

Julia Valeva “*The painted Coffers of the Ostrusha Tomb*”, Bugarski houdozhnik Publ., Sofia 2005, pp. 200, Pl. 1-18.

Valeva presented us with a truly informative and daring interpretation of the painted coffered sealing of the Ostrusha burial complex. Her work begins right after Dr. G. Kitov discovered this remarkable find in 1995 and continued throughout the years with consultations and cooperation of many colleagues from Bulgaria and abroad, especially with the support of Tokyo University and the *Centre for Roman Wall Painting* at Soissons. In spite of the poor condition of the paintings and the destruction due to the vandalism in Late Antiquity, Valeva managed to offer a remarkable contribution recognizing some of the motifs of the decorative programme of this Thracian tomb.

After determining the terminology which, in the case of Valeva has been discussed with eminent scholars of the field, we are informed of the general data. In the *First Chapter* Valeva locates the Ostrusha Tomb both geographically (territory of the Odrysi in the Kazanluk valley) and chronologically (Late Classical / Early Hellenistic period). She explains the conditions of the find as well as all the needed information of the orientation, dimensions, architecture, and the decorative elements of this burial complex. The central burial chamber is composed out of two monolithic parts, resembling a sarcophagus with a funeral bed in its interior. It is surrounded with three additional rectangular chambers and a round one to which the author pays more attention, searching for analogies and explaining it as a commemorative space. The analogies concerning the building complex in general are leading the author to Persia with strong recognizable Greek and Mesopotamian elements, leaving us with a question whether it was built before or after Alexander’s expedition to the East. In the *Second Chapter* we are presented with the interior of the tomb, and with the stone carved coffered sealing in detail. Valeva studies the genesis of this architectural motif, following it from the oldest examples dated in the late archaic period all the way to the fourth century BC to which period the Ostrusha tomb belongs.

From *Chapter Three* to *Chapter Sixteen* Valeva approaches each coffered division with utmost attention, describing them in detail and trying to identify the painted decorations and their meaning in relation to the funeral function of the building. She numbers and groups them, in order to proceed arguing the possible iconographical interpretations which rest on rich comparative material from the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic art, but also greatly supported by the popular literature of the time, mostly Homer’s *Iliad*. We are left with a suggestive mythological narration which starts with the central compositions, and works its way towards the peripheral coffers.

Valeva recognized Sirens in Coffers 39-42 and Nereids riding hippocampi in Coffers 35-38, positioning the Ostrusha ensemble as the earliest example where these mythological creatures were brought together in sepulchral art. The figures enriched with floral decoration in Coffers 23–34 may be, according to Valeva’s opinion, chthonic deities from the Eleusinian or Dionysian mythological circle. However, she leaves the question of their identification open for the time being. The author then, beginning with Coffer 2 where Thetis in the Forge of Hephaistus is recognized, interprets several compositions where the myth of Achilles is central. The lonely figure of Thetis, having in mind that the previously mentioned composition is always multifigural, is leading Valeva to question herself whether this particular example is an original composition, or is it an abridged variant of a larger one. She finds the solution among the paintings of the Tomb of Persephone in Vergina where

