

THE PROFANE AND THE SACRED IN AN EARLY NEOLITHIC HOUSE AT THE PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT SITE OF BALGARCHEVO, BLAGOEVGRAD DISTRICT, BULGARIA

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Abstract

A burnt house measuring 6 x 8 m was discovered in the Early Neolithic layer of the prehistoric settlement of Balgarchevo. It was occupied during the period 5550–5450 cal. BC. The structure consisted of a dug-in part and a ground level area. Several big storage vessels and the wheat scattered on a fallen clay platform suggest that the upper story was used for grain storage.

All installations and movable inventory in the house were uncovered in the dug-in room: two ovens and several grinding stone facilities, 50 ceramic vessels, 15 stone tools, four bone tools, two anthropomorphic figurines, a clay mask, and a 'movable altar'. The cult objects were found in different parts of the dug-in area, and thus do not define any spaces intended specifically for cult practices. The archaeological material, as well as the interior design show similarities to other contemporary settlements in the Struma River Valley (Kovachevo Id, Ilindentsi, Galabnik III, Vaksevo III, and Mursalevo) and in the Vardar River Valley (Zelenikovo I, Madzari, and Govrlevo).

Keywords: Balkans – Early Neolithic – house – oven – household inventory.

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The lifetime of the settlement in short

The prehistoric settlement site of Balgarchevo is situated in the area of Kasi Banya, close to the northeastern end of the village, 10 km northwest of Blagoevgrad. It is located on a right bank terrace of the Struma River in the foothills of the Vlahina Mountain.

It is a stratified site with a long lifetime that was occupied from the second half of the Early Neolithic until the Early Chalcolithic (first half of the 6th to the first half of the 5th mill. BC) lasting approximately 1000 years. During the Early and Middle Neolithic (Balgarchevo I and II), the settlement occupied an area of about 10,000 sq. m; in the Late Neolithic (Balgarchevo III), and particularly in the Early Chalcolithic (Balgarchevo IV), the occupied area almost doubled to 17,000 square meters. The average thickness of the cultural layer is 1.50 m and in some sectors with cut features it reaches a depth of 2.20 m. The settlement was investigated from 1977 to 1987 in two large trenches – north and south – with a total excavated area of 1100 sq. m (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011).

In the north trench, the Early Neolithic layer (Balgarchevo I) yielded remains of three houses featuring a combination of dug-in areas and ground level zones (fig. 1). All three structures were destroyed by conflagrations. One of them, located in the central part of the northern trench, was completely excavated (Pernicheva et al. 2000; Pernicheva 2006, 227-230; Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, 69–98). The building (house 1) underwent three construction phases associated with changes in its dimensions and in the layout of the living area (fig. 2). The orientation of the dwelling remained unchanged throughout the three phases – it was aligned in the cardinal directions – but the surface area increased from 34 to 50 sq. m.

Construction phases and structural characteristics

In the first construction phase, the building (house 1) measured 5.60 x 6.00 m and was completely dug in the natural at a depth of approximately 0.60 m.

In the second phase, the house extended northwards with the addition of a two-meter wide surface level zone; the building measured 6 (E-W) x 8.20 meters (N-S). The dug-in area, however, still constituted the main part of the residential area. It is approximately square in shape, with sides measuring from 5.90 to 6.00 m long. The dug-in zone is 0.60–0.75 m deep to the northwest and 0.35–0.40 m to the south. The deepest NW sector of the dug-in area – the so called ‘barn’ – was surrounded from the north, east and west by part of a wall reaching a height of up to 60 cm with a thickness of 10–15 cm. Composed of posts and weaves and daubed on the inner side with clay, it is characteristic of the wattle and daub construction type. The so-called ‘barn’ sector of the dwelling was open to the south, facing oven 2. Additionally, the ground level zone constructed during this phase formed a two-meter wide strip (N-S) extending the northern part of the building. Over this northern ground level zone and above the eastern section of the dug-in area, a L-shaped clay platform was constructed. Collapsed parts of this platform were found covering nearly the entire northern ground level in addition to the eastern dug-in area and the southern part of the ‘barn’. The floor of the dwelling consisted of very well rammed compacted soil, presenting no traces of plaster and/or wood floor coverings.

During the third phase, the house was constructed fully at ground level, without dug-in rooms, measuring 5.60 E-W x 8.40 meters N-S. The ruins of the earlier construc-

