

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
National Institute of Archaeology and Museum

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FROM THE EDITOR

The eighteenth volume of *Studia Praehistorica* is now online, having traditionally – and purposedly – been ready just before the holidays. It's admittedly smaller than usual but includes papers that explore the results of significant projects providing crucial insights into the prehistory of Southeast Europe such as a re-examination of the role of open-air areas in the Neolithic of northern Greece, a synopsis of the Tash Bair Project in northeast Bulgaria, and a microregional study in the Middle Struma Valley. Another article introduces a previously unpublished, uncommon anthropomorph from Upper Thrace. And last but not least, for those of our readers who haven't had the chance to attend the recently held World Neolithic Congress in Sanliurfa, Türkiye – but also for congress participants who've missed some details or wouldn't mind refreshing their memories – we've provided an extensive review of that magnificent event, complete with a profusion of images.

The full digital version of volume 18 is available for reading or download at our website. Enjoy it.

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BEYOND THE *OIKOS*: YARDS, KITCHEN AREAS, AND THE MANIPULATION OF OUTDOOR SPACE IN NEOLITHIC GREECE

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Abstract

This paper challenges the traditional focus on indoor spaces in Neolithic archaeology by examining the role of open-air areas in daily life. It approaches open-air spaces as active zones of Neolithic daily life in northern Greece and contributes to an updated narrative of community formation in the region. The study examines 37 excavated sites and explores how localized, socio-cultural assemblages exhibit significant diversity, pointing to varied forms of collective structures rather than unified community groups. The results of this study do not suggest marked contrasts in spatial expressions between the earlier and the later phases of the Neolithic, indicating that social coherence was achieved through various communal quotidian and special, individual and collective performances, in both the domestic–private and communal–public spheres. The study looks at the location of combustion features, such as hearths, ovens, fire pits and kilns in the settlements as a proxy to understand the dynamics of open-air spaces and their contribution to the formation of social life. The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that open-air spaces were actively manipulated by people and constituted significant social arenas for everyday routines, workshops, communal gatherings, and social interactions, all of which played a key role in the formation of community traditions, collective identities, and social cohesion.

Keywords: Neolithic – northern Greece – open-air spaces – daily life – public spheres – combustion features – communal dynamics – social coherence.

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Introduction

The last thirty years have seen increased archaeological research in Greece, mainly due to large-scale, development-led public works (Pappa & Bessios 1999; Chondroyianni-Metoki 2009; Toufexis 2016; Ziota 2014). The discovery of new sites and recent advances in archaeological methodology have transformed established perceptions in the discipline, changing our views on aspects as diverse as the various forms of material culture, social organization, labor division, production and specialization, networks and interactions, which have contributed to an overall re-assessment of Neolithic communities in southeast Europe (Bailey & Whittle 2008; Whittle 2011 and 2017; Sarris et al. 2017; Shennan 2018; Chapman 2020). In Greek Neolithic research, *oikos*, the house as a physical construction and the household as a concept and analytical unit, holds a key role in the study of social space, as an agent of traditions, social reproduction, and community coherence (Halstead 1999; Kotsakis 1999 and 2014; Efstratiou 2007; Souvatzi 2008a; Nanoglou 2008; Kalogiropoulou & Ziota 2014). On the contrary, outdoor open-air spaces remain considerably underrepresented and undertheorized. The analytical scheme of ‘wild and untamed’ outdoor spaces as opposed to the indoor domesticated areas has dominated the research agenda and has created lasting interpretations in social archaeology (Hodder 1990). Current debate, however, approaches outdoor spaces as multi-task venues and recognizes their dynamic contribution to the formation of social production, daily life, and community (Byrd 1994 and 2000; Bickle & Kalogiropoulou 2017; Kalogiropoulou et al., in press). Research has identified a growing number of outdoor activities taking place in Neolithic settlements in the region, such as gardening and cultivation plots (Bogaard 2005; Jones 2005), herding (Koromila et al. 2017), pyrotechnological activities like cooking and pottery production (Kalogiropoulou et al. 2023; Kyparissi-Apostolika et al. 2022), trackways and fences (Giagkoulis 2020), burial grounds (Stratouli et al. 2020) and designated discard areas (Chondroyianni-Metoki 2009; Chrysostomou & Giagkoulis 2018).

The aim of this paper is to produce an overview of the various combustion practices identified outside building contexts, in the open-air settlement spaces during the Neolithic. I focus on northern Greece,¹ including Macedonia and Western Thrace, where a dense concentration of Neolithic sites provides a rich data set for examination. My research has concentrated on diverse pyrotechnological activity areas, projected at varied scales, working interchangeably between intra- and inter-site analysis, and looking at both the local and the regional contexts. In this study, I consider outdoor spaces as arenas of different daily routines, workshop production, communal gathering and interactions that played a key role in the formation of community traditions, collective identities, and cohesion. Combustion features, such as hearths, ovens, fire pits and kilns, constitute the main analytical tool that controls outdoor arrangements, creating focal points of domestic and

¹ Throughout the paper I use the names of the three administrative regions in northern Greece – eastern, central, and western Macedonia – to show the location of the Neolithic sites as distributed in this broad area.

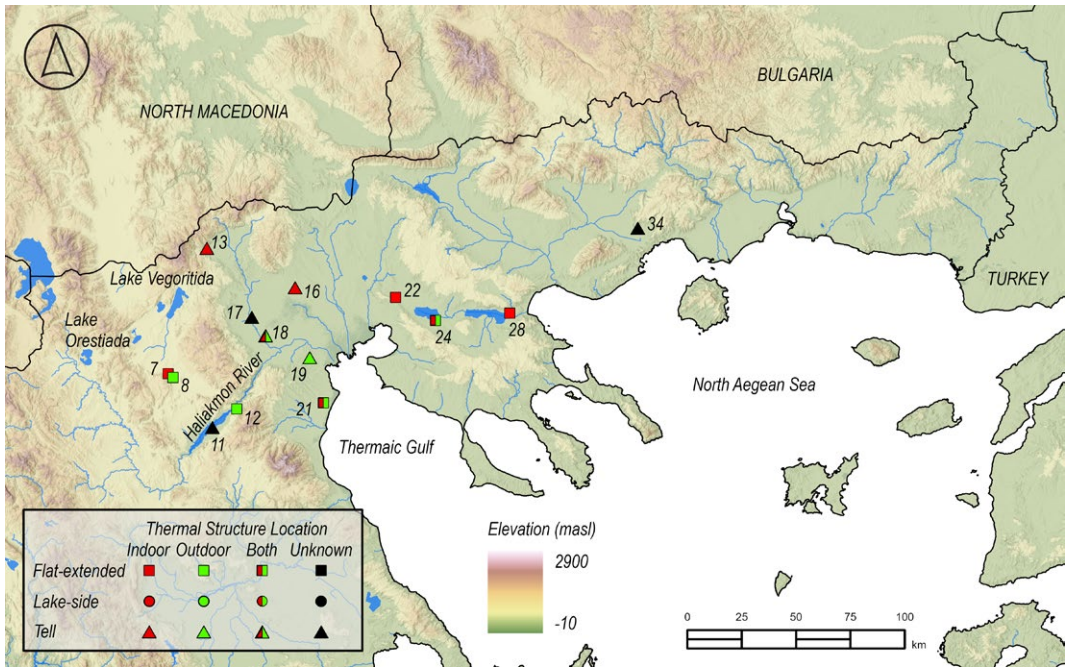


Figure 1. Map of Northern Greece showing the selection of Early Neolithic sites. For the sites listed, see also Table 1: (7) Mavropigi-Filotsairi, (11) Servi, (12) Paliambela Roditi, (13) Sossandra, (17) Plyplatanos, (18) Nea Nikomedeia, (19) Paliambela Kolindros, (21) Revenia, (22) Lete I & III, (24) Koroneia, and (28) Mikri Volvi. Image Credit: J. Donati.

workshop routines that tackle questions of daily performativity, commensality, interaction, and social reproduction. Approaching outdoor settlement arrangements contributes to grasping variability in the study of social space, unfolds the complexity and diversity of Neolithic lifeways and produces an updated and inclusive narrative for the dynamics of the communities in the region. The study examines 37 excavated sites from northern Greece and explores how localized, socio-cultural assemblages exhibit significant diversity, pointing to varied forms of collective structures rather than unified community groups (figs. 1 & 2; table 1). The results of this study do not suggest marked contrasts in spatial expressions between the earlier and the later phases of the Neolithic, indicating that social coherence was achieved through various communal quotidian and special, individual and collective performances, in both the domestic–private and communal–public spheres. The paper is crucial for understanding social developments in the region in the sixth and fifth millennia cal BC, with an emphasis on the socio-cultural changeover from the Middle (5600 to 5300 cal BC) to the Late Neolithic (5300 to 4500 cal BC).¹

¹ The paper follows the Greek chronology system of the Neolithic after Papathanassopoulos 1996: Early Neolithic (EN), 6800 to 5600 cal BC; Middle Neolithic (MN), 5600 to 5300 cal BC; Late Neolithic (LN), 5300 to 4500 cal BC; and Final Neolithic (FN), 4500 to 3300 cal BC.

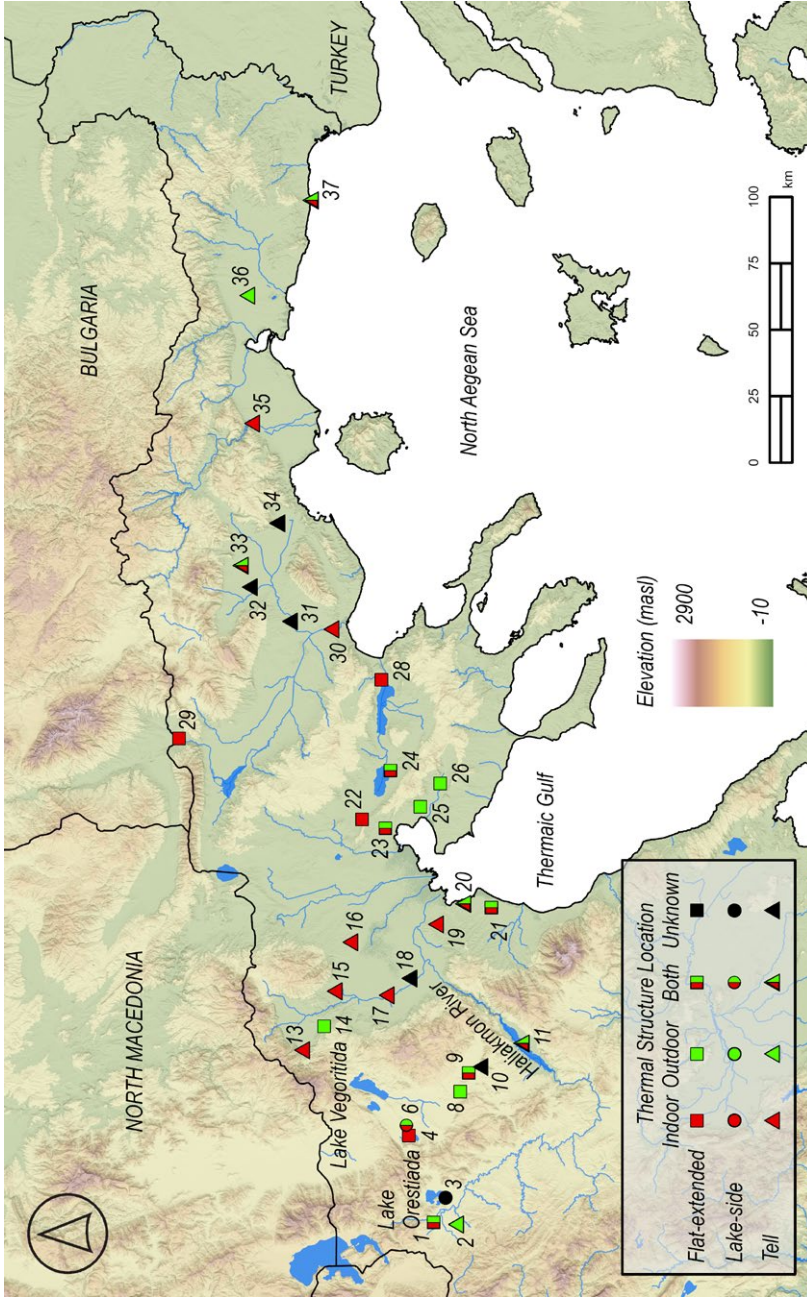


Figure 2. Map of Northern Greece showing the selection of Middle and Late Neolithic sites. For the sites listed, see also Table 1: (1) Trita Koronias, (2) Avgi I & II, (3) Dispilio, (4) Limnorchori III, (6) Anargyroi IXb, (8) Souloukia-Pontokomis, (9) Kleitos 1 & 2, (10) Megalo Nisi Galanis, (13) Sossandra, (14) Apsalos-Grammi, (15) Mandalo, (16) Giannitsa B, (17) Polyplatanos, (18) Nea Nikomedeia, (19) Paliambela, (20) Makriyalos, (21) Revenia, (22) Lete I & III, (23) Stavroupoli, (24) Koroneia, (25) Thermi B, (26) Vasilika Kyparissi, (28) Mikri Volvi, (30) Kryoneri, (31) Dimitra, (32) Sitagroi, (33) Arkadikos, (34) Dikili Tash, (35) Paradeisos, (36) Paradimi, and (37) Makri. Image Credit: J. Donati.

ID	Site	Location	Periods	Settlement type	Open-air spaces	TS location
	Macedonia & Western Thrace					
1	Trita Koromilias	Kastoria	LN	flat-extended	loose	indoors & outdoors
2	Avgi I & II	Kastoria	MN/ LN	flat-extended	loose	outdoors
3	Dispilio	Kastoria	MN/LN	lake-side site	loose	indoors & outdoors
4	Limnochori III	Florina	LN	flat-extended		indoors
5	Anargyroi III	Florina	FN	flat-extended	loose	indoors
6	Anargyroi IXb	Florina	LN	lake-side site	loose/ trackways	indoors & outdoors
7	Mavropigi-Filotsairi	Kozani	EN	flat-extended		indoors
8	Souloukia-Pontokomis	Kozani	EN/MN	tell		outdoors
9	Kleitros I & 2	Kozani	LN/FN	flat-extended	loose/ sheltered spaces	indoors & outdoors
10	Megalo Nisi Galanis	Kozani	LN	tell	?	?
11	Servia	Kozani	EN/MN/LN	tell	loose/ yards & sheltered spaces	indoors & outdoors
12	Paliambela Roditi	Kozani	EN	?	?	outdoors
13	Sossandra	Pella	EN/LN	tell	x	indoors
14	Apsalos Grammi	Pella	MN	flat-extended	loose	outdoors
15	Mandalo	Pella	LN	tell	dense	indoors
16	Giannitsa B	Giannitsa	EN/MN/LN	tell	?	indoors
17	Polyplatanos	Imathia	EN/LN	tell	?	indoors
18	Nea Nikomedeia	Imathia	EN/LN	tell	dense	indoors & outdoors
19	Paliambela	Kolindros	EN/MN	tell & flat-extended	pebbled-paved yards	x
20	Makriyalos	Pieria	LN	flat-extended	loose pebbled-paved yards	indoors & outdoors

Table 1. *Selected Neolithic sites in northern Greece that demonstrate evidence of social space arrangements, indoors and outdoors (continued on the next page).*

ID	Site	Location	Periods	Settlement type	Open-air spaces	TS location
	Macedonia & Western Thrace					
21	Revenia	Corinos	EN/LN	flat-extended	loose	indoors
22	Lete I & III	Langadas	MN	flat-extended	loose	indoors
23	Stavroupoli	Thessaloniki	MN/LN	flat-extended	loose/stone-paved yard	indoors & outdoors
24	Koroneia	Langadas	EN/MN/LN	flat-extended	?	indoors & outdoors
25	Thermi B	Thessaloniki	MN/LN	flat-extended	loose/stone-paved yard	outdoors
26	Vasilika Kyparissi	Halkidiki	MN/LN	flat-extended	?	outdoors
27	Olynthos	Halkidiki	FN	tell	x	x
28	Mikri Volvi	Langadas	EN/MN	flat-extended	loose?	indoors
29	Promachonas-Topolnitsa	Serres – Blagoevgrad	LN	flat-extended	loose/clay & stone paved areas	indoors
30	Kryoneri	Nea Kardyfia	LN	tell	?	indoors
31	Dimitra	Serres	MN/LN	tell	x	?
32	Sitagroï	Drama	LN/MN/FN	tell	?	outdoors
33	Arkadikos	Drama	MN/LN	tell	sheltered space	indoors & outdoors
34	Dikili Tash	Kavala	EN/MN/LN	tell	dense rubbish area yards	indoors & outdoors
35	Paradeisos	Kavala	LN	tell	?	indoors
36	Paradimi	Komotini	MN/LN	tell	?	outdoors
37	Makri	Alexandroupoli	MN/LN	tell	?	indoors & outdoors

Table 1. Selected Neolithic sites in northern Greece that demonstrate evidence of social space arrangements, indoors and outdoors.

Walling off the household: open household dynamics

It has been suggested that the rise of the autonomous household in southeast Europe by the mid-fifth millennium cal BC demonstrates a discernible shift in terms of social coherence that eventually weakened the bonds of community (Chapman 1989, 1990, and 2020; Tringham 2000; Kuijt et al. 2011). A dominant model of social developments in Neolithic Greece has suggested marked alterations in daily domestic dynamics, resulting in the gradual architectural isolation of the household during the Late and the Final Neolithic, 5300–3300 cal BC (Halstead 1994, 1995, and 1999; Kotsakis 1999, 2014, and 2020). According to the proposed model, these changes culminated in walling off the household in favor of communally oriented living strategies during the Early and Middle Neolithic. These strategies were acknowledged by the widespread location of cooking facilities both indoors and outdoors, between buildings, yards, and open-air communal spaces. The Late and Final Neolithic, however, were marked by the progressive separation of the household from these social arenas and the relocation of kitchen spaces in enclosed units. Competition among households and increasing privatization in community lifestyles during the later stages of the Neolithic materialized a shift from an ideology of sharing to an ideology of hoarding that gradually weakened social unity (Halstead 1995 and 1999; Kotsakis 1999 and 2018). Based on these early observations, there was a marked contrast in the location of combustion features between the earlier and the mature phases of Neolithic in the region. During the last two decades, however, the great volume of new evidence unearthed in northern Greece shows that household dynamics during the Late Neolithic preserved earlier traditions of sharing and visibility of cooking practices with plenty of evidence for household variability (Valamoti 2005; Nanoglou 2008; Souvatzis 2008b; Kalogiropoulou 2013 and 2014; Bickle et al. 2016). The interplay between indoors and outdoors, private and public, continued to shape the loose boundaries of domestic space as recorded in earlier phases. Reassessing the body of new findings, my study suggests that spaces constitute arenas of varied performativities that resist neat chronological and cultural classifications, which stresses the impact of local and regional choices in the development of daily living and consequently in the formation of individual and collective social spaces.

Exploring outdoor spaces in Neolithic northern Greece: a synthesis

The assemblage of selected sites is formed by excavated settlements that have provided us with indoors and outdoors spatial information. Settlements offer a body of evidence where remains of buildings, workshop spaces, yards, pathways, and various outdoor constructions have been identified. Data coming from surveys and caves are not included in this study. Diversity in the extent of the excavated area is noted, as the selected settlements vary from small-scale trial trenches to large-scale excavation projects. Tells and flat-extended sites have been the primary settlement type in the study area, together with lakeside sites that have been included in the sample.

The Early Neolithic (EN) in northern Greece provides limited evidence on spatial patterns mainly due to small-scale excavations of irregularly distributed sites. A selection of 12 sites demonstrates a variety of forms of habitation, which could have stemmed from diverse social traditions (table 1; fig. 1). Due to limited data, the EN in northern Greece cannot to date provide much information on the intra-site spatial organization of outdoor spaces, including patterns in the distribution of kitchen spaces. Architectural remains of structures or other domestic features are lacking from Dikili Tash in Kavala (Malamidou et al. 2017), Servia–Varytimides Kozanis (Ridley et al. 2000), and Polyplatanos Imathias (Merousis & Stefani 2000), while scattered finds of combustion features were recorded at outdoor spaces in Paliambela Roditi and Souloukia Pontokomi in Kozani. Although more than eight buildings were found at Yiannitsa B on the Yiannitsa plain, the evidence for spatial arrangements is scarce and inconsistent, due to incomplete publication data and deficient chronological reference points (Chrysostomou 1989, 1991, 1993, 1996, and 2003; Chrysostomou & Chrysostomou 1990). Bedrock installations used as mortars for food preparation that involved grinding grains, pounding and dehusking are recorded at the EN site of Paliambela Kolindros (Tsartsidou & Kotsakis 2020). These installations were probably found in open-air spaces of the settlement suggesting outdoor cooking and household routines in the community. On the other hand, Nea Nikomedeia Imathias is a site that allows intra-site spatial analysis of outdoor and domestic kitchen spaces, due to the large-scale excavation of an area of 1690 m² (Rodden 1965; Wardle 1996). Thermal structures at Nea Nikomedeia were identified both indoors and outdoors in direct connection with designated buildings, suggesting direct association with individual households, rather than shared operations by community groups. Spatial diversity of cooking facilities inside and outside buildings indicated varied cooking practices and traditions (Perlès 2001, 196). Given the shortage of evidence, comparing spatial data for the location of combustion practices produces fragmented stories for the use of outdoor spaces in the EN in Greece. The identification of cooking facilities both indoors and outdoors suggests diverse spatial arrangements for cooking and domestic routines favoring mixed ideologies of sharing and hoarding that were not dominant.

In the Middle Neolithic (MN), open-air spaces in northern Greece were in flux, lacking systematic and recurrent forms of spatial arrangements, which suggests an opportunistic organization of daily routines in the settlements. As opposed to the variability recorded for the organization of outdoor settlement areas and kitchen spaces in the EN, a selection of 19 MN sites shows a marked preference for practices taking place outdoors (table 1; fig. 2). Cooking facilities were found both inside and outside buildings, with a preference for the extension of household practices outdoors, either close to buildings directly associated with them, as in the case of Avgi I in Kastoria (Kalogiropoulou 2013; Stratouli et al. 2020), or in visible communal areas, as in the cases of Trita Koromilias in Kastoria (Stratouli et al. 2019) and Souloukia-Pontokomis in Kozani (Stroulia et al. 2022). Seven sites from the selected assemblage demonstrated domestic cooking routines

outdoors: Avgi I, Souloukia Pontokomis, Apsalos Grammi, Thermi B, Vassilika Kyparissi, Sitagroi, and Paradimi (table 1). Additionally, spatial arrangements of domestic routines and cooking facilities distributed both indoors and outdoors have been identified at seven of the sites: Dispilio, Servia, Stavroupoli, Koroneia, Arkadikos, Dikili Tash, and Makri (table 1). Only three MN sites organized their kitchen spaces indoors: Sossandra in Pieria (Georgiadou 2015) and the settlements of Lete I and III in the Langadas Basin in central Macedonia (Tzanavari & Filis 2002). At the MN settlement of Paradimi in Komotini in Western Thrace, thermal installations have exclusively been found in the open-air spaces, in direct association with the buildings, possibly suggesting extension of the household outdoors in favor of visible and semi-public domestic and cooking routines (Bakalakis & Sakellariou 1981). In central Macedonia, the large-scale excavations at Thermi B exposed widespread parts of a flat-extended settlement. The site had irregularly scattered habitation clusters with open-air spaces at intervals that included clay floors, cooking facilities and stone-paved spaces or yards among the buildings (Pappa 2020; Grammenos et al. 1992). The lack of indoor combustion features at the site indicates a preference for the public sphere and possibly signifies cooking as a visible social activity (Byrd 1994; Halstead 1995 and 1999; Hodder 1990; Kalogiropoulou 2014; Kalogiropoulou et al. 2025).

At the site of Grammi in Pella County, western Macedonia, a single oven was found in the open-air space, suggesting the presence of an outdoor kitchen space, which was lacking direct connection to a building (Chrysostomou et al. 2000 and 2001). No combustion features were uncovered in the buildings at Avgi I, and therefore food processing and cooking were taking place outdoors, making household practices visible to the community (Kalogiropoulou 2013; Stratouli et al. 2020, figs. 6 and 12). Cooking facilities at Avgi I were organized either in clusters or as single units, directly or indirectly connected to buildings, indicating that food processing and cooking did not occur in private household contexts but constituted daily routines recurrently taking place in public (Kalogiropoulou 2013). Moreover, at the settlements of Arkadikos in Drama, Stavroupoli in Thessaloniki, and Servia in Kozani, kitchen spaces were organized both indoors in buildings and outdoors in open-air community spaces, suggesting diverse traditions of household routines. Furthermore, pebbled-paved yards were identified at MN Paliambela, demonstrating notable outdoor constructions that put an emphasis on public or communal spatial investments.

The Late Neolithic (LN) shows a diversity of intra-site spatial arrangements and demonstrates variability within patterning in intra-site domestic and social spaces. People organized their community spaces both indoors and outdoors, constructing smaller or larger-scale community works to allocate their numerous domestic and communal activities. The selection of 27 LN settlement sites shows mixed spatial arrangements of daily domestic and public routines that were spread between indoors and outdoors (table 1; fig. 2). Space seems to have been more unified than we have seen previously, while out-

door areas were becoming extensions of domestic practices, blurring the boundaries of the household and the public sphere. Social coherence was achieved in daily routines and exceptional events both inside building units and outside in community areas, suggesting fluid and open social living traditions. Cooking facilities were found both inside and outside buildings, showcasing the spatially mixed distribution of daily cooking routines.

Thirteen sites from the selected assemblage organized their cooking spaces both indoors and outdoors: Trita Koromilias, Dispilio, Anargyroi IXb, Kleitos 1 and 2, Servia, Nea Nikomedeia, Makriyalos, Stavroupoli, Koroneia, Arkadikos, Dikili Tash, and Makri (table 1; fig. 2). Additionally, spatial arrangements of strictly outdoor cooking facilities have been recorded at five sites, raising the overall number to 18 settlements with a preference for open-air spaces for daily domestic and cooking routines. Settlements with only outdoor cooking facilities are Avgi II, Thermi B, Vasilika Kyparissi, Sitagroi, and Paradimi (table 1; fig. 2). In contrast to the latter group, nine settlements organized their kitchen spaces indoors: Limnochori, Sossandra, Mandalo, Giannitsa B, Polyplatanos, Revenia, Promachonas-Topolnitsa, Kryoneri, and Paradeisos (table 1; fig. 2). The development of diverse intra-site spatial models of domestic practices indicates the variability of LN social structures and arrangements.

During the last two decades, western Macedonia has been a region of thriving archaeological research that has provided us with abundant evidence of outdoor arrangements. At the LN site of Avgi II in Kastoria, a large assemblage of outdoor cooking facilities was recorded, including clusters of features or individual constructions for daily cooking operations. A designated burial ground was also found outdoors in Avgi II, showing that both variable routines and exceptional practices took place in open-air spaces in the settlement (Triantaphyllou et al. 2010). Moving southeastwards, at the LN settlements of Kleitos 1 and Kleitos 2 in Kozani, we have identified pluralistic models of pyrotechnological management by the community of the settlement (fig. 3). Here combustion features are distributed in different spatial arrangements in the settlement, both indoors and outdoors, revealing diverse spatial settings at both household and settlement scale (Kalogiropoulou & Ziota 2021; Kalogiropoulou et al. 2023). A concentration of large clay basins located centrally in the settlement could be linked to large-scale social events and indicates potential communal use. In the space west of building A, a rich set of thermal structures of different typologies combines the integration of everyday culinary practices with workshop activities, forming complex pyrotechnic palimpsests within the settlement (Kalogiropoulou et al. 2025). The western area of the settlement brought to light clay floors that define designated outdoor activity spaces (Ziota 2014). Additionally, open-air spaces at Kleitos 1 hosted scattered burials, possibly suggesting a social approach of the community to funerary customs (Ziota 2014). Another example of mixed domestic spatial arrangements has been identified at the lakeside site of Anargyroi IXb in Florina County, which has provided us with numerous community works and evidence of management of the open-air space at the settlement. Cooking installations

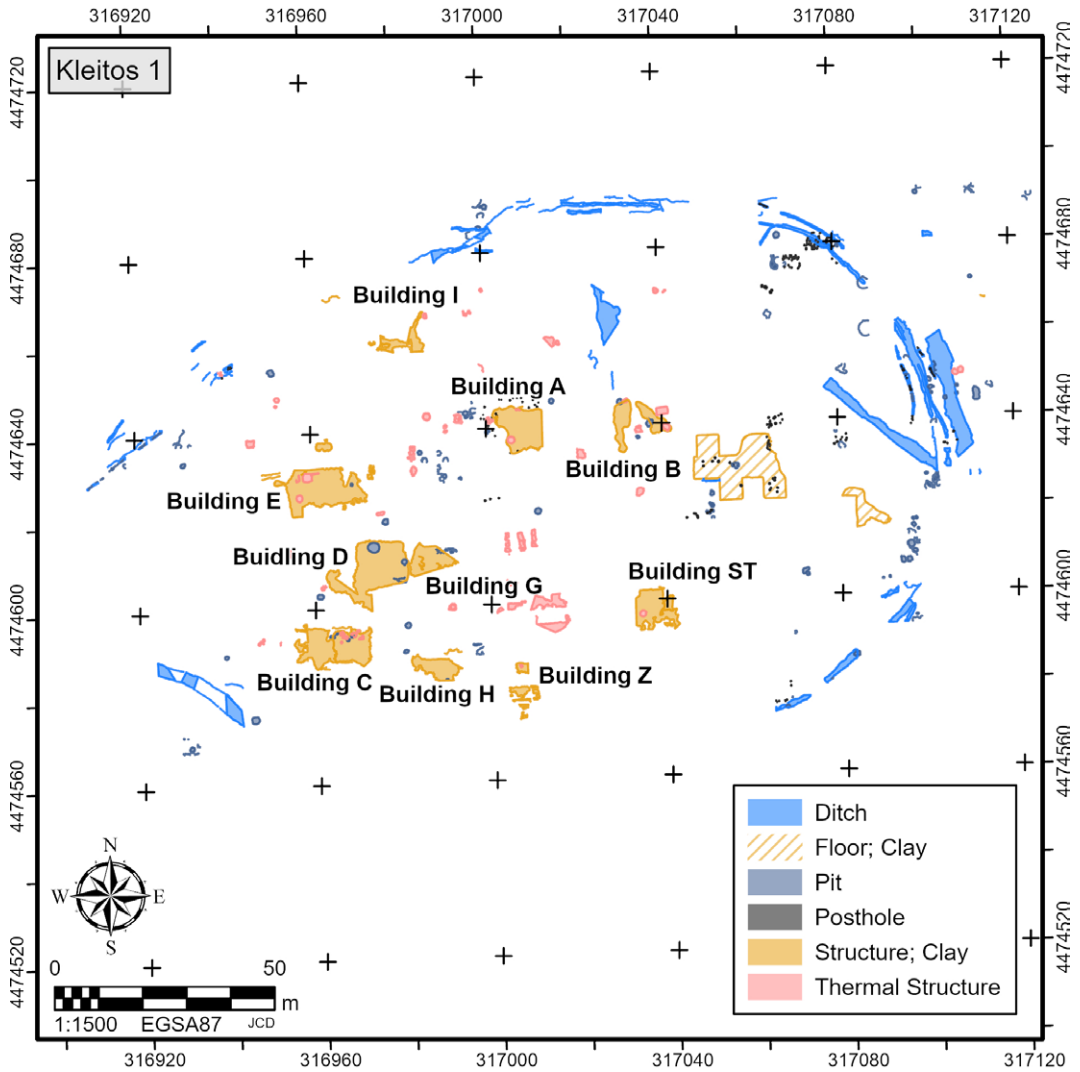


Figure 3. *Layout of the Neolithic settlement site of Kleitos 1 in Kozani, Greece. Image Credit: J. Donati.*

were found both inside dwellings and in the open-air spaces, suggesting a mixed model of daily household routines. The eastern open-air area of the settlement was designated by waste disposals, while its western boundary was marked by wooden fences and trackways leading to the lake. The 122 m long Trackway 3 connected the site of Anargyroi IXb to the neighboring settlement of Anargyroi XI, bringing to light a unique case of large-scale inter-communal public work (Giagkoulis 2020; cf. fig. 5).

In central Macedonia, the prominent LN settlement of Makriyalos in Pieria demonstrates another expression of the spatial organization of cooking operations, where

private/not visible and public/visible spaces were entangled, extending the boundaries of household into the public space (fig. 4). Cooking areas at Makriyalos were placed in shallow pits, allocated directly across pit-dwellings and subjected to public view. These semi-outdoor and semi-private kitchen spaces worked as extensions of household units, adding another proxy to the overall discussion of the spatial distribution of cooking operations in the region (Pappa 2008; Pappa & Bessios 1999; Skourtopoulou 1999; Tsoraki 2007; Urem-Kotsos & Kotsakis 2007). Large borrow pits were scattered across the settlements occupying large open-air public spaces, while ditches enclosed several settlements, creating artificial boundaries and potentially water supply constructions (Pappa 2020). Pebbled-paved yards were also found between pits and pit-dwellings suggesting planned investment of public spatial management. Additionally, the exceptional pit 212 hosted a social event of extreme food consumption and marked a significant outdoor area that brought people together in a large-scale social gathering (Pappa et al. 2004; Halstead 2007; Vaiglova et al. 2018). Two more sites, Stavroupoli and Thermi B in central Macedonia, brought to light designated outdoor stone-paved spaces. These carefully constructed artificial spaces demonstrate preplanning, time and workload investment by the community for the management of outdoor spaces, indicating potential local practices or traditions for the manipulation of outdoor spaces. Additionally, Promachonas-Topolnitsa in east Macedonia and southwest Bulgaria is another LN site with outdoor stone-paved spaces that shows evidence of public investment in outdoor spatial organization (Kazantzis 2018). Finally, at the LN sites of Servia in Kozani and Arkadikos in Drama, cooking facilities were found both indoors and outdoors in yard spaces. Some outdoor features were found covered with wooden shelter constructions that show planning for lasting use of the features (Ridley et al. 2000).

