

Cultural Processes in the Rhodope Mountain during the Neolithic Era and the Chalcolithic Era

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(Summary)

This article represents a summary onto the Neolithic Era and the Chalcolithic Era researches in the Rhodope Mountain, in the period from the end of VII- IV millennium B.C. A view of the Neolithic settlements is made in Kurdzhali and Krumovgrad in the East Rhodopes and in Rakitovo in the Central Rhodopes. The chalcolithic monuments are a lot and diversified in typological attitude. Most of the famous and research Chalcolithic objects are from the East part of the Mountain. Here, in except of the settlements are formed and some specific places such as crafts centre and rock sanctuaries.

The exhibition is following the science information about the structure and aspects of the prehistoric social life. The characteristics of the researched prehistoric places are presented, such as – structure of the settlement, architecture, ceramic and other manufactures which was discovered during the archaeological excavations.

TEXT

The Neolithic [1] and the Chalcolithic [2] Eras comprised the period from the of VII and the beginning of IV millennium B.C. The cultural process in the Rhodope Mountain district is destined from settlement stages and settling down for life of the human groups, which was followed by leaving and abandoning of the inhabited spaces.

Nowadays only part from the famous prehistoric objects in the Rhodope Mountain is researched (**Example 1**). However, for the last 40 years a lot of scientific researches and publications are realized, which allow to be made enough reliable way of life renovation of the earliest societies.

Neolithic Era [3]. The Neolithization of the Ancient Thrace is implemented by Anatolian colonists. In the end of the VII millennium B.C. they reach the Maritsa river valley. In this way the earliest Neolithic culture in Thrace arouse. It is called Karanovo I. It is said that the earliest settlements in the Rhodope Mountain are appeared around the Arda River from the first wave of migrants. Moreover, the Anatolian groups of people bring with them patriarchal societies, based in kinship principle. This is principle of structuring and functioning of the public life. It is perceived to the middle of the Chalcolithic Era.

The first farmers built their villages in convenient and places full of water with favorable climate and fertile land. Their houses are in square plan, with walls from so called knitted construction, doped with clay. It is specific for villages from this period – the Early Neolithic Era that they are without fortifications.

The main occupations of the citizens are farming and cattle. Moreover, another crafts are developed such as – pottery, spinning, weaving, furriery; stone, flint and bone industry. Also, the hunt and the fishing were very important in their life. A lot of excavations evidenced about these activities, ordinary discovered as domestic inventory in the settlements.

The Neolithic settlement is Kardzhali [4]. It is located in the left coast of the Arda River – in the center of present town. Only the 5 construction horizons are researched. When the place was founded, the first inhabitants made special ritual for consecration accompanied by straw burning. After that they covered with yellow – green soil where they want to build their houses. Also, they level up the ground. Their houses are located near to the covered with Cobblestones Street. The houses have two rooms with fireplace in one of the room. The ceramic crockery and cutlery showed the characteristic features for the culture – Karanovo I in Thrace.

From the Neolithic settlement in Kurdzhali come from one of the emblematic for the Neolithic Era in Bulgaria artifact – Jade Amulet (**Example 2**). This “prestige subject” blends the sun semantic with the frog semantic, which keep from infertility and hard pregnancy. The common symbol “swastika with frog legs” gave unusual strength of the amulet and probably it was taken by a woman [5].

In the upper two constructional horizons are founded two child and two woman funerals in position “hoker”. The dead people are lay with funeral inventory in a pit surrounded by stones [6]. Here is founded the first Neolithic skull in Bulgaria – Mediterranean racial type.

The settlement with the early horizons in the settlement mounds near Kazanlak and Azkashkata mounds near Stara Zagora, as well as the early layer in the settlement Asagi Pinar near to Kirklareli, East Thrace, Turkey [8]. The life in the settlement is interrupted from disastrous flood.

The Neolithic settlement in Krumovgrad [9]. It is located in the center of contemporary town in the left coast of Krumovitsa river. For the first time in the Early Neolithic Era is founded some features in the production of tools and in the whole economic life. It is dominated the tools which are made from bones and horns. The flint industry is weak, but it is compensated by clay tools. The found clay tables and dishes with different pictures can be met not only in places in Bulgaria but also in Porodin, Macedonia and Nicomedia, Greece. The clay anthropomorphic plastic has exact parallels in Asia Minor, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Romania. According to the scientists the settlements is later local manifestation of the culture Karanovo I. It

is synchronized with Starchevo II a – b group and with several places from Macedonia, such as: Porodin, Zelenikovo, Anzabegovo, Vrashtnik.