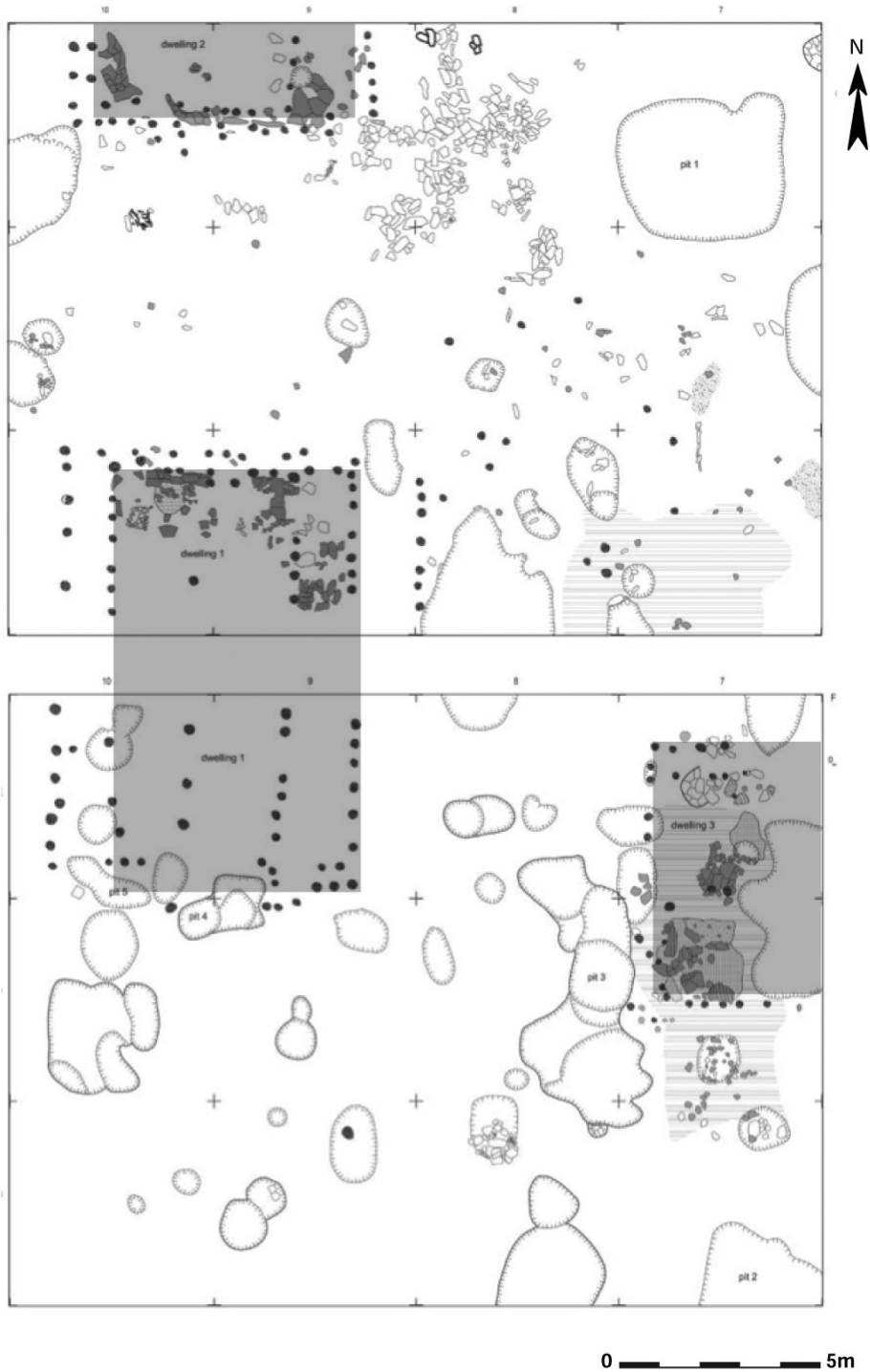


Figure 1. The northern trench at Balgarchevo: layout of three burnt houses from the end of the Early Neolithic (mid-6th mill. BC).