Discussion: outdoor spaces in the spotlight

In *The Construction of Society* Anthony Giddens (1984, 165), aiming to attribute agency and diversity to social developments, suggested that ‘the degree of ‘systemness’ is very variable.’ He argues that social systems should not be understood to designate only clusters of social relations which set clear boundaries from others. Giddens (1984, 164) adds that ‘all societies both are social systems and at the same time are constituted by intersections of multiple social systems.’ Projecting Giddens’s approach for social systems onto Neolithic communities and their social formations, this study argues that the key to understanding social structures and lifeways in dissimilar cultural and social surroundings is to disentangle the diversity of social expressions and to discern variability within patterning to approach social groups and people. Considering that Neolithic communities integrate complex agglomerations of varied agents, traditions, and materialities, this study suggests that we should incorporate the various forms of spatial expressions both in spaces of routine daily operations in private and public contexts, and also in community-wide venues that bring people together in diverse social events. Space has been approached here as a ground that unites people,

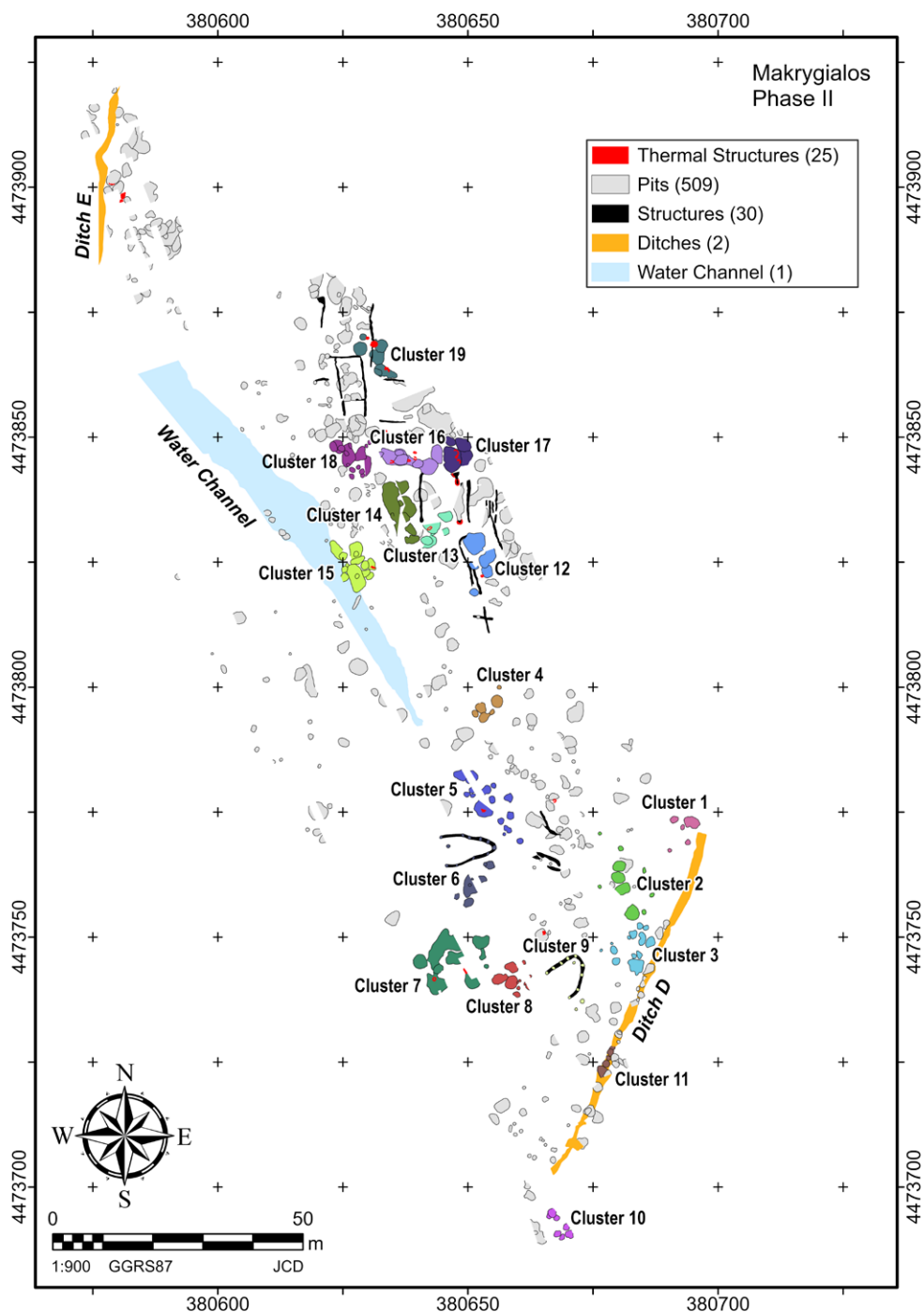


Figure 4. *Layout of the Neolithic settlement site of Makryyalos II in Pieria, Greece. Image Credit: J. Donati.*

material agents, routines, and traditions. To counterbalance the lasting research interest in buildings, our analysis has turned the spotlight on the outdoor social spaces, aiming for the formation of inclusive perspectives and nuanced interpretations of the Neolithic of Greece.

Evidence from the EN suggests diverse spatial arrangements of domestic and cooking routines, indicating communities of unsettled and variable social formation. The given shortage of spatial data for cooking spaces has resulted in the generation of fragmented narratives of social developments, domestic routines and traditions in the communities studied. The identification of cooking structures both indoors and outdoors points to mixed ideologies of sharing and hoarding reflected on the living social space.

Various formations and spatial arrangements were identified for the MN. Spatial evidence provides more coherent narratives of the distribution of domestic and cooking routines. The selection of sites suggests that open-air spaces in the MN were still in flux, but preference for open domestic and cooking routines was noted at many sites, as in the cases of Avgi I in Kastoria, Vassilika Kyparissi in Halkidiki, Stavroupoli in Thessaloniki, and Paradimi in Komotini. The distribution of cooking facilities in the MN indicates the extension of household practices in visible communal areas, either close or distant from buildings.

For the LN, diverse intra-site arrangements suggest variability within patterning in domestic spatial configurations. People organized their domestic and cooking spaces both indoors and outdoors, through numerous spatial expressions. The selection of sites shows mixed arrangements of daily routines that were taking place both indoors in private contexts, but also outdoors in the public sphere of the community. Spatial boundaries of household and public works were blurred, creating mixed distributions of daily cooking activities. Kleitos in Kozani, Anargyroi IXb in Florina, Makriyalos in Pieria and Dikili Tash in Kavala for example brought to light diverse expressions of spatial arrangements, where domestic routines were interchanged between indoors and outdoors, blurring the boundaries of the household and the public sphere.

Based on the spatial analysis conducted above, a main question emerges: Can we use cooking facilities as a key means to understand domestic routines and socialities in the Neolithic? The answer is yes, we can. This paper suggests that domestic habitual behaviors among different social groups, as reflected in spatial arrangements, were not markedly different throughout the Neolithic of northern Greece. In fact, the study shows some degree of continuity in community living that potentially suggests geographical or cultural deviations. The leading pattern of outdoor kitchen spaces that continued from the EN to the LN indicates that domestic activities could be described as bonding practices, enhancing social coherence for the communities, chosen to take place in the public eye (Byrd 2000; Overing 2003; Bailey & Whittle 2008; Souvatzi 2012; Bickle & Kalogiropoulou 2017; Koromila et al. 2017; Chapman 2020). The study suggests that kitchen spaces served more than utilitarian purposes, as arenas for social interactions, cultural performances, and community bonding. Varying configurations of domestic spaces observed across geographic regions

throughout the Neolithic put emphasis on the heterogeneity of social identities and practices, highlighting the ways in which cooking and food preparation acted as pivotal nodes for everyday social engagements. Outdoor spaces have been identified here as fields of diverse everyday routines and interactions that brought people together in the formation of shared choices and traditions. Social coherence was achieved visibly in the various arenas of quotidian practices, while household space remained in flux and socially open. This study invites us to consider Neolithic communities beyond chronological and spatial classifications and to look at human actions as continuous dynamic processes formed by living together, creating shared traditions and routines.

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THE BEGINNING OF THE COPPER AGE IN THE BLAGOEVGRAD VALLEY, SOUTHWEST BULGARIA: THE SITES OF MOSHTANETS–CHUKATA AND STRUMSKO

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Abstract

This paper considers the results of the investigations of two prehistoric sites in the southern part of the Blagoevgrad Valley, southwest Bulgaria: Moshtanets–Chukata and Strumsko. Being situated at the highest points of opposing hills on either side of the Struma River, these small, fortified settlements were strategically located in difficult-to-access areas allowing them control over the key routes to the Kresna Gorge and the Aegean coast to the south, the Upper Struma Valley to the north, and the Vardar Valley to the west. Radiocarbon dating of material from the sites suggests that they existed during the first quarter of the fifth millennium BC, at the beginning of the Copper Age. The study focuses on the ceramic repertoire from the sites; the most distinctive shapes and recurring combinations of technological, typological, and decorative characteristics are examined and the common elements and trends in the ceramic production of both settlements are highlighted. Based on the evidence of absolute chronology, ceramic assemblages, stratigraphic sequences, topography, and settlement layout, the author theorizes that both sites might have co-existed as parts of a single community that shared common organizational structure for at least some time of their life-cycles.

Keywords: Early Copper Age – Struma River Valley – prehistoric sites – ceramic assemblages – radiocarbon dating – social structure.

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Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary results of the investigations of the prehistoric site located in the Chukata locality near the village of Moshtanets, southwest Bulgaria. Based on a comparison with the evidence from the significantly larger settlement site of Strumsko situated in the Kaymenska Chuka locality just across the river Struma, the common features and development trends are outlined for the beginning of the Copper Age in the area of the Blagoevgrad Valley.

The early fifth millennium BC is an underexplored yet pivotal time for the formation of societies during the emergence of copper metallurgy. The proximity of Moshtanets and Strumsko to the well-documented copper ore deposit in the area of Boboshevo (Chohadzhiev 1998, 10) where pieces of native copper have been uncovered, further highlights the significance of the region's geographical location.

Both prehistoric sites sit at the tops of the hills on the opposite banks of the Struma River, in the southern part of the Blagoevgrad Valley, just before the river valley narrows into the Kresna Gorge. Both sites occupy dominant positions in the surrounding landscape, offering excellent visibility to the north and south along the river's course. The relative elevation of the Chukata Hill above the Struma River's bank is approximately 115 m, while that of the Kaimenska Chuka Hill is about 80 m. The distance between the sites is 1.3 km (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Map showing the location of the sites of Moshtanets–Chukata (1) and Strumsko (2).
Image Credit: <https://maps-for-free.com/> and the author.

The investigations at the prehistoric site of Moshtanets–Chukata

The site of Moshtanets is situated on the steep slopes and the flat top of the Chukata Hill on the right bank of the Struma River, at the base of a terrace in the Vlahina Mountain. It was registered in 2014 during a field survey prior to the construction of the Struma Motorway (Chukalev et al. 2015, 824ff). A small-scale excavation was conducted in September 2016 (Bacvarov & Katsarov 2017), and magnetic gradiometry was carried out in 2023 (figs. 2 and 3; Bacvarov et al., in print).

A relatively even distribution of isolated, undiagnostic, and unidentifiable pottery sherds and small burnt daub pieces was recorded on the ground surface across the entire slope of the terrace. The slope is intersected by several dirt roads, an agricultural channel, and natural channels formed as a result of erosional processes.

In the lowest part of the investigated area of the terrace, several severely disturbed cut features from the Late Iron Age were identified. No cultural layer was recorded in the remaining trenches on the slope. The isolated sherds dating to the Early Chalcolithic and the Late Iron Age are relocated.

Cultural layers and archaeological features were recorded only in three small trenches in the northeastern part of the terrace, at the relatively flat top of the hill, where the magnetic survey was conducted. The magnetic field in the surveyed area is relatively disturbed – the background values of the magnetic gradient range from ± 2 to 3 nT – indicating that the surface environment is nonhomogeneous and contains shallow geological ‘disturbances’ (bedrock). Against this backdrop, especially in the central parts of the area, a large number of anomalies with varied shapes and sizes, and medium to high intensity (ranging from 7–8 to 30–40 nT and above) were recorded. Some of these anomalies have linear characteristics and may be related to remains of house walls. The remaining anomalies are oval or amorphous in shape and are likely caused by cut features or accumulations of material exposed to heating in the past. All anomalies with the indicated intensity found within the surveyed area seem to suggest human activities in the past (fig. 4).

Numerous anomalies were also identified characterized by alternating very high positive and negative values of the magnetic gradient, ranging from several tens to several hundred nT. They are all caused by shallowly buried iron objects, varying in size, most likely of modern origin. A particularly high concentration of such anomalies was found in the far southwest and southeast quadrants.

Four trenches were made in the same part of the site. In the westernmost trench, no cultural layer was recorded, and the bedrock was uncovered at 0.60 m below the ground surface. The gray or gray-brown sediment contained relocated archaeological material: sherds (including from the Late Iron Age), faunal remains, and small burnt daub pieces. Archaeological features were identified in the other three trenches.

Trench BH9 (figs. 5 and 6). In the northern part of the trench, remains of the corner of a burnt structure were uncovered (feature 4). It was constructed of a wooden frame and clay daub, and had a shallow (ca. 0.70 m) cut under the floor. The feature was identified



Figure 2. *The site of Moshtanets–Chukata: panoramic view from the site of Strumsko. Image Credit: K. Bacvarov.*

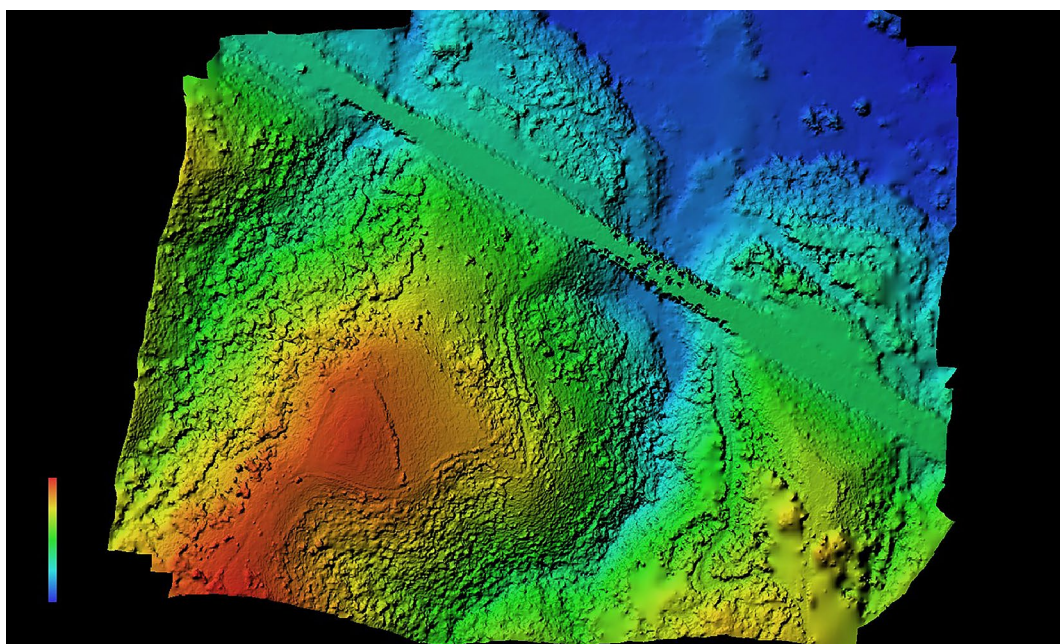


Figure 3. *Digital elevation model of the area of Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: P. Leshtakov & T. Chetashki.*

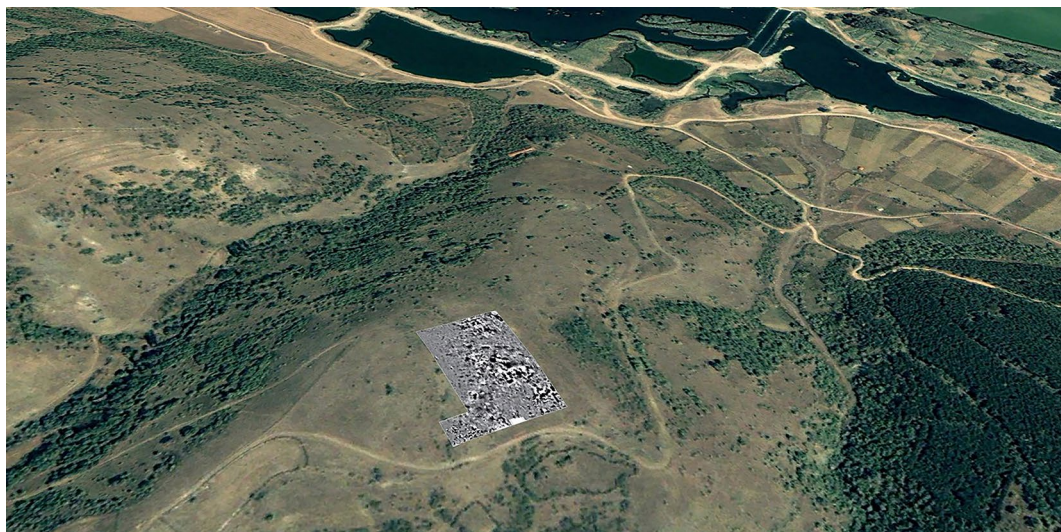


Figure 4. *Fluxgate gradiometry at Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: Google Earth, N. Tonkov & P. Leshtakov.*

at a depth of approximately 0.40 m below the ground surface and was NW–SE/NE–SW oriented. Only the southern end of the house was excavated (ca. 1 m²). The ruins formed a dense layer of burnt daub pieces of varying sizes and degree of firing, with a gradient from east to west. A posthole measuring 0.12 m in diameter was recorded in the corner. The burnt daub pieces were more densely packed to the north and at greater depth. They were positioned both above and within the cut, likely having sunken down after the perishable material of the floor burned out.

Three layers were distinguished in the fill of the cut under the floor. The upper layer, 0.20–0.25 m thick, was predominantly composed of burnt daub pieces and also contained a grindstone fragment and a piece of clay plaster from the base of a thermal installation. The middle layer measured up to 0.20 m thick and consisted of a reddish-brown, loose sediment with a low concentration of sherds and animal bones, and a large amount of scattered daub pieces. The bottom layer measured up to 0.30 m thick – compact, grayish sediment with tiny burnt daub lumps and charcoal pieces as well as a few sherds and animal bones.

Trench BF6 (figs. 7 and 8). At a depth of 0.60 to 0.80 m below the ground surface, a ‘scatter’ of rubble stones was uncovered over the entire area of the trench covered by a brown sediment layer containing small rocks and burnt daub pieces and extending in all directions beyond the excavated area (feature 3). The stones were arranged in several ‘rows’, up to three in total, with a maximum height of 0.35 m, overlapping one another. They vary in size, with smaller stones located at the top of the scatter. Secondarily fired sherds with weathered surfaces of medium and large size were found among and on top

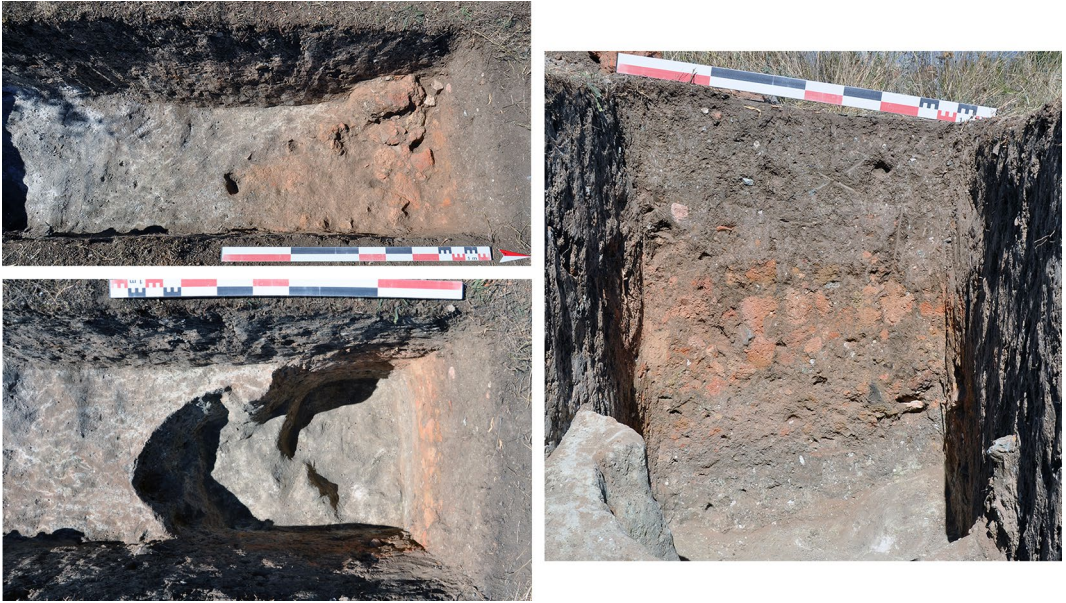


Figure 5. Feature 4 at Moshtanets–Chukata. Left: at the level of identification (above) and after excavation (below). Right: profile. Image Credit: K. Bacvarov.

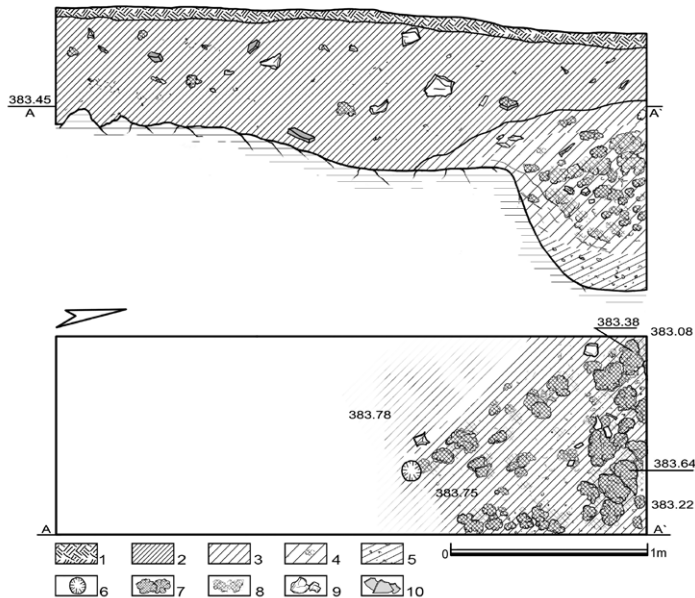


Figure 6. Line drawing of feature 4 at Moshtanets-Chukata. Above: profile of trench BH9. Below: layout of feature 4. Key: (1) plowzone; (2) topsoil; (3) brown sediment; (4) brown sediment colored in reddish by weathered burnt structural debris; (5) gray sediment; (6) postholes; (7) pieces of burnt structural debris; (8) shapeless pieces of burnt structural debris; (9) stone; (10) sherds. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.



Figure 7. *Feature 3 at Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: K. Bacvarov.*

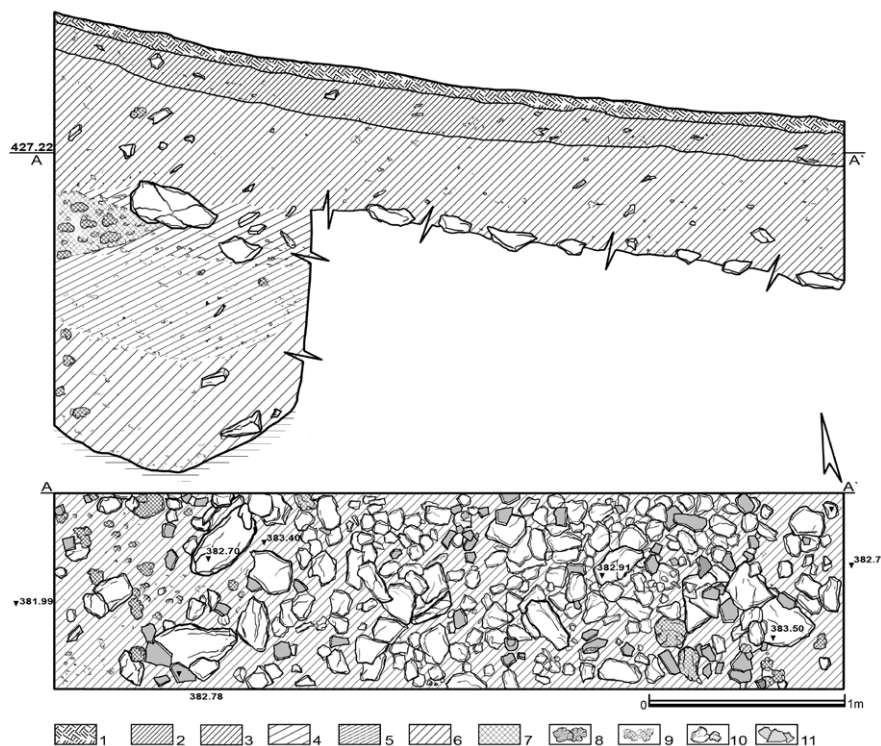


Figure 8. *Line drawing of feature 3 at Moshtanets–Chukata. Above: profile of trench BF6. Below: layout of feature 3. Key: (1) plowzone; (2) topsoil; (3) gray-brown sediment; (4) brown/gray-brown sediment; (5) gray sediment; (6) light brown sediment; (7) dark brown sediment; (8) pieces of burnt structural debris; (9) shapeless pieces of burnt structural debris; (10) stone; (11) sherds. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*

of the rocks, as well as single pieces of red or orange-colored burnt daub and plaster from thermal installations. Below the stones, two layers were recorded with a total thickness of up to 1.20 m: (1) the upper layer was gray in color, had fine texture and contained charcoal fragments, small burnt daub pieces and sherds; (2) the lower layer, brown and loose, contained numerous sherds and charcoal pieces.

Trench BE9 (figs. 9 and 10). In the northern part of the trench, ca. 0.40 m below the ground surface, beneath a brown sediment layer containing many small rocks and burnt daub pieces, a 'scatter' of rubble stones and sherds was uncovered (feature 5). It measured 1.40 m (east–west) x 1 m (north–south) and extended beyond the excavated area to the west, north, and south. Five large rocks were found at its eastern end. To the west, a loose deposit was investigated that was composed of secondarily fired, weathered sherds and small stones. The stone scatter was not excavated in depth and its use and possible relation to feature 3 remain unclear. East of this feature, three layers were recorded in the trench, with a total thickness of up to 2 m. The uppermost, gray-brown layer, 0.60–0.80 m thick, contained a high concentration of secondarily fired, weathered sherds. It covered a grayish, loose layer measuring up to 0.60 m thick and containing small charcoal pieces and a few sherds. The bottom layer was gray, loose, and measured up to 0.80 m thick, with just several sherds. Two pits were recorded in the southeastern part of the trench, their fill showing the same characteristics as the lowermost layer.

Absolute chronology

A series of nine radiocarbon dates were obtained from Moshtanets-Chukata, three each from the trenches that yielded archaeological features (table 1). The dates from trench BH9 were made on material associated with the burnt debris of feature 4: one from the bottom layer of the cut fill (SUERC-95969) and two from the middle layer (SUERC-95968 and SUERC-95967). The calibrated dates fall within a relatively narrow range covering the first century of the fifth millennium BC and should be considered a *terminus ante quem* for the building.

The dates from trench BF6 were made on material from feature 3. They span a slightly wider chronological interval, with the first two (SUERC-95964 and SUERC-95965) calibrated to between 4950–4800 cal BC. The third date (SUERC-95966) is significantly earlier and seems to be an outlier, so it should be excluded from further consideration.

The dates from trench BE9 were made on material from the layers below feature 5. Two of them (SUERC-95959 and SUERC-95960) come from the bottom layer, while the third is from the layer above it (SUERC-95958). The latter is calibrated to between 5000–4850 cal BC, while the former two show very similar values. Although these dates were obtained from lower layers, they relate to a later period and fall within the chronological range of 4850–4700 cal BC. The animal bones used may have been part of the deposit filling the pits whose boundaries were difficult to distinguish.



Figure 9. Trench BE9 and feature 5 at Moshtanets–Chukata. Left: layout of feature 5. Right: west profile of trench BE9. Image Credit: K. Bacvarov.

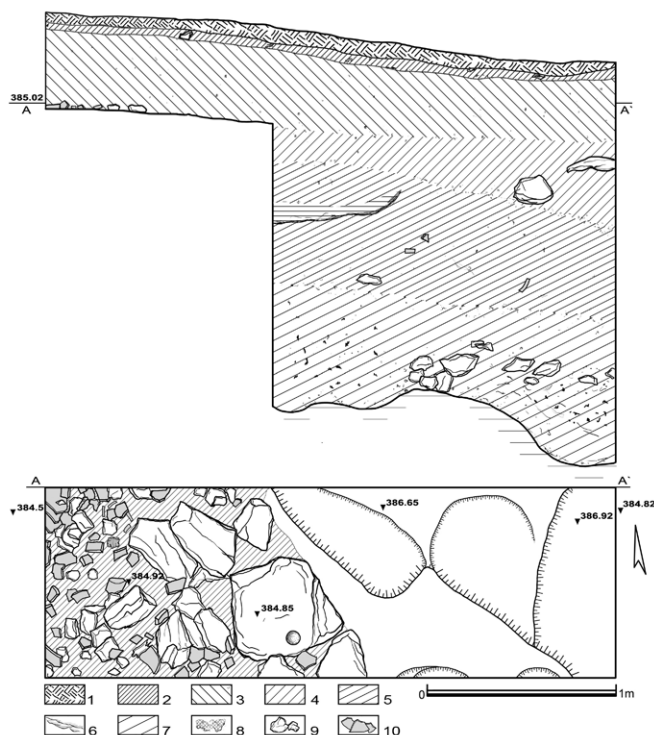


Figure 10. Line drawing of trench BE9 and feature 5 at Moshtanets–Chukata. Above: profile of trench BE9. Below: layout of feature 5. Key: (1) plowzone; (2) topsoil; (3) brown sediment colored in reddish by weathered burnt structural debris. (4) gray-brown sediment; (5) gray sediment; (6) strip/streak of material from the natural, (7) light gray sediment; (8) shapeless pieces of burnt structural debris; (9) stone; (10) sherds. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

Lab Code	Context ID	Material	¹⁴ C Age BP	¹⁴ C Age cal BC (95.4%)
SUERC-95958 (GU56377)	BE9	Ovis/Capra: molar	6039 ± 28	5007–4844 cal BC
SUERC-95959 (GU56378)	BE9	large ruminant: rib	5878 ± 28	4802–4691 cal BC
SUERC-95960 (GU56379)	BE9	Bos taurus: 1st phalange	5922 ± 28	4848–4720 cal BC
SUERC-95964 (GU56380)	BF6	large ruminant: rib	5993 ± 28	4953–4796 cal BC
SUERC-95965 (GU56381)	BF6	Ovis/Capra: metacarpal	5973 ± 28	4939–4788 cal BC
SUERC-95966 (GU56382)	BF6	large ruminant: long bone	6144 ± 28	5208–5008 cal BC
SUERC-95967 (GU56383)	BH9	Bos taurus: 1st phalange	6025 ± 28	4997–4842 cal BC
SUERC-95968 (GU56384)	BH9	Ovis/Capra: molar	6084 ± 28	5065–4910 cal BC
SUERC-95969 (GU56385)	BH9	Cervus elaphus: metatarsal	6083 ± 28	4925–4910 cal. BC

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from the site of Moshetanets–Chukata.

The identification of this previously unknown prehistoric site and the results of its investigation provide new insights into the settlement pattern at the beginning of the Copper Age in the northern part of the Middle Struma Valley. Even though a limited area was excavated, it indicates the presence of a small settlement situated at a strategic and difficult-to-access location. The findings of magnetic gradiometry and excavation at Moshtanets–Chukata reveal well-preserved layers and features. Moreover, a burnt house and a large structure built of stones arranged in several ‘rows’ were recorded. The structure’s characteristics resemble another feature uncovered at the nearby site of Strumsko on the opposite bank of the river Struma that has been interpreted as a stone wall with a palisade (Pernicheva 1993).

The prehistoric site of Strumsko

The prehistoric settlement site of Strumsko has been known in the literature since 1970 (Stoyanova-Serafimova 1970, 71). In 1975, G. Toncheva conducted small-scale digs at the site, and in 1978–1979, L. Pernicheva and I. Kulov carried out more extensive excavations there (Pernicheva & Kulov 1979 and 1980). In the early 1990s, M. Stefanovich investigated a Late Bronze Age site at the lower part of the hill (Stefanovich & Bankoff 1998).

The Copper Age settlement is located on a high, naturally protected hill with steep, almost inaccessible southern and southwestern slopes; the other slopes are also difficult to access due to the significant gradient of the terrain, except for the gentle northern slope. Similarly to the site of Moshtanets–Chukata on the right bank of the Struma River, the settlement of Strumsko in the Kaimenska Chuka locality dominates the surrounding area with visibility to the south and north along the river’s course (fig. 11).

The archaeological investigations were conducted on the northern slope of the hill in two areas – East and West – covering a total area of ca. 420 m²; five small test-trenches were made as well in the southernmost part of the same slope (fig. 12). The settlement covered only a strip of the gentle northern slope and did not extend on the southern slope or the highest part of the hill. The thickness of the cultural layer ranged from 0.30 to 1 m, reaching up to 1.40 m only in a small section of the highest part of the West area. Two distinct occupation levels, house remains, and a fortification system were revealed. The houses occupied a relatively narrow area measuring 80–100 m long. They followed the general orientation of the settlement aligned in the slope’s direction, mainly NE to SW. A common construction technique involved foundations trenches for the walls or parts of the walls. The occupied area was terraced through rock cutting and, to some extent, by filling lower zones with clay or clay mixed with finely crushed rock (Pernicheva 1993, 97).

A fortification system was revealed in the West area consisting of a stone wall and a palisade, which enclosed only the northwest, higher part of the settlement (Pernicheva 1993, obr. 1). The excavated part of the fortification was ca. 35 m long. The outer part of



Figure 11. *The site of Strumsko: aerial view from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: K. Bacvarov.*

the structure consisted of a stone facing on top of a low clay bank with a maximum width of 2.20 to 2.40 m. Up to three rows of stones were preserved in height. According to the excavator, the wall had two primary functions: to reinforce the sloping terrain and to support the palisade behind it. The palisade followed the direction of the outer fortification and consisted of two or three rows of posts with a diameter of 0.20–0.30 m.

Two radiocarbon dates were made on samples from the remains of wooden posts in houses dating to the first occupation period and situated in the West (Bln-2612) and East (Bln-2611) area, respectively (table 2). As with Moshtanets–Chukata, the calibrated dates fall within the first quarter of the fifth millennium BC (Görsdorf & Bojadžiev 1996, 142).

