

The Early Neolithic settlement of Ilindentsi, Strumyani Municipality. Excavations 2004-2009 (Abstract)

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The prehistoric settlement of Ilindentsi-Masovets is located on the western slopes of Pirin Mountain, in the valley of Struma between the villages Strumyani and Ilindentsi (fig.1). The site was investigated from 2004 until 2009, with two trenches 2 x 5 m in its central part, and in the area of Square A4, measuring 5 x 5 m. It was established that there was a settlement from the Early Neolithic (Ilindentsi I) and the Middle Neolithic (Ilindentsi II).

The cultural layer is up to 0.50 m thick in Trench No. 1 and Sq. A4 (fig. 2). Two layers were identified: Layer 1 - brown with daub, and Layer 2 - grey and compact. A large dug-out structure, provisionally named a 'trench', was discovered. It was from 1 to 2.20 m wide and 0.60 m deep. The fill of the 'trench' consists of alternating layers of yellowish clay, gray soil and large stones. The stratigraphic observations provide grounds for the identification of three buildings in the area of Trench No. 1 and Sq. A4. All of them follow the cardinal directions and two are built above the dug-out structure. Their closest parallels are the buildings from the late stages of the Early Neolithic site at Kovačevo. A particular architectural feature at Ilindentsi is the stone foundation of the walls that were made in pisé technique, together with a wooden floor construction.

The pottery assemblage from Ilindentsi is very homogenous in terms of raw material, decoration, production techniques, shapes and functions of the vessels. There are five decoration techniques (channeling, in relief, incised, punctate and painted) and the painted decoration dominates. The paint is only white on red, wine-red or orange slip and the ornamental composition (figs. 4, 5) is

most often under the rim (net, oblique lines, dots, etc.). A horizontal line separates it from the main composition on the body that very often consists of a spiral or hanging angular motifs and net-like triangles. The feet are most often decorated with vertical lines. This decoration has closest analogues in Kovačevo Ic and Id, and to a lesser extent in Vaksevo, Dobribinishte, Eleshnitsa, and Rakitovo. The decoration of dots under the rim and elongated triangles filled with net-like motif is typical for the Galabnik Group. Among the shapes that could be restored, four types were identified. Most common are the vertically perforated lugs, flat bases with profiled sides and cylindrical feet. High technological variability could be observed in the modeling of the vessels. Three manners of coil-building are distinguished, together with six different ways of modeling of the bases. The diversity of technology of manufacture is due to individual choices, rather than chronological difference. It is possible that several potters with different skills and traditions in pottery production were working at the same time.

Trench No. 2 (fig. 15) is located at 60 m to the east of Trench No. 1. The cultural layer is some 0.80 m thick, up to 1.40 m in the dug-out structures. It is homogenous and consists of dark, crumbly soil, heavily mixed with pieces of daub. A large number of negative structures were registered (post-holes, pits, a trench). The shape, the size, the fill and the step-like appearance of the eastern wall of one of the pits are reminiscent of the household structures in Balgarchevo II, as well as of many other Balkan settlements, especially those from the Starčevo Group.

Fine black and grey burnished ware was found in the trench. The shapes are fairly simple – open and carinated. The fine ware features channeled decoration (fig. 16 1, 3), punctate of the Dolna Ribnitsa type, with lines in two rows over the carination (fig. 16 14), relief knobs over the carination (fig. 16 16), and bitumen painting (fig. 16 4, 5). Incised decoration is frequently met on the coarse and thick-walled ware (fig. 16 2, 19, 22, 23). This ware finds its closest analogues in the Middle Neolithic settlements along the Middle Struma valley: Kovačevo II, Balgarchevo II, Dolna Ribnitsa, etc.

Special finds are rare, consisting mainly of tools made of shards, stone and bone tools, figurines, and a pendant made of greenstone (fig. 17). One of the figurines has a rod-shaped head and two horn-like lugs in the upper end (fig. 17 7). It is very close typologically to two Middle Neolithic figurines from the Franchthi Cave, to figurines from Toumba Porodin in Pelagonia, to figurines from Group 1 and Group 2 from Balgarchevo I and II, and to a figurine from Galabnik III. They all date from the second half of the Early Neolithic.

The Early Neolithic settlement of Ilindentsi I belongs to the cultural group that inhabited the area between Kresna and Rupel gorges in the Middle Struma valley in the second half of the Early Neolithic, and Kovačevo was most probably its center. It is very likely that the settlement was founded by migrants from Kovačevo, having in mind the extraordinary similarities in the pottery assemblage and the architectural features. In this period (phases Ic, Id), the settlement at Kovačevo was very large, i.e. there was a significant population increase.

The settlement of Ilindentsi II belongs to the Balgarchevo II – Dolna Ribnitsa cultural group, distributed in the Middle Struma valley in the Middle Neolithic. All diagnostic elements for this group were registered in the settlement: black burnished ware with grey inner surface and section, gray-topped ware, punctate decoration of Dolna Ribnitsa type, small plastic knobs, cylindrical bowls with flat vertical handles above the carination and incised zigzag lines under the handles of the thick vessels. A particular feature in Ilindentsi II is the pottery with bitumen decoration.