

## **A fifth millennium BC urban center in the context of the western Black Sea coast: Provadia-Solnitsata (Abstract)**

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The geographical scope of this study comprises the drainage basin of the middle and lower Provadiyska River that flows into the Black Sea through the Lakes Beloslavsko and Varnensko. Numerous publications and discussions focused on Chalcolithic Varna cemetery shaped the opinion that in the fifth millennium BC, the communities in the eastern part of the drainage basin of the River Provadiyska accumulated a significant amount of prestigious items, a testimony to the highly developed economy and social structure; this area has been identified as the birthplace of the European Copper Age, in culture-historical sense. In this context, a brief argumentation could be offered to support the claim that Provadia-Solnitsata possessed all features of a prehistoric town. The town as a socio-economic structure did not appear overnight, but its emergence was predefined by a certain level of development of the socio-economic relations in the area.

*The real Chalcolithic economy.* The real economy produces both means for subsistence and means for the everyday life and household manufacture. In this case, the real economy included also a specialized production: the production of salt that did not belong to the above-described scheme and created preconditions for a highly developed 'prestigious' economy in the area.

Agriculture and stock breeding provided the base of the real economy of the later prehistoric society, but the natural conditions in the Provadiyska River area did not favor particularly high yields (i.e. substantial surpluses). The thing, however, that made the big difference for the real economy in the Provadiyska River area, compared to other Eastern Balkan regions, was the specialized production of salt that was based on a natural resource that was exploited: a huge deposit of rock salt. Salt was a vital necessity for the people and livestock that predefined the need and the importance of this production. The commercial distribution of salt that was a strategic resource in the later prehistory provided a solid economic base for the community that produced it. Salt became the engine of accelerated social and cultural processes in the area.

In the beginning of the late Neolithic, ca. 5500 BC, migrants from Thrace settled at the brine springs near Provadia and began extracting salt. The salt production continued in the Middle Chalcolithic Period, between 4700 and 4500 BC. Precisely in this period, a large salt production center appeared immediately next to the settlement. It continued to function in the late Chalcolithic, i.e. at least until the third quarter of the fifth millennium BC (4500-4200 BC).

The real Chalcolithic economy of the Provadiyska River area could hardly surpass the neighboring regions only on the grounds of the basic traditional livelihoods. The thing that made it special, at least against the background of the Eastern and Central Balkans, was the specialized production of salt that was traded on long distances and by means of the accumulated added value provided the necessary base for the development of 'prestigious' economy in the same area.

*'Prestigious' economy and the social structure of Chalcolithic society.* 'Prestigious' economy comprised activities and manufactured items that designated social status, indicated social hierarchy and eventually contributed to a pronounced social stratification.

The manufacture of copper and gold items in the Varna Lakes area was the second specialized production in the Provadiyska River area. While salt production at Provadia-Solnitsata was part of the real economy and, because of the surplus it created, a precondition and reason for accelerated social stratification in the region, the manufacture of metal items in the Varna Metallurgical Center was at the heart of the 'prestigious' economy, and served to designate the high prestige, thus contributing to further stratification of the elitarian society in the Provadiyska River area. Some scholars are right to assume that it was precisely here, in the Western Pontic region, that the European Copper Age began in the sense of a new stage of social and economic development, one that immediately preceded state formation.

*Long-distance trade.* The distribution of the substantial surplus of

salt production could have been achieved only through large-scale long-distance trade. The organization of commercial operations and the redistribution of the obtained added value suggest the existence of a separate group of people of high social status within a still egalitarian society. This group assumed these functions, which not only maintained, but enhanced their elevated social status. So far, the evidence of the results of the trade relations comes mostly from the Varna cemetery. Salt was the only good that was vital for people and livestock, available in the Provadiyska River area (but lacking in Thrace and neighboring regions), where it was produced in large quantities. For this reason, the salt from Provadia-Solnitsata was not only a precondition for and object of active, large-scale trade, but also undoubtedly served as means of exchange in the later prehistory (i.e. it was the first 'money'). The production and trade of salt was the main reason for the accelerated development of the area along the middle and lower Provadiyska River