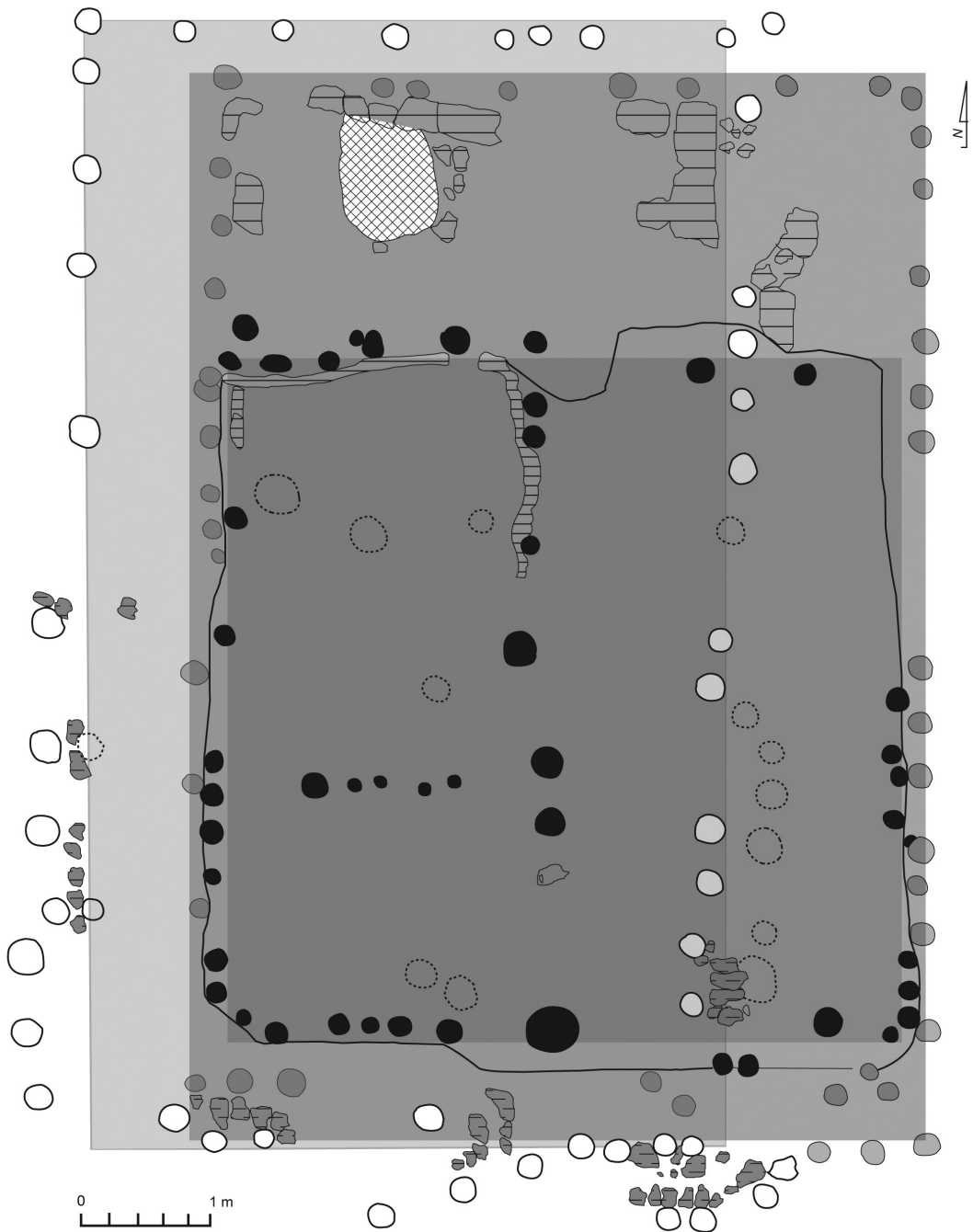


Figure 2. The diachronic development of house 1 with three construction phases.

tion were covered with a 0.20 m thick layer of clay, functioning as the floor of the dwelling. Furthermore, the house was displaced 1.40 m to the west and 0.20 meters to the north with a partly incorporated clay platform in its northern section.

Chronological position of the dwelling

The chronological position of house 1 corresponds to the Balgarchevo I period, and probably covers Balgarchevo IA (the earliest phase) and IB (the second phase). In several stratigraphically related pits located around the dwelling, dark painted pottery sherds of the Starčevo III-IV type – the Zelenikovo I variant – and a single white painted sherd were found (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.37.1-4), thereby corroborating its chronological position in the Early Neolithic. The third phase of the house is linked to the transition between Balgarchevo IB – II or even to Balgarchevo II, *i.e.*, Early-Middle Neolithic transition or entirely Middle Neolithic (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, 98). According to an archaeomagnetic examination of oven 1 of the second construction phase of house 1 (Kovacheva & Toshkov 1991, 12), it was utilized for the last time between 5520–5450 BC. This reading is also confirmed by the ¹⁴C dating of charred wheat and lentils found in the dwelling (5550–5460 cal. BC)¹.

Installations

All installations referred to in this text correspond with the second construction phase of house 1 (*i.e.*, Balgarchevo IB, Final Early Neolithic): two ovens and two grinding stone facilities (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, 87–91).

Both ovens are situated in the dug-in area at a distance of 0.85 m from each other, with their openings facing opposite directions: oven 1 to the south and oven 2 to the north. A 25 cm thick clay wall separates them. Both ovens have a square base with slightly rounded corners and are identical in plan and dimensions: 0.75 x 0.75 m. Their openings are relatively small – 40 cm in width and 20 cm in height – which means that the ovens were used for heating rather than for cooking.

Houses with two ovens are registered at several settlements in the neighboring regions. The best example in Bulgaria was found at Stara Zagora – Okrazhna bolnitsa dating to the end of the Early Neolithic (Kalchev 2013, fig. 1). The closest parallels however are present in house 1 at Madzari in North Macedonia, where two ovens are also separated by a clay wall (Stojanova-Kanzurova 2011). Furthermore, Late Neolithic dwelling with two ovens is also registered at Banjica in Serbia (Todorović 1977, 14), and at several Middle Neolithic settlements in North Macedonia.

In the house, two grinding stone facilities were also found: one lower grinding stone in the eastern part of the house, five upper grinding stones dispersed within the dug-in area, and one mortar positioned on the eastern side of oven 1. Each of these grinding facilities was connected to one of the two ovens.

¹ The ¹⁴C dating was done by Dr. Bernhard Wenninger at the Köln Radiocarbon Laboratory.

The first grinding stone facility (No. 1) was situated next to the western wall of oven 1. It consisted of a clay platform with a ledge and a lower grinding stone permanently fixed in it.

The second grinding stone facility (No. 2) was located 50 cm northwest of oven 2. It was attached to the western wall of the house, in the southern part of its plastered sector or the 'barn'. The facility also consists of a clay platform but with no vertical ledge.

Mobile household inventory

The mobile inventory consists of pottery, stone and bone tools, as well as cult objects (fig. 3). Most of this equipment was found on the floor of the dug-in area, including in some sectors below the fallen clay platform. Several vessels and a large quantity of charred wheat and barley, however, were revealed over the top of the collapsed platform in the southeast corner of the house. A rectangular pithos with relatively large dimensions was also found in this section.