Lab Code	Context ID	Material	14C Age BP	14C Age cal BC
Bln-2612	grid square Z6; 1.30 m	charred wood	5990 ± 50	4940–4810 cal BC
Bln-2611	grid square I2; 0.65 m	charred wood	5950 ± 60	4910–4780 cal BC

Table 2. *Radiocarbon dates from the site of Strumsko (after Görsdorf & Bojadžiev 1996, 142).*

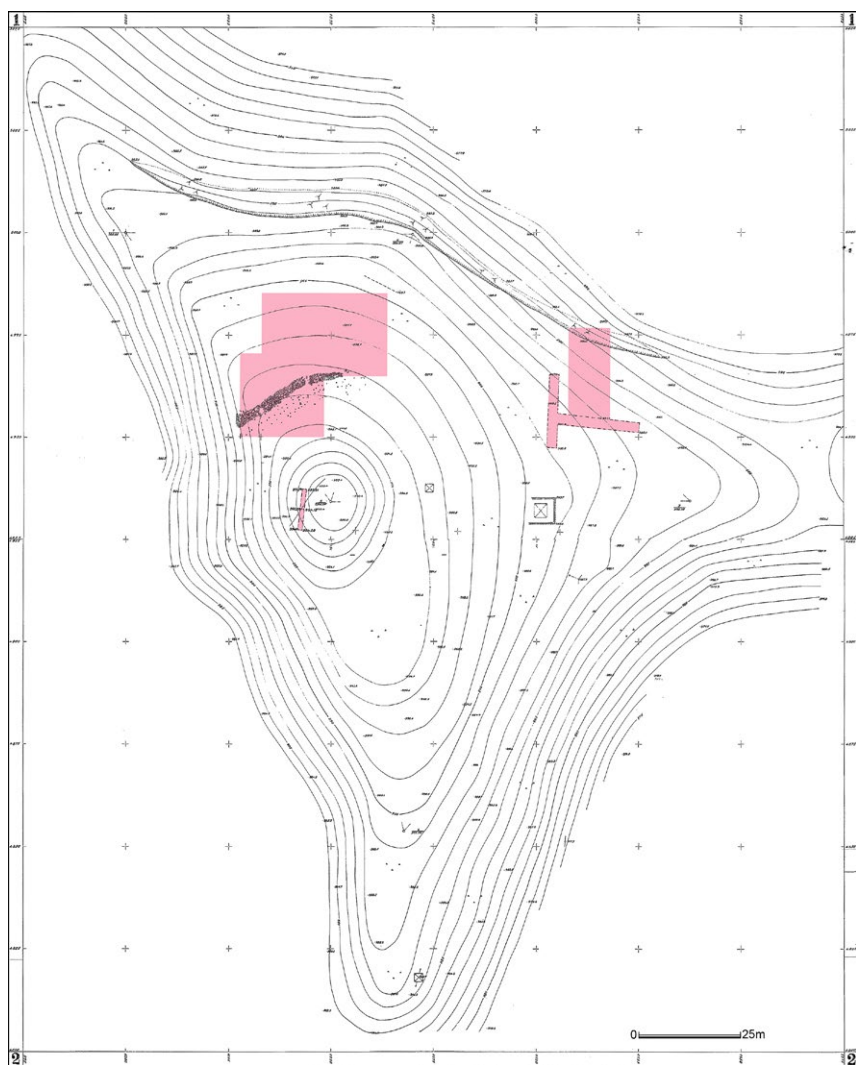


Figure 12. *Topographic map and location of the surveyed area at Strumsko. Image Credit: Blagoevgrad Regional Museum of History & G. Katsarov.*

The dates from both sites cluster around 6000–6050 BP and fall within the 5000–4800 cal BC range (fig. 13). The larger series from Moshtanets–Chukata entirely fits within this period, with the exception of two slightly later dates (SUERC-95959 and SUERC-95960). The latter might be explained by a later occupation which was not identified within the limited area of the test trenches. Meanwhile, the two dates from Strumsko narrow the chronological interval for the early occupation phase of the site to 4900–4800 cal BC. The resulting absolute chronology seems to suggest that both sites

existed simultaneously, a theory that should be further confirmed by comparing their ceramic assemblages.

The ceramic assemblages

The ceramic assemblage of Moshtanets–Chukata is smaller, poorly preserved, and highly fragmented. Most of the pots were made from well-purified clay with fine mineral inclusions. In some cases, larger grains are observed measuring up to 2 mm and rarely 3 mm in size. The majority of the vessels have light gray, gray-black, gray-brown, or brown-red, well-smoothed or occasionally polished surfaces. The light gray pots are particularly thin-walled and were made of very well-purified paste.

At Strumsko, vessels with light gray, gray-black, gray-brown, or brown-red, well-smoothed or rarely polished surfaces predominate in both occupation phases. In the ear-

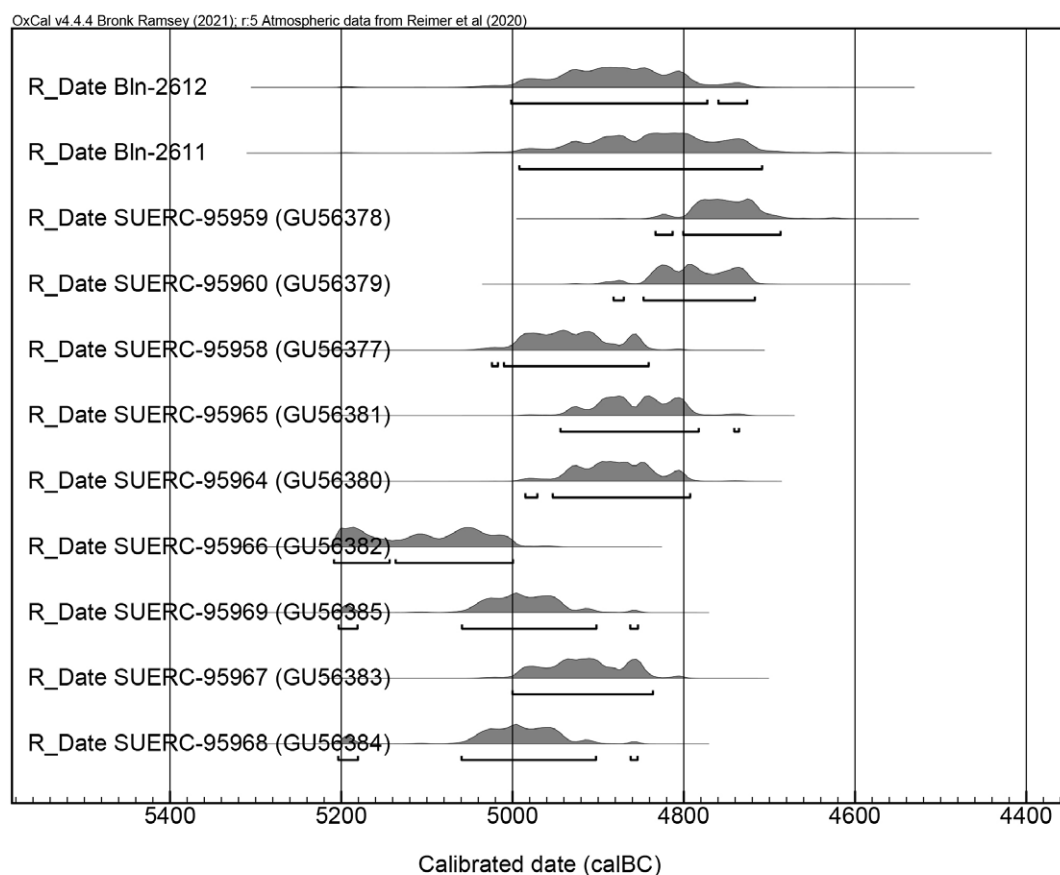


Figure 13. Calibration plot of the radiocarbon dates from Moshtanets–Chukata and Strumsko. Generated with OxCal v4.4.4. Image Credit: OxCal online <https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCal.html>.

lier level of occupation, brown-red ceramics are evenly distributed or slightly more prevalent, while gray, gray-brown, or gray-black ceramic surfaces predominate in the later level. The paste is well-purified, with fine mineral inclusions. However, larger grains are often observed measuring up to 2 or 3 mm, or even 7–8 mm in size. The light gray, ‘cement-colored’ vessels are extremely thin-walled and were made of very well-purified paste.

The ceramic repertoires of both sites include bowls, deep bowls, cups, two-handled vessels (a.k.a. amphora-like vessels), jugs, jars, lids, strainers, and pot-stands. The following description will focus on the most characteristic and common shapes.

Much of the typological diversity of the Late Neolithic shapes continued into the Early Chalcolithic, while the Late Neolithic painted decoration in the Akropotamos style declined (Chohadziev 2007, 89). During the transition between the Late Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic, black painted decoration on a red background became prevalent. A single sherd with black-painted decoration on a red background was found at Moshtanets–Chukata (fig. 14.1), but it is identical to the material from Strumsko, where painted ceramics appear in both phases of occupation (fig. 14.3 and 4, 7–11, and 13–15). The main shapes featuring painted decoration are vessels with two vertical handles and bowls. Three categories of painted decoration were identified: linear, bichrome, and thick red patterns, with the linear type predominating. Complex patterns are prevalent, occasionally difficult to define, with a tendency to fill larger areas with black paint. Hatched semi-ellipses and triangles are also encountered (Grembska-Kulova 1998, 43).

The ceramic assemblage of Strumsko also includes vessels with bichrome decoration (fig. 14.2, 5 and 6, and 12). The most common patterns are ellipses and broad bands filled with red paint and outlined with black lines. The surface of these ceramic vessels is red in color. The painted decoration in the Akropotamos style from Strumsko was analyzed and published by M. Grebska-Kulow (Gembaska-Kulova 1994; 1998, and 2007).

A key criterion for the beginning of the Copper Age is the appearance of graphite decoration on ceramic vessels. Only a few such sherds were found at Moshtanets–Chukata (fig. 15.1), while the examples from Strumsko are significantly more numerous. The quantitative analysis of the ceramic assemblage of Strumsko shows that out of 1400 processed sherds and whole vessels, just under 70 sherds have graphite decoration (fig. 15.2–13). They are relatively evenly distributed stratigraphically, with a gradual increase in the upper level of occupation. Shapes with graphite decoration include bowls, deep bowls, and jugs. They are thin-walled, with well-smoothed or sometimes polished, brown to dark brown or black-brown surfaces. Overall, these shapes have a soft profile, and deep bowls often have wide open mouths (fig. 30.5). The decoration is positive, with some open forms decorated on both the inner and outer surfaces (fig. 15.4–6). Linear patterns predominate, featuring relatively wide lines (up to 6–10 mm), though narrower lines, 2–5 mm in width, are also found. Often, thinner lines form groups of 3 to 5 parallel or tightly spaced lines appearing as a wider line. There is significant similarity in the patterns painted with black paint on a red background.

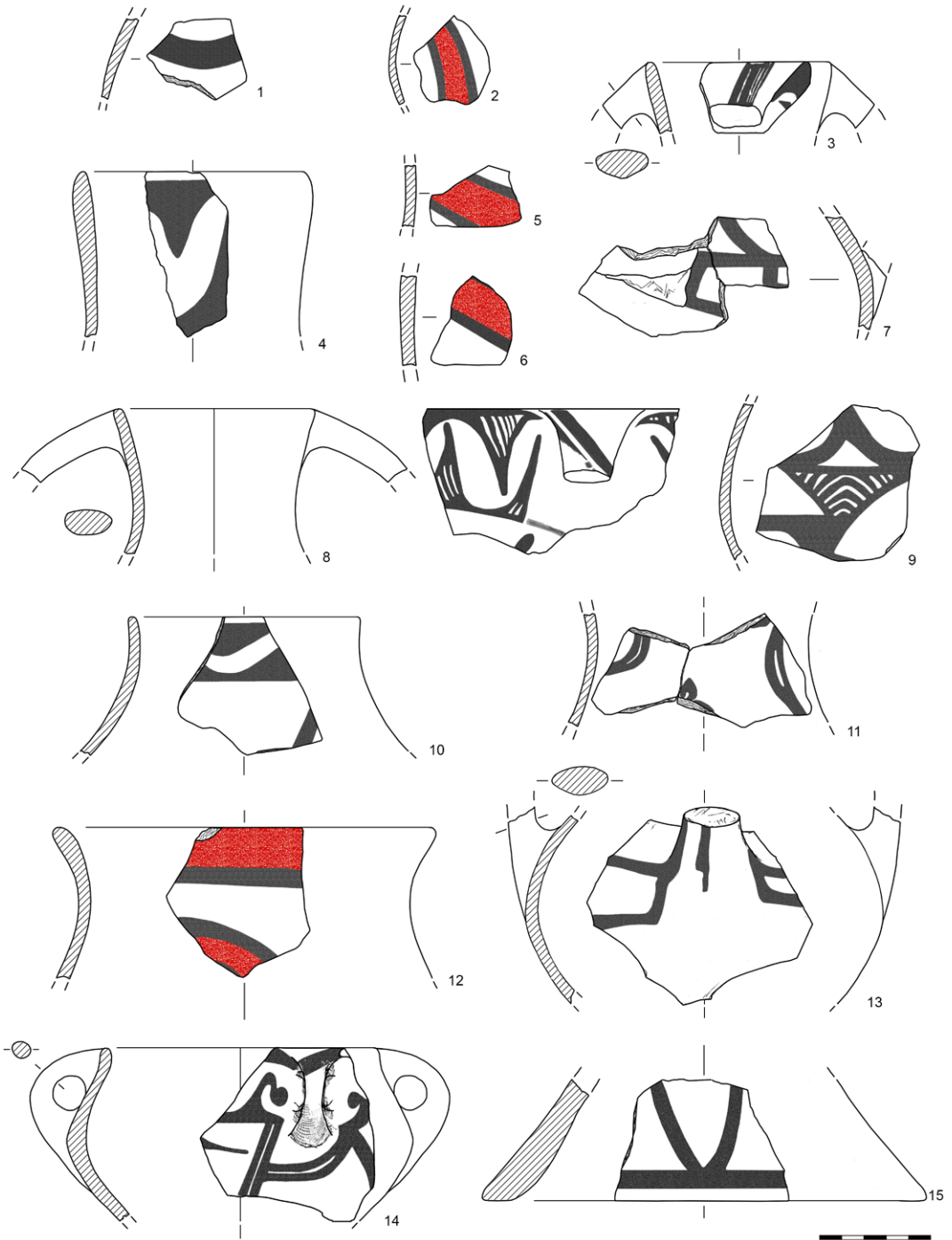


Figure 14. Painted pottery: (1) Moshtanets–Chukata; (2–15) Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov (1, 7, and 13) & M. Grębska-Kulow and G. Katsarov (2–6, 8–12, 14, and 15).

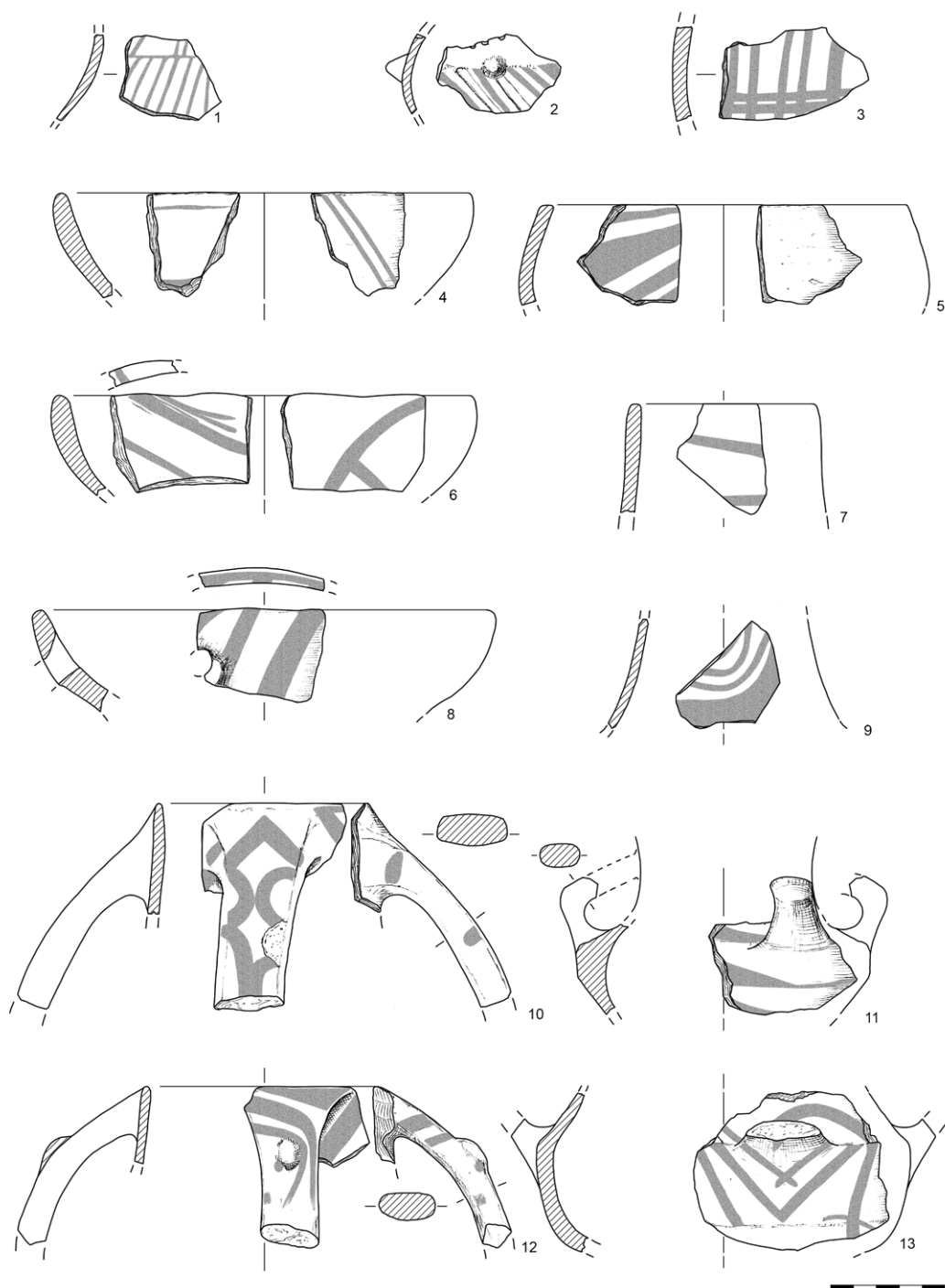


Figure 15. *Graphite-painted pottery: (1) Moshtanets–Chukata; (2–13) Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov (1–6 and 8–13), & M. Grębska-Kulow and G. Katsarov (7).*

Another characteristic element of the Early Chalcolithic ceramic assemblages in the Middle Struma Valley that is well represented both at Moshtanets–Chukata (fig. 16) and Strumsko (fig. 17), are the two-handled vessels. The handles start from the rim or just below it and usually end at the carination. They are solid and are decorated with grooves, fishbone channeling, or incisions, and feature conical knobs at the top. The decoration covers the entire outer surface of the handles, which have an oval or elliptical cross-section. The vessels typically have a medium-high to high neck of a cylindrical or slightly conical shape, and are generally very thin-walled. Almost all of the pieces in this category are sherds from handles and rims, making their reconstruction uncertain, although most likely they had a spherical, bulging lower part.

In addition to the described vessels, some deep bowls and cups from the ceramic repertoire of Strumsko (fig. 18) also have similar handles. Their decoration mainly consists of fine channeling, and they always have conical knobs at the top. Indeed, bowls and deep bowls are the dominant form in both phases of occupation at Strumsko and at Moshtanets–Chukata. Both types are usually biconical. The deep bowls in these assemblages are biconical with either soft or sharp carination and a low neck, or they are biconical or spherical. The necks of the former are cylindrical or slightly conical and measure less than one-third of the vessel's total height. Their sizes do not vary significantly but can be divided into two groups: (1) with a rim diameter of up to 20 cm and (2) with a rim diameter ranging between 20–30 cm. No significant differences are noted regarding the wall thickness, which is typically between 0.5–1.0 cm, though it can reach up to 1.5 cm in the larger vessels. The rim is usually straight or slightly everted. The outer and inner surfaces are smooth, often well-smoothed or polished, but more frequently are matte rather than glossy.

Most of the vessels of these forms are decorated, although the decoration techniques, ornamental motifs, and compositions are not highly varied. The primary techniques for the deep bowls with low necks include channeling, plastic and impressed decoration, often used in combinations. Instances of a single technique use, such as plastic knobs (fig. 20.4 and 5), are relatively rare. A distinctive decoration scheme features a horizontal band between the neck and the carination of the vessel. A plastic pellet or impressed dimple is often located at the carination, around which is the main ornamental scheme of channeling (figs. 18.3, 19.5, and 20.1–3 and 6). The channeling is shallow, with soft rounded edges, and a width of 5 to 10 mm, either diagonal or arc-shaped, applied in groups with opposing directions around the plastic pellet or impressed dimple.

Another type in this category are the carinated deep bowls. Technologically, they are not different from the previously described types, but their outer surface is not polished, and in some cases, the lower part of the vessel was rusticated. No significant differences are observed in their metric characteristics, except for a relatively small group of vessels whose rim diameter exceeds 30 cm, and in a few examples measures up to 40 cm. A characteristic feature of most carinated deep bowls is the presence of large horizontal

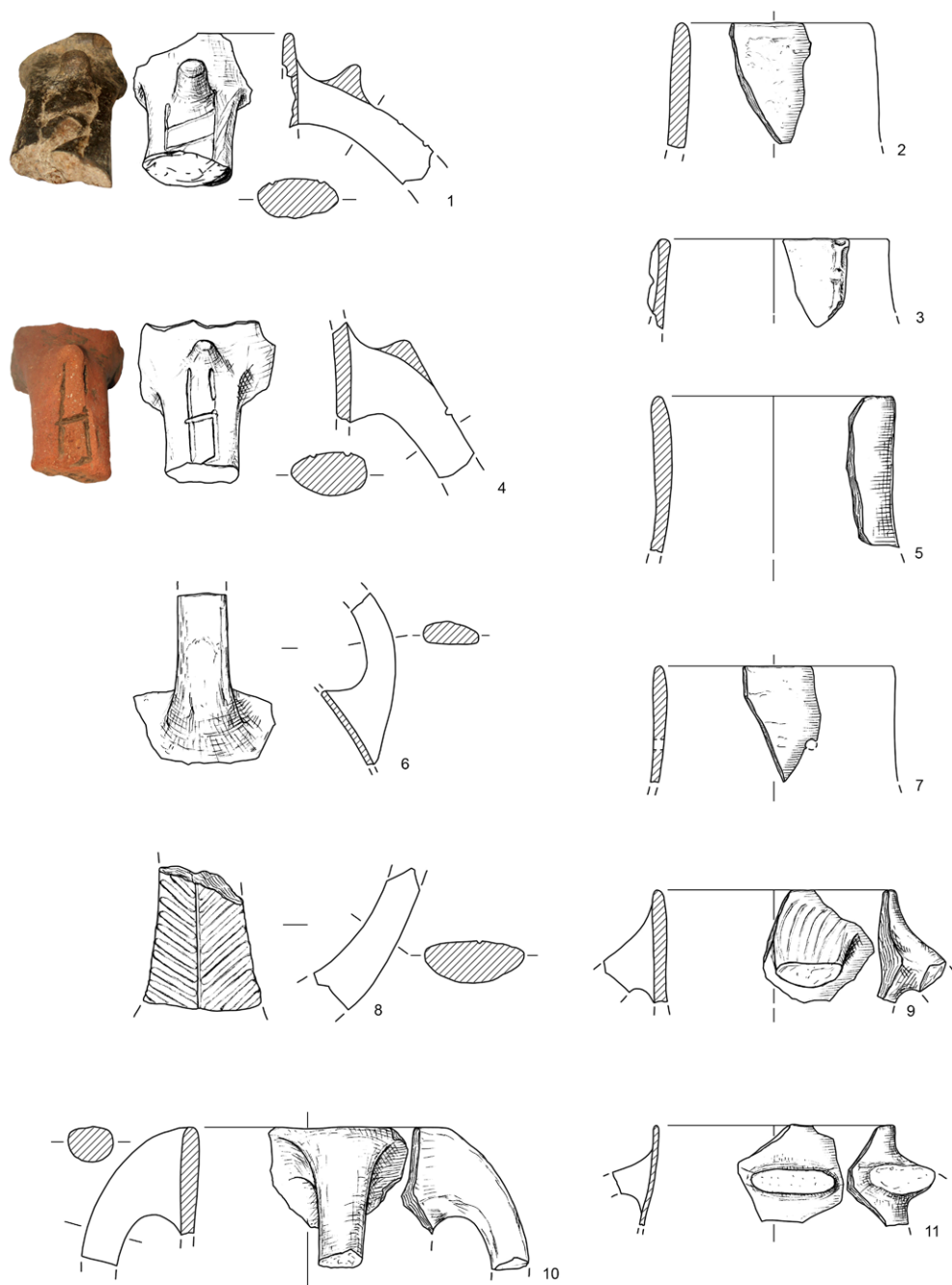


Figure 16. *Amphora-like vessels from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*

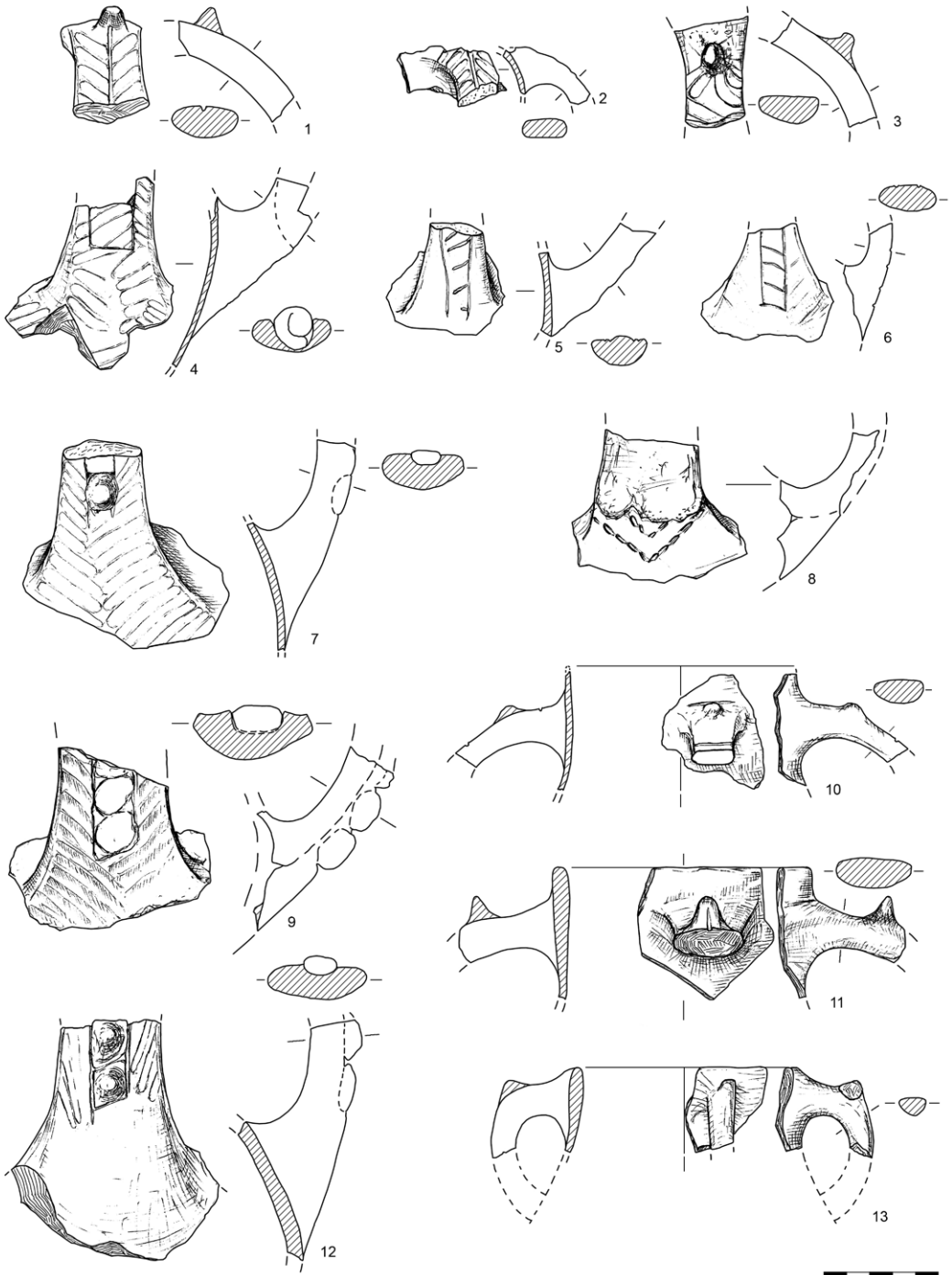


Figure 17. Amphora-like vessels from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

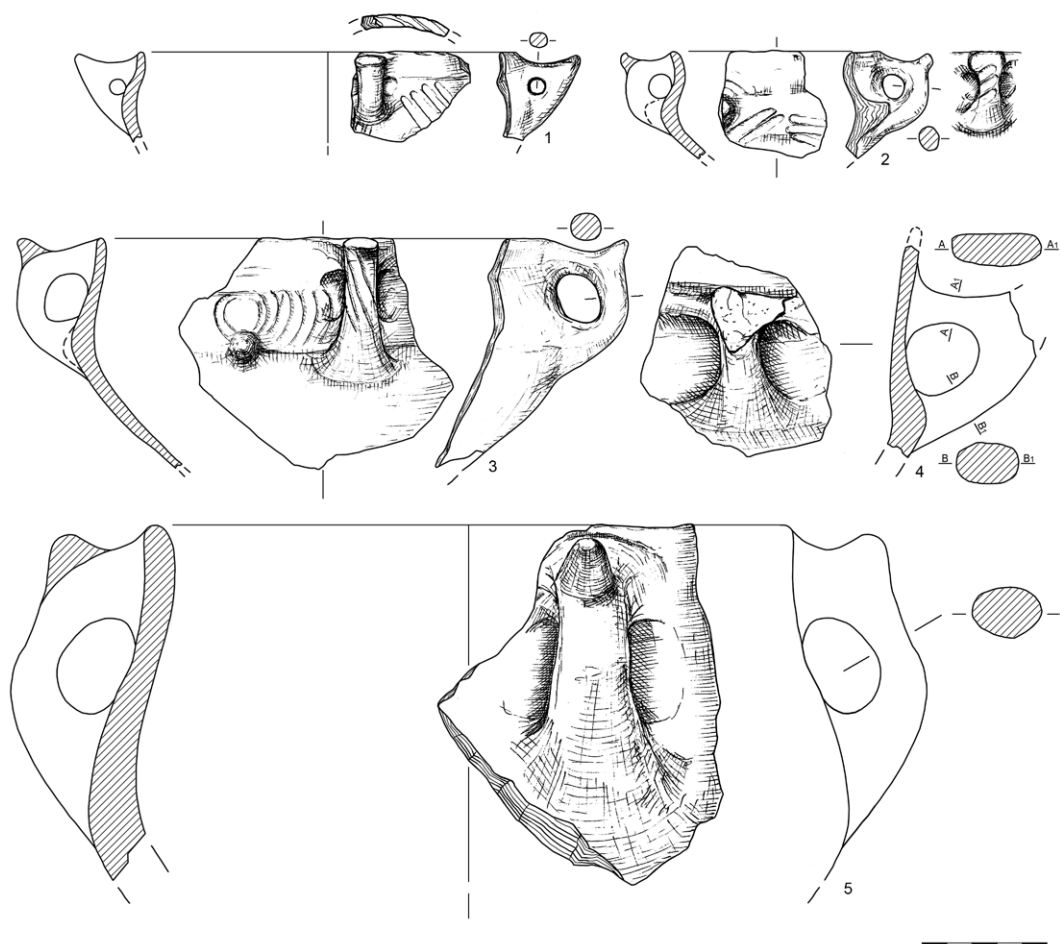


Figure 18. Deep bowls (1 and 3–5) and a cup (2) from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

knobs or lugs located at the carination. They are solid, and measure up to 3 cm wide and up to 10 cm long in the larger vessels. The available examples of this type are not decorated, but single horizontal knobs covered with arc-shaped channeling (figs. 21.2 and 22.1 and 4) and fine shallow incisions (fig. 22.1) were found at both sites. Vessels with such elements are well represented in the ceramic assemblages of both Moshtanets–Chukata (fig. 21) and Strumsko (fig. 22); at the latter site, they appear in both phases of occupation, but are significantly more frequent in the earlier phase.

