members of ICAZ (the international council for archeozoology), but they have taken active parts in conferences, and organizing events. In 2005 the first ICAZ event was held in the town of Veliko Tarnovo, which was the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the worked bone group. The event was co-organized by Petar Zidarov and Milena Stancheva. This year a second ICAZ event will take place in Sofia, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Medieval Pe-

<sup>1</sup> Source: Personal communication with Dr. Beech.

riod Working Group meeting. These conferences offer scholars the chance to exchange contacts and collaborate on future projects.

### Conclusion

The following historiography illustrates a picture of Bulgaria archaeological research. Based on the review of the full list of articles it can be stated that there is a growth in the number of archaeological articles in the last decade. The attitude towards faunal remains is also slowly changing, as more archaeological publications have started to include this data. The last decades show a growing number of collaborations between Bulgarian and foreign scholars. We can end on a positive note, stating that there are many more themes to be explored, but the current state of research offers a solid base.

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