The most numerous types of mobile equipment are pottery vessels. Approximately 50 of them were recovered complete and/or partially complete. They have been divided into three categories:

1. Storage vessels (pithoi): 10 pcs.
2. Fine vessels: 3 pcs.
3. Ordinary vessels: 36 pcs.

Not all storage vessels (*i.e.*, pithoi) were restored due to their high degree of fragmentation. They have two basic forms: circular or square cross-section of the body. The first group, consisting of circular cross-sectioned pithoi, includes two fully preserved and restored vessels. One of them, presenting the largest dimensions (fig. 4.5), was situated in the southwest corner of the house. To its immediate east was situated another pithos with a circular cross-section. The third one (fig. 4.4) was fully preserved and was uncovered behind oven 1. All vessels of this type have similar technological and morphological characteristics. The clay contains only mineral temper, the outer surface is brown, the upper part is burnished, and the lower surface is roughened, however, without resemblance to barbotine. The body is pear-shaped, the bottom is flat, and the neck is either cylindrical or slightly curved outward. Both fully restored pithoi of this type are decorated by the addition of a plastic cordon with impressed dots. The cordon on the largest pithos is placed at the widest part of the body and is divided in three, with two ends finishing with pairs of vertical appendages (fig. 4.5b). Two small lugs interrupt the cordon. On the smaller pithos, the cordon (also impressed with dots) is located on the lower part of the body forming an uninterrupted circle with one small lug below it (fig. 4.4b). The small dimensions of the lugs, in both cases, are in direct contrast with the dimensions of the vessels, which imply their decorative function. Such a combination of small lugs and cordons exists also on large pithoi found in the 'sanctuary' of Madzari, North Macedonia, however in the latter case they have an additional row of decorative lugs located at the bottom of the body (Sanev 1988, sl. 2 and 3).

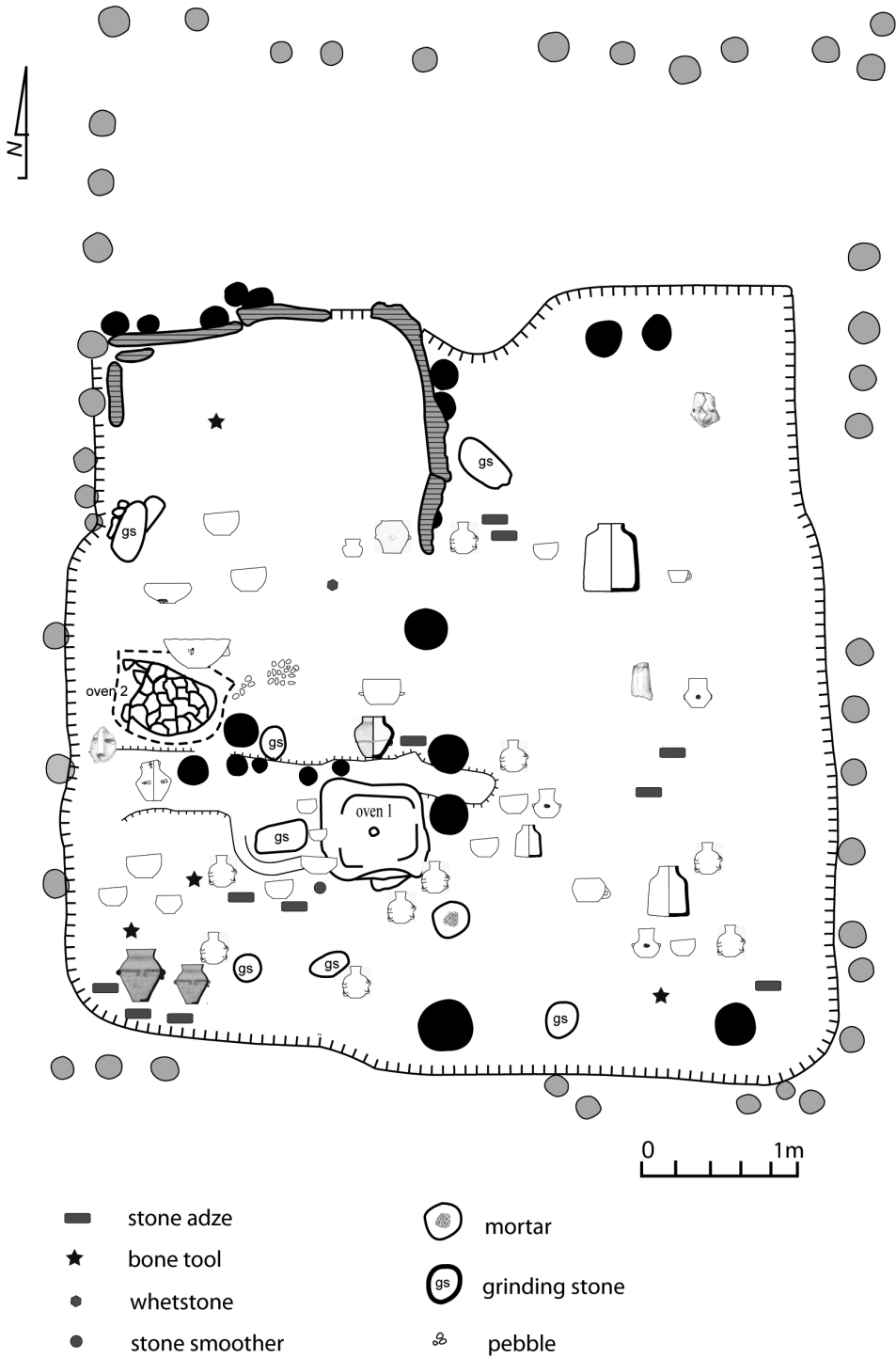


Figure 3. Installations and mobile inventory of house 1.