The bowl category is primarily represented in the ceramic repertoires of Moshtanets–Chukata and Strumsko by conical, carinated, and hemispherical types. All vessels are relatively deep, and are divided equally into groups based on their rim diameter: larger bowls with diameter of 20–25 cm, smaller bowls with diameter of 15–20 cm, and hemi-

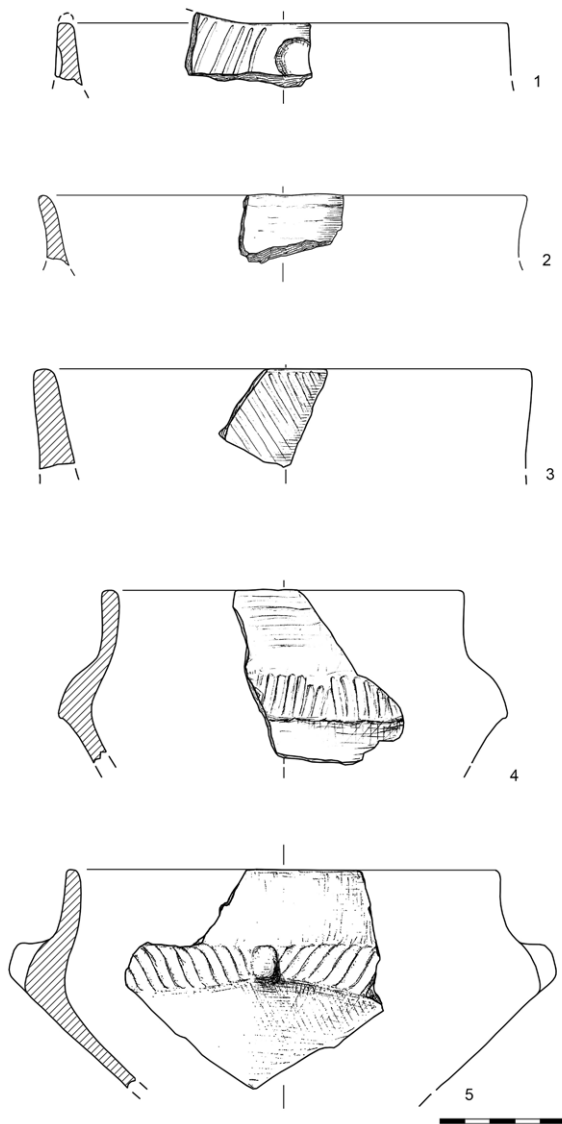


Figure 19. Deep bowls from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

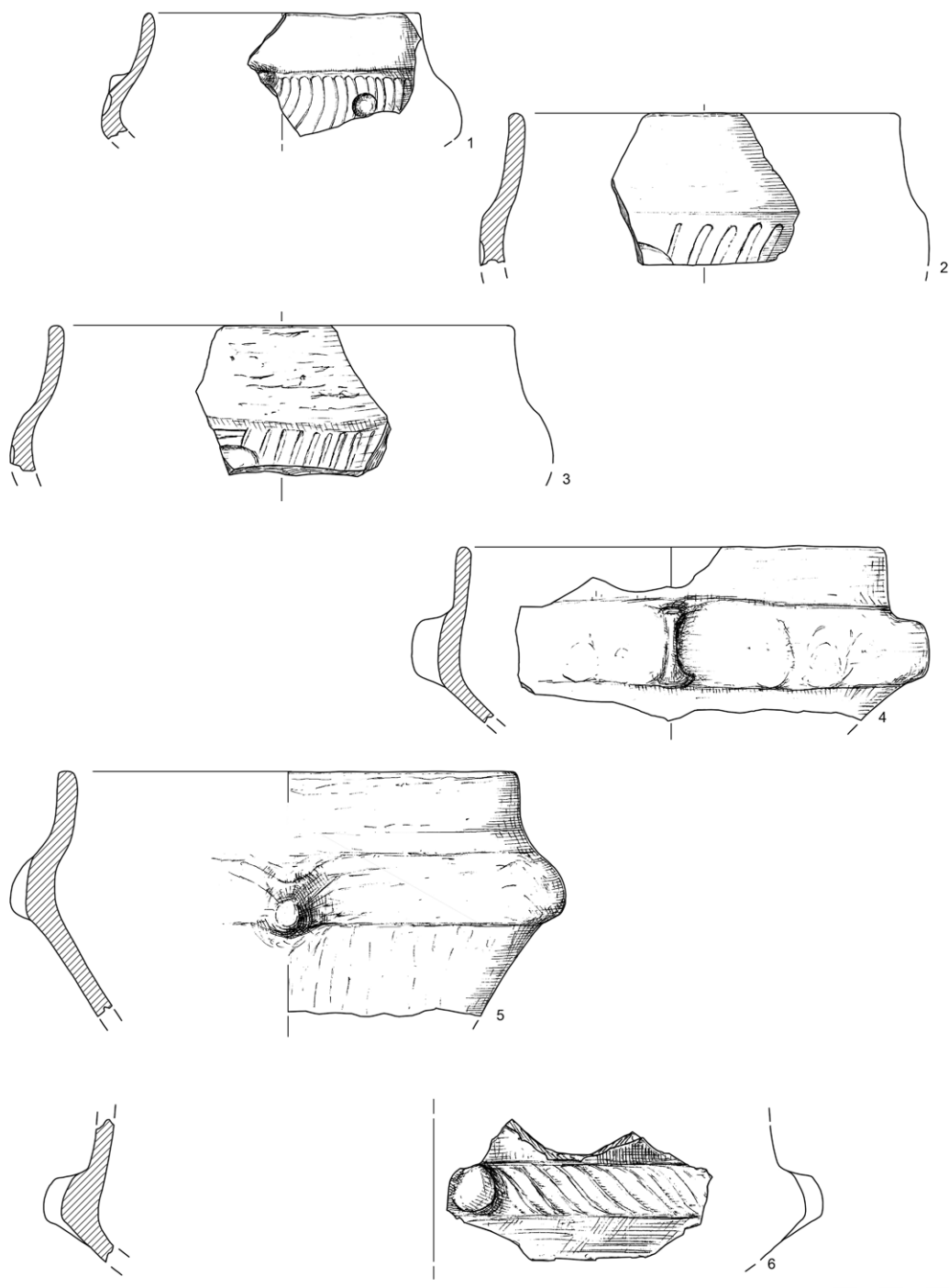


Figure 20. *Deep bowls from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*

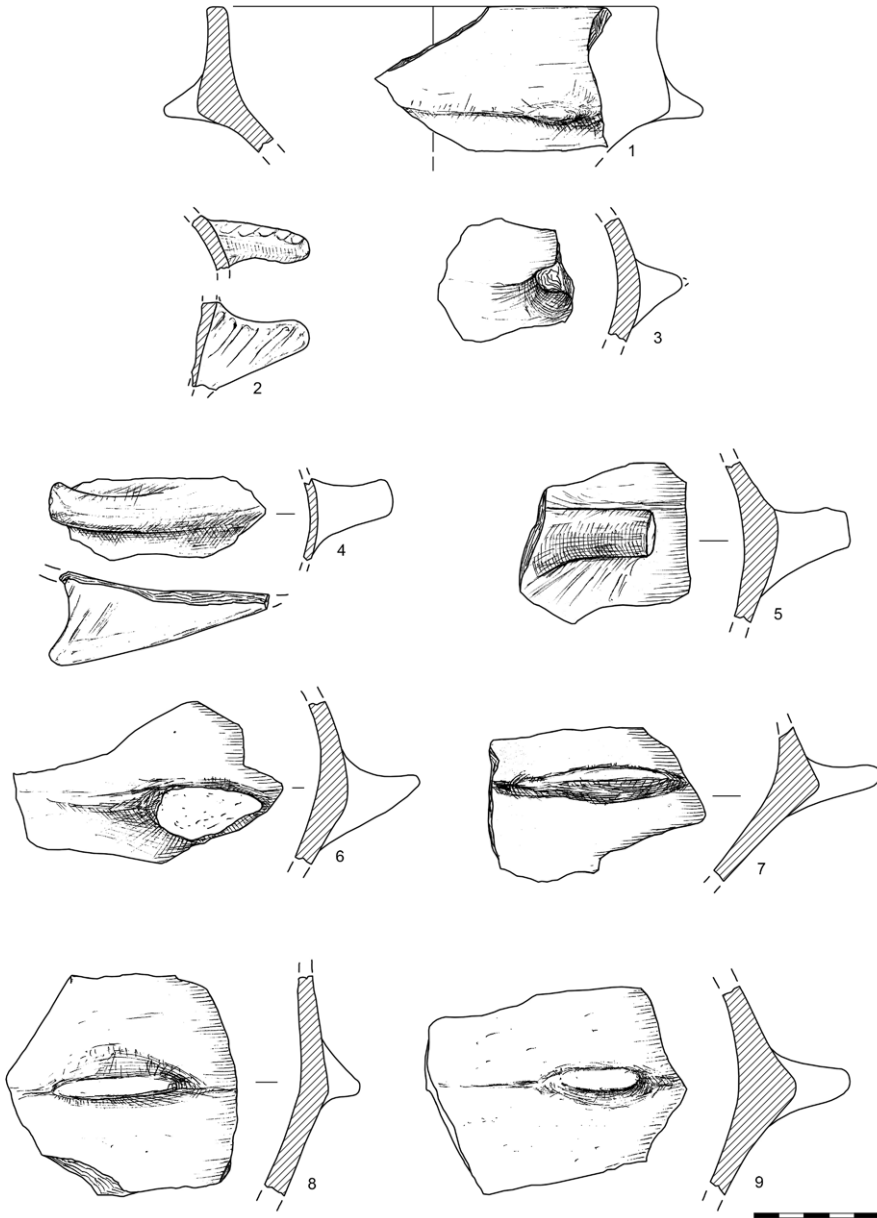


Figure 21. Deep bowls with horizontal knobs (2, 4, and 5) or lugs (1, 3, and 6–9) from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

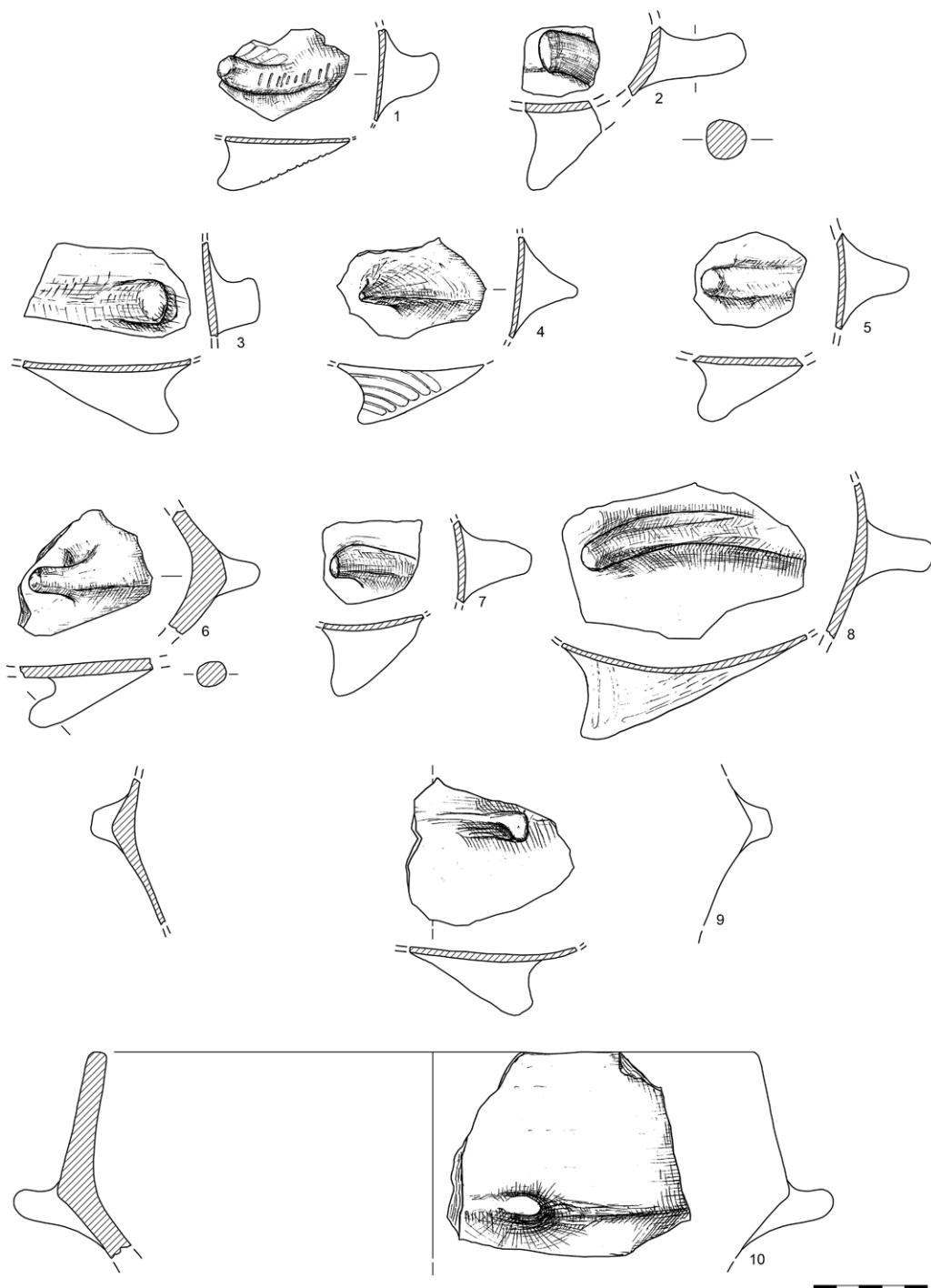


Figure 22. Deep bowls with horizontal knobs (1–9) or lugs (10) from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

spherical bowls with diameter ranging between 25–40 cm (ca. 20% of the hemispherical bowls). The bowls are relatively thin-walled, with wall thickness measuring up to 0.8–0.9 cm, although thicker pieces are also present, reaching up to 1.0–1.5 cm.

The conical bowls from Moshtanets–Chukata typically have well-smoothed outer and inner surfaces, brown, reddish-brown, or rarely gray-black or black-brown in color. The surfaces of the conical bowls from Strumsko were treated in the same manner, but the brown or reddish-brown and gray or gray-black types are distributed equally. Overall, these vessel types at Strumsko are simply decorated: incisions at the rim, and knobs above the rim and on the outer surface (fig. 24). The examples from Moshtanets–Chukata are all plain (fig. 23).

The surface treatment of the carinated bowls at both sites does not differ from that of the conical bowls. At Moshtanets–Chukata, the former are usually gray-brown or gray-beige in color, while at Strumsko they appear in a somewhat darker range, up to black-brown or gray-black. At the latter site, carinated bowls are represented in both phases of occupation, but are twice as numerous in the earlier phase. Many carinated bowls are decorated, with the decoration type and location being common for this shape. The decoration consists of fine, diagonal or vertical channeling applied above the carination (figs. 25.2 and 3, 26.9 and 10). It is often combined with plastic knobs immediately below the rim (fig. 25.11); knobs also appear with no other decoration (figs. 25.9 and 26.12). In addition to the plastic decoration, channeling is also combined with impressed dimples, also placed on the upper part of the vessels, between the channeling. Single (fig. 26.3 and 5–7) or multiple rows of impressed dimples are applied at the carination (fig. 25.11). In the former case, the diameter is larger, ranging between 1 and 1.5 cm, and such decorated vessels are characteristic mainly of the earlier level of occupation at Strumsko. Some carinated bowls have handles (fig. 25.1 and 12).

In the ceramic assemblage of Moshtanets–Chukata, the hemispherical bowls are underrepresented, likely due to the limited excavation area (fig. 27.2–6). At Strumsko, this type is widespread and appears in both occupation phases, with a noticeable increase in the later period. This is particularly true for graphite-painted vessels, which were found only at Strumsko (fig. 28.1, 4, 6, and 11). In both assemblages, the predominant surface color is brown, with lighter or darker shades. Both outer and inner surfaces are evenly smoothed or polished, except for one example from Moshtanets–Chukata whose outer surface is covered with pattern barbotine (fig. 27.5). Just over 15 percent of the shape's examples are decorated. Among them, vessels with graphite-painted decoration predominate covering the entire outer and often the inner surface (fig. 28.1, 4, and 11), and in some cases, the rim (fig. 28.6). There are few vessels with channeled decoration, which, like the graphite decoration, covers the outer surface and rarely the rim. The channeling is shallow and up to 5 mm wide, with the flutes organized in parallel groups. Some are arc-shaped (fig. 27.2), others are diagonal, sometimes combined in alternating directions.

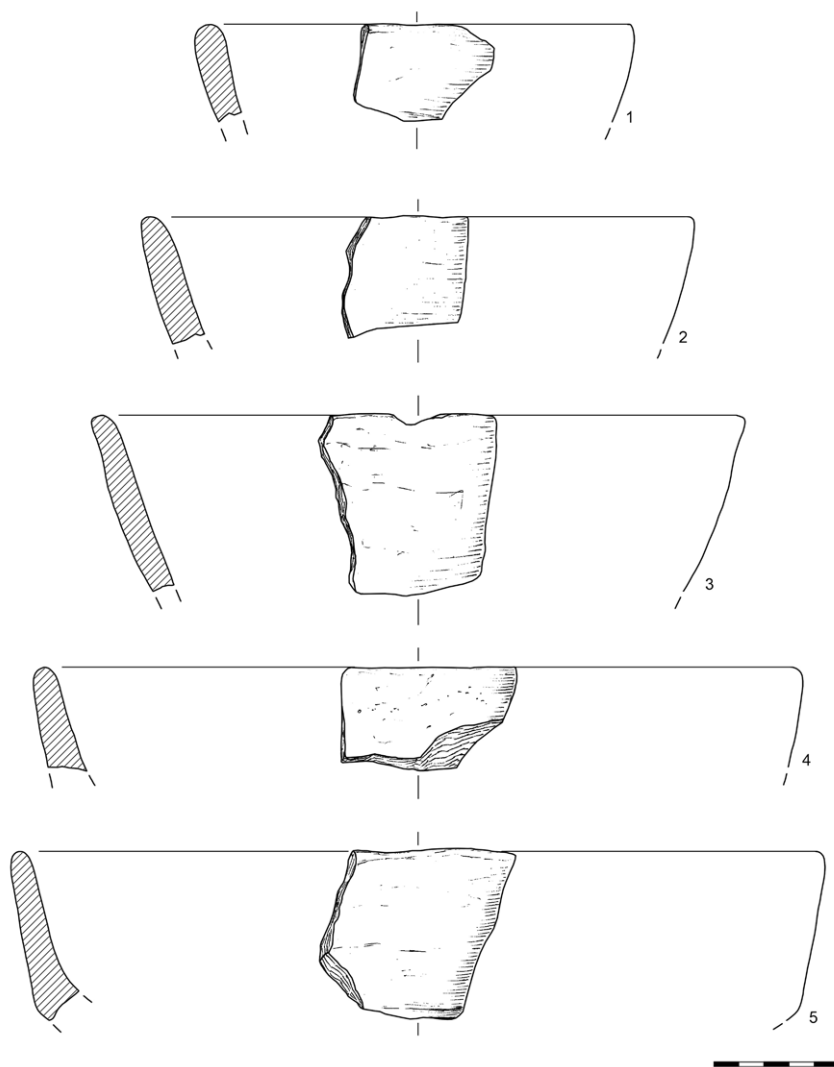


Figure 23. *Conical bowls from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*

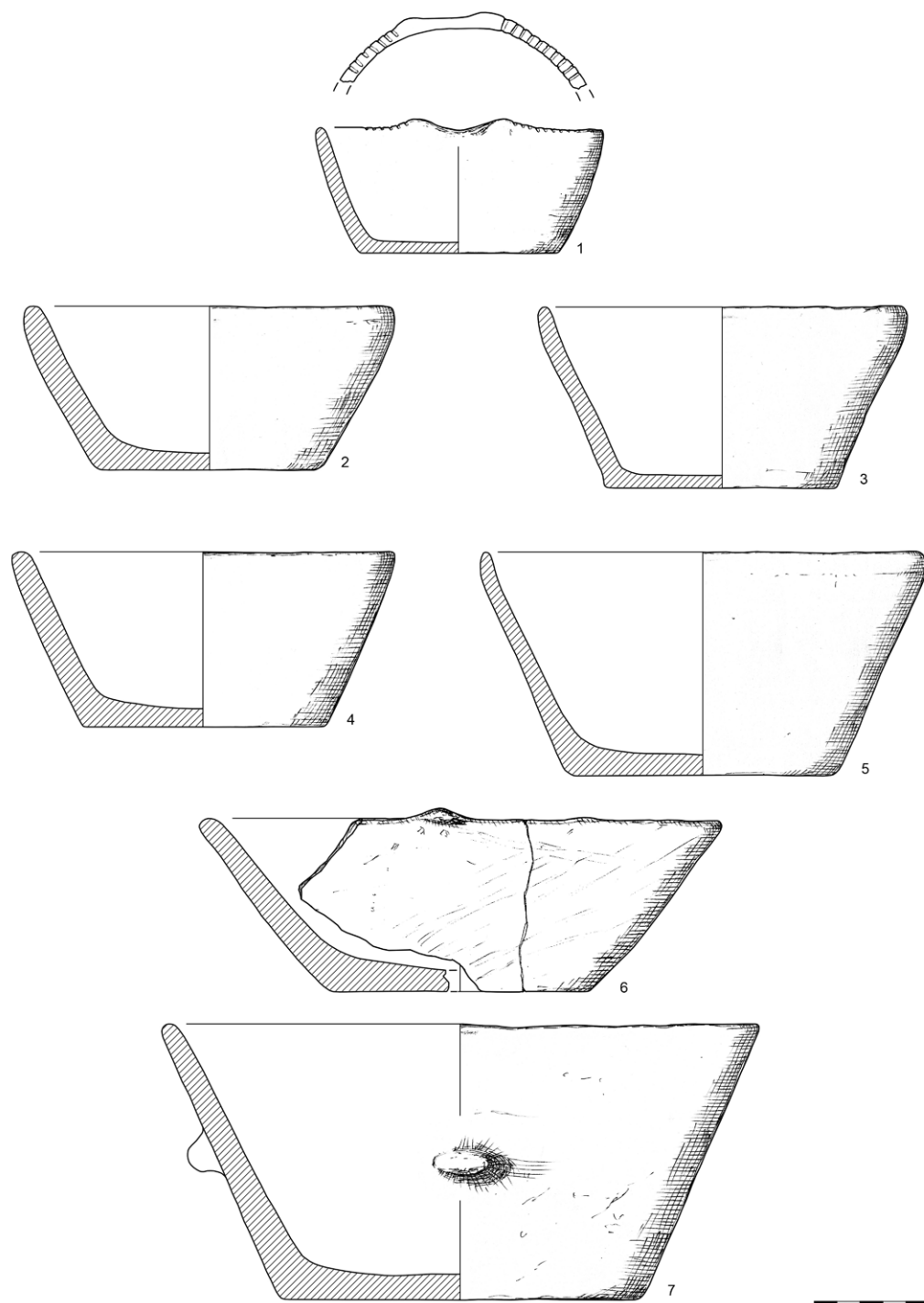


Figure 24. Conical bowls from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

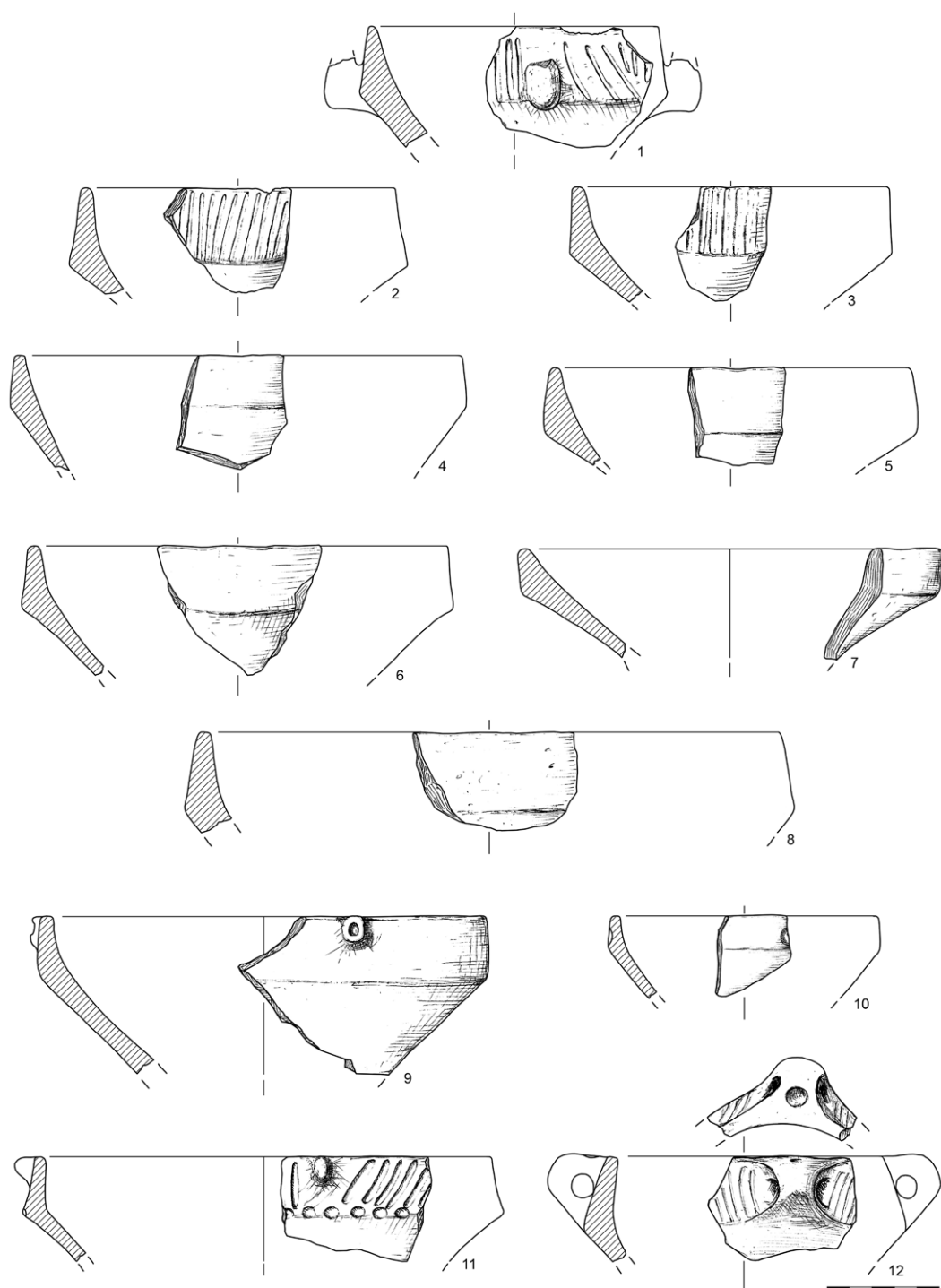


Figure 25. *Carinated bowls from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*

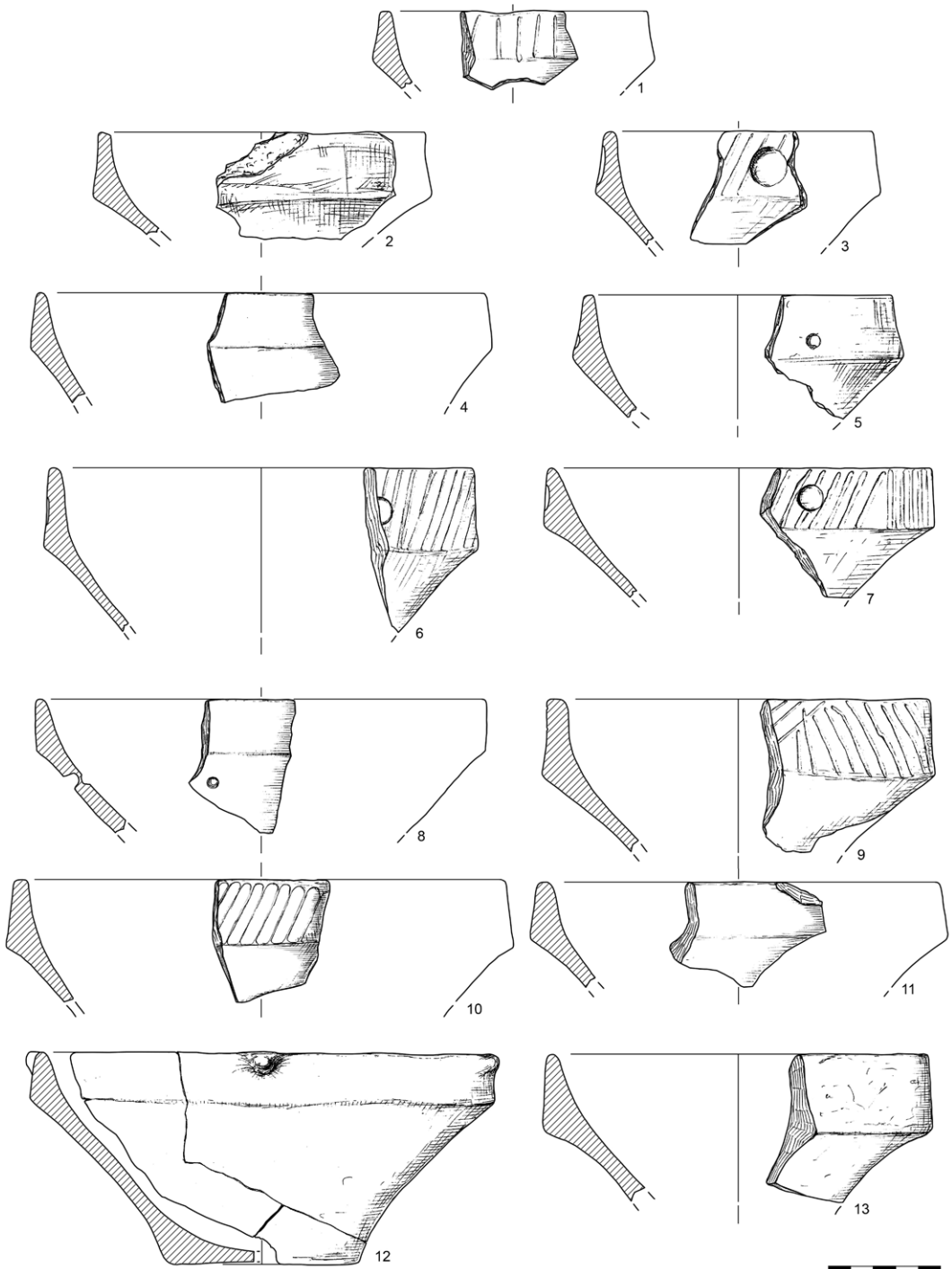


Figure 26. Carinated bowls from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

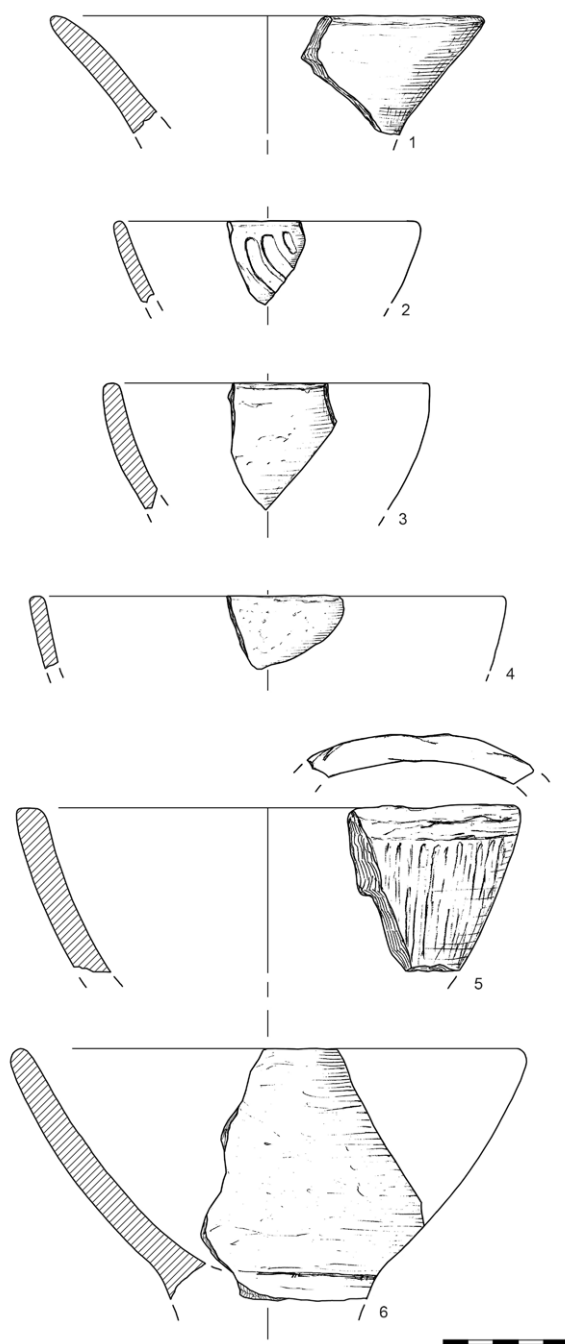


Figure 27. Hemispherical (2–6) and conical bowls (1) from Moshtanets–Chukata. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

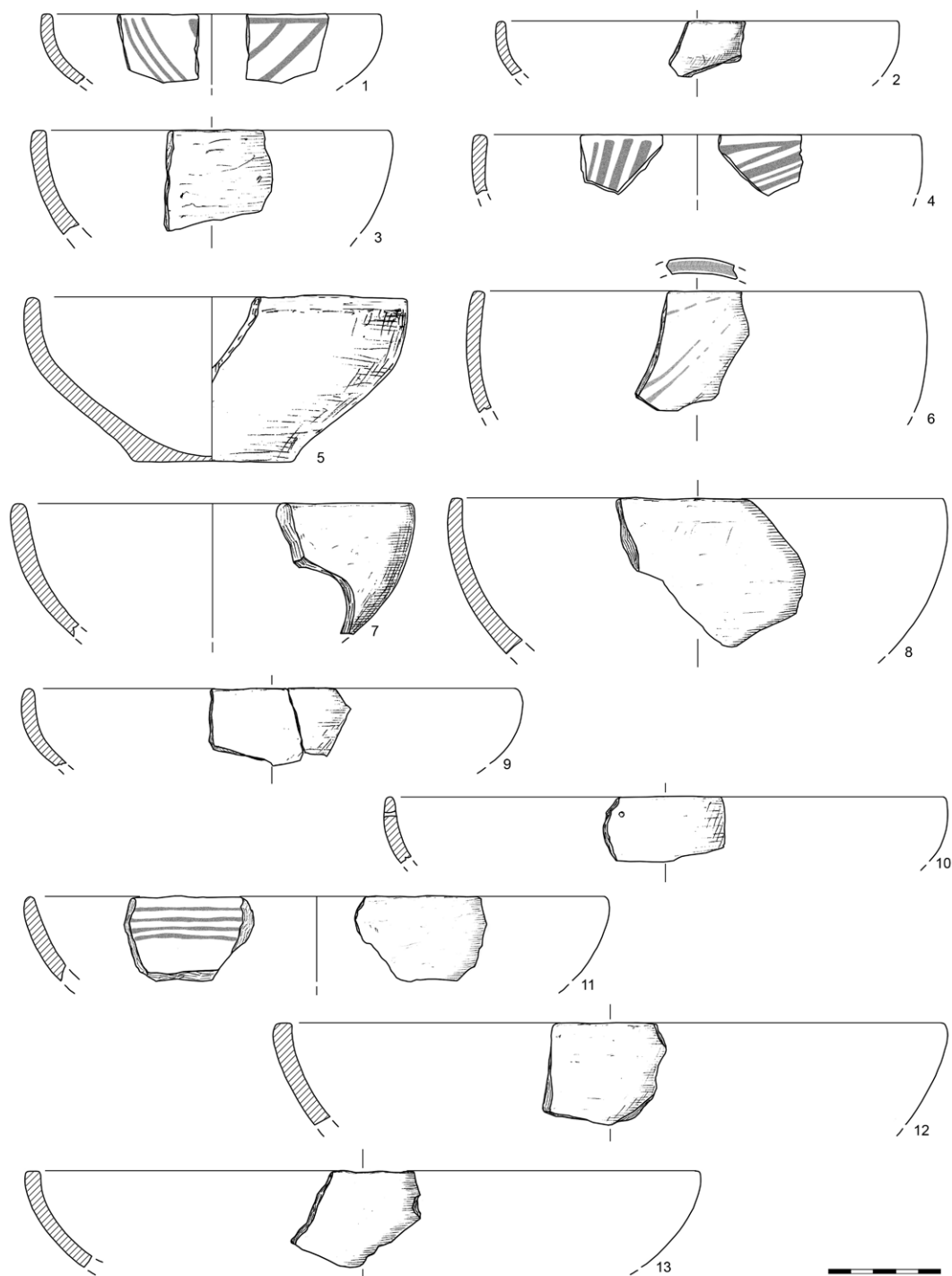


Figure 28. Hemispherical bowls from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

The bases of the bowls are typically flat or slightly concave, but some conical and hemispherical bowls are placed on sizable hollow or solid pedestals (commonly known as fruit-stands). In the ceramic repertoire of Moshtanets–Chukata, a few pedestal bowls are identified (fig. 27.1 and 6), whereas at Strumsko, they are more common, distributed evenly across both occupation phases (fig. 29). The treatment of the outer surface and the color of the pedestals match those of the upper parts of the vessels described for conical and hemispherical bowls, while the interior is less carefully smoothed. The wall thickness of the pedestals is also consistent with that of the upper parts of the vessels. At Strumsko, solid pedestals were also identified (fig. 29.12). In this specific instance, the vessel was made in parts, which were joined together with a wooden dowel.

