

**Salt, early complex society, urbanization:
Provadia-Solnitsata (5500-4200 BC) (Abstract)
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The expanding scope of the field investigations at Provadia-Solnitsata, and especially the results of the excavations in 2011 provide a new perspective to this exceptional archaeological site.

A premise for the prosperity of the society in the later prehistory (6th and 5th millennia BC) in the region of Provadia-Solnitsata was the salt that in the early agricultural period became the only strategic resource.

Salt-extraction facilities and salt production

The production of salt at present-day Provadia started in the beginning of the Late Neolithic Period Karanovo III-IV (about 5500 BC).

During the first stage of the Late Neolithic (5500-5200 BC), the salt was extracted by boiling brine from the sources in thin-walled ceramic vases that were made especially for the purpose and placed in special massive domed kilns; the kilns were in buildings inside the settlement. During the second stage of the Late Neolithic in the region (LN 2, 5200-4900 BC) boiling brine in special ceramic vases continued, but in shallow sunken structures near the settlement mound. This considerably increased the productivity of salt-extraction.

In the Middle Chalcolithic (Hamangia IV Culture, 4700-4500 BC), a large production complex for production of solid salt emerged near the settlement and continued in the Late Chalcolithic (Varna Culture, 4500-4200 BC). The technological process was modified, leading to a sharp increase of the productive capacity. Deep and wide pits were used and brine was boiled in numerous large ceramic vases. In the Middle and Late Chalcolithic, salt was

produced in “industrial” quantities and solid salt became a medium of exchange in long-distance trade with neighbouring regions, as well as a base for a pronounced economic prosperity in the area of Varna Lakes.

The settlement and its fortifications

In the Middle and Late Chalcolithic, the settlement on the settlement mound was fortified with a strong fortification system that went through several phases of modifications and development. Probably, the main reason for each reconstruction of the fortifications was either its destruction by an earthquake, or the need to expand the settlement. Three successive fortification systems were identified – the first one included a wooden-earthen palisade, and the other two were probably entirely made of stone. They were built and used in the Middle and Late Chalcolithic (4700-4200 BC). The stone walls are two to three meters thick and have bastions. A moat was excavated in front of the southeastern gate.

At present, the successive settlements in the settlement mound remain practically unexcavated. Still, the remains of several buildings have been identified so far, belonging to the three main prehistoric periods, attested on the site – Late Neolithic, Middle and Late Chalcolithic. Three of the buildings that were two-storied provide most information.

Judging from the excavations of the southeastern gate of the Middle Chalcolithic fortification, a street, some two meters wide, led from the gate to the settlement’s interior. Obviously, the settlements of the period were well organized, but at present there is no additional evidence.

Ritual structures and ritual complexes

Several Neolithic and Chalcolithic ritual structures have been identified in the settlement mound.

A complex of ritual pits was identified at about 60 m to the W-NW of the settlement mound. Its surface is at least 0.2 ha.

A complex of ritual structures was found within the limits of the Chalcolithic production complex. The ritual structures that were identified on about 350 square meters did not affect the production facilities. These are four ritual pits, a grave and two rectangular structures, outlined with stones.

There seem to be two Late Chalcolithic ritual complexes outside the settlement, situated almost symmetrically in relation to the settlement. In the first one, to the northwest of the settlement, traditional rituals that could be termed "agricultural" were practiced. The second complex, to the northeast of the settlement, illustrates unusual rituals that combine various elements: ritual pits, graves and stone structures. It could be related to a specialized activity that was new for the early agricultural society and was set apart from the traditional economic model, namely the production of salt.

The Chalcolithic necropolis

Through trench investigations, a necropolis was located that belongs to the settlement Provadia-Solnitsata. All graves, detected so far, date from the Late Chalcolithic. The cemetery of several thousand square meters is at about 250 m to the southwest of the settlement mound. Three graves have been investigated so far. They are inhumations in flexed position on the right side, with the head turned to the north.

Provadia-Solnitsata, Varna Chalcolithic necropolis and longdistance trade

There should have been important reasons for the emergence of Varna Necropolis, very unusual for its time, with numerous pit graves and high concentration of diverse grave goods, both as types and materials, as well as for its appearance precisely on the shores of Varna Lake. The "wealth" of Varna Necropolis was acquired through regular commercial transactions, imposed by the regionalized division of labour due to natural circumstances. The main reason for the precocious development of the region of Provadia Solnitsata and Varna Lakes, against the background of Late Chalcolithic communities in the Balkans, was the production and trade of salt.

Society and social relations in the region of Provadia-Solnitsata and Varna Lakes in the second half of the 5th millennium BC

The early complex society in present-day Bulgarian lands created a hierarchical structure with organizational and governmental functions. This variant of politogenesis is typical for the developed early agricultural communities, especially in the Balkans. However, the area of the most rapidly developing politogenesis was the Black Sea coast (roughly the area of the so-called "Varna Culture") in the Late Chalcolithic. There, it could have led very early to institutionalization of power and emergence of a pre-state formation. The reason was not the sea and the commercial opportunities it offered. The reason was the huge salt deposits and the sources of saline water, respectively the highly efficient salt production centre of Provadia Solnitsata, situated close to the sea. A premise for the economic prosperity of the Black Sea area was the trade of salt, against which this otherwise poor in natural resources region acquired various raw materials, some of which were processed into luxury goods.

The reason, however, for the disintegration of this society was the relatively quick and important climate change, bringing considerable rise of

average annual temperature and severe dry spell in the region. The flourishing early agricultural communities experienced a shock that necessitated their quick nomadization. The prehistoric salt production centre of Provadia-Solnitsata was abandoned for thousands of years, indicating that it was precisely the drought that caused the collapse of the Chalcolithic society, and not a powerful invasion from the north.

Provadia-Solnitsata – a prehistoric city

A “city” could be defined only through criteria that hold true for a specific age in a specific region. These are characteristics that portray a certain settlement as “central place” that could be defined as “city”.

I offer an analysis of the data about the Middle and especially the Late

Chalcolithic Period, obtained so far from Provadia-Solnitsata, in the context of the emergence of urban centres in ancient times. Provadia-Solnitsata complex fulfils the following basic criteria for a prehistoric “city”: 1. Centre of an agricultural region; 2. Production centre (centre of specialized productions); 3. Commercial centre; 4. Military centre; 5. Ideological centre; 6. Centre of organization and government of production and social structures.

According to the criteria, accepted for the period, the prehistoric settlement of Provadia-Solnitsata could be defined as a prehistoric city that existed in the middle and the second half of the 5th millennium BC. Of the six listed preconditions, most important are the specialized salt production and the successful long distance trade with this product that was vital for both people and animals.