Figure 4. Storage vessels discovered on the first floor of house 1.

The second group of storage vessels consists of square cross-sectioned pithoi made of clay having both organic and mineral temper and rough outer surfaces (fig. 4.2 and 4.3). They have a square base and body, but the neck has a circular cross-section. These pithoi are of different sizes. They were found in the eastern part of the house: two below the fallen platform, one next to the eastern side of oven 1, and one over the top of the collapsed platform in the southern part of the dwelling. Pithoi with a similar form (unpublished) were also found at Kovačevo in a burned house dated to the last Early Neolithic phase (Kovačevo Id). The archaeomagnetic date (5590–5410 BC) corresponding to an oven in the burnt house at Kovačevo (Id) (Kovacheva & Toshkov 1991, 11) is similar to the archaeomagnetic date retrieved from oven 1 at Balgarchevo.

Additionally, one more very roughly made object (fig. 4.1) was found next to the eastern side of oven 1. It has cylindrical shape with two grooves on the rim and a flat base. At first, this object was interpreted as a chimney (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, 75), but with the existence of a base this interpretation is no longer valid.

The second category of vessels consists of only three pots assigned to the fine ware. The first is a cylindrical-conical bowl with a gently oblique rim, flat bottom, and brown polished surface (fig. 5.2). The bowl was found between the western wall of oven 1 and a grinding stone facility (No. 1). The second vessel is a bowl with a rounded biconical body and flat bottom. The outer surface is black, very well polished, and decorated by very shallow channeling (of the herringbone type?) from the bottom up (fig. 5.3). This vessel was found in the eastern part of the house below the platform. The third fine ware vessel is a bowl with an S-shaped profile and flat bottom. The surface is dark polished decorated with a light brown stripe below the rim (fig. 5.1). Fragments of this vessel were found dispersed in the western part of the house.

The third vessel category consists of ordinary ceramics with medium thick walls (7–8 to 10 mm), mostly brown, well smoothed or even burnished. Two forms predominate among the completely preserved vessels:

- Hemispherical bowls (14 pcs.) (figs. 6.9, 15, 16; 7.1, 2) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.32.1–11). They have flat bottom and gently rounded body. Almost all of these vessels have one specific feature – oblique rim, probably dictated by practical reasons to facilitate the emptying of their contents;

- Jars with 5 lugs (9 pcs.) (fig. 7.4–11) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.33.1–4; 4.34.1–4). They have rounded or elongated bodies, cylindrical necks, and various combinations of small vertical and horizontal lugs. Generally, stacked pairs of vertically perforated lugs are located on the most convex part of the body on opposite sides, while a single lug is located between them, which may be vertically or horizontally perforated. Only two jars of this type present differently perforated lugs: the upper lugs in a stacked pair are horizontal while the lower ones are vertical, but the opposite single lug is horizontally pierced. Additionally, one pot found in the southeastern corner of the dwelling, below the platform, has an opposite single lug decorated by an incised zigzag line. These pots

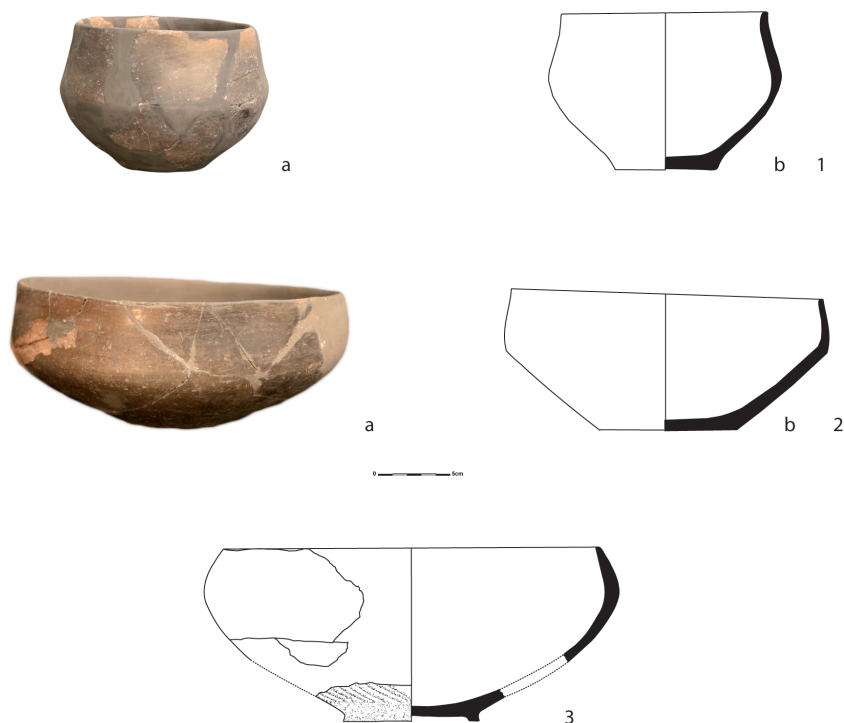


Figure 5. Fine vessels discovered on the first floor of house 1.

were probably suspended by their lugs and served for pouring liquids (note the existence of the narrow neck). The method of attachment is easy to understand in most cases, but is not immediately obvious in the cases presenting differently perforated lugs.

