

## Neolithic pit sanctuaries (Abstract)

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Until very recently, we knew nothing about the ritual activities of the Neolithic farmers in Bulgaria that took place beyond the settlements. The solving of this puzzle began in 2006, with the identification of the Late Neolithic pit sanctuary at Dana Bunar 2 near Lyubimets.

The identification of negative ritual features from the Neolithic clashes with “the garbagepits syndrome” and the erroneous interpretation of large prehistoric dug-out features as dug-out dwellings. Several criteria are offered here for the definition of the dug-out Neolithic features as ritual.

The article presents a short review of some recently discovered pit sanctuaries, together with some long-known Neolithic sites that were reinterpreted as pit sanctuaries.

Archaeological excavations of an Early Neolithic site have been carried out in the last decade in Valoga locality near the village of **Ohoden**, Vratsa District. The director of the ongoing digs interprets the dug-out features (figs. 1-6) as the remains of a settlement. The analysis of the published information provides grounds to suggest that there was no settlement, but that the place was used for ritual practices. The appearance of graves in and between the ritual features is surprising and is of particular importance in the context of the absence of Neolithic cemeteries in the Balkans and in Bulgaria.

A dug-out ritual feature from the beginning of the Late Neolithic was excavated in the course of rescue digs of a site at the village of **Krum**, near Dimitrovgrad (in Thrace). Its base is concave and ten smaller grave-pits were dug into it. The typological similarity with the pit sanctuary at Ohoden is obvious.

Several shallow and deeper features, dug into the virgin soil (fig. 7), were

excavated under the Chalcolithic layer of Tell **Golyamo Delchevo**; they were interpreted as sunken or semi-sunken dwellings. After the analysis of the published information, arguments are put forward that the convenient high terrace over the shore of the river Luda Kamchia was used in the end of the Early Neolithic and throughout the Late Neolithic (second half of the 6th mill. BC) as a ritual place.

**Halka Bunar** pit sanctuary at the village of Georgi Belev, Chirpan Municipality, first phase of the Late Neolithic (5500-5400 BC, Karanovo III period), excavations 2010. Until now, only one large ritual complex was found.

**Dana Bunar 2** pit sanctuary at **Lyubimets**, Haskovo district, second and third phases of the Late Neolithic (5400-5000 BC), excavations 2000, 2006-2007, 2010. Around 120 ritual pits (figs. 8-10) were excavated on 2000 sq. m.

**Sarnevo** pit sanctuary, second phase of the Late Neolithic (5400-5200 BC), excavations 2008-2010. Over 70 features dug into the virgin soil were excavated on over 4000 sq. m.

**Sabrano** pit sanctuary, Nova Zagora district, second phase of the Late Neolithic (5400-5200 BC), excavations 2009. Around 30 circular or oval pits were excavated, in three cases clustered in complexes.

**Ezero** pit sanctuary, Nova Zagora district, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-5000 BC), excavations 2009-2010. Over 30 shallow ritual pits were found in an area enclosed with a shallow ditch, 60 m in diameter.

**Bikovo** pit sanctuary, Nova Zagora district, second phase of the Late (5400-5200 BC), excavations 2009. Several large dug-out features with oval shape were excavated.

**Chokoba** pit sanctuary, Sliven district, third phase of the Late (5200-5000 BC), excavations 2009-2010. Several single ritual pits and a large dug-out feature (complex) were found.

**Hadzhidimitrovo** pit sanctuary, Yambol district, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-5000 BC), excavations 2008-2010. Over 200 ritual features dug into the virgin soil were found on an area of 12,500 sq. m, including seven large complexes with an area between 50 sq. m and 400 sq. m.

**Devetak** pit sanctuary, Karnobat district, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-5000 BC), excavations 2009-2010. Three almost oval dug-out features were found.

**Chernomorets** pit sanctuary, Burgas district, second and third phase of the Late Neolithic (5400-5000 BC), excavations 2009. A large ritual complex (80 sq. m) was excavated, along with 40 ritual pits.

**Budzhaka-Sozopol** pit sanctuary, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-5000 BC), excavations 2007-2010. Several dozens of ritual pits were identified, some of which were excavated. A ritual complex with an area of 30 sq. m. was also discovered. The rich information that was accumulated in recent years as a result of the excavation of Late Neolithic ritual sites in Thrace and on the Black Sea coast provides grounds for the reinterpretation of other Late Neolithic dug-out features in Bulgaria.

**Kalugerovo** pit sanctuary, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-5000 BC), excavations 1976-1978 and 1981. On an area of 1.2 ha, mostly large and very large dug-out features were excavated that were interpreted as sunken or semi-sunken dwellings. The published information suggests that the Late Neolithic 'settlement' could be reinterpreted as a pit sanctuary.

**Simeonovgrad** pit sanctuary, second and third phases of the Late Neolithic (5400-5000 BC), excavations 1978-1982 and 2005. Over 100 ritual pits are reported, some of which belong to the Late Neolithic.

**Usoe** pit sanctuary near Asparuhovo, Dalgopol Municipality, second and third phases of the Late Neolithic (5400-5000 BC), excavations 1972-1976. The area is around 5 ha, and the site is located between two shallow ravines. The excavated 71 dug-out features (fig. 11) were interpreted as 'sunken or semi-sunken dwellings'. The Neolithic site meets the established criteria for a pit sanctuary. Moreover, it is one of the largest sanctuaries identified so far.

**Durankulak-Nivata** pit sanctuary, Dobrich district, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-000 BC), excavations 1978-1984. Two large dug-out features with irregular shape and very uneven base were excavated on the western shore of Durankulak Lake (fig. 12). The features were interpreted as sunken dwellings. These, however, are ritual rather than dwelling features.

**Podgoritsa** pit sanctuary, Targovishte district, third phase of the Late Neolithic (5200-5000 BC), excavations 1981. The prehistoric site was excavated over 6000 sq. m and includes several piles of baked daub, a pile of animal bones on the virgin soil, and 74 features with different shape and dimensions, dug into the virgin soil (figs. 13 and 14). The site was interpreted as a settlement of sunken dwellings that also comprises clay pits (?), garbage-pits, storage pits, and ritual pits. Within the context of the new interpretation, the site can be considered as a pit sanctuary. It consists of individual pits and ritual complexes.

Although only a small part of the observations on the identified sanctuaries are published, it is possible to argue that a new research field has recently emerged in Bulgarian prehistory. It is obvious that the pit sanctuaries provide an important variability of ritual activities, despite their similar meaning. In comparison with Lyubimets and some newly discovered ritual fields, such as Sabrano and Bikovo, that contain single, although sometimes large ritual pits, the rest of the newly discovered sanctuaries (Sarnevo,

Hadzhidimitrovo, Chernomorets, Devetak, and Sozopol-Budzhaka) consist of complexes of many pits, dug next to each other and even often inter-cutting. The latter is most probably valid for Golyamo Delchevo, Kalugerovo, Durankulak-Nivata, and Podgoritsa. So far, Ezero is the only site, where a ditch was discovered that encloses the ritual space - the temenos. As far as the evidence suggests, the sanctuary at Simeonovgrad perhaps belongs to the first group: the group of

sanctuaries with single pits. However, there are hardly any differences in the ritual practices; the specifics of the identified features are most probably due to differences in the social organization or differences in the organization of the ritual activities in a sanctuary (for example, a hypothetical tradition of a family or a clan to perform rituals at the same place that could lead to the present identification of ritual complexes of different size).