the image of the mourning Demeter is being part of a larger composition and analogous to the image of Thetis in Ostrusha who is also in mourning over Achilles' tragic destiny. This analysis is a considerable contribution in defining the iconographical type of the "mourning Divine Mother". For the figure of the Hero in front of Panoply from the Coffers 3 and 4 Valeva argues the possibility that it represents the mourning Achilles. Analogies are found among the many representations in vase painting, but also in a wall painting from the House of the Cryptoportico in Pompeii. In this chapter the question of which specific scene this mourning Achilles belongs to is opened. The weapons in front of the hero are suggesting future battle, the contemplation of Achilles just before the fight with Hector and the awareness of his own death. The types of the helmet and of the shield in this painted coffer are also regarded in terms of dating the Ostrusha tomb. The presentation of The Embassy of Achilles - *Presbeia* is seen in Coffers 3 and 4, having been discarded as a possibility from the painted composition on the previous coffer. Several figural combinations are taken into account, all inspired by the Book IX of the *Iliad*; Phoenix and Achilles, Odysseus and Achilles, or Agamemnon and Achilles. Another solution is the image of Meleagros instead of the one of Achilles or even the illustration of the Ransom of Hector's body by Priam. Achilles is again the author's preferable choice in the figure of the Warrior in Fight from the Coffers 5 and 6. The identification of the second figure is more hypothetical, recognized as the Amazonian queen Penthesilea or even as a *xoanon* (Palladium of Troy) or the divine image of Hera because of its static posture. The figure in question in the next chapter titled Hero standing next to his Shield from the Coffers 7 and 8 was considered as Heracles, however, this interpretation has been abandoned due to the incompatible iconography. It is more likely, according to Valeva's opinion, that here another hero is represented – Ajax, Hector, or once more Achilles. Again, the shape of the arms is helping Valeva while dating the tomb. In this case it is the Thracian helmet which also suggests the higher social status of the presented hero. Achilles is again recognizable in the figure of the Sitting Warrior in Coffers 9 and 10. Most of the coffers of the east and south sides (9-11, 13-18) are without paint layer, therefore impossible for further iconographical analysis. Valeva interprets the last three coffers with figural depictions as the mythological images of Silenus (Coffer 20), Bellerephon (Coffer 21), and Cybele (Coffer 22). The image of Silenus is connected with the Dionisian mysteries which is compatible with the overall iconography of the Ostrusha tomb and associated with the Thracian Kabiri. Hephaistus is also considered here, however not probable having in mind the lack of analogous representations of the post-Classical time. Bellerephon, on the other hand, is certain in the following painted coffer. He is depicted in the usual manner of slaying the Chimaira. In relation to the funeral ensemble of the Ostrusha tomb this composition is seen as symbolic presentation of victory of order over chaos, a frequent sepulchral motif seen on many funeral monuments. Valeva discusses the great importance of this myth within the Thracian religious systems and the impact that it had on Classical art. She even goes further with the interpretation and believes that the deceased Thracian ruler was identified with Bellerephon in order for his immortality to be ensured. Concerning the last figural composition on the coffers from Ostrusha Valeva suggested Cybele on a feline in the title, but in the text also considered Heracles strangling the Nemean lion as well as Dionysus, Maenad, or a Satyr riding on a panther. The author is more inclined to believe that the painted figure represents Cybele on a lion after all, based upon the popularity of her cult in Thrace.

Following are the coffers without figural presentations. The corner coffers (1, 8, 12, 19) are painted with colorful flower decorations. The author, based again on analogies, defines their types. *Chapter Seventeen* is where Valeva explains the scroll ornament on the vertical borders, abundantly reflecting on this motif through monumental architecture, votive and funeral art, vase painting, mosaics and fresco painting, also through certain jewelry items. She concludes the chapter with a suggestion about the dating not only to Ostrusha tomb, but of the Kazanluk one as well. She places them in the second half of the fourth century and differs their stylistic approach. Finally, in *Chapter Eighteen*, Valeva discusses the guilloche ornamental frame of the bordering bands and refers to the symbolical meaning of the unity of Appolo and Dionysus, seen in the overlapping laurel and ivy leaves and inspired by the twenty – sixth Homeric Hymn.

All the reflections of the painted coffers of Ostrusha tomb are leading Valeva to the final interpretation in *Chapter Nineteen*. She begins with the symbolical meaning of the decorative programme. The depictions of mythological heroes have been adequately chosen by the Thracian nobleman who rested in this tomb. It is for the first time that images of Achilles are appearing on a Thracian monument, having in mind that his cult, although popular all throughout the Greek world, has not been attested in Thrace. All the mythological characters that Valeva managed to recognize have chthonic associations. Achilles is here also in that function and not as a reflection of his cult. The compositions can be divided into two main themes connected by the funerary context – the legend of Achilles and the Dionysian mythological circle. Thetis enters the first one, considered by the author also as a deity reigning over the world but also over the underworld. The reason for her sisters, the Nereids, to be placed in the central coffers lays in their nature as divine beings that assist the transition between cosmic levels. Valeva reflects on the Bolshaya Bliznitsa tumulus in the Taman Peninsula as analogous considering the choice of figural depictions, as well as the inscriptions from Thessaly, South Italy, Olbia, and Derveni where Dyionisian, Eleusinian and Orphic eschatology is expressed. Therefore, she believes that the Eleusinian goddesses were also part of the Ostrusha painted ensemble. Regarding the symbolic meaning, Valeva concludes with the royal Macedonian propaganda as the most influential one for the creation of these frescoes. Their stylistic analysis is more difficult due to the devastation. However, the frescoes are most certainly the work of a renowned and schooled author, executed in pure Greek style with use of expensive materials and closely connected to the standards of the Macedonian royal art of the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic period. The dating is based mainly upon the iconographical observations of the author, but also on some historical accounts. Valeva's opinion is that the burial took place sometimes around 330-310 BC.

The remarkable find of Ostrusha Tomb deserves the knowledgeable and skillful treatment that the author has offered while interpreting the painted sealing, under which a Thracian nobleman rested for eternity. Apart of the well selected comparative material, the vast number of photographs, drawings and illustrations after every chapter additionally helps the reader while perceiving the material in question and the author's pertaining arguments. We are left with an important contribution to the art history of the antiquity which sheds more light on the artistic creations on the territory of Thrace in Late Classical time.