Jars with five lugs, such as those described, are characteristic of the Starčevo culture. In the Middle Struma Valley, they appear in the second half of the Early Neolithic, and are contemporaneous with dark painted pottery. At Vaksevo, however, similar vessels were found also in horizons I and II alongside white painted pottery (Chohadzhiev 2001, figs. 9 and 28b). Also, vessels with 5 lugs, very often having the shape of askoi, were found at Madzari (Sanev 1988, sl. 5; Zdravkovski 2013, 284), Zelenikovo I, house I (Garašanin & Bilbija 1988, sl. 5B), Vrbjanska čuka (Mitkoski 2005, 39T.VIII, 47), Govrlevo (Fidanoski 2012, sl. 48–50), and in Pelagonia (North Macedonia). At Madzari and Zelenikovo I, they were found together with dark painted pottery dated to the Anzabegovo–Vršnik IV period, the end of the Middle Neolithic in North Macedonia (Garašanin & Bilbija 1988, 38). However, this dating has recently been changed to the earlier Anzabegovo–Vršnik II–III and III period (Zdravkovski 2013, 289; Stojanova-Kanzurova 2011, 36). In North Macedonia, most of these pots have the form of askoi and there is flat surface between the two lug pairs which facilitates their transporting on the back. Only at Zelenikovo I and Govrlevo, the pots with 5 lugs are very close to those from Balgarchevo.

Other complete ordinary vessels found in house 1 are single specimens (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.34.5):

- Askoi with four lugs (fig. 7.3); this shape is most widespread in North Macedonia during the dark painted pottery period (Fidanoski 2011);

- Jars with long neck and four handles or lugs imitating handles located on the most convex part of the body (3 pcs., fig. 6.10–12) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.31.4–6);

- Jar with S-shaped profile and highly tilted outward neck (fig. 7.6) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.31.1);

- Spherical vessel with a handle (2 pcs., fig. 6.13, 14) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.31.7, 12);

- Ladle with a handle (fig. 6.6) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.31.2);

- Very roughly made small bowl and three dishes (fig. 6.1, 2, 4, 5) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, fig. 4.31.7, 12);

- Rusticated dish (fig. 6.17) (Pernicheva-Perets et al. 2011, Fig. 4.30.7).

It is noteworthy that conical bowls – so popular at other sites – are absent among the complete vessels found in the house.

Most of the vessels (11 pcs.) were located around oven 1 and the associated grinding stone facility. The second cluster (6 pcs.) was found around oven 2 and the associated grinding stone facility. The third and least dense cluster (3 pcs.) was found under the collapsed platform in the southeastern part of the house.

Along with the ceramic vessels, different stone and bone tools as well as cult objects make up the mobile household inventory.

Fourteen stone tools were found: 11 adzes, two pieces of ochre, a smoother, and three whetstones (figs. 8 and 9). The adzes were dispersed mainly in the southern and southwestern part of the house. Three of them were placed directly below vessels; one adze was placed under the largest pithos in the SW corner of the dwelling, while two adzes were placed under a jar with five lugs, next to the eastern part of oven 1. Two adzes were deposited on a stone alongside both pieces of ochre, next to the southern wall of the house. The rest of the adzes were located in the southern part of the dwelling between the vessels, while only one was found in the southeastern part of the house. A single stone smoother (fig. 9.1) was placed directly beneath one of the vessels next to oven 1, and as such notably shares similar location as three of the stone adzes. Three whetstones were found, one of them with seven grooves, probably produced during the manufacturing of bone awls (fig. 9.2). It was found in the northwestern part of the dwelling, near the ‘barn’, while two others (fig. 9.3, 5) were dispersed on the clay platform in the eastern part of the house.

Four bone tools were uncovered: three awls and a sleeve (fig. 10). Two awls (fig. 10.1, 3) were found in the southwestern part of the house, close to grinding stone facility 1, while a third with an almond shape (fig. 10.2) was found in the NW part of the house.



Figure 6. Ordinary vessels discovered on the first floor of house 1.



Figure 7. Ordinary vessels discovered on the first floor of house 1.

This particular awl has a very symmetrical almond-like shape and may also be interpreted as an arrowhead. The sleeve was found under the platform in the southeastern part of the dwelling.

The cult objects are as follows: two ceramic figurines, a ceramic mask, a ceramic altar, and an anthropomorphic vessel (figs. 11 and 12).

One of the anthropomorphic figurines represents a pregnant woman with big and floppy belly and breasts (figs. 11.1 and 12.1). An incised zigzag line passes between the breasts and probably continues up to the face. The figurine is covered with white paint and was subsequently burnt in a strong fire. An interesting feature is the presence of a horizontal perforation passing along the entire width of the body. The perforation suggests that the figurine may have been worn as a pendant or alternatively was suspended inside of the house. This representation of the female body resembles other figurines from Anatolia, in particular from Çatalhöyük, Hacilar, Höyücek, and Kuruçay (Nakamura & Meskell 2009; Hansen 2007, Taf. 57.10–12; 61.1; 74.2), and is not so common in the Balkan Early Neolithic, with the exception of some anthropomorphic house models in North Macedonia (Fidanoski 2012, sl. 58) and figurines from Southern Greece and Thessaly (Hansen 2007, 96.3; 97.3,8; 99.2,3). At Balgarchevo, among the numerous Early Neolithic figurines (Pernicheva 2008), this is the only one with such a representation.