The Neolithic settlements in Kardzhali and Krumovgrad were in contact with the Sea of Marmara and places such as Hodzha Cesme III and IaramBurgas 4. The founded in Krumovgrad square dishes with decoration have a relation with the classical phase of Fikirtepe and Ilapanar VIII and the V phase, Turkey [10].

Another Rhodope Mountain region in which settlements from the Neolithic era are registered are in the valley of the river Chepinska in the West Rhodope Mountain.

The settlement mound near the town Rakitovo [11]. It is researched 2 construction levels from the time of the Early Neolithic Era – culture Koranovo I and II. The both settlements died because of a fire. The buildings are from knitted constructions, but their trapezoidal form and the facilities inner in it are quite unusual. They have parallels in the Early Neolithic temple complex near Simeonovgrad, settlements Lepenski pool and Padina in Serbia – entirely build with trapezoidal houses.

In the upper construction horizon is discovered not only houses but also a deep shelter – construction for migrant meeting. Cult complex is created from 3 buildings with permanent cult facilities, and stone was used in order to build them. The facilities represent home altar related with cults for family extension and home fireplace.

In the statements on the lower construction horizon also have a lot of facilities – granary, furnaces, places for drying of wheat, places for treatment of clay, alters and others. One of the buildings is used for cult profess toward the heavenly figures. A funeral of a newborn child in big clay dish is implemented in a building.

The earliest inhabitants burned and destroyed their own settlement, probably after epidemic disaster. After a couple of years they came again in this settlement and they made excavations and put into them ruins from the old burned houses. With the soil they carefully made embankment onto which build the second settlement.

The ceramic crockery and cutlery represent local version of the Thracian Early Neolithic Era. It is developed so called “Rakitovski type” ceramics, depicted with cream paint onto dishes with deep brown, crimson and claret slipware. The ceramic found the closest parallels in Eleshnitsa, Blagoevradsko, Anzabegovo, Macedonia, in the settlements of the Adult group in Serbia and the group Korosh in Hungary.

The Rakitovo settlement is located in the periphery of the ethno cultural areal Koranovo I, near to the cultural groups Kremikovtsi I and Kremenik – Anzabegovo, which influence is feeling really a lot.

In the end of the Early Neolithic Era the life in the whole Rhodope Mountain region is interrupted. In the East Rhodope Mountain the life come again in the period Koranovo III and it is related with influx of new population. In the Rhodopes the period of Late Neolithic Era, Koranovo IV, is very weak presented, probably because of the influx of Early Chalcolithic Population, which is located in the Upper Thracian Plain [12].

Chalcolithic [13]. The Rhodope Mountain massif during the Chalcolithic Era and the following Bronze Era is depicted as a specific cultural district – contact zone between the Carpathian Mountains and the Aegean Sea. From the period of Early Chalcolithic Era, Karanovo V, in the Rhodopes clues for durable occupy of this area is not found until nowadays. From the second half of the Chalcolithic Era started the expansion of Upper Thracian Plane tribes toward the peripheral areas. During the Late Chalcolithic Era started to implement big changes in the Central Balkan areas. For example, it is created big tribe group – culture Kodzhadermen – Gumelnitsa – Koranovo VI, which was existed around 400 years. The Rhodope Mountain is part of the South periphery of this tribe union, spreading from North of river Danube. This archaeological culture has dual character for its management organs – secular and religious. In order to service the needs of the new social formation new types of objects are organized and they are active to the end of the Era, such as – craft – production centers, rock sanctuaries and probably some mine for gold yield. Such kind of places is found only in the southeast parts of the mountain. While, the southwest part of the mountain downstream the river Mesta remains in the bigger part of its area without any people.