The last bowl type I will discuss here are vessels with a smooth S-shaped profile (fig. 30), thus far identified only at Strumsko. They have an elegant, widely open shape, gentle carination, and thin walls, and some of them feature handles (fig. 30.5 and 6). Bowls with a rim diameter of 20–30 cm predominate, with fewer examples having a smaller diameter of 15–20 cm. Both the outer and inner surfaces of the vessels are very well-smoothed or polished, usually brown or gray-brown in color. Both decorated and plain pieces were uncovered, but the latter are relatively few. The most common decoration for this type is graphite painting on both the inner and outer surface. The few preserved sherds from Strumsko reveal linear patterns, with lines ranging in width from 2–3 to 6 mm (fig. 30.5 and 6). There is significant similarity with the patterns painted in black on red. Vessels with channeled decoration are notably more common. Typically, the flutes are shallow, with soft, rounded edges and a width of 3 to ca. 6 mm. As a rule, the decoration is located at the widest parts of the vessels, above the carination. The flutes are mostly inclined and are organized in groups with alternating orientations (fig. 30.1 and 2).

Another type common in the Early Copper Age of southwest Bulgaria are the large conical vessels, referred to by V. Nikolov as ‘open fire cooking pans’ (Nikolov 1987) and by the researchers of Balgarchevo as ‘rusticated dishes’ (Pernicheva et al. 2011, 195). The sherds found at Moshtanets (fig. 31.1–6) and Strumsko (fig. 31.7–12) are identical in terms of technology and shape. They have conical shape with straight or slightly convex walls. Vessels with a rim diameter of 40–50 cm predominate, with fewer examples smaller than 40–45 cm and wall thicknesses ranging between 0.5–1.0 cm. All pieces have thickened, everted rim. The treatment of the inner and outer surfaces of the vessels differs significantly; the inner surface is very well smoothed, while the outer is rough and coarse. According to V. Nikolov (1987, 33), this and the thin walls of the vessels are evidence of their use in food preparation by burying them into embers.

Conclusion

The presence of two small fortified sites located close to each other indicates a well-organized settlement system in the northern part of the Middle Struma region, controlling access to and from the Kresna Gorge and the Aegean coast to the south, the

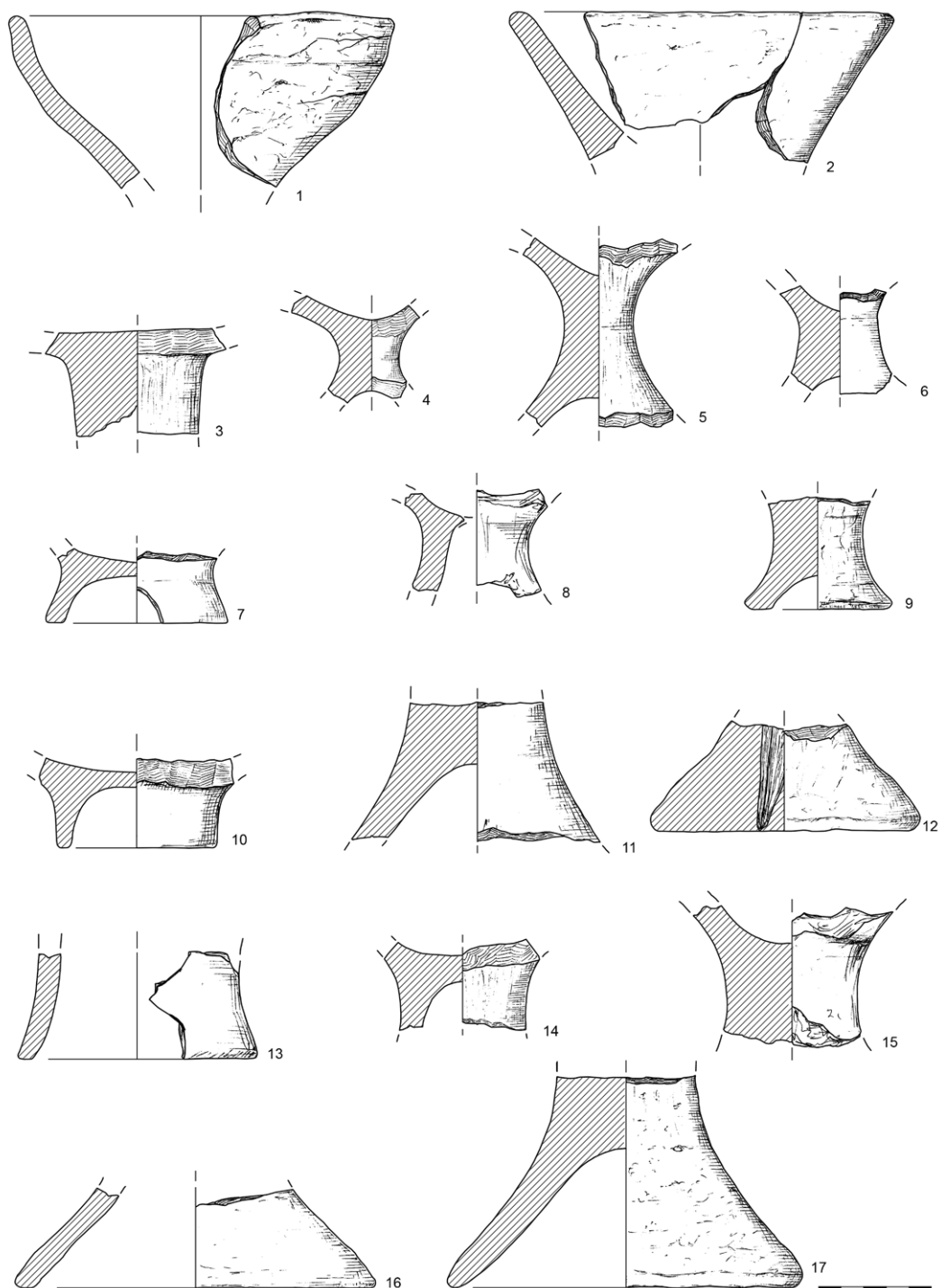


Figure 29. Pedestal bowls from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.

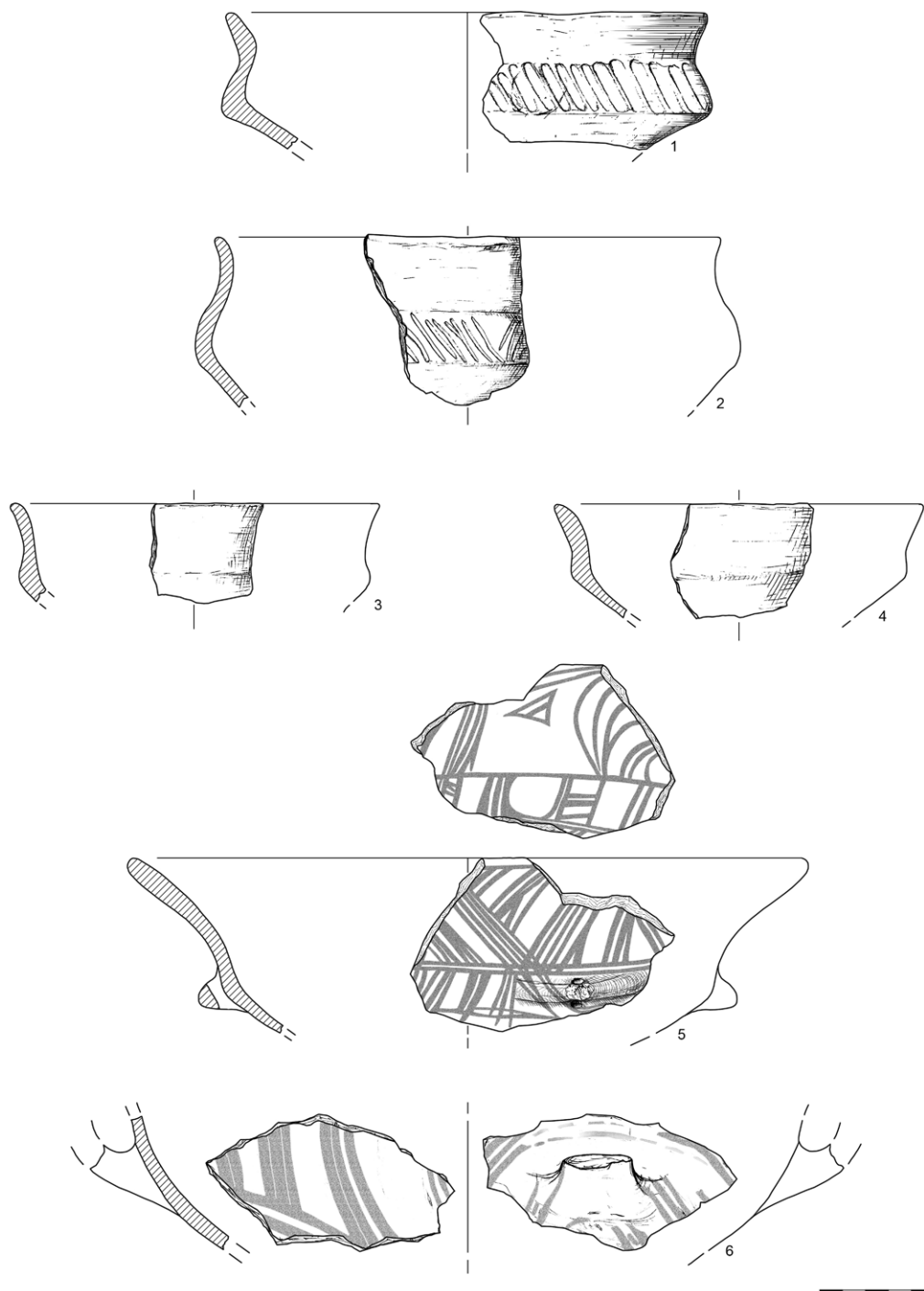


Figure 30. *Bowls with smooth S-shaped profile from Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*

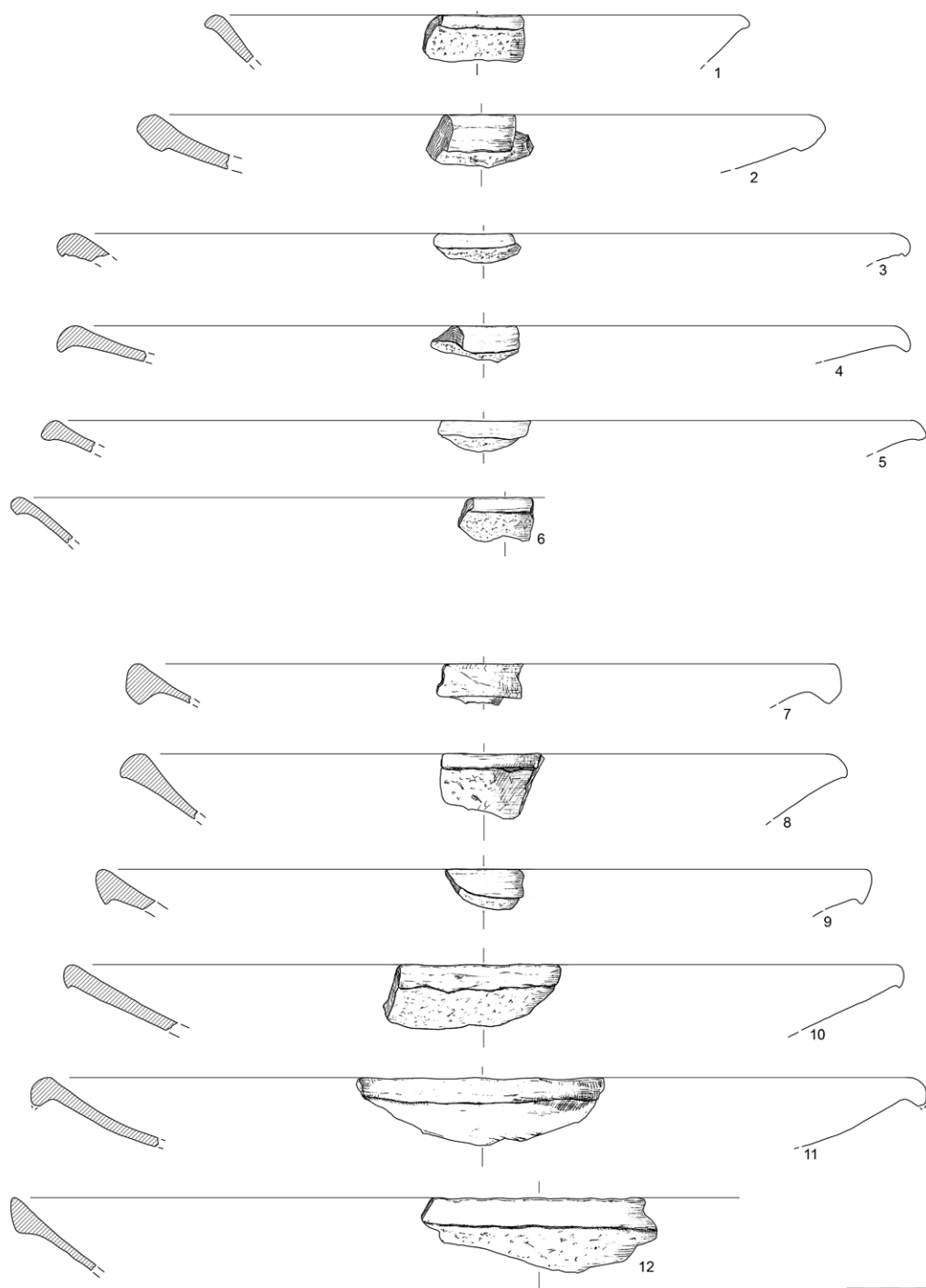


Figure 31. *Open fire cooking pans: (1–6) Moshtanets-Chukata; (7–12) Strumsko. Image Credit: G. Katsarov.*



Figure 32. Location of the sites of Moshtanets–Chukata (right) and Strumsko (left) on the opposite banks of the Struma River: panoramic view of the Kresna Gorge. Image Credit: Google Earth & G. Katsarov.

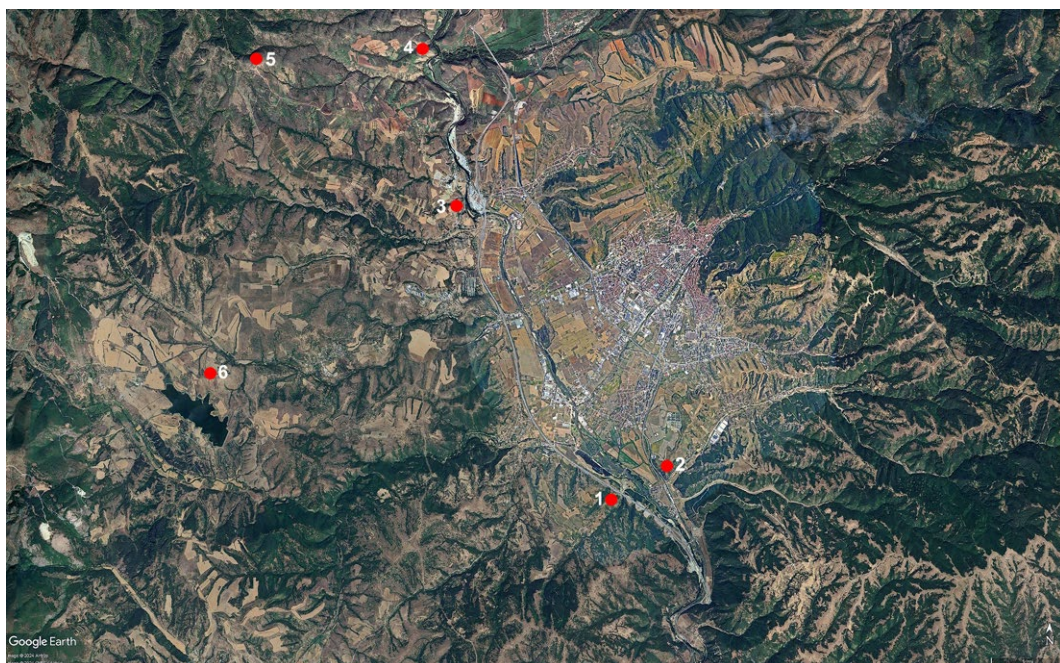


Figure 33. Map showing the location of the Early Copper Age sites of (1) Moshtanets–Chukata; (2) Strumsko; (3) Balgarchevo; (4) Buchino–Goliya rid; (5) Buchino–Lisiyska chuka; and (6) Logodazh–Berova kitka. Image Credit: Google Earth & G. Katsarov.

Upper Struma Valley to the north, and the Vardar River Valley to the west (fig. 32). The topographical characteristics of the sites are similar to those of other Early Copper Age sites in the northern part of the Middle Struma Valley, mostly investigated by field surveys (fig. 33). Usually, these elevated settlements are situated at locations with specific geomorphological features, mostly formed as the result of strong denudation processes that lead to the destruction of the sites. The evidence of the existence of similar sites on the right bank of the Struma River – e.g., Buchino–Golio rid, Buchino–Lisiyska chuka, and Logodazh–Berova kitka (Grebska-Kulova 2004, 139; Grembska-Kulova & Kulov 2007, fig. 5) – highlights the significance of the Blagoevgrad Valley for the control over the roads along the Struma River and its tributaries to the north, west, and south. To the west and north, the ceramic assemblage of the Blagoevgrad Valley finds parallels at sites like Angeltsi–Stranata (Zdravkovski & Stojanova-Kanzurova 2016; Rujak 2017a), Tsarevi Kuli (Rujak 2017b and 2020), and Slatino–Karo (Chohadviev 2006, 19f). The analogies in stratigraphic sequences, topography, and settlement layout, the similar ceramic repertoires, and the absolute chronology of Moshtanets–Chukata and Strumsko provide a basis for me to theorize that both sites not only co-existed but that they also constituted parts of a single settlement with shared organization, at least for a certain period of time.

Of course, this suggests the appearance of an elaborated social organization with vertical hierarchy, but such a theory requires further investigations. New systematic research at Moshtanets–Chukata will contribute to clarifying the processes and structural changes of the population that resulted in the shift in settlement patterns, the abandonment of large Late Neolithic settlements, and the emergence of smaller sites at naturally protected locations.

Acknowledgements

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PREHISTORIC OCCUPATION AT TASH BAIR NEAR NOVGRAD (RUSE DISTRICT) AND ITS CULTURAL-HISTORICAL POSITION IN THE EASTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

The Tash bair mountain ridge at the confluence of the Yantra and the Lower Danube has been the subject of intensive archaeological research by a Bulgarian-German team since 2018. Significant prehistoric settlement sites existed there in the Late Neolithic, Middle Bronze Age, and Early Iron Age. Based on the stratigraphic observations of the settlement layers, a substantial relative chronological classification for the prehistoric periods was elaborated for the first time. Beyond this, a series of radiocarbon dates allows a first absolute chronological classification of the extensive find inventories from the prehistoric periods. The development of occupation at these sites was closely linked to the development of the water system in the lowlands of the Yantra and Studena reka rivers, which continues into historical times. During the prehistoric period, it was an important center where various cultural groups can be found that are also characteristic of the northern bank of the Danube (Wallachia). Apparently, Tash bair functioned for a long time as a bridgehead between the two banks of the Lower Danube, which emphasizes its strategic position.

Keywords: Prehistoric occupation – environmental factors – settlement ditches – Late Neolithic – Middle Bronze Age – Early Iron Age – radiocarbon dating.

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Introduction

The mountain ridge of Tash bair is a dominant landmark above the lowlands near the confluence of the Yantra River and the Lower Danube. It also dominates the confluence of the Studena reka valley coming from the southwest and the Yantra. The geofactors favoring settlement, such as the strategically dominant position near the southernmost point of the Danube's course with an important river crossing, the direct access to the Yantra near its mouth and a pronounced south-facing slope, led to a concentration of important settlement and fortification sites, the chronology of which extends over various periods from the Late Neolithic to the Early Middle Ages (fig. 1). In addition, the routes along the Lower Danube, Studena reka and Yantra crossed here, the latter providing access to the Balkan passes. At all times, the Danube represented a geographical obstacle, but it functioned as an important communication and exchange route in prehistory until the Late Iron Age. Moreover, the importance of riverine food resources should not be underestimated.

Stefan Stefanov (1974) has already mentioned the existence of a large Roman site here in his basic compilation of archaeological sites on the lower Yantra. The significance of the multi-period site complex on the southern slope of Tash bair, however, could only be worked out in the course of the Bulgarian-German survey, which was carried out between 1997 and 2001 in a study area along the lower course of the Yantra and between the *limes* fortifications of Novae and Iatrus (Krauß 2006a, cat. 48).

After further sites were discovered in satellite images in the following years, an interdisciplinary project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) since 2018 is now investigating the extent to which the concentration of sites can be attributed to the favorable location at this supra-regionally important crossing point and the reasons for their later abandonment. The research has been carried out as a joint project of the National Archaeological Institute and Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (NAIM-BAS) and the Institute of Prehistory, Early History and Medieval Archaeology of the University of Tübingen (Germany). A working group of the Geographical Institute of the University of Leuven (Belgium) as a collaboration partner carried out investigations on the river history of the Yantra near its mouth. Various scientists from other institutions carried out special investigations.

Based on the stratigraphic observations of the settlement layers at sites 1, 3, and 4 at Tash bair, a substantial relative chronological classification for the prehistoric periods from the Late Neolithic to the Early Iron Age could be made for the first time for the Yantra catchment area. A series of radiocarbon dates allows us to discuss their absolute chronology. In this paper, therefore, the focus will be less on the excavated features and more on the finds and their chronology. The analysis is largely based on the results of the first part of the project (2018–20), which were recently published (cf. Vagalinski et al. 2023a), as well as on unpublished material from the second phase of the project (2021–23). Therefore, literature references can be largely dispensed with at this point.

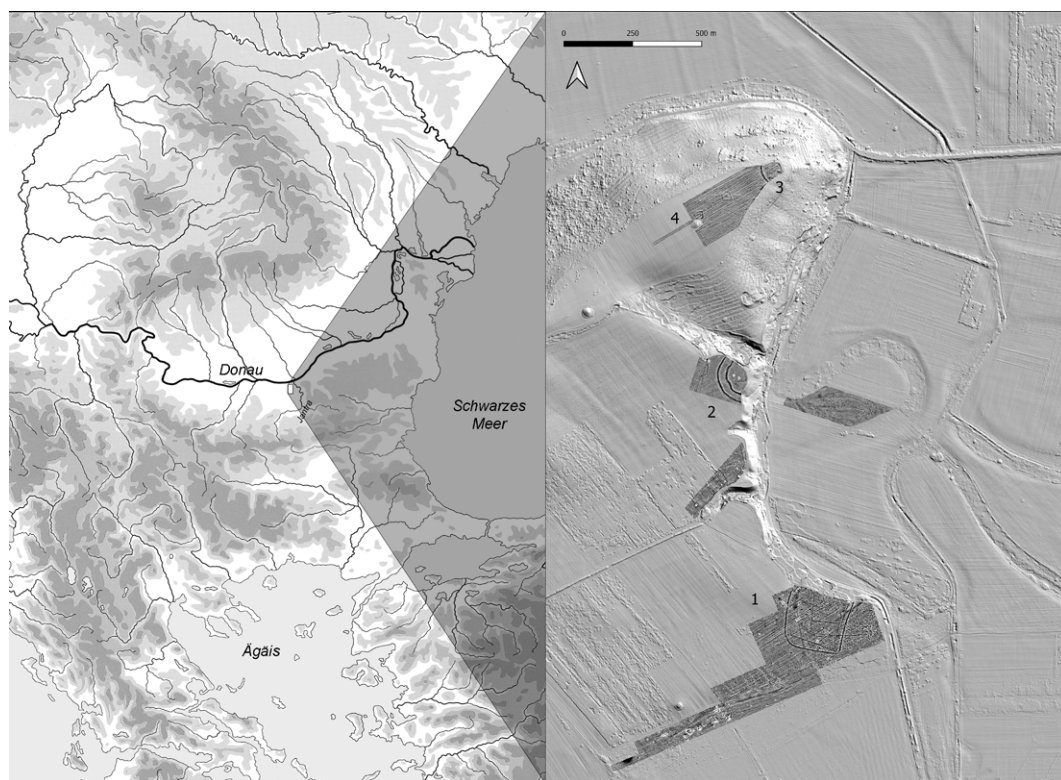


Figure 1. *Geographical position of Tash bair at the southernmost point of the Danube River. LiDAR Image of the Tash bair ridge with geomagnetic mapping (Eastern Atlas Berlin) of archaeological sites 1–4. Image Credit: R. Krauß.*

The Neolithic

If one considers the available material and chronological studies for the entire lower course of the Danube River in context, there is a clear focus on the beginning of the Neolithic from the late seventh to the first half of the sixth millennium BC and then again on the beginning of the Copper Age in the early fifth millennium BC. This situation also clearly reflects the research interests in the beginning of sedentism, agriculture, and animal husbandry in the region on the one hand, and in the cultural environment of the spectacular finds at the beginning of copper and gold metallurgy on the other, the latter having been represented above all by the opulent burials of the Varna cemetery. An additional focus on the beginning of the Copper Age resulted from the sensational discovery of fortifications – already known for some time in the form of multiple palisade fortifications of the lower settlement layers at Tell Polyanitsa, as well as other sites, and more recently also in the form of massive stone walls at the tell sites of Provadia, Sushina, and Suvorovo (Chohadzhiev & Krauß 2019). A lot of radiocarbon dates are thus available for the above-mentioned timespans, while the periods in

between and after them are hardly documented with absolute dating (cf. Görsdorf & Boyadzhiev 1996; Tsirtsoni 2016).

The period in the second half of the sixth millennium BC, which is represented in Thrace in the settlement sequence from Karanovo III to IV or Aşağı Pınar 5 to 3, offers an abundance of find material in northern Bulgaria, too, which has so far only been roughly structured (e.g., Todorova & Vajsov 1993; Popov 1996). Larger collections of material from this period in northern Bulgaria come from the sites of Samovodene and Kachitsa, as well as from the upper settlement layers of Koprivets and Hotnitsa-Orlovka. The excavator Petar Stanev (2002) proposed a division of the material from Samovodene into phases A, A-B1, B2, and B2-C. In his opinion, the reason for the still unclear sequence of the individual building levels is that the area of the settlement was investigated only by small excavation trenches. Nevertheless, the few finds offer a small insight into the development of ceramic shapes of this period. The eponymous site of Hotnitsa-Orlovka was in fact investigated just by small trenches ahead of an infrastructure project (Chohadzhiev & Chohadzhiev 2014). The materials presented in earlier publications are unstratified and often hardly identifiable in detail simply because of the poor quality of the published photographs and drawings (cf. Ilcheva 2002). The material from Kachitsa is unpublished, apart from cursory mentions in various journal articles (Stanev 1976, 1981, and 1982). More extensive Late Neolithic material comes from trench A at Koprivets. The ceramic finds were assigned to the Hotnitsa I and II levels by Volodya Popov (1996, 37, 165ff). He assigned further material from the Chakmak Tepe and Magaritsata sites near Byala to Hotnitsa I and Vădastra culture (Popov 1996, 183ff). In addition, material from various sites was assigned to the Boian I phenomenon (Popov 1996, 191ff). This clearly outlines the heterogenous appearance of the north Bulgarian Late Neolithic and its problems. There is a great deal of excavated material which, due to a lack of reliable stratigraphic observations, can be assigned mainly stylistically to different cultural groups, without their relative chronological relationships being clear.

The Late Neolithic occupation of site 1 at Tash bair (ca. 5200–4900 BC) is of particular importance here (fig. 2). Due to the favorable position on the long-extended terrace on the southern slope of Tash bair, close to the mouth of the Yantra River into the Danube, this settlement has a key position for the settlement system in the region during prehistoric times. It is the earliest settlement at the mouth of the Yantra, which is known so far¹ and covers at least 6 ha.

¹ It cannot be ruled out that neolithization at the mouth of the Yantra River began already in the Early Neolithic, contemporary to the known sites at the middle course of the river (Dzhulyunitsa, Koprivets, Orlovets). During the geomorphological investigations, settlement remains were found when core drilling at a site in the river lowlands ca. 3.5 m below the present surface, which were dated to ca. 6000 calBC. However, their cultural assignment must remain open for the time being until clarification by an excavation. So far, the Late Neolithic settlement on the southern slope of Tash bair is the earliest clearly identifiable site at the Yantra estuary after the end of the last Ice Age.

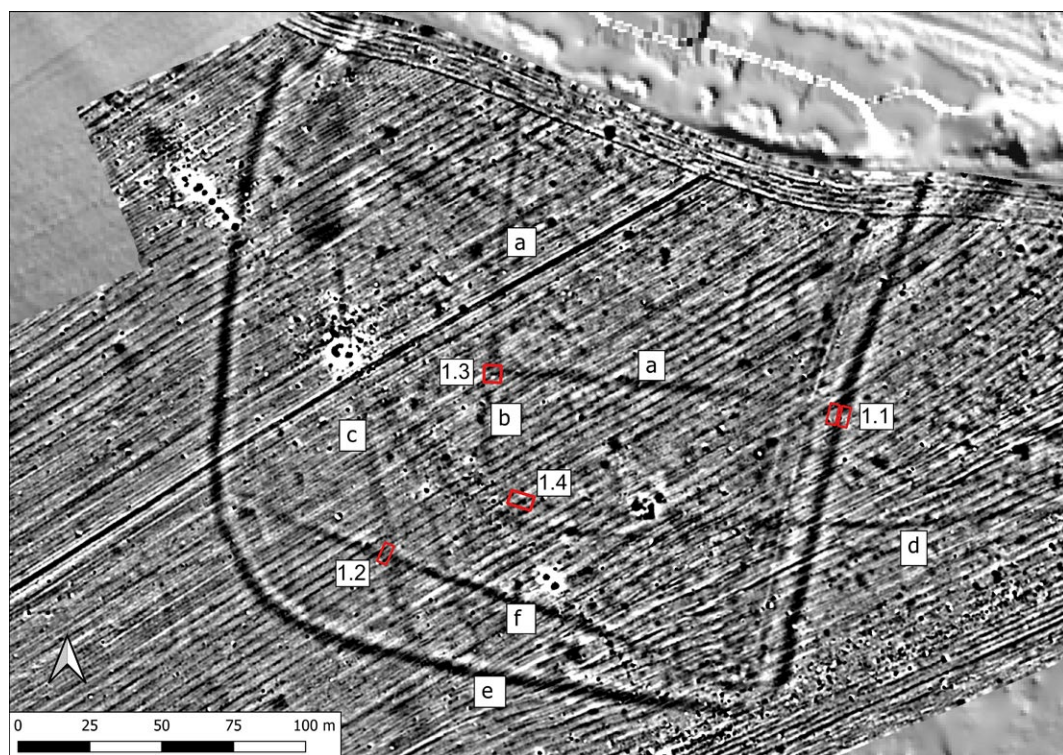


Figure 2. Geomagnetic mapping (*Eastern Atlas Berlin*) at Tash bair, site 1, with the position of excavation trenches 1.1–1.4. (a–d) Late Neolithic ditches; (e–f) early Medieval ditches. Image Credit: S. Conrad.

At the beginning of the Bulgarian-German research project, several Late Neolithic features have already been identified at site 1, whose exact time and space position seemed to be unclear at first. Besides common material of the north Bulgarian Late Neolithic (Hotnitsa/Kachitsa), ceramic forms of Vădastra, Boian and even Hamangia are represented. The latter phenomenon has its center of distribution in Dobrudzha (Haşotti 1997; Todorova 2011, 54ff). To the west, connections to Vinča A to C are possible based on absolute chronology (cf. Krauß 2023b, 139).

Based on large-scale geomagnetic measurements (cf. Ullrich et al. 2023, 102f, figs. 3–5), four linear or double-linear anomalies were identified, which targeted excavation trenches proved to be Late Neolithic ditches (fig. 2a–d). In the case of ditches a–c, the Late Neolithic date is confirmed by both finds and radiocarbon dates (trench 1.4, see below). Only the double ditch d (feature 1.4.7), which was difficult to define during the excavations, can be plausibly dated to a late phase of the Late Neolithic based on its stratigraphic position and the finds only. The stratigraphic relationship of the three other ditches a–c, which should be dated earlier than ditch d, is not sure for the time being.

The ditch a has a preserved width of approximately 1.90 m and a depth of up to 1.20 m. In the western part it is angled at 90°; there was probably a passage here. A first section of the ditch was recorded in the double trench 1.1 (cf. Vagalinski et al. 2023c, feature 1.1.6/15), and the corner context was examined later in trench 1.3.¹

Ditch b most likely corresponds to feature 1.4.10 and was at least 2.10 m wide and 0.95 m deep. If the identification with the circular ditch in the geomagnetic mapping is right, then it appears to run in a circular arc.² This is the earliest feature attested in trench 1.4 and possibly (though not surely confirmed) the earliest of the ditches excavated so far. Radiocarbon dates on ruminant bones are available from both contexts (feature 1.3.11 [Poz-156808: 6140±40 BP]; feature 1.4.10 [Poz-156809: 6200±40 BP]) that indicate a date between the 53rd and 51st centuries calBC (table 1).

Ditch c was identified in the excavation trench as a relatively shallow double trench running NNW–SSE (features 1.2.4 and 1.2.6/8; Krauß & Conrad 2023). Three radiocarbon dates (Poz-120368: 6155±35 BP; Poz-120370: 6170±40 BP; Poz-120371: 6120±35 BP) place these ditches in the 51st to 50th centuries calBC, i.e., the first two phases of the north Bulgarian Late Neolithic represented at Tash bair, site 1. Comparable dates are available from Kachitsa and Hotnitsa–Orlovka (Görsdorf & Boyadzhiev 1996).

Regarding the function of these trenches, we are currently only dependent on assumptions, especially since their original depth and width can no longer be determined. With regard to their position in relation to the surface finds identified (Kecheva et al. 2023, site 1) and in view of their course, ditches a, b, and d appear to have represented certain demarcation of the actual settlement area. Ditch features are common elements of the Neolithic settlements and can be found at numerous sites. Due to large-scale rescue excavations and geomagnetic prospections, their number in Bulgaria has increased considerably in recent years (Roodenberg et al. 2014; Nikolova 2018; Aleksandrov et al. 2024).

During the 2022 archaeological campaign, a series of pit complexes with numerous ceramic finds was uncovered here which are currently still being processed (fig. 3). Due to the stratigraphic overlaps of some of them, they offer certain potential to differentiate several phases of the Late Neolithic. At least two stages were identified in trench 1.3, and at least three in trench 1.4. A comparison to finds from the neighboring sites mentioned above could make it possible to better sort and chronologically classify the Late Neolithic finds in north central Bulgaria.³ Radiocarbon dates are now available for some

¹ This ditch (feature 1.1.8/15) was provisionally dated to the Late Iron Age in the publication of the excavations carried out in 2019 (Vagalinski et al. 2023b; Conrad & Krauß 2023b, 262ff, tables 4 and 5). The reason for this was some ceramic sherds found in the ditch filling, which contaminated the original filling. The dating to the Late Neolithic was corrected by the excavations carried out in 2022, the results of which will be published in the Novgrad – Tash bair 2 volume (feature 1.3.11).

² Ditch b will also be included in the Novgrad – Tash bair 2 volume, which is currently in preparation.

³ The detailed results of this investigation will be published in the Novgrad – Tash bair 2 volume.

Sample	Site	Feature	Material	Species	LabCode	14C BP	STD	calBC (2 σ)
TB 26	Site 1	4/1/09	charred seeds	<i>Triticum New Type</i>	Poz-174130	6210	40	5320–5000
TB 23	Site 1	Ft 1.4.10, trench at W profile	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-156809	6200	40	5280–5000
TB 24	Site 1	3/1/10	charred seeds	<i>Prunus non spinosa, Fragn.</i>	Poz-174030	6200	40	5280–5000
TB 12	Site 1	Ft 1.2/1.2.4 NW (niv. 28.58–28.11 m)	bone	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Poz-120370	6170	40	5240–5000
TB 09	Site 1	Ft 1.2 NE/1-2-7/8 (niv. 28.40–28.10 m)	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-120368	6155	35	5260–4980
TB 22	Site 1	Ft 1.3.11 BNE 4, ditch bottom 4th level	bone	large ungulate	Poz-156808	6140	40	5260–4940
TB 13	Site 1	Ft 1.2NE/1.2 7/8 (niv. 29.30–28.94 m)	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-120371	6120	35	5250–4930
TB 29	Site 1	Ft 1.4.4	charred seeds	<i>Prunus non spinosa, Fragn.</i>	Poz-174060	6110	40	5240–4880
TB 28	Site 1	Ft 1.4.13	charred seeds	<i>Hordeum distichon/vulgare</i>	Poz-173985	6105	35	5210–4890
TB 11	Site 1	Ft 1.2/1.2.4 NW (niv. 29.30–29.08 m)	bone	large ungulate	Poz-120369	5545	35	4470–4310
TB 27	Site 1	Ft 1.4.26	charred seeds	<i>Triticum New Type/Lens culinaris</i>	Poz-174131	4120	35	2920–2520
TB 20	Site 3	Ft 3.6S (niv. 58.60–58.10 m) up to above stones	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-156798	3625	35	2090–1890
TB 21	Site 3	Ft 3.6.4 (niv. 57.71–57.59 m)	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-156807	3615	35	2070–1870
TB 19	Site 3	Ft 3.6S (niv. 58.35–58.10 m) under stones	bone	large ungulate	Poz-156797	3600	35	2060–1860

Table 1. List of radiocarbon dates for the prehistoric features at Tash bair (continued on the next page).

Sample	Site	Feature	Material	Species	LabCode	¹⁴ C BP	STD	calBC (2σ)
TB 01	Site 3	Ft 3.6, ditch filling (niv. 58.32–58.03 m)	bone	<i>Bos taurus</i>	Poz-108792	3585	35	2040–1840
TB 03	Site 3	Ft 3.6, ditch filling (niv. 58.80–58.58 m)	bone	<i>Bos taurus</i>	Poz-108794	3555	35	2010–1770
TB 07	Site 3	Ft 3.1.1., Qu. A, 30–40 cm (niv. 61.38–61.28 m)	bone	large ungulate (cat-tle-sized)	Poz-115807	3165	30	1510–1390
TB 08	Site 3	Ft 3.1.1., Qu. A, Pl. 2 (niv. approx. 61.21 m)	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-115808	3135	30	1470–1350
TB 05	Site 3	Ft 3.3, south; Ft 3.2.1; 20+ cm; PL2–3 (niv. 63.97–63.58 m)	bone	large mammal	Poz-115804	3110	30	1460–1300
TB 02	Site 3	Ft 3.1.1, Qu. B, layer B1 (niv. approx. 61.30–61.35 m)	bone	<i>Bos</i> or large ungulate	Poz-108793	3035	30	1410–1210
TB 06	Site 3	Ft 3.1.1, Qu. A, 50–60 cm (niv. 61.18–61.08 m)	bone	<i>Bos</i>	Poz-115806	3035	35	1430–1190
TB 04	Site 3	Ft 3.3; Ft 3.2.1; betw. planum 2 and 3 (niv. 63.77–63.38 m)	charred wood	not determined	Poz-115331	2990	30	1350–1110
TB 14	Site 4	Ft 4.3 W-105 (niv. 92.50–92.40 m)	charred wood	<i>Quercus cf. cerris</i>	Poz-146649	2980	35	1320–1080
TB 18	Site 3	Ft 3.7.1 (niv. 66.11 m)	charred wood	not determined	Poz-156584	2940	30	1260–1020
TB 17	Site 4	Ft 4.3 W-105 (niv. 92.17–91.99 m)	charred wood	<i>Rosaceae cf. Maloideae</i>	Poz-147042	2930	90	1390–870
TB 31	Site 1	Ft 1.3.2, grave	bone	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Poz-179985	2920	30	1240–1000
TB 16	Site 4	Ft 4.3, E-115/116	charred wood	<i>Fraxinus cf. excelsior</i>	Poz-146651	2800	30	1030–870
TB 15	Site 4	Ft 4.4.110; NW quadrant	charred wood	<i>Quercus cf. cerris</i>	Poz-146650	2795	30	1020–860

Table 1. List of radiocarbon dates for the prehistoric features at Tash bair.



Figure 3. *Trench 1.4, planum 9, at Tash bair, site 1. Late Neolithic features, after the end of excavation. Image credit: UAV (J. Sprißler).*

of the Late Neolithic features (feature 1.3.10 [Poz-174030: 6200 ± 40 BP]; feature 1.4.9 [Poz-174130: 6210 ± 40 BP]; feature 1.4.13 [Poz-173985: 6105 ± 35 BP]; feature 1.4.4 [Poz-174060: 6110 ± 40 BP]). Provisionally, the Late Neolithic ceramic assemblage from Tash bair can be ordered chronologically based on the stratigraphic observations at site 1.

At the beginning of the development are biconical bowls with fluted decoration on the shoulder (fig. 4) that could be derived from the earlier material of the late Early Neolithic (Ovcharovo–Gorata, Samovodene). In the further course, this fluting was supplemented by indentation and incised decoration, while the vessel forms remained largely the same. Fine ceramics are dominated by biconical bowls with a high-set rim. The development of Late Neolithic pottery led to the appearance of forms decorated only with incised patterns, which are hardly represented at Tash bair (fig. 5.4, 20, and 21). This third stage is well documented in the find material from Hotnitsa–Kaya bunar (Ilcheva 2002, 144ff). Coarse ware also demonstrates development as many coarse vessels are covered with finger-trailed pattern barbotine. While the early phases of the Late Neolithic pottery production were still dominated by the rounded forms of the earlier tradition, they eventually developed into more sharply carinated shapes. Biconical jugs with cylindrical necks and knobbed handles appeared at the end, again common at Hotnitsa–Kaya bunar (Ilcheva 2002, 148), and also at Kachitsa (Stanev 1982, obr. 14–17). These forms are also present at Samovodene (Stanev 1985, obr. 3) but were

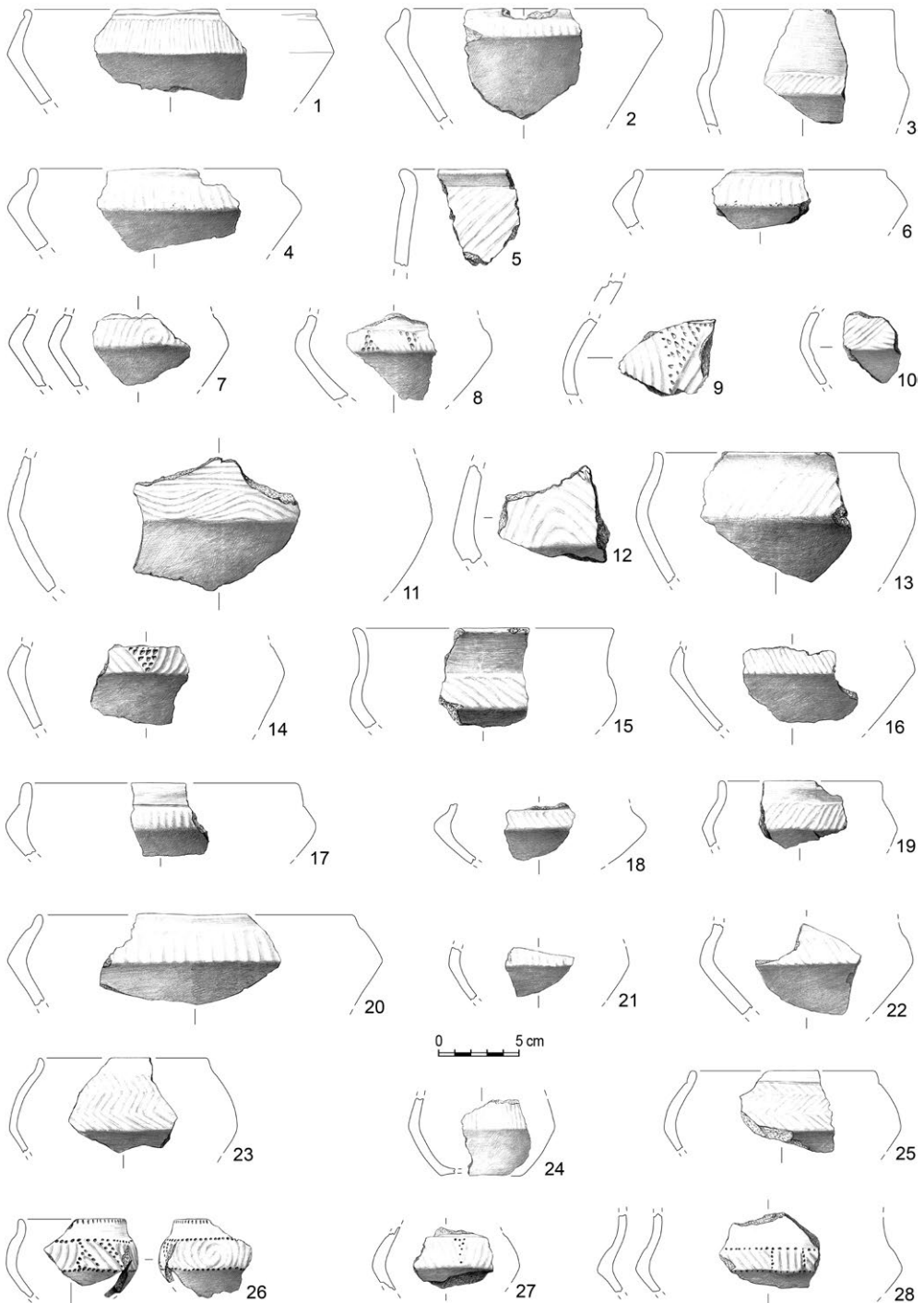


Figure 4. Late Neolithic pottery with channelled decoration from Tash bair, site 1. Image Credit: B. Terzieva and R. Krauß.

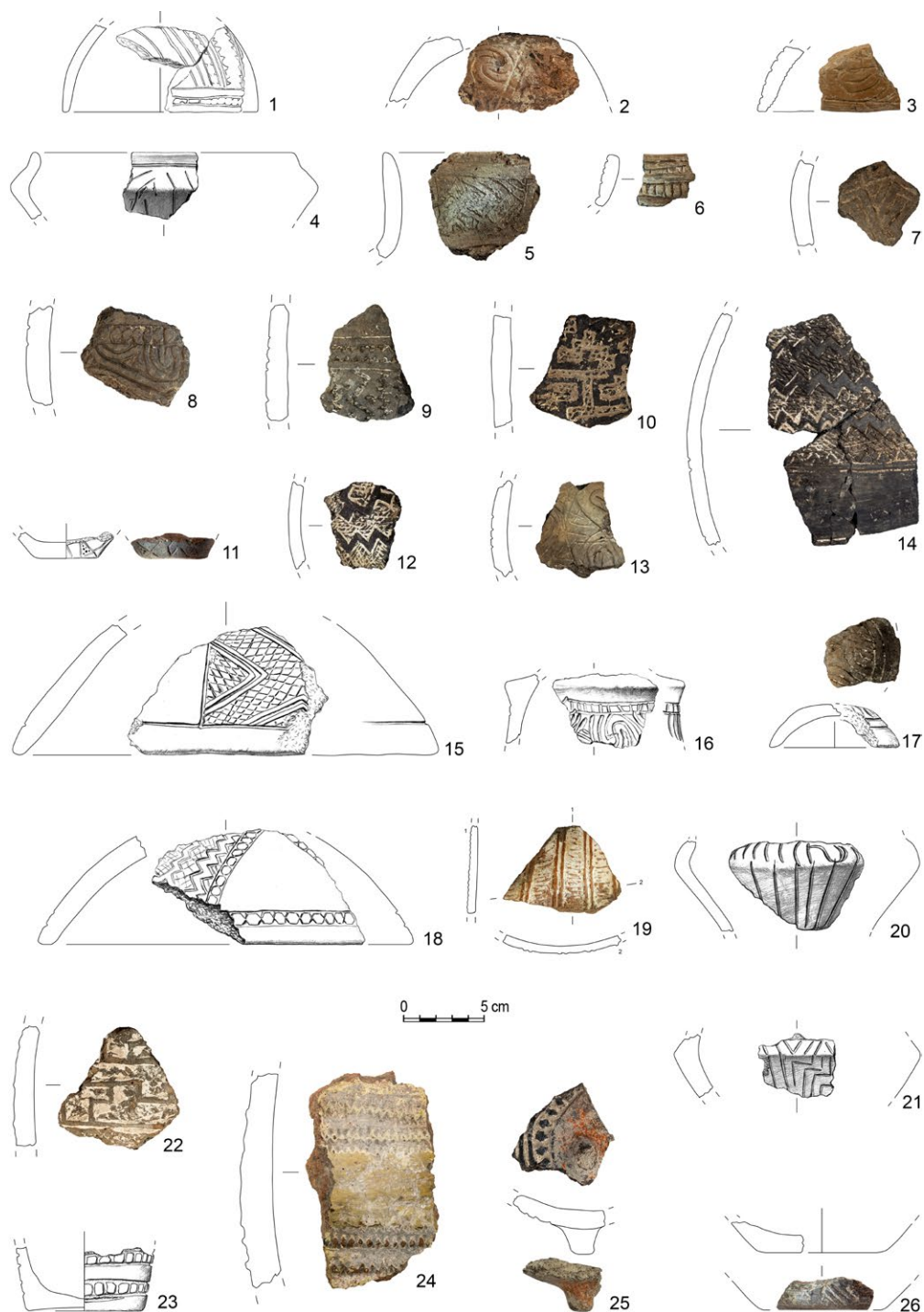


Figure 5. Late Neolithic pottery with incised and white-incrusted decoration from Tash bair, site 1.
Image Credit: B. Terzieva and R. Krauß.

assigned by Stanev to its earlier phase A-B1 (cf. Stanev 2002, Taf. 6). Compared to the straight knobbed handles on cylindrical jars, which are a diagnostic shape of Karanovo III (cf. Stanev 2002, Taf. 7), the slanting knobbed handles on biconical forms should be of a later date.

The north Bulgarian cultural groups mentioned above show strong links to the Boian and Vădastra groups in Wallachia (Gaul 1948; Berciu 1961). It is clear that both groups had bridgehead settlements in the areas south of the lower Danube (Naydenova 2005), and it seems possible that the Late Neolithic settlement at Tash bair was one of the most important of these sites. This assumption is based on the high percentage of pottery with characteristics considered typical of the Vădastra culture: lavish excised decoration, specific shapes, etc. (fig. 5.1–3, 5–19, and 22–25).

The Chalcolithic and Transitional period

The beginning of the Chalcolithic marks a shift in the settlement life at Tash bair. After the intense Late Neolithic occupation, the area seems to have been abandoned as no Early and Middle Chalcolithic materials have been found so far. The absolute chronological position of the Early and Late Chalcolithic has been the subject of intense debate in recent years (Hansen et al. 2008; Gaydarska 2011; Reingruber et al. 2011; Tsirtsoni 2016). There is a remarkable overlap of radiocarbon dates for both phases, which makes difficult their chronological classification (cf. Görsdorf & Boyadzhiev 1996; Boyadzhiev 1998).

Some scattered finds and one radiocarbon date (Poz-120369: 5545±35 BP) from site 1, both from the upper filling layer of the Late Neolithic ditch in trench 1.2, indicate that Tash bair was resettled or at least visited during the Late Chalcolithic (cf. Krauß & Conrad 2023; Krauß 2023a, P 1/242, pl. 22). This result from our research at Tash bair corresponds clearly with the results of earlier field surveys on the lower Yantra. In contrast to a settlement concentration on the upper reaches of Batinsko dere (and the areas further east), only a few small Chalcolithic settlement sites were found along the lower Yantra itself (Krauß 2006a, 223ff).

The end of the Late Chalcolithic can be grasped even more clearly, as all tell sites in this area were abandoned by 4200 cal BC at the latest (Hansen et al. 2008; Chohadzhiev & Krauß 2019).

In terms of research history, the following time has been viewed as a Transitional period¹ to the Early Bronze Age (EBA; Morintz & Roman 1968; Roman 1971; Todorova 1979; Georgieva 1993).² Since this is a comparatively long period of time, it made sense to divide it into phases. The determination developed in southern Romania on the basis of the various sites of Cernavodă (Roman 1971; Morintz 2001) is suitable for this purpose, although it was only adopted selectively by Bulgarian research (cf. Nikolova 1999).

¹ The term ‘Transitional period’ was first proposed for Bulgaria by Henrieta Todorova (1979).

² The latest review of research on the Transitional period was made by Ivan Suvandzhiev (2022).

Instead, Ivan Vajsov (2002) developed his own structure based on the sequence of burials at Durankulak, describing the 42nd to 37th centuries as the Post-Chalcolithic and the 36th to 32nd centuries as the Proto-Bronze Age.

Interestingly, two radiocarbon dates on samples from the geomorphological core drilling in the central area of the floodplain close to the mouth of the Yantra (T9C13_467/RICH-28435: 5075±27 BP; T9C17_280/RICH-28446: 5294±28 BP) lay within this timespan (Vagalinski et al. 2023a, 294f). The dates were made on a piece of wood from a sediment layer in an old riverbed and on a sediment sample from a terrace deposit from transect 9 (Lopez del Olmo et al. 2023, fig. 14, table 5).

In the wider area, numerous settlement sites of the Transitional period have been identified on the lower reaches of the Yantra (Krauß 2006a, 75ff), but there was apparently no significant settlement at Tash bair itself during this period.

The Bronze Age

Several researchers have contributed to the development of Bronze Age chronology and periodization in Bulgarian historiography (Mikov et al. 1952; Katincharov 1974, 1975, 1981, 1982, and 1984; Panayotov 1984, 1985, 1988, 1989, and 1995; Leshtakov 1992; Boyadzhiev 2003). The investigations at a large number of tell sites in Upper Thrace, such as Ezero, Dyadovo, Karanovo, and Galabovo allow for the identification of three phases of the EBA: phase I (Ezero) with the inclusion of an earlier period contemporaneous with Cernavodă III, phase II (Mihalich), and phase III (Sveti Kirilovo). The tripartite periodization system has also been adopted for northern Bulgaria. The development of these lands in the EBA and Middle Bronze Age (MBA) is related to Cernavodă III, Coţofeni, Kostolac, Vučedol, Tei, Verbicioara, and Vatina, identified until the mid-twentieth century in southern Romania and Serbia, whose Bronze Age chronological and periodization schemes were largely influenced by the Central European chronology (Alexandrov 2018). On the basis of the above review of the current advances in the study of the chronological parameters of the EBA expressed in newly obtained radiocarbon dates, some corrections and re-dating of individual phases have become necessary. For the purposes of this paper, the following chronological boundaries can be used for the beginning and end of the EBA, the beginning of the MBA, and the internal division and duration of each phase: EBA I 'Ezero' (~3500–2900 BC), EBA II 'Mihalich' (~2900–2500/2400 BC), EBA III 'Sveti Kirilovo' (~2500/2400–2200/2100 BC), and MBA 'Galabovo' (~2200/2100–1600/1500 BC).¹ As in the Chalcolithic, a single, small flat settlement seems to have existed at site 1 in the Early

¹ After Alexandrov (2020, 251, fig. 1). In particular, it is difficult to distinguish EBA III from MBA on the basis of the finds alone. The radiocarbon dates from the end of EBA III also overlap very strongly with those of MBA. It is therefore not possible to make a meaningful distinction between EBA III and MBA in northern Bulgaria (Krauß 2006b; Aleksandrov & Hristova 2014; Leshtakov & Tsirtsoni 2016; Krauß 2024).

Bronze Age, which is indicated by a few finds scattered on the surface or relocated by later features.

The determination of the Middle Bronze Age on the lower course of the Danube is again closely related to our research in the catchment area of the Yantra and the neighboring areas. In northern Bulgaria, no tell sites or larger stratigraphic sequences are known so far that can be linked to the sequences of the Tei and Verbicioara cultural groups in southern Romania (Krauß 2006a). For the time being, one of the few known sites is the settlement near Vladinya (Lovech Municipality) which was recently investigated during rescue excavations (Valentinova et al. 2020a and 2020b). The latest radiocarbon dates collected allow these facies to be narrowed down to the time between the 23rd and 17th centuries BCE (Krauß 2024). This chronological delimitation makes sense because it corresponds to the horizon of the Mycenaean Shaft Graves, which allows them to be connected over a large area with the Apa-Hajdúsámson hoarding horizon in the Carpathian Basin, which in turn corresponds to level Br-A2 of the South German Bronze Age (Hänsel 1968; David 2002; Metzner-Nebelsick 2013). The Bulgarian finds are located in a geographically middle position in-between the Aegean, and the Carpathian region.

As far as the beginning of the Late Bronze Age is concerned, the Zimnicea-Cherkovna-Plovdiv find horizon, which can be found over a large area in the Eastern Balkans, provides a good starting point (Alexandrescu 1973; Hänsel 1976; Panayotov 1989). The north Bulgarian sites do not offer sufficient settlement stratigraphies for this period either, which is why it makes sense to look initially at the cultural development in the neighboring areas. Significant highlights can certainly be seen here in the end of the Mycenaean palace culture and the fall of the Hittite empire around 1200 BC (Jung & Weninger 2002).

There is evidence of a significant settlement at Tash bair, especially from the Middle to the Late Bronze Age. The initial construction of the inner ditch at Tash bair, site 3, dates to the Middle Bronze Age, as well as very likely the outer ditch (fig. 6). If our assumption is correct, the preserved double quarter-circle can be expanded to form a full circle, which would make it one of the largest preserved circular enclosures in the Eastern Balkans. Comparable sites from the Middle Bronze Age are known, particularly from southern Bulgaria.

Corresponding ceramic finds come from the bottom layer of the inner ditch, and their time position is secured by radiocarbon dates. This ditch was apparently still in use during the Late Bronze Age and even later during the Early and Late Iron Age, and also during the Late Roman Period (fig. 7; cf. Vagalinski et al. 2023b; Conrad & Krauß 2023b, 270ff, table 7; Krauß 2023a). Diagnostic ceramic forms of this period are wish-bone handles on large bowls, and various shapes of single-handled jugs, sometimes with large spouts (fig. 8).

For the Late Bronze Age, radiocarbon dates are available from the second layer of the outer ditch (Poz-156584: 2940±30 BP), and from two different features within

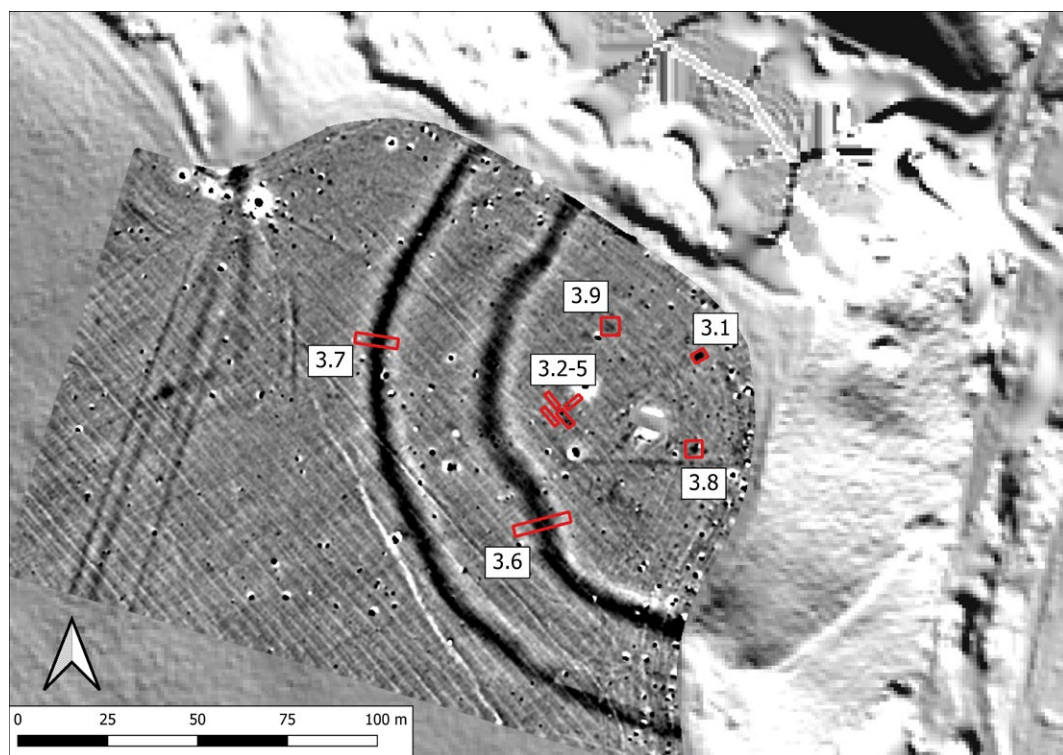


Figure 6. Geomagnetic mapping of the circular double ditch at Tash bair, site 3 (Eastern Atlas Berlin), with the position of excavation trenches. The edge of the high terrace is clearly visible in the LiDAR image. Trenches 3.1–5, Late Bronze Age features; trench 3.6, inner ditch; trench 3.7, outer ditch; trench 3.8, late Roman pit; trench 3.9, late Roman pit house. Image Credit: S. Conrad.

the enclosure. We have a total of eight radiocarbon dates on short-lived samples (Poz-115331: 2990 ± 30 BP; Poz-115804: 3110 ± 30 BP; Poz-115806: 3035 ± 35 BP; Poz-115807: 3165 ± 30 BP; Poz-108793: 3035 ± 30 BP; Poz-115808: 3135 ± 30 BP; Poz-108792: 3585 ± 35 BP; Poz-108794: 3555 ± 35 BP), most of which can also be related to one another stratigraphically. The finds from this period mainly come from the two features mentioned above and are not easily identifiable (fig. 9). Characteristic for the ceramic assemblage are vessels with stepped necks and large cups.

The first construction of a ditch and an earthwork which fortified the spur of the Tash bair is also dated to the Late Bronze Age (site 4, figs. 10 and 11; cf. Kecheva et al. 2023, no. 4). The ditch (cut by our trench 4.3) could be dated by two radiocarbon dates to about the same time horizon as the Late Bronze Age features at site 3 (Poz-146649: 2980 ± 35 BP; Poz-147042: 2930 ± 90 BP; Vagalinski & Traykova 2023; Conrad & Krauß 2023a). Here, as in the Late Bronze Age phase of the inner ditch at site 3, numerous rubble stones were thrown into the ditch, presumably when the site was abandoned. Un-



Figure 7. North profile of the inner ditch at Tash bair, site 3: (a) Middle Bronze Age layer; (b) Late Bronze Age layer; (c) Late Iron Age layer; (d) late Roman layer. Image Credit: S. Conrad.

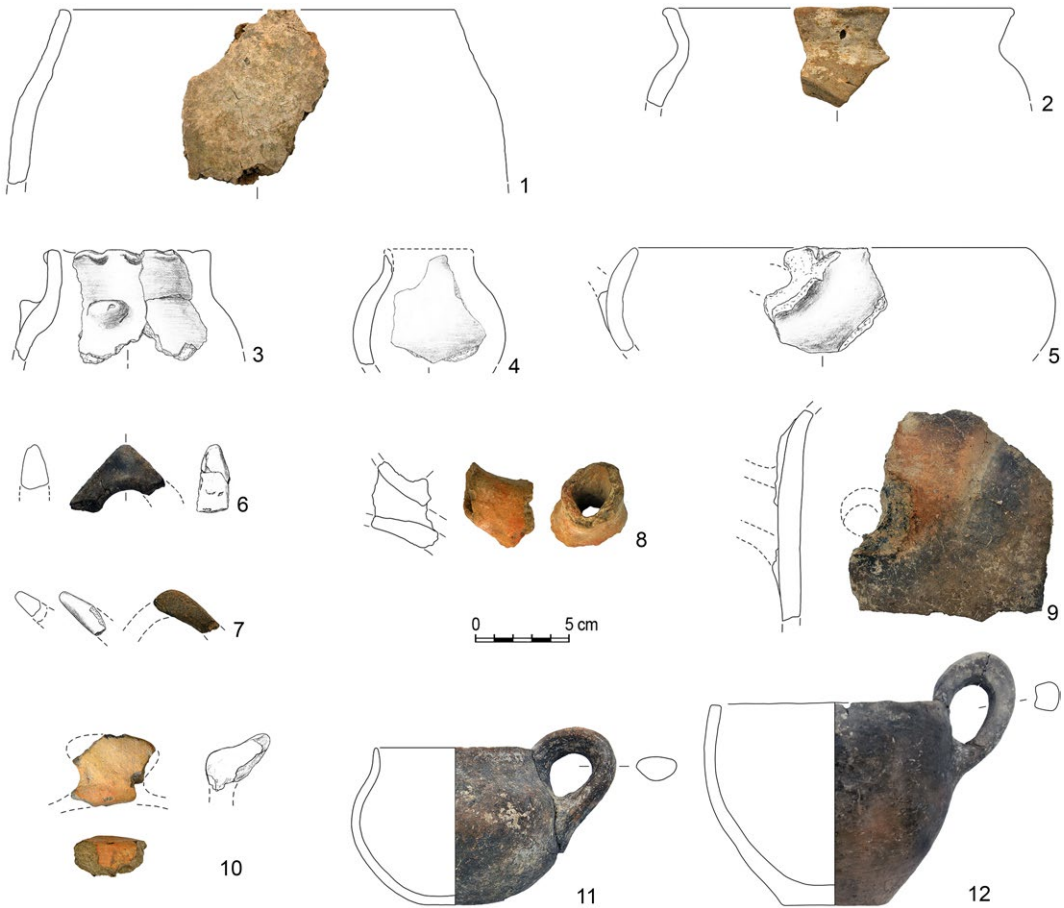


Figure 8. Middle Bronze Age pottery from Tash bair, site 3. Image Credit: A. Frey and R. Krauß.

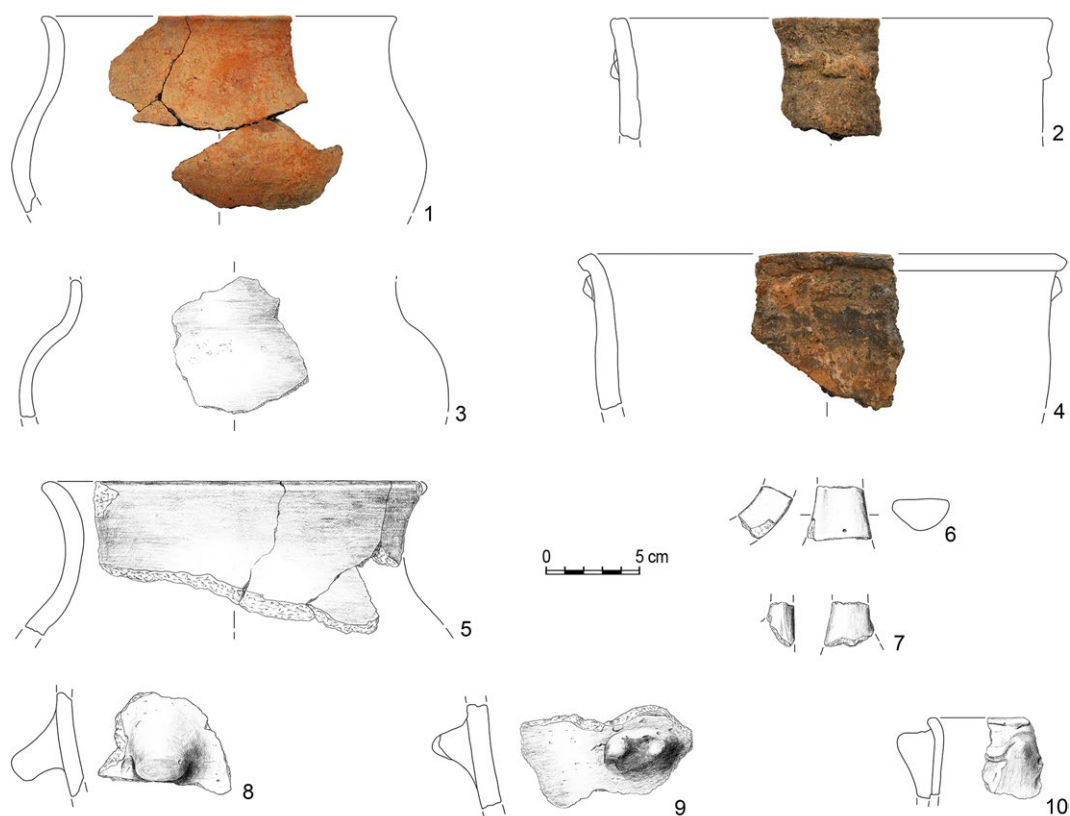


Figure 9. *Late Bronze Age pottery from Tash bair, site 3. Image Credit: A. Frey and R. Krauß.*

fortunately, no dateable finds from this period were uncovered here or in the separated, protected area of the spur.

Apart from the important ditch construction works at the Tash bair, there were flat Middle and Late Bronze Age settlements at site 1, which are currently only documented by survey finds. The Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age settlement on the eastern terrace of the Yantra lowlands near the old mill of Novgrad has been known for a long time. Parts of it came to light during dike construction work in the 1920s and 1930s (Stefanov 1974).

The Early Iron Age

The primary determination of the Early Iron Age on the lower course of the Danube goes back to Bernhard Hänsel (1976) and was further specified and labeled due to the later excavations, especially at Sboryanovo (Stoyanov 1997). In earlier research for northern Bulgaria, we proposed a development of the Early Iron Age pottery in four stag-

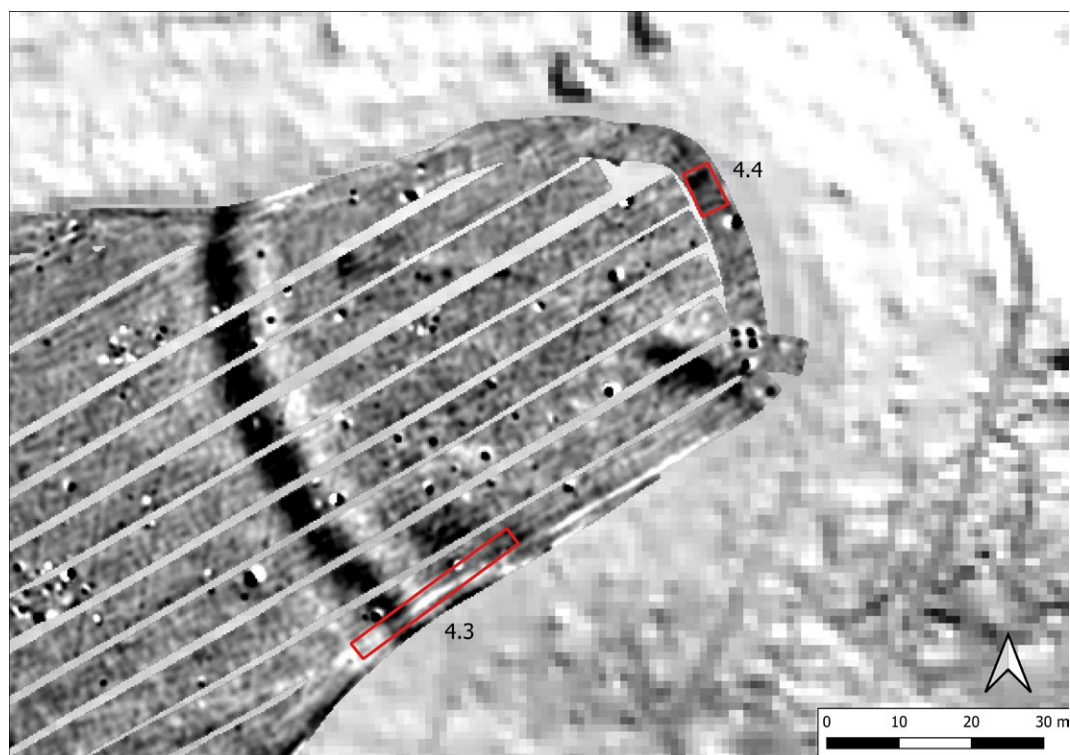


Figure 10. *Fortification of the promontory, with ditch and earthen wall at Tash bair, site 4. Geo-magnetic mapping (Eastern Atlas Berlin) and position of trenches 4.3 and 4.4, with the LiDAR map as background. Image Credit: S. Conrad.*

es (Krauß 2006a; Conrad & Krauß 2020): phase I, Stamped pottery (Hänsel's Tsenovo type); phase II, 'Sboryanovo', phase III, 'Tlachene' (as a preliminary stage of the classical Basarabi ware); and finally phase IV, the Basarabi culture in the narrower sense.

This development can be paralleled with the groups in Thrace (Nekhrizov & Tzvetkova 2018) and can be delimited precisely in absolute chronological terms (Conrad & Krauß 2020).

With some reservations, some finds from Tash bair can be assigned to the Tlachene stage. On the other hand, two Early Iron Age pits were investigated on the spur of Tash bair (trench 4.4). One of them was dug into the earthen wall, which was built during the Late Bronze Age and reused at this time (fig. 12). Another pit complex lies within the enclosed area of the fortification. Several diagnostic pottery vessels were found. They include a jug and several bowls with fluted decoration as well as a sherd with a stamped row of S-hooks (fig. 13). Channeled decoration preceded, but also co-existed with stamped decoration (Nekhrizov & Tzvetkova 2018, 24; Ailincăi 2020, 459f). The pottery thus belongs to the Sboryanovo stage in our scheme of the Early Iron Age pottery. Channeled pottery and ceramics decorated with stamped S-hooks were found at the cemetery of



Figure 11. *The promontory, with trenches 4.3 and 4.4 at Tash bair, site 4. View from the north. Image Credit: UAV (M. Offermann).*

the eponymous site (Stoyanov 1997, tables VIII, IX, and XI). Similar connections have been published for the Babadag and Lower Danube culture area (Ailincăi 2016, 334f). A chronologically distinguishable appearance of the S-hooks is observed at the end of period III according to the scheme of Nehrizov and Tsvetkova (2018, 26) for southern Thrace at the end of the 10th century BC. This is matched by the radiocarbon dates obtained, which date the two pits to the turn of the 11th century BC (Poz-146650; Poz-146651).

Evidence of the existence of a large settlement of the Basarabi phase of the Early Iron Age (ca. 8th – mid-6th c. BC) is available in the ceramic assemblage from site 1 at the southern slope of Tash bair (fig. 14; Krauß 2006a, cat. no. 48; Kecheva et al. 2023, site 1; Krauß 2023a). In addition, extensive Early Iron Age settlements – especially from the Basarabi phase – could also be found along the old, silted-up Yantra meanders in the lowlands (Kecheva et al. 2023, site 24; Krauß 2023a, 232f). On the one hand, due to the numerous Basarabi finds, the settlements at Tash bair and its surroundings can be seen as ‘bridgeheads’ for this culture which according to the current state of research was mainly spread north of the lower Danube in what is now Romania. However, recent research results are increasingly bringing to light such finds south of the Danube (cf. Petrova et al. 2020; Vasileva 2022; Agre 2004 and 2008), so that the current picture may be due to the current state of research.



Figure 12. *Early Iron Age pit cutting the Late Bronze Age earthen wall at Tash bair, site 4. Above: orthophoto of a part of the south profile of trench 4.3, with the pit. Below: photo of planum 4. Image Credit: J. Spriffler and S. Conrad.*

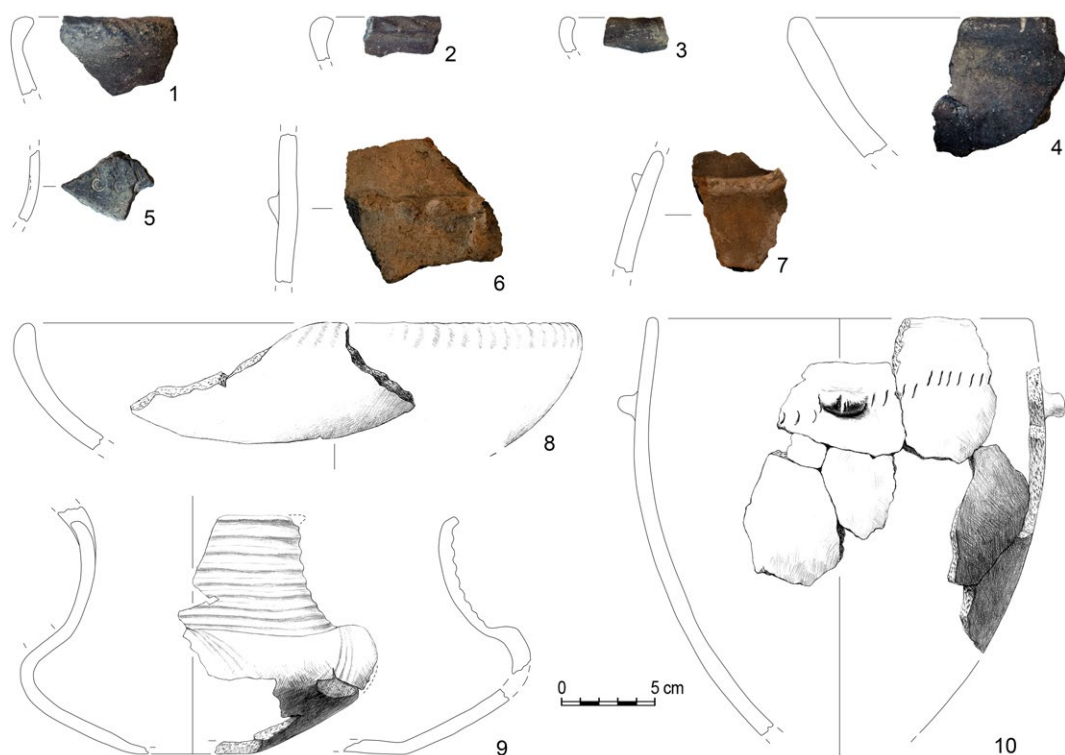


Figure 13. *Iron Age pottery from two pits at Tash bair, site 4. Image Credit: B. Terzieva and R. Krauß.*

For the time being, all these finds from the slope of Tash bair and the Yantra lowlands come from field surveys; no features were investigated. Further, detailed stratigraphic observations are required to clarify the question of how the development within this Early Iron Age settlement is to be assessed.

Conclusion

The concentration of prehistoric settlement sites at Tash bair near Novgrad is to a large extent due to the favorable geographic location of the site in terms of occupation and transport. On the one hand, the Danube reaches its southernmost point of the overall course here, and the geographical situation with the narrow lowland plain in the Svish-tov–Zimnicea section offers – as evidenced by various historical examples – a favorable location for crossing the Danube. In addition, a well-known route to and from the Balkan range passes leads along the Yantra, which may have been part of a route from Asia Minor to Central Europe.

Both the long southern slope of Tash bair and the proximity to the meanders of the Yantra in the river lowlands near the confluence with the Danube were of particular

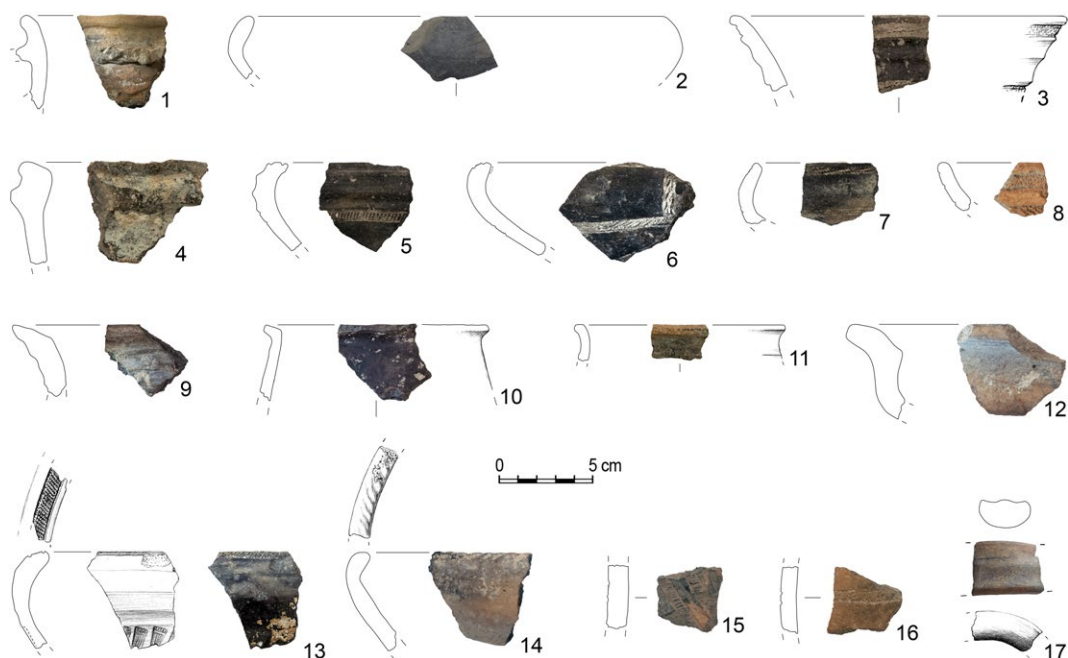


Figure 14. Early Iron Age finds of the Tlachene and Basarabi cultural groups from Tash bair, site 1. Image Credit: B. Terzieva and R. Krauß.

importance for the development of the settlement and fortifications. In addition, the surrounding area offered very good conditions for agricultural use. The development of the Late Neolithic settlement was probably determined by the route along the Yantra River and the spread of the Neolithic population along it. If one takes into account the strong spread of the Vădastra culture in southwestern Romania (as well as the Early Iron Age Basarabi culture), the favorable location of the site was very decisive for the transmission of cultural elements across the Danube.

In the Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age, i.e., over a period of almost 3,000 years, Tash bair and its surroundings initially seem to have played only a subordinate role in settlement life. At the same time, only relatively small settlements from this period are known in our study area on the lower course of the Yantra. With regard to the reasons for this recognizable marginalization of the region, it can be assumed that the focal points of settlement during this period were in what is now northeastern Bulgaria, but primarily in Thrace (Alexandrov 2018; Vasileva & Minkov 2018).

As evidenced by the ditches and extensive settlements, it was only in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and the Early Iron Age that a settlement and regional power center developed again at Tash bair and its surroundings. It was probably only during this period

that the road connection along the Yantra regained its importance as part of a communication line from Asia Minor and southeastern Thrace across the Carpathians to Central Europe. This could be related to the flourishing metallurgy and the intensification of supra-regional trade activities.

Even in the Late Iron Age, smaller fortifications still existed at Tash bair that monitored the access to the Yantra and the Danube. However, they were undoubtedly subordinate to the fortified centers at Byala and Svishtov. In Roman and early medieval times, Tash bair and its surroundings continued to be densely populated, but its importance as a strategic position declined more and more. A certainly important reason could be determined by geomorphological investigations; around the turn of the Christian era, the Yantra meanders below Tash bair began to silt up, reducing the waterflow and shifting the riverbed to the eastern part of the estuary plain due to increasing sedimentation (cf. Lopez del Olmo et al. 2023). One reason for this can be seen in the advanced deforestation and simultaneous increase in agriculture in the catchment area of the river, which is also reflected in the pollen profiles. The construction of the fort of Iatrus at the beginning of the fourth century on the eastern terrace on the new riverbed is probably to be seen as a consequence of these serious anthropogenic landscape changes. At the end of the Early Middle Ages, i.e., with the end of the First Bulgarian Empire, Tash bair and the surrounding lowlands were abandoned and subsequently not resettled. This can be taken as an indirect confirmation that direct river access to the Yantra and thus to the Danube can be seen as a consistent prerequisite for the development of prehistoric occupation at Tash bair.

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AN UNPUBLISHED EARLY BRONZE AGE ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINE FROM TELL EZERO, UPPER THRACE

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to a previously unpublished ceramic anthropomorph from the Early Bronze Age layer of Tell Ezero in Upper Thrace. It was discovered during the excavations at the tell site in the 1950s and was erroneously logged in the catalog of the Nova Zagora Museum of History as a handle fragment of a ceramic vessel. Only the lower part of the flat figurine is preserved. Dot punctations seem to show a single anatomical detail – the navel – as well as a necklace and probably folds of a garment such as a skirt or dress. This artifact belongs to a small group of decorated figurines from the Early Bronze Age of Bulgaria. Its closest parallels can be found in Western and Central Anatolia, at the sites of Alacahöyük, Alişar Hüyük, and Kocumbeli. The relative dating of the figurine is thus based on its parallels in the second phase of the Early Bronze Age.

Keywords: *Anthropomorphic figurines – Tell Ezero – Upper Thrace – Early Bronze Age – Anatolian parallels.*

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Introduction

A review of the existing literature reveals that no studies have been published on the Early Bronze Age ceramic anthropomorphs from Bulgaria that include artifacts similar to the subject of this paper recovered from the well-known tell site of Ezero (aka Dipsizka settlement mound; cf. Georgiev et al. 1979; Katincharov 1972 and 1979). This could be explained by the difficulty in identifying such objects from preserved fragments.

The objective of this paper is twofold: first, to correct the description of an item logged in the catalog of the Nova Zagora Museum of History as a fragment of a vessel handle, and second, to discuss its relative chronology and culture-historical affiliation. Its formal typology and decorative characteristics suggest that it is actually a fragment from a ceramic anthropomorphic figurine.

The figurine

The artifact is catalogued under No. 2631 in the Nova Zagora Museum of History (fig. 1), as a knobbed, decorated handle fragment of a pot, found at the Dipsizka settlement mound on 18 September 1956, with no additional information about the specific archaeological context. It was made from a clay paste with a medium to high concentration of fine quartz and gravels, white or brown/black in color (0.1–0.2 cm). The light brown to brown-beige surface displays moderate smoothing, with occasional irregularities and roughness evident in specific areas, resulting from the modelling process.

Only the lower part of the flat figurine is preserved. It has an irregular oval shape and a neck that tapers in height. The head is broken off and missing. A single decoration technique was used – dot punctation. A dot located roughly in the central lower part of the ‘front’ side represents the only anatomical detail, a navel. A ‘necklace’ is depicted on both sides of the neck, with seven or eight dots respectively; the dots were made unevenly and inaccurately. Dots ($n=45$) are also visible on the side edge of the flat torso, which lends the impression of stylized clothing folds. The preserved piece measures 5.3 cm high, 4.4 cm wide, and 1.4 cm thick. The artifact seems to represent a stylized female anthropomorph with schematically rendered features that are characteristic of the Early Bronze Age figurines in Bulgaria.

Parallels

No close parallels of the figurine from Ezero can be found in Bulgaria (fig. 2). It is thus a rare example of a group of decorated anthropomorphs that includes ceramic pieces (fig. 3) from Kiten (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 310, fig. 4/4), Kapitan Andreevo (Minkov 2018, 76, figs. 2 and 4), Svilengrad (Valentinova & Nenova 2008, tab. XV/5 and 6), Galabovo (Leshtakov 2021, 65, fig. 17/4), Popskata mogila (Ivanov et al. 2017, 125, fig. 3; Ivanov & Dzhurkovska 2018, 77), and Oryahovo (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 311, fig. 5). Their decoration seems to indicate clothing, ornaments, and/or tattoos (Minkov &



Figure 1. *Ceramic anthropomorph from Tell Ezero. Above: line drawing. Below: photograph. Image Credit: the author.*

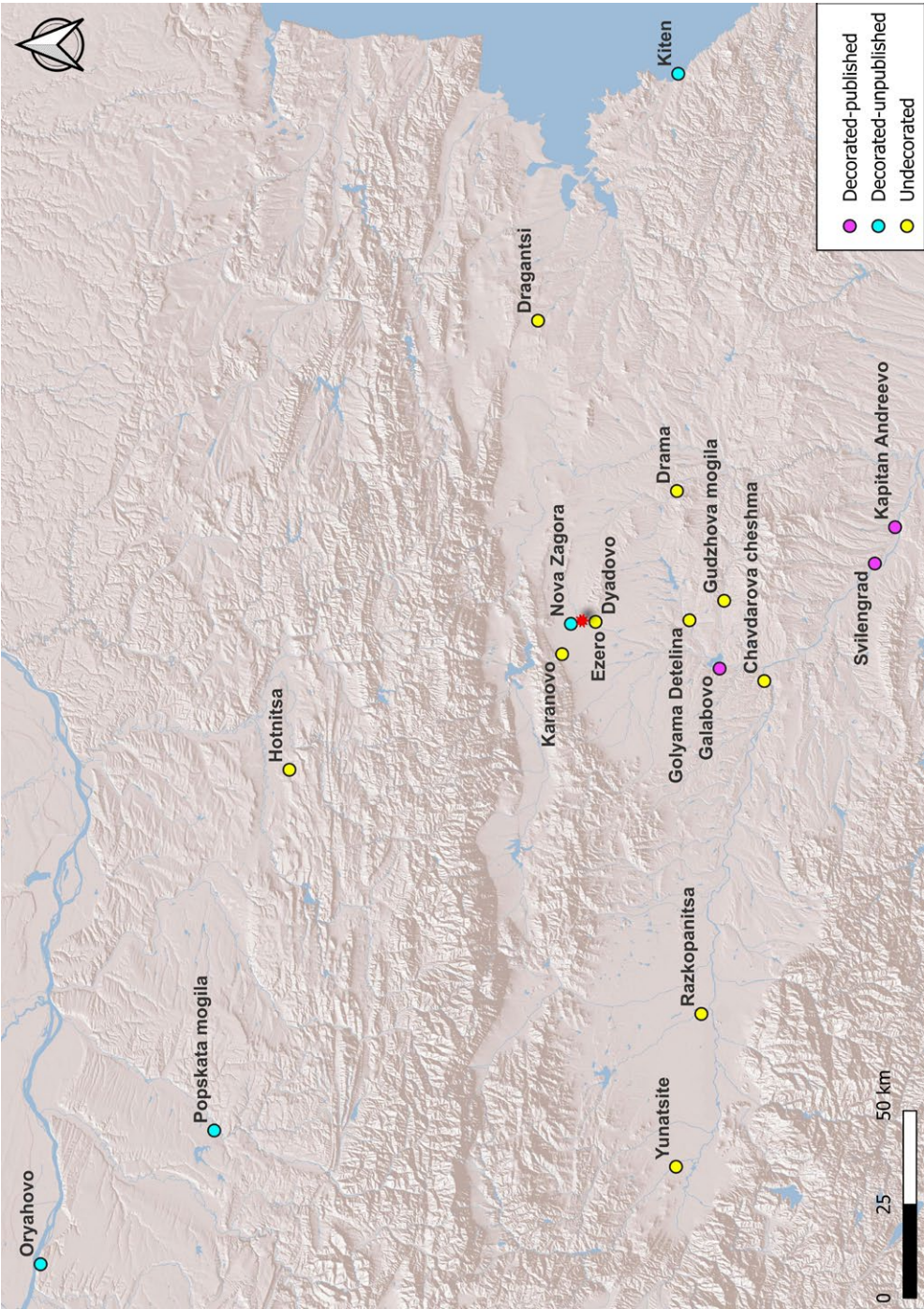


Figure 2. Map showing the distribution of the Early Bronze Age ceramic anthropomorphs in Bulgaria. Image Credit: Denitsa Sandeva.

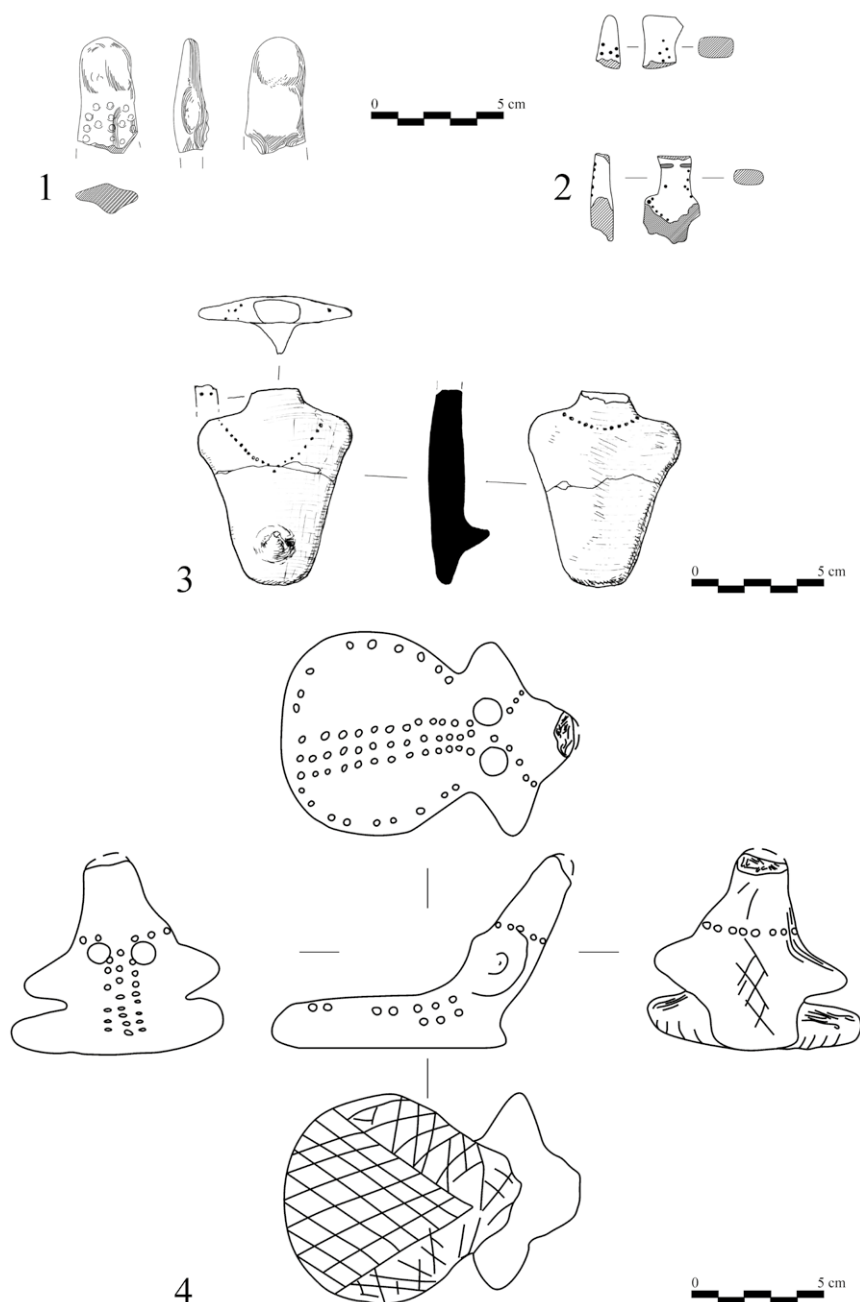


Figure 3. *Decorated ceramic anthropomorphs from Bulgaria: (1) Tell Galabovo (Image Credit: Leshtakov 2021, fig. 17/4); (2) Svilengrad (Image Credit: Valentinova & Nenova 2008, tabl. XV/6); (3) Svilengrad (Image Credit: Valentinova & Nenova 2008, tabl. XV/5); (4) Kiten (Image Credit: Hristina Vasileva).*

Vasileva 2024, 308, fig. 4). However, among the published examples, there are no parallels of the figurine from Tell Ezero in terms of shape and decorative technique, even though the anthropomorphs from Kiten, Kapitan Andreevo, Galabovo, and Svilengrad also show anatomical details (navel), clothing elements (skirt/dress), and ornaments (necklace).

Although the absence of the Ezero figurine's head makes it difficult to connect it to any of the existing Anatolian anthropomorph types, parallels could be found in Anatolia based on the preserved part of the artifact. Its closest parallels in terms of shape, presence of a navel, and punctated decoration are a group of figurines from Early Bronze Age sites in Central Anatolia and the Northeastern Aegean: Alacahöyük (fig. 4a; cf. Yalçın & Yalçın 2013, 46f, figs. 13 and 14), Alişar Hüyük (fig. 4b; cf. Schmidt 1932, fig. 62; Bilgi 2012, fig. 793), Koçumbeli (Atakuman 2017, 93 and 95, figs. 7a, d, and e; 8a and b; and 9), Kalinkaya (Kulaçoğlu 1992, fig. 93), Ahlatlıbel (Kulaçoğlu 1992, fig. 81), Etiokuşu (Kulaçoğlu 1992, fig. 86), and in particular Demircihüyük (Baykal-Seeher & Obladen-Kauder 1996, fig. 118/8; Bilgi 2012, fig. 686), Troy (Blegen et al. 1950, fig. 360/34–36; Bilgi 2012, fig. 730), and Thermi (Lamb & Hutchinson 1930). As already stated, similar elements can be observed in the flat profile of the figurines, the oval, circular, or elliptical shape of the lower body part, the presence of decoration, and the representation of a navel as a central anatomical detail situated in the middle of the body.

Chronological considerations

The absence of any records in the Nova Zagora Museum of History catalog on the archaeological context of the figurine from Tell Ezero makes impossible for us to look for associated finds and diagnostic material which, in turn, rules out the establishment of a reference point for the relative dating of the anthropomorph. Thus, only its Anatolian parallels can be used to fix an approximate date for the Ezero object.

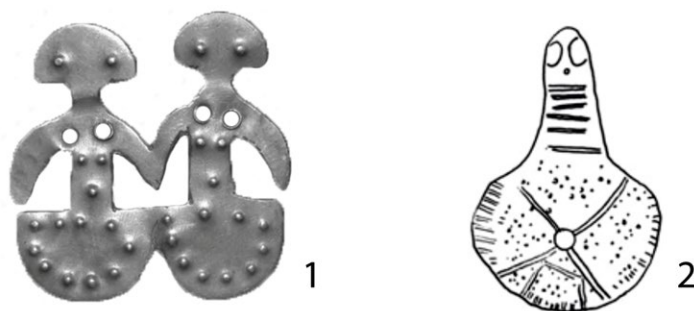


Figure 4. *Anthropomorphic figurines from Central Anatolia: (1) Alacahöyük (Image Credit: Yalçın & Yalçın 2013, fig. 13), (2) Alişar Hüyük (Image Credit: Atakuman 2017, fig. 1e). No scale.*

The dating of the flat figurine from Ahlatlıbel can be broadly synchronized with the second phase of the Early Bronze Age in Bulgaria (according to the most recent refinement of the chronological boundaries for the EBA in Bulgarian archaeology; cf. Alexandrov 2018 and 2020). The ceramic assemblage of Ahlatlıbel is consistent with the assemblage of the Yortan culture (Bertram 2008, 78). Moreover, Bertram (2008, 75) compared the ceramic assemblage of Koçumbeli with that of Etiokuşu, pitchers and vessels with S-shaped profiles decorated with channeling and incised patterns being particularly noteworthy among that material, as well as small bowls and cups. On the other hand, the gold twin figurine from Alacahöyük was dated to the period between 2800 and 2450 cal BC (Yalçın & Yalçın 2013, 38; Atakuman 2017, 90). Considering the dating of the Anatolian parallels and the observations on the appearance of Early Bronze Age decorated anthropomorphs in Bulgaria after ca. 2900 cal BC (cf. Minkov & Vasileva 2024, 311f), it seems reasonable to suggest that the figurine from Tell Ezero also dates to the second phase of the Early Bronze Age.

Discussion

A total of 30 ceramic anthropomorphs dating to the second phase of the Early Bronze Age were recovered from 17 sites in Upper Thrace and north Bulgaria: Oryahovo (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 311, fig. 5), Tell Yunatsite (Matsanova 2002, 222f, fig. 1/5; Katincharov & Matsanova 1993, 158 and 170), Razkopanitsa (Detev 1981, 159 and 169; Lestakov 1996, 286, fig. 11/6), Tell Karanovo (Hiller & Nikolov 2002, 9, Abb. 5a), Tell Nova Zagora (Stefanova 2013), the flat site of Nova Zagora (Kancheva-Russeva & Leshtakov 2008, 54 and 69, obr. 9/5), Tell Dyadovo (Sekine & Kamuro 1991, 66 and 85, figs. 16/10; Sekine & Kamuro 2000, 2f and 64, figs. 1, 2, and 27/1, and pl. 2), Tell Galabovo (Leshtakov 2021, 65, fig. 17/4), Chavdarova cheshma (Boyadzhiev & Antonova 2015, 77), Golyama Detelina (Leshtakov et al. 2001, 22 and 62, fig. 32k), Drama (Lihardus et al. 2001, 37), Svilengrad (Valentinova & Nenova 2008, 50 and 52, tabl. XV/5 and 6), Kapitan Andreevo (Minkov 2018, 76, fig. 2/4), Dragantsi (Gergova et al. 2010), Popskata mogila (Ivanov et al. 2017, 125, fig. 3; Ivanov & Dzhurkovska 2018, 77), Osmankin dol (Ilcheva 2000, 35 and 42, fig. 7/3; Ilcheva 2005, 52 and 54, tabl. 4), and Kiten (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 310, fig. 4/4). The small number of figurines, along with the lack of typological diversity seems to suggest that these artifacts were made only occasionally throughout the different phases of the Early Bronze Age in Bulgaria, and that no tradition existed of their regular production and distribution. However, their presence almost exclusively in residential contexts suggests that, despite their limited territorial and typological distribution, they might have been related to specific domestic practices.

The limited number of ceramic anthropomorphs would render pointless any attempts at the construction of a comprehensive typological scheme. Nevertheless, certain preliminary observations can still be made regarding their form and style. It seems that all Early Bronze Age examples of anthropomorphic imagery from Upper Thrace can be

classified as schematic or stylized figurines characterized by absence of realistic or detailed depiction of individual anatomical details. Moreover, it's noteworthy that no anthropomorphs were uncovered in burial or ritual contexts, except for a ritual ditch at Drama (Lichardus et al. 2000). The figurines discovered at settlement sites in Thrace thus far are typically single finds from individual houses, with the exception of Tell Dyadovo, where two figurines were uncovered in one of the houses, though they dated to different phases of its occupation (Sekine & Kamuro 1991, 66 and 85, fig. 16/10; Sekine & Kamuro 2000, 2f and 64, figs. 1, 2, and 27/1, and pl. 2).

The appearance of numerous figurines in Early Bronze Age Anatolia is associated with the growth of material resources and the division of labor, with specialization in specific crafts and industries, including weaving, the domestic production of essential household items, and the development of metallurgy (Atakuman 2017, 88f and 103f). The pursuit of new resources and raw materials resulted in the emergence of several minor sites, which were satellites to the larger ones. Concurrently, there were indications of the centralization in the major settlements. During this period, the distribution of ceramic anthropomorphs in Anatolia reached its most significant peak. The period of exchange of goods and ideas, and population movements at the end of the second and the beginning of the third phase of the Early Bronze Age coincides with the material flourishing in both Anatolia and Thrace, which may explain the appearance of the anthropomorphs in the latter region.

In the third phase of the Early Bronze Age in Upper Thrace, the number of decorated anthropomorphs increased. This coincided with the appearance of large, enclosed sanctuaries with various features including pits, ritual platforms, altars, wells, basins, and graves, which could be associated with a transition of the Early Bronze Age communities to new beliefs and religious practices. This should not be taken as a shift from private/domestic to public rituals, but rather as a transformation of their constituent elements. If such a theoretical reconstruction is accepted, it could also be theorized that, based on the anthropomorph found in a ritual ditch at Drama (Lichardus et al. 2001, 37), deposition of anthropomorphs in ditches might have been practiced in this period. It is noteworthy that this practice is not attested after the end of the Early Bronze Age.