The second figurine has a very long neck smoothly passing into the head with applied nose and incised eyes (figs. 11.2 and 12.2). This form is typical for the Early Neolithic in the Balkans. Such representations are very popular in Balgarchevo I (Pernicheva 2007, 82–91) and in the neighboring contemporaneous settlements along the Struma (Kovačevo, Sapareva banya, Vaksevo, Kocherinovo, Mursalevo, Galabnik), Vardar (Anza-



Figure 8. Stone adzes discovered on the first floor of house 1.

begovo, Zelenikovo I, Madzari) and Mesta (Dobrinishte) Valleys (Lichardus et al: 2002, pl. 22; Chohadzhiev 2001, ris. 91.3, 92.5, and 93.8; Hansen 2007, Taf. 136.3; 143.3; 160.1–4, 6; 162.1, 3, 9; and 167.1–7). Both figurines emphasize two different cultural traditions in the representation of the human body. The mask represents human face (figs. 11.3 and 12.3) and is made of clay with a notable amount of organic temper. The face is covered with a layer of white paint. Impressions of wood are still visible on the back side, indicating that the mask was likely affixed to a wooden pole or some other type of wooden superstructure. Two similar masks, also with wood impressions on their back sides, were found at Balgarchevo in other Early Neolithic dwellings. A similar tradition of attaching human clay figurines or masks inside houses was registered at least at one other Early Neolithic settlement (Ilindentsi) in the Struma Valley.

The ceramic altar (fig. 11.4) (or tentatively called ‘house model’) is quite fragmented, but similar objects were found at other contemporaneous settlements providing an indication of its appearance when complete. The fragment represents a circular base with a wall positioned on a hollow pedestal (stool). The upper part is open. A similar object is found in Kovachevo in layers dated to the Final Early Neolithic period Kovachevo Id (Pernicheva, Kulov 2011). Pernicheva interprets it as a portable altar and not as a house model. A second similar object, defined as a house model, however, was found in a burnt house at Galabnik (Pavuk & Bakamska 2014, Abb. 34) dating to the Galabnik III period with dark painted pottery.



Figure 9. Stone tools discovered on the first floor of house 1: (1) smoother; (2, 3, and 5) whetstones; (4) ochre.

Lastly, the anthropomorphic vessel (fig. 12.4) is a small jar with a biconical body and cylindrical neck having four lugs below the rim. It depicts a human face. The surface is black and polished.

The clay mask and the anthropomorphic vessel were found in the western part of the house, around oven 2, while the other cult objects (altar and two figurines) were scattered under the platform in the eastern part of the house.



Figure 10. Bone tools discovered on the first floor of house 1: (1–3) awls; (4) sleeve.



Figure 11. Cult objects discovered on the first floor of house 1: (1 and 2) anthropomorphic ceramic figurines; (3) ceramic mask; (4) ceramic altar.

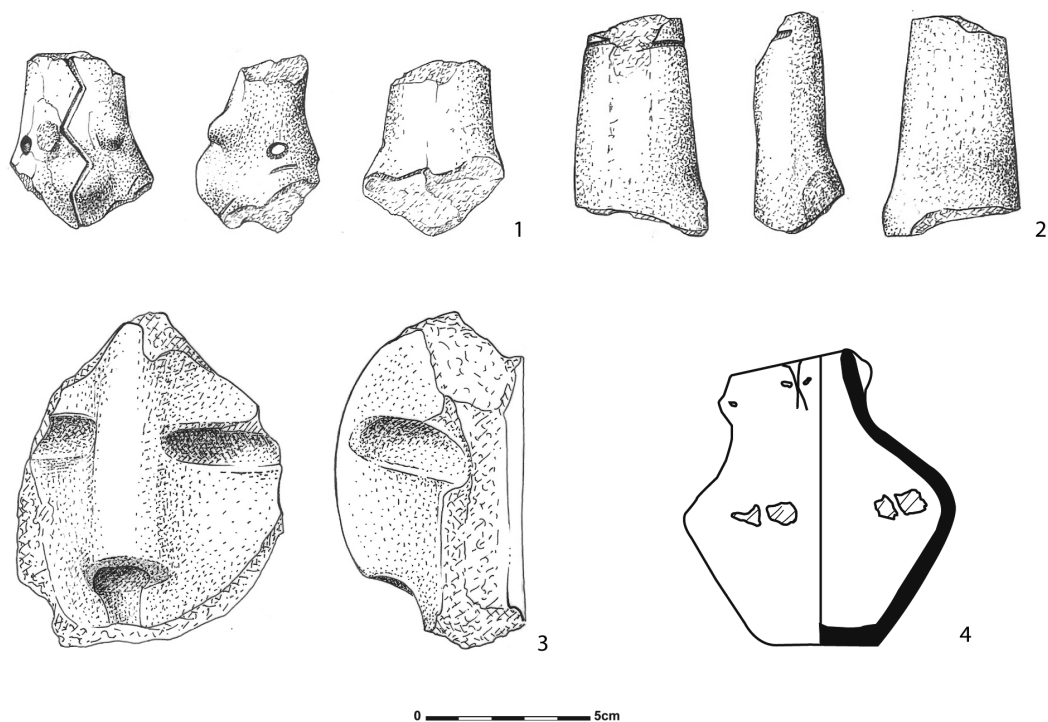


Figure 12. Cult objects discovered on the first floor of house 1: (1 and 2) anthropomorphic ceramic figurines; (3) ceramic mask; (4) anthropomorphic vessel.