The Chalcolithic settlement “Varhari”, municipality of Momchilgrad [14]. It is located in the left coast of river Varbitsa when it is transfuse in Diva River. The place represents big exposed monolayer settlement. The buildings are created during the following way – around landing with sizes from 30 to 80 sq. m. are located underground objects with depth from 0, 60 m to above 4 m and sizes from 10-15 sq.m to 60-70 sq.m. The total area of one complex, including ground and underground parts is over 300 to 500 sq.m. The fireplaces are located onto the ground or into the underground, which are made onto platform over the floor. Burned coat of paint with clues from wood constructions and rocks are remained from this Era. The separated rooms are used for food storages, other for manufacture workshops for products such as – Chalcedony, Jasper, Opal, Agate and Tufi. Adzes, axes, chisels and fight axes are elaborated from stone. The production is mainly for other countries. In two workshops are founded beads from different elaboration degree as well as flint objects which help to perforate small halls in the beats.

The most spectacular building is with sizes – 30 X 25 m and area above 750 sq. m. The north wall is with stone basic, and in height – with clay. Here was located an entrance which was formed with big stones.

From north the settlement is surrounded by a ditch with extremely big sizes – in depth 3, 80 m and wide above 15 m.

The ceramics have specific view. Some crockery and cutlery types are related for the Early and Late Chalcolithic Era. Typical Chalcolithic ceramic forms are met which have specific handles, considered until nowadays as inherent for the Early Bronze Era.

There is big diversity of clay products. Anthropomorphic idols found parallels in big cultural area: Shuplevets –Bakarno Gumno in Macedonia, Vinca in Serbia, Kodzhadermen – Gumelnitsa in Bulgaria and in Romania; Prekukuteni – Tripolie in Romania and Ukraine.

The received radiocarbon dating is related about the settlement existence around 4600 year B.C., in the end of the Early and beginning of the Late Chalcolithic Era. This settlement died in a fire, and after that it was flooded.

The Chalcolithic craft – production centre near village Sedlare, municipality of Momchilgrad [15]. It is located in the high left coast of river Varbitsa around 3 km south from the settlement near village Varhari. It is registered cultural layers from the Early and Late Neolithic Era. The two upper horizons of the mound are from the Late Chalcolithic Era. New and remarkably in the settlements from this period is the wide use of stone layers in the architecture. With stone layers outside and inside are paneled the walls, floors, furnaces and landings around them and the remaining facilities in buildings. The walls are from clay. The settlement is surrounded with the same technique such as in the first and second horizon. The fortification has towers and there is north and south entrances.

On the top construction horizon there are buildings which have unusual big sizes – length 15 m and wide 7, 50 m. They are located near two parallel streets in direction north-south, covered with cobblestones from the river. The building with the biggest sizes is very impressive (**Example 3**). And with facilities for elaboration of different objects such as – store halls for clay, work landings, polishing and exacerbation of tools made by stone, agate and japes. It was discovered a lot of ready and semi ready products and huge amount of production waste. Another building has workshop for product elaboration from bone and horn. With the similar inner furnishing are all buildings, which are used as houses.

Facilities related with the implementation of magical rituals are found. In hall with big sizes are put, things like: human teeth, mandible, separated bones from the limbs, animal bones and small pieces red ochre, and later this halls are covered with stones. Such kind of hall is evidenced in many places. The hall is surrounded by stone circle and it is used in I and II horizon. Building from II construction horizon is used for funeral of cult objects.

The settlement is dated from the beginning of Late Chalcolithic Era, Karanovo VI. It is populated in certain periods from different groups of masters, specialized in production of different objects and tools. They used the native food base – jasper, agate and heliotrope. Part of the production was designed for the trade. Production is found in Eleshnitsa, Blagoevgradsko and in culture Chalcolithic center near village Dolnoslav, Asenovgradsko, in graves in the Varna Chalcolithic necropolis and in Sesklo, Greece. The significance of this craft center increased with the time. In the later period the building size is increased as well as the production capacity. Part of the workshops work for clearly ritual needs, related with the sanctuaries in the East Rhodopes.

In the East Rhodopes several settlements are famous from the Late Chalcolithic Era. The settlement near village Orlitsa, municipality Kirkovo is built with 2 floor houses. Their floors construction are made by wood spars, plaster with clay, onto the supporting pillars. One of the houses have porch. Interesting circumstance in this settlement is the full lack of bones [16]. Near village Zvinitza, municipality of Kurdzhali is found ruins from a settlement and a cult anthropomorphic dish (**Example 4.1**). Late Chalcolithic Era house researched in village Chomakovo, under rock swath with cropped around 30 trapezoidal niches [17]. During this period inhabitant clues are found in some East Rhodope Mountain Caves.

In the Middle Rhodope Mountain are researched two settlements. First, near the locality called Adata [18], village of Pespal, municipality of Ardino are registered a lot of rock halls, ceramic clusters and ruins from the Late Chalcolithic Era settlement with home inventory. It makes impression the full lack of animal bones in this place. 12 km northeast from this place is located the settlement in the locality called Kashlata [19], village Dolna Drianka, municipality of Banite. Ruins are researched from a house with rock walls and arch south wall – form, identical of the house in the locality Adata. In the ceramics you can see influence from the complex Krivodol – Salkutsa – Bubani Hum I, which is indication that the life in the locality called Kashlata continue and after the III phase of complex KGK VI.

Late Chalcolithic materials are found in several Thracian and Middle Age fortresses from the West Rhodope Mountain.

The Rhodope Mountain Late Chalcolithic Era rock sanctuaries [20]. During the Late Chalcolithic Era in the East Rhodope Mountain is developed spacious and complex system from rock sanctuaries. They are focused basically on east from the line Cepina – Davidkovo – Zlatograd. The typical location of a sanctuary is in a peak, surrounded by a river, in the circle center, depicted from far away and high mountains. The inner layout of the sacred area include natural or artificial caves and water resources, making of ladder, niches with trapezoidal, square or rectangular form, throne, altars, basins and others. Also, a specific type “Sharapan” is related to this period.

The places for sanctuaries construction are not elected randomly. The archaeological – astronomical researches, implemented in the frameworks of rock sanctuaries showed that they are located in zones with magnetic anomalies. The sanctuaries worked as a observatories. Some of the rock structures are used for observation of the location of big heavenly bodies, stars and constellations.

The researches of the rock sanctuaries put the question about the dating of the most specific East Rhodope Mountain monuments – trapezoidal niches. They are ordinarily defined as “Thracian”. According to the new researches the complexes with trapezoidal niches are dated from the Late Chalcolithic Era. The main evidences are that there are no clues of iron chisels, and 80 percent of the ceramics is from the Late Chalcolithic Era.

The rock sanctuary Perperikon [21]. The life of one the most famous archaeological objects in the Rhodope Mountain started during the Late Chalcolithic Era. The materials from this period are found in layers onto the basic of rock halls, rock rifts, furrows and ponds. The ritual activity is implemented in the inner side of one deep and unformed rock furrow. There are discovered clay vertebral notch and a dish put with the bottom upside.

Rock Sanctuary in the locality called Gradishteto, village of Pchelarovo, municipality of Kurdzhali [22]. It is consisted of several huge, carved in the rock – cult halls, filled with soil and big quantity of the Late Chalcolithic Era materials, such as: ceramics, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic monuments, marble idol, flint plate and others. Some of the idols are not fully completed – but other are totally completed (**Example 4.2**) or fragmented even before their putting into cult halls.

Complex of rock sanctuaries are developed in the villages of Raven, Tatul and Dolna Chobanka, municipality of Momchilgrad. In the basic of the rock sanctuaries near village of Tatul there is a layer from the Late Chalcolithic Era. In the rock sanctuary Harman Kaia, village of Bivoliane, it is also found Late Chalcolithic Era ceramic, covered rock areas with cuttings – including the place considered for ancient observatory [23].

Near to Harman Kaia there are researched two artificial caves, dated from the Late Chalcolithic Era. In the caves a human skull is buried, surrounded by put vertically flat stones. The rock sanctuaries in this region are visited by the inhabitants of North Greece and the Aegean Sea. It is discovered significance amount of fragments from the classical Dimini [24] cultural phase.

Onto the rock cuttings of Old Chalcolithic sanctuaries is created medieval fortress Ustra [25]. From there three Late Chalcolithic Era copper axes – hummers came from. They are type Plochnik (**Example 4.3**) and they are spread in wide areal of the Southeast Europe [26].

The most eastern Rhodope Mountain rock sanctuary is located in the neighborhood Bosilkovo, village of Davidkovo, municipality of Banite. Stone fence of the sanctuary, stone shaft with circle form and many semi circle rock cuttings are dated from the Late Chalcolithic Era. In the center of circle alter is buried clay head of anthropomorphic idol [27].

There is a connection between the sanctuaries and the gold fields. Near the biggest Balkan rock sanctuaries – Perperikon, village of Gorna Fortress and Belantash, village of Mostovo, the gold rivers Perpereshka and Gornoslavska are flowed. Near to Perperikon is located the gold mine in village of Stremtsi, but near to Belantash – the gold vein over village of Gornoslav.

Each of the sanctuaries has its own view. As the whole system – the rock sanctuaries made in comprehensible and in real aspect the sacred mountain. After the end of the Chalcolithic Era some of them are used again as sacred places during the Late Bronze Era.

The reasons for the interrupted development of the bright Late Chalcolithic Era cultures from the end of V – to the beginning of the IV millennium B.C and the depopulation of the Central Balkan areas are searched in the following climate changes and with following invasion of nomad tribe from the South Russian Steppes [28]. According to another theory from the Rhodope mountain rock sanctuaries – observatories is given a signal of the leaving of the old, inhabited by a millennium areas and its announcement for taboo. As a result, the Rhodope Mountain is depopulated for a period of around 1,000 years [29].

However, in the central Rhodope Mountain are discovered life clues and after the final phases of the Chalcolithic Era. This region remains relatively isolated from migration processes and it determines closed and consistent development.

Several caves from the region of Trigrad Gorge are inhabited during the Chalcolithic Era, the transitional period and the Bronze Era. From them researched are: the Iagodin Cave [30] and the Harmanly Hall [31]. From the end of the Late Chalcolithic Era, around 3800-3750 years B.C., they formed so called “Iagodina Group”, represent a specific model in the development of the ceramic style. The character for this style are the crockery and cutlery depicted with graphite (**Example 5.1**) and mineral ocher in yellow, pink – red and fire brick red. This horizon is synchronized with the culture Krivodol – Salkutsa – Bubani III, Telish III and the late Krivodol.

After two horizons in the Iagodin cave are related toward transitional period from the Chalcolithic Era toward the Bronze Era. The earlier one is dated in the period between 3130 – 3010 years B.C. The ceramics have most similar things with culture Galatin in Northwest Bulgaria. In the forms and crockery and cutlery types development is discovered the cultural influences and connections of the native population with North Greece, with West and Southwest Balkans. From

Haramiiskata hall come from two copper daggers (**Example 5.2**) – type “Nerushai” and type “Sofiefka” with parallels from transitional period – Early Bronze Era of the Balkans and culture Bodrokerestur, Hungary. Toward the same culture belongs copper digger-ax – type “Mezokereshtesh”, discovered fully accidentally near village of Kochan, municipality Satovcha [32].

The cave inhabitants were stock breeder and farmers. They cultivate the areas in the near surroundings where they had areas, which they used during the summer. They cultivate sheeps and goats and they exercise livestock breeding. The caves were used as winter places for women, children and adults. During the autumn men let their herd to south, and during the spring they came again in the mountain.

The cultural life in the Rhodope Mountain was marked with many influences, changes and innovations during the Neolithic Era and the Chalcolithic Era. The life was very dynamic. In compare with the Neolithic monuments, the Chalcolithic ones are more and diversified in typological relations. During the Late Chalcolithic Era the mountain experience real flourishing in economical and cultural – religious relation. In this period the Rhodope mountain significance for the ancient Balkan societies reached its peak. The future archaeological researches will fulfill the lack of our knowledge and probably will add more surprising facts.

ABBREVIATIONS:

YUMG - Yearbook of University of Mining and Geology “Saint Ivan Rilski”

YNMH - Yearbook of National Museum of History

MHAR - Magazine for Historical and Archaeological Researches

IR - Interdisciplinary researches

BAR – British Archaeological Reports

LITERATURE:

[1] The Neolithic Era

[2] Chalcolithic Era

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Novations:

Example 1 - Map of places from The Neolithic and Chalcolithic Era in Rhodopes

Example 2 – Amulet, Jade, the Neolithic settlement Kardzhali

Example 3 – Renovation of workshop from craft center Sedlare, Late Chalcolithic Era, Regional museum of history (RMH) Kardzhali

Example 4.1 – Cult anthropomorphic dish, The Late Chalcolithic, village of Zvinica,

2. Sitting Idol, The Late Chalcolithic, village of Pchelarovo

3. Copper axes – hummers, The Late Chalcolithic, Ustra.

Example 5.1 The ceramic dish, The Late Chalcolithic Era, Haramiiska Hall; 2. Copper dagger, Transitional period, Haramiiska Hall.