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THE ŞANLIURFA STONE MOUNDS (TENTH–SEVENTH MILLENNIUM BC)

REVIEW OF THE 2024 WORLD NEOLITHIC CONGRESS IN TÜRKIYE

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An event long anticipated in the field of prehistoric archaeology has finally taken place. The World Neolithic Congress was held 3–8 November 2024, in Şanlıurfa, south-eastern Türkiye. The Congress had been postponed for over a year due to the devastating earthquake of 6 February 2023, which severely affected southern and central Türkiye and northern and western Syria. Despite the tragic loss of life, extensive damage, and economic repercussions caused by the earthquake, much of the destruction in the city has been remedied. Numerous new constructions have emerged, and while remnants of collapsed buildings are still visible in some areas, the local authorities and community invested tremendous effort in preparing for and hosting this pivotal forum for the Neolithic archaeology. This underlines the resilience of the region and its commitment to advancing archaeological research despite significant challenges.

The 2024 World Neolithic Congress explored the diverse cultural and socio-economic pathways of Neolithic societies worldwide. It addressed key themes, including the transition to sedentary life, environmental interactions, technological innovations, and social hierarchies, while integrating the latest scientific and archaeological methods. The Congress, first of its kind globally, aimed to challenge established theories and foster fresh perspectives on the global and local significance of the Neolithic. This event emphasized the significance of prehistoric sites like Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe, contributing to discussions on early human civilization.

Since I believe that no other conference on the Neolithic in the near future will surpass the recently held Congress, I took the liberty of writing out an extensive review in order to present my impressions in sufficient detail and with adequate justification.

Hosts, organization and venue

The Congress was organized in collaboration with Istanbul University and Harran University, and was supported by Türkiye's Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Over 70 individuals contributed as members of the Organizing and Scientific Committees and the Advisory Board, with a strong international presence. The role of the nine-member Organizing Committee should be emphasized, primarily composed of members from Harran and Istanbul Universities. The head of the Organizing Committee was Prof. Dr. Necmi Karul (Head of the Department of Prehistory at the Istanbul University), who is responsible for the Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project (Taş Tepeler) and directs the excavations at Karahantepe (fig. 1). The project to be discussed shortly appears to have been the driving force behind the idea of organizing the Congress.

This academic forum brought together more than 900 participants (over 1000 registered) from 63 nations, representing 486 institutions worldwide, and featured the remarkable number of 687 presentations (fig. 2). It was truly an intergenerational gathering of archaeologists, historians, anthropologists and other specialists dedicated to exploring various aspects of the Neolithic. Respected, internationally recognized scholars, some

PROF. DR. NECMİ KARUL

ORGANİZASYON KOMİTESİ BAŞKANI
HEAD OF ORGANISING COMMITTEE



Figure 1. Necmi Karul
at the opening ceremony.
*Image Credit: Oasis Travel
Enterprizes Co.*



Figure 2. Some of the participants in the Congress. Image Credit: Oasis Travel Enterprizes Co.

of them retired, engaged in discussions alongside established and early-career researchers, PhD candidates, and even master's students. While listing individual names would be unnecessary and inevitably incomplete, one figure stood out prominently: Mehmet Özdoğan, the doyenne of Anatolian prehistory and now Emeritus Professor at the Istanbul University.

Prof. Özdoğan's extensive contributions to archaeological research across Türkiye and his robust international collaborations seemed to form the central pillar around which the event's discourse revolved. Following the opening address by the Mayor of Şanlıurfa and the Rector of the Harran University during the opening ceremony of the academic program, Mehmet Özdoğan delivered a welcome speech about the inspiration for the meeting and the major ideas that are to be discussed. His address was followed by the honorary presentation of the latest volume in the *Neolithic in Turkey* series, dedicated to his legacy and introduced by the Editors Necmi Karul, Eylem Özdoğan, and Nezih Başgelen, together with Hans Georg Gebel (fig. 3).

Turning our attention back to the organization of the forum, it is important to highlight the official travel agency of the Congress, Oasis Travel Enterprizes Co., which man-



Figure 3. *Opening ceremony of the Congress. From left to right: Nezi̇h Bařgelen, Mehmet  zdoĝan, Eylem  zdoĝan, Hans Georg Gebel, and Necmi Karul. Image Credit: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları (https://www.instagram.com/p/DCY_AkuuWfi/?locale=zh-hans).*

aged registrations, booking accommodations, coordinating tours and airport-hotel-airport transfers for the participants. Their work was exemplary and highly professional. The hotels they suggested were preferred by most attendees, providing great convenience, as the Congress itself took place at the Osmanbey Campus of the Harran University located approximately 20 km east of řanlıurfa. Every morning, buses were organized at several locations in the city, primarily in front of hotels, to transport participants to the campus, and in the evenings, these buses also facilitated returns or transfers to the venues hosting social events.

The Harran University was founded in 1992. Its structure comprises three institutes, 14 faculties, four colleges, one state conservatory, 14 vocational schools and 14 research and application centers. Approximately 1200 faculty members are involved in teaching and research across a diverse range of departments and programs, supporting a student population of more than 26,000 (<https://www.harran.edu.tr/>). The Osmanbey Campus, one of the university's several campuses, spans approximately 210 hectares and resembles a small, well-organized village where it is still easy to lose one's way. The central part of the campus features a green space with a large lake, a park, and gazebos. Surrounding this area, primarily to the south and east as the campus continues to grow and be developed, are the buildings of the faculties and administrative offices (fig. 4). There is also an area with caf s, fast food options, and a market, which proved to be frequently visited, providing the sought-after espresso that many of us yearned for. It became apparent that in řanlıurfa, most hotels and establishments predominantly offer instant coffee, alongside T rkiye's traditional aromatic tea.



Figure 4. *The Osmanbey Campus of the Harran University.* Image Credit: <https://www.harran.edu.tr/galeri.aspx>

The Congress was hosted across 13 rooms in the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences. The convenience of having all the sessions in a single building was greatly appreciated by the participants. The rooms were situated side by side on two floors within the building. Also located in the building was the lecture hall, where the opening ceremony and various keynote lectures and speeches were held. Although this hall was spacious, the congregation of standing colleagues at the back was inevitable, particularly on the first day of the event.

The working language of the Congress was English, as is customary at most large-scale international conferences. Some of the volunteers, whose tireless and dedicated assistance deserves recognition, faced challenges in communicating in English. However, as the organizers had kindly warned, ‘Şanlıurfa is rather a moderate town where foreign languages are very rarely spoken.’ Ultimately, mutual understanding was achieved during the sessions and with the local population in the city.

The hosts provided complimentary lunch at the University’s cafeteria during the one-hour lunch break, which was a welcome exception not often seen at major conferences. The menu was well-balanced, featuring typical local cuisine, with vegetarian options available. Water, instant coffee, and tea were abundantly provided during the breaks between sessions.

The registration desk opened as early as 3 November, although most participants arrived in the evening, resulting in a long registration line the following day and a minor delay in the Congress schedule. Upon registration, we received a conference bag containing materials, gifts and a name badge. However, the package did not include a printed program booklet, which would have been quite convenient. On the other hand, the

availability of a dedicated Wi-Fi network in the building allowed access to the Congress's well-designed app, where the schedule was organized in multiple formats (<https://www.worldneolithiccongress.org/program.aspx>). We were also sent a link with the program, sorted by days and sessions, in a section of the 'Stone Mounds' app (<https://stonemounds.app/tr/wnc>). This option turned out to be exceptionally easy and practical to use. In the Faculty's lobby, just outside the lecture hall, several stalls were set up selling souvenirs and jewelry, alongside various exhibitors. The greatest attention, of course, was drawn to the tables overlaid with books, conference proceedings, and journals from several publishing houses (e.g., Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları and Bilgin Kültür Sanat Publications).

Scientific program

The Congress sessions explored 45 key topics, covering aspects from early settlement patterns to the symbolic and ritual elements of Neolithic societies. The sessions were divided into two main sections: *Global Perspectives on the Neolithic* (22) and *Regional Neolithic* (23). Additionally, there was a poster session, *Recent Finds, Recent Recoveries*, in which 62 posters were available for viewing in the building's lobby.

The sessions in *Global Perspectives on the Neolithic* addressed diverse major themes, starting with theoretical and terminological issues, such as the understanding of 'Long Neolithics' or the regional and global problems with the terms Neolithic/neolithization. Several sessions were grouped under the theme of Neolithic diets and food technology, addressing various aspects such as plant and animal domestication trajectories, food production and circulation pathways, and dietary strategies. Key topics included long-term changes in plant consumption patterns (e.g., storage, grinding, and cooking), settlement trends, human population dynamics, and the spread of farming and herding, analyzed through interdisciplinary approaches like genetics, linguistics, and archaeology. A couple of sessions dealt with the future potential of biomolecular and isotopic proxies in Neolithic studies, highlighting advances in bioarchaeology. Topics included ancient DNA from humans, animals, and plants, stable and dietary isotopes, microbiomes, proteomics, and residue analysis, emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach to uncovering new insights. Some sessions addressed specific issues, such as the connections between climate change and the rise and expansion of early farming societies, the impact of Neolithic architecture on social behavior and building technology, and the diversity of mortuary practices across different regions and time periods. Additionally, discussions explored how tectonic and geomorphological processes from the Last Glacial Maximum to the Holocene influenced landscape changes and resource distribution, highlighting Neolithic communities' resilience and adaptability. A number of sessions explored topics such as lithic and stone-polished tool technologies, the use of clay tokens and counting objects, and the role of animals in rituals and symbolism, emphasizing their connection to supernatural beliefs. Additionally, discussions focused on symbolic systems, including signs, images, built spaces, and burial practices, as well as the material culture and iconography of the

early Neolithic communities, analyzing the interplay between art and the socio-economic context of these societies.

The sessions in *Regional Neolithic* were organized from Eurasia, Central and East Asia (5), through Southwest Asia and Anatolia (12), and Caucasia (1), to Southeast Europe/Europe and Eastern Europe (4). They addressed various aspects of the neolithization and the Neolithic, with a focus on themes related to the Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic communities, the transition to the Neolithic, and the interactions between early agricultural communities in different regions.

In addition to the regular sessions, several special talks were held. On 4 November, Peter Bellwood delivered a keynote lecture on the impact of food production on global human population history over the past 12,000 years. On 5 and 8 November, two plenary lectures took place – one by Hsiao-chun Hung on the emergence of Neolithic life in East and Southeast Asia, and another by Melinda Zeder titled ‘Unpacking the Neolithic.’ On 7 November, three commemorative speeches were given, tracing and honoring the work of the early researchers of the Pre-Pottery and Early Pottery Neolithic in Anatolia and especially in Urfa. Mehmet Özdoğan acknowledged the pioneers of Neolithic research in southeast Anatolia, including Bruce Howe, Halet Çambel, and Robert J. Braidwood. Barbara Helwing delivered an emotional speech on the legacy of Harald Hauptmann, while Joris Peters paid tribute to Klaus Schmidt and especially his work at Göbeklitepe. These commemorative speeches provided an essential link between generations of Neolithic researchers, not only in Anatolia but around the world. It is worth emphasizing once again that the Congress created a true impression of an intergenerational gathering of archaeologists.

A common drawback of large scientific forums, where many sessions are held simultaneously, is that it’s impossible to attend everything one would like, necessitating tough choices about what to participate in and what to skip. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I chose to focus on the sessions I attended as well as on the participation of Bulgarian archaeologists in the Congress.

The participation of a significant number of Bulgarian scholars from various institutions made a positive impression. A total of 12 Bulgarians attended the event, delivering ten presentations in total. The representatives of the National Institute of Archaeology & Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, were the most numerous; in fact, almost the entire Department of Prehistory participated. However, some co-authors of the papers could not join in person for various reasons. Those present included Krum Bacvarov (Head of the Department), Vasil Nikolov, Maria Gurova, Desislava Takorova, Galina Samichkova, and this author, Nikolina Nikolova.

The other Bulgarian participants were Tanya Dzhanezova of the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Malgorzata Grebska-Kulow, formerly of the Blagoevgrad Regional Museum of History, Ivan Gatsov of the National Museum of History, Petranka Nedelcheva of the New Bulgarian University/National Museum of History, Sevdalina Tsaneva of the Provadia Museum of History, and Petar Zidarov (independen-

dent researcher). Tanya Dzhanfezova co-organized a session, while Petranka Nedelcheva was a member of the Advisory Board of the Congress.

The Bulgarian participation was concentrated in the *Regional Neolithic* section, specifically in the four sessions of the Southeast Europe/Europe and Eastern Europe region (R14–17), as well as in one session from the *Global Perspectives on the Neolithic* section, which was generally dedicated to the Neolithic burial practices (G24).

Regrettably, I was only able to attend couple of sessions in their entirety. The first one, *Anatolia and the Balkans During the Neolithization Process: Connections, Similarities and Differences* (R16), was organized by Barbara Horejs, Sofija Stefanović, and Tanya Dzhanfezova. This session highlighted the key role of Anatolia and the Balkans in the neolithization process, focusing on their mutual connections. It provided a platform for presenting new evidence and theories on the formation of the Neolithic, addressing social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects, such as built environments, diet, burial customs, production, technologies, and innovations. By examining regional and supra-regional perspectives, the session aimed to shed light on the complexity of neolithization and the interconnections between these regions during the early to middle Holocene, contributing to a broader understanding within the global Neolithic context.

The session featured 17 papers, three of which were presented by Bulgarian participants. The presentation by Nikolina Nikolova, Atanas Tsirev, and Krum Bacvarov summarized the results of extensive archaeological research in the Middle Maritsa Valley in Upper Thrace over the last two decades, shedding light on various aspects of Early Neolithic material culture and social practices. The authors argued in favor of the Middle Maritsa Valley as a dynamic thoroughfare for interaction and exchange throughout the Neolithic expansion in Upper Thrace and beyond. Immediately following, Małgorzata Grębska-Kulow gave a similar and detailed overview of the Early Neolithic in southwest Bulgaria. She focused on how prehistoric communities in Anatolia influenced the shaping of the Early Neolithic along the rivers Struma and Mesta, and how these processes impacted the development of Neolithic cultures in the region. Tanya Dzhanfezova's paper examined the pottery attested at some of the earliest Neolithic sites in Bulgaria through a range of macro- and microscopic analyses, aiming to investigate the adaptation mechanisms of Neolithic communities by exploring the earliest ceramic technology.

The session was particularly interesting as it presented several new studies from well-known sites, exploring various aspects of Neolithic cultures, including settlement patterns, architecture, burial practices, flint production, and ceramic technology. Especially valuable was the presentation of new series of radiocarbon dates from numerous sites, mainly in the Balkans.

As with most sessions, due to the large number of participants and the tight schedule, no dedicated discussion slots were included. After most presentations, there was an opportunity for one or a few questions, but in some cases, time did not allow for any. Final discussions were scheduled at the end of the sessions. This is, of course, not a criticism of

the Congress itself, but applies to most, if not all, large-scale conferences (e.g., the EAA annual meetings).

The next session I attended – *The Neolithic of the Aegean and Beyond: Supra-Regional Networks and Local Communities* (R15) – was organized by Agathe Reingruber, Zafer Derin, and Eylem Özdoğan. The session focused on the beginnings of the Neolithic way of life in the context of the Mesolithic precursor and the subsequent transformations up to the early sixth millennium BC. It explored the internal dynamics within the Circum-Aegean world and exchanges with surrounding areas, with special attention given to the differences between its eastern and western parts. Topics included material culture, chronology, regional cultures, and interregional networks, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches such as environmental studies, archaeometry, and bioarchaeology, aiming to highlight the uniqueness of Aegean Neolithic societies.

A total of 28 papers were presented at the session, two of which by Bulgarian participants. Ivan Gatsov and Petranka Nedelcheva summarized their study over the past two decades on lithic technologies and raw material supply in the Marmara Sea area and its neighboring regions during the Early Neolithic. Vassil Nikolov and colleagues presented findings from two Late Neolithic pit sites in the Maritsa River Valley in Upper Thrace: Svilengrad (Lyubimets–DB 2) and Kapitan Andreevo. An interesting focus was placed on more than 700 sherds from face pots found in the pits at Kapitan Andreevo, which were likely made for ritual purposes and intended for multiple use. An additional contribution to the Bulgarian presentations was made by Jean-Paul Demoule, who summarized the results of the excavations at Kovachevo, one of the earliest settlements in the Balkans. The remaining contributions were dedicated to specific microregions and/or particular sites, as well as various find types, both from the western and the eastern Aegean coasts, as well as from the Balkans.

The third session from the European region section I attended, *Early Monumentality and Social Differentiation: Transformations in Europe* (R17), was organized by Johannes Müller and Wiebke Kirleis. The session explored the role of megalithic monuments in shaping the European landscape, linking their rise to social, economic, and environmental changes. It focused on how these monuments reflect broader cultural transformations, including the expansion of external relations and the diversification of material culture. By integrating case studies on early monumental architecture, social changes, and environmental shifts, the session aimed to provide insights into the creation of Europe's earliest cultural landscapes during the Neolithic.

The session featured 20 talks, with a significant representation of participants from Central, Western, and, to a lesser extent, Northern Europe, including a notable number of scholars from the Kiel University. This predominance reflects the historical development of research on megaliths and monumentality, which has been primarily advanced by West European scholars – particularly from the UK, Germany, and France – dating back over a century.

Most presentations focused on case studies, mainly examining various types of megalithic tombs of the Funnel Beaker culture, Corded Ware culture, Yamnaya culture, Wartberg archaeological group, etc. Additional contributions explored megaliths, burial structures, and standing stones from France and the Alps, as well as tumuli and stone circles from Iberia. Several papers presented findings on Trypillia mega-structures, specifically the assembly houses identified at these sites.

Three presentations addressed the monumental nature of prehistoric ditch enclosures in different parts of Europe, providing valuable insights into the methodological and analytical approaches employed in studying such sites. The study focusing on the ‘westernmost’ region analyzed depositional practices at a selection of North European causewayed enclosures in southern Britain and Scandinavia. The ‘central’ study examined rondels as Neolithic monuments and their visibility in the local landscape of Central Europe. The ‘southeastern’ study, presented by the author, aimed to explore the Early Neolithic ditch enclosures in the Eastern Balkans as monumental features – large-scale projects, but also memorial in their significance. The argument was made that the repeated activities of digging, refilling, and recutting, along with deposition practices performed in and around the ditches, highlight the importance of these enclosures in the collective memory of the Early Neolithic societies in the region.

Several presentations explored more abstract aspects of monumentality, such as investigating gender inequalities in the Neolithic through ancient human genomes and using eye-tracking techniques to understand how monuments shape our perception of the world. A particularly engaging discussion focused on the emergence of waste monumentality in Europe.

The fourth regional session with Bulgarian participation was *Regional and Inter-Regional Palimpsests of Neolithization Processes: South-Eastern Europe* (R14), organized by Mihael Budja, Dušan Borić, Zuzana Hofmanová, and Maxime Bami. The session explored a broad spectrum of topics related to regional palimpsests, encompassing archaeological, archaeogenetic, biomolecular, demographic, climatic, and paleoeconomic perspectives. It addressed themes such as the transition to farming, artifact assemblages, chronological developments, symbolism, and social practices. Key theoretical frameworks were also examined, including the Neolithic package, demic diffusion, migration, gene-culture coevolution, and the Neolithic demographic transition.

Of the 13 presentations, two were delivered by Bulgarian scholars. Petar Zidarov discussed a case study from the Early Neolithic site of Sinagovtsi in northwestern Bulgaria, which featured a single large pit and three skeletons – an adult male, a female, and a child – each buried in a distinct manner. Zidarov highlighted the importance of this Early Neolithic feature and its broader implications for understanding connections along the Middle and Lower Danube regions. Maria Gurova, in collaboration with Clive Bonsall, discussed the use of Balkan flint by Early Neolithic communities in the Balkans during the early sixth millennium BC. Understanding the supply and distribution of this raw ma-

terial is key to tracing the trajectory and regional dynamics of the neolithization process. The concentration of Balkan flint in northern Bulgaria positioned the region as pivotal in spreading the Neolithic lifestyle, though the origins of the flint distribution network remain unclear.

The final session I will discuss, although, unfortunately, I was unable to attend, is *Treating Dead Bodies in the Neolithic: Exploring the Increasing Social Complexity* (G24), organized by Yılmaz Selim Erdal, Françoise Le Mort, and Stéphane Rottier. This was the largest session of the Congress, spanning three days. A total of 38 presentations were delivered, two of which were given by Bulgarian teams. This session examined Neolithic mortuary practices as a lens for understanding societal transitions and the evolving relationship between the living and spaces of the deceased. The diversity of burial practices was explored – including variations in location, architecture, grave goods, and body treatments – alongside phenomena such as skull plastering and cannibalism. Scholars presented regional and interregional analyses, diachronic studies, and integrative interpretations to trace the evolution of attitudes toward death over time.

Desislava Takorova, together with Vassil Nikolov, Kathleen McSweeney, Nadezhda Atanassova, and Todor Dyakov, presented the latest discoveries at the Early Neolithic site of Slatina–Sofia. In the ritual complex near the settlement, numerous human remains were found, including articulated skeletons as well as skulls. Unlike the settlement, where burials found between houses showed no post-mortem manipulation, the remains at the ritual complex exhibited evidence of dismemberment, cutting, and soft tissue removal, suggesting these actions occurred near the time of death. Krum Bacvarov, together with Nikolina Nikolova, Georgi Katsarov, Atanas Tsurev, and Kathleen McSweeney, presented Early Neolithic burial evidence from Nova Nadezhda in Upper Thrace. Eighteen burial contexts, containing the remains of 24 individuals, were found either in the fill of an enclosure ditch, along its inner edge, or associated with its intentional filling. This is the largest burial sample from an early sixth millennium BC site in an area lacking formal burial grounds, offering valuable insights into the social practices of early farming communities.

Due to the high level of interest in this session and the numerous opportunities for analysis and interpretation offered by the topic of ‘treating dead bodies’, the presentations were divided into several subsections. The main themes covered included: treating the skull, recognizing and interpreting intentional modifications of human remains, the diversity and complexity of multi-stage mortuary practices, shedding light on social complexity through genetic analysis of dead bodies, age, gender, and status in death, and exploring regional identities through mortuary practices.

Social events

The beauty of such large academic forums, as well as smaller-scale conferences, lies in the virtually constant opportunities they offer for socializing with colleagues from around the world – during sessions, coffee breaks, and even after the official program

concludes. The organizers ensured that we were never bored or left to plan most of our time on our own. They prepared a rich and exciting schedule of social events for us. I must emphasize that all the events were entirely free of charge. Moreover, the registration fee for participation was completely reasonable and, in my opinion, even insufficient given the level of organization. For the group of countries that includes Bulgaria, and within the early bird payment period, the fee was only €90. It is worth noting that the Congress was supported by a large number of partners and sponsors whom we should gratefully acknowledge.

The events primarily consisted of receptions but also included concerts, exhibitions, and the highly anticipated visit to archaeological sites, which I believe is one of the reasons for the high attendance at the Congress. On the very first day, although only a relatively small number of attendees had arrived by then – most members of the Bulgarian group, for instance, arrived late in the evening – there was a classical music concert performed by Cihat Aşkın – *Türk Valsleri* immediately after the official opening ceremony of the forum. The evening continued with a welcome reception at the Hilton DoubleTree Hotel.

The following day, now with around 900 scholars in presence, we attended a reception held in the courtyard of the Şanlıurfa Archaeological Museum. Our hosts had arranged a concert featuring traditional Turkish music as well as a tasting of various local dishes. Naturally, the tables laden with delicacies drew a crowd. This was followed by the official opening of *Beyond the Past* art exhibition, which presented a modern interpretation of prehistoric art in the region.

The Şanlıurfa Archaeological Museum is among the most impressive museums I have visited, particularly for its Neolithic collection. The Museum opened relatively recently, in 2015. Its modern building is square-shaped, covering an area of 6000 square meters (fig. 5). It's the largest museum in Türkiye, with 14 main exhibition halls and 33 animation areas. Around 10,000 artifacts from various periods are displayed. The exhibition is organized chronologically, starting from the Paleolithic and extending to the Islamic period (Karul et al. 2024, 4ff). From the author's perspective, the most impressive part is the Neolithic exhibition, where one can see one of the oldest statues in the world, found at Yenimahalle, a replica of the Göbeklitepe D Temple, the original Nevali Çori Temple, and many more. This year, the Museum also opened a new exhibition hall, Taş Tepeler, dedicated to the discoveries of a large-scale archaeological and socialization project in the region, which I will describe shortly. A wonderful surprise was the Neolithic Catalogue (Karul et al. 2024), published in connection with the opening of the new hall, which was given to us on the registration day. A notable aspect was that the organizers had provided free access with the Congress badges, not only to the Archaeological Museum but also to the Şanlıurfa Haleplibahçe Mosaic Museum and the Kızılkoyun Necropolis of rock tombs, which a significant number of participants took the opportunity to visit.



Figure 5. *The Şanlıurfa Archaeological Museum.* Image Credit: <https://www.turkishmuseums.com/museum/detail/2227-sanliurfa-museum/2227/4>

On 7 November, we attended a cocktail reception, once again held at the Hilton Double Tree Hotel, which served as the closing event. A speech was delivered by Gökhan Yazgı, the Deputy Minister of Türkiye’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, who spoke about the cultural heritage of Şanlıurfa, the Taş Tepeler Project, and the success of the Congress. This was followed by hours of conversations with colleagues, accompanied by music, delicious catering, and glasses of wine (figs. 6 and 7).

The Taş Tepeler Project

Undoubtedly, the highlight of the program was our visit to Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites at the Şanlıurfa Plateau. Some of the sites are newly discovered, while others have been known for a shorter or longer time. Their extensive investigation in recent years, however, is the result of a major project that has been carried out. The Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project – Taş Tepeler (Stone Mounds in English) – launched in 2021 by Türkiye’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, is a large-scale archaeological initiative focused on studying Neolithic sites in the Şanlıurfa region. The project aims to uncover the origins of sedentary life across a plateau encircling the Harran Plain, extending over 200 kilometers from the foothills of the Eastern Taurus Mountains (<https://tastepeler.org/en>).

Involving 33 academic institutions, including 19 international partners, and directed by Necmi Karul, the project investigates the transition from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles. Discoveries at sites such as Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe challenge earlier assumptions that agriculture was the primary driver of sedentary living. Instead, the evidence



Figure 6. Reception at the Hilton Double Tree Hotel, Şanlıurfa. From left to right: Vassil Nikolov, Mehmet Özdoğan, and Herman Parzinger. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.



Figure 7. Reception at the Hilton Double Tree Hotel, Şanlıurfa. From left to right: Ivan Gatsov, Vassil Nikolov, Mehmet Özdoğan, and Krum Bacvarov. Image Credit: S. Tsaneva.

suggests that settled communities preceded agricultural practices, with food production emerging as a subsequent development. Distinct from other Southwest Asian Neolithic sites, the Taş Tepeler settlements are notable for their monumental architecture and artistic achievements, providing valuable insights into daily life, social structures, and religious practices. The project also explores inter-settlement relationships, settlement hierarchies, and environmental adaptations during the Neolithic (tenth–seventh millennium BC). In addition to its archaeological objectives, the Taş Tepeler Project emphasizes the protection, preservation, and public presentation of these sites. It also aims to document and safeguard the traditional architecture and cultural heritage of the Şanlıurfa region, marking it as one of the most ambitious and comprehensive archaeological undertakings in Türkiye’s history (Karul 2024, 16ff).

Visits to the stone mounds

The site visits were planned for 6 November. We were divided into four large groups to ensure there were not too many people at each site, with each group following a different route across the locations. Sufficient time was allocated at the sites, enabling us to thoroughly explore them and gain a firsthand understanding of their key features, with some of the site researchers offering on-site insights. The sites are mostly situated on limestone heights and hilltops, dominating the surrounding terrain, complemented by their monumental stone architecture – hence the stone mounds.

Gürcütepe. The first site we visited was Gürcütepe, which consists of eight settlements – four mounds and four flat areas. Occupation began in the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNB) and continued until the Pottery Neolithic. From 1995 to 1999, it was excavated alongside Göbeklitepe by a Turkish–German team as part of the Urfa Project. Research resumed in 2021 under the Taş Tepeler Project. Two main layers were revealed: Large Room Structures and Cell-Planned Structures. Gürcütepe was likely inhabited by different groups in the same period and is considered one of the ‘Mega Villages’ of the Late PPNB (Erdalkiran 2024).

Sefertepe. We visited next Sefertepe, the easternmost site of the PPN settlements on the Şanlıurfa Plateau, where excavations began in 2021 as part of the Taş Tepeler Project. Most of the uncovered structures are quadrangular, similar to those found at Göbeklitepe, and are attributed to the PPNB. They feature benches, platforms, and broken grinding stones embedded in the walls. The floors were made of a lime-clay mortar mixture, and some structures revealed T-shaped, one-sided T-shaped, flat-topped, and quadrangular pillars (Güldoğan 2024).

Karahantepe. The most impressive visit was to Karahantepe, not only due to the nature of the uncovered features, many of which have also been found at other sites in the region, but because of the scale of the excavated area since 2019 (fig. 8). At least three phases, dating from 9400 to 8200 cal BC (PPNA and PPNB), have been identified at the western terrace of the site (Karul 2021; 2024a). Our attention was immediately drawn



Figure 8. *Some of the Bulgarian participants in the Congress at Karahantepe. From left to right: Desislava Takorova, Galina Samichkova, Krum Bacvarov, Nikolina Nikolova, Sevdalina Tsaneva, and Vassil Nikolov. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*

to the largest central structure (AD) of the monumental complex (fig. 9). Built into the bedrock, it features T-shaped pillars, two-step benches, and two central pillars facing each other. However, it was the human head carved into the wall of structure AB, connected to the former structure by a staircase, that truly captured our gaze. Inside this significantly smaller structure, ten phallic-shaped pillars and a serpentine channel, likely related to a liquid-based ritual, were found (fig. 10). Another highlight of the site is located in a public building at the top of the western slope, where a massive human statue sits on a bench along the wall. The statue, 2.45 m tall, has a well-defined face and ribcage, holding an emphasized phallus in its hands (fig. 11). I was also struck by the remarkable quality of the limestone vessels found in most of the small round or oval dwellings, and in the communal buildings as well (fig. 12).

Göbeklitepe. Our next stop was Göbeklitepe, the benchmark for monumentality in the PPN period. No matter what I write about this site, it will inevitably fall short. Göbekli was discovered in the 1960s, however excavations were initiated in the mid-1990s and continue until this day. In 2018, Göbeklitepe was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Clare et al. 2019). It spans at least 1,500 years, dating to the PPNA and PPNB (ca. 9600–8000 cal BC). Initially, research focused on the monumental buildings and their T-shaped pillars, leading to interpretations of Göbeklitepe as a purely ritual site.



Figure 9. *Structure AD at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*



Figure 10. *Structure AB at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*



Figure 11. *Seated human statue at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*



Figure 12. *Limestone vessels at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*

However, recent studies have shifted attention to the more numerous structures without T-pillars, now interpreted as houses (Clare 2020 and 2024).

As dedicated prehistorians, we were keen to arrive at the site. We were eager to see the round special buildings with stone walls and the incredible T-shaped pillars, especially the various images carved on them (fig. 13). Most of the pillars are interpreted as stylized human figures, confirmed by the application of arms, hands, and clothing elements (belts, pendants, etc.) on some of them. What stood out were the diverse depictions of animals on other pillars – birds, snakes, scorpions, spiders, and predators (Schmidt 2010). We were told that the largest T-shaped pillar likely reached a height of 6 meters and weighed up to 10 tons.

Çakmaktepe. In the late afternoon, we arrived at Çakmaktepe, the second-to-last site on our tour. Excavations began in 2021 as part of the Taş Tepeler Project. The site dates to the early PPNA period (ca. 9600–8800 cal BC), representing an earlier stage of sedentism compared to other PPN settlements in the region. Excavations uncovered round, semi-underground domestic and special buildings, with conical holes carved into the bedrock, similar to mortars found at Natufian settlements. One special building is notable for having pillars that haven't yet taken on the typical T-shape (Şahin 2024). We



Figure 13. *Göbeklitepe.* Image Credit: N. Nikolova.

quickly toured the area, enjoyed the sunset over Şanlıurfa, and headed to our final stop for the evening.

Sayburç. We arrived at Sayburç after dark. Initially, our group harbored some skepticism about what could be observed at the site. However, the researcher Eylem Özdoğan and her team impressed us with their resourcefulness, utilizing a large lantern to illuminate key areas of the site. Excavations at Sayburç, part of the Taş Tepeler Project, began in 2021, revealing two PPN occupations from the mid-ninth millennium BC. The first, with communal buildings, is in the northern part of the settlement, while the second, with residential buildings, lies further south (Özdoğan 2024). It was fortunate that we visited the site at night, as the most notable discovery was challenging to perceive in daylight. A relief was found on the inner face of a bench in a large communal building. The figures are arranged in a linear sequence, with a bull and a male figure facing each other on the left, followed by two leopards and another male figure on the right. The central male figure (fig. 14), depicted in high relief, holds his phallus in his right hand and looks towards the people in the room, while the others are gazing at each other (Özdoğan 2022).

After the unique light show at Sayburç, we returned to Şanlıurfa, filled with impressions from the archaeological sites we visited, as well as the features, artworks, and landscapes we had long hoped to experience.

The city of Şanlıurfa

Modern Şanlıurfa blends the old city's Arabic charm and Middle Eastern architecture with newer districts of modern apartments, restaurants, and so on. Şanlıurfa, regarded as one of the most religious cities in Türkiye, is believed to be the birthplace of both



Figure 14. *Human figure in a wall relief at Sayburç. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*

Abraham and Job. Balıklıgöl, also known as the Holy Lake, is a beautiful and noteworthy site in the city, a picturesque oblong lake surrounded by buildings and filled with carp, holding religious significance due to its supposed connection to Abraham. The old town is home to a vast ancient bazaar where visitors can purchase everything from traditional crafts, handwoven textiles, leather saddles, and copperware to wooden carvings, gold and silver jewelry, spices, and even second-hand motorcycles.

The city boasts numerous cafés and small restaurants, primarily outdoor, offering traditional local cuisine. The food is heavily meat-based, with dishes such as kebabs, liver, and *köfte* taking center stage. Popular pastries such as *içli pide* and *lahmacun* are also commonly found, and they can be served either with meat or in a relatively vegetarian version with cheese. The area is also known for its many sweet shops offering *baklava* and other desserts, where visitors are invariably served traditional Turkish black tea (*çay*). Furthermore, the local ice cream, *dondurma*, is available in a variety of flavors, though pistachio (*Antep fıstığı*), a characteristic flavor of both Türkiye and the region, is particularly popular. In fact, Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa are responsible for 80 percent of the pistachio production in the country.

It is clear that there could have been no better venue for the World Neolithic Congress than Şanlıurfa. The region's millennia-old history, coupled with significant discoveries and the extensive research associated with the Taş Tepeler Project, offers natural and inspiring setting for bringing together scholars from around the world to discuss the origins of sedentary life.

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