Conclusion

The investigations of the burnt dwelling (house 1) at Balgarchevo allowed for the precise observation of architectural features and on the internal distribution of its inventory.

Firstly, some spaces are completely devoid of mobile inventory, such as the northern ground level zone of the house. The assumption that this area primarily served as a dormitory is supported by the absence of evidence pertaining to other household activities. It should be noted, however, that the remains from the northern ground level zone are obscured and have primarily been associated to the final construction phase of house 1. As such, we do not have precise information about its inventory during the second construction phase.

A limited number of vessels were uncovered in the 'barn', located in the NW sector of the dug-in area. These occur mainly in the southern periphery. Only one vessel was found in its NW corner, where quite a substantial amount of wheat and lentil grains were also discovered in the notable absence of a pithoi.

The greatest amount of mobile inventory is concentrated in the southern part of the house. The quadrangular pithoi certainly served for storing grain, as a large quantity

of grain was found in its direct vicinity. Contrastingly, in the SW corner where the rounded pithoi were located there were no seeds or grain. Perhaps these rounded pithoi then served for storing water?

In the house, two forms of vessels were predominant: hemispherical bowls and jugs with five handles. Almost all of the hemispherical bowls have oblique mouths. This is a particularly interesting feature, seeing as how it has not been noted on other contemporaneous sites. The second in popularity are jars with five handles. The placement of the handles suggests that the vessels were hung from the ceiling and probably were filled with water, and so the handles facilitated its outflow. These vessels are characteristic for the region. Some of these vessels present an asymmetrical shape of the body strongly resembling askoi.

The so-called 'fine ware' types also served for everyday use and differ only in their thoroughly treated surfaces. Numerous fragments of rustic dishes were found in the interior of the house and one was fully preserved. It has a large size and could not have been inserted into the ovens due to the small size of their openings (0.40 m x 0.20 m). The same observation may be extended and applied to most of the vessels in the inventory. The ovens in this house thus served rather for heating, while cooking must have been done elsewhere outside of the house.

The position of the vessels found around oven 1 suggests that they were located above floor level; these were either hung (pots with 5 lugs) or placed on shelves (bowls). This could also explain the existence of a partition wall between the two ovens, to which shelves may have been attached on both sides.

The location of the stone tools is quite interesting, as three adzes and one smoother were positioned directly beneath vessels. The intentional placement of these stone tools is thus indicated. Special placement of adzes has also been observed in at least one other Early Neolithic settlement (Ilindentsi-Masovets) where some adzes were found positioned directly on top of filled in pits. Most likely, in these cases, we are observing the material remains of ancient rituals (Grębska-Kulow & Whitford 2016).

Cult objects are grouped in two locations within the dwelling: around oven 2 and under the platform in the eastern part of the house. The cult objects are quite different and rather dispersed, eliminating the possibility that a special section of the house was intently isolated specifically for the performance of ritual and/or religious practices.

Overall, the spatial arrangement of inventory items recorded in house 1 at Balgarchevo sheds light on the nature and distribution of household activities during the Early Neolithic of the area. Notably, the absence of an intentionally isolated space used specifically for the performance of ritual practices within the household suggests that a not so ridged division exists between the sacred and the mundane. Items commonly classified as sacred, such as figurines, altars, and masks were found dispersed within the dwelling and are in most cases associated with items more typically viewed as mundane, such as ordinary vessels, pithoi, ovens, and grinding stone facilities. Additionally, artifacts more usual-

ly classified as serving particular economic functions, such as stone adzes and smoothers, were found placed directly beneath large pithoi effectively transcending the boundaries of their economic interpretation. Such items then also may hold symbolic value. The architectural characteristics and mobile inventory of house 1 in Balgarchevo show a great deal of similarities with some contemporaneous settlements in the the Struma (Kovačevo Id, Vaksevo III, and Galabnik III) and Vardar (Zelenikovo I, Madzari) Valleys. At the villages of the Upper Struma and at Balgarchevo, the period is defined with the appearance of dark painted ceramics attributed to Starčevo III-IV, while at Kovačevo a local evolution with the preservation of the white painted pottery tradition persists until the end of the Early Neolithic. It is also quite possible that its cultural characteristics are very close to the prehistoric settlement at Mursalevo, judging by preliminary publications (Nikolov et al. 2015). In the Vardar Valley, the Anzabegovo III – Vršnik cultural group develops in this period as a southern variant of the Starčevo cultural complex. In the Middle Struma Valley, this cultural phenomenon is defined as the Anzabegovo-Kremenik culture (Nikolov 1999). It is then apparent that both regions (*i.e.*, the Struma and Vardar valleys) were populated by groups of people presenting very similar aspects of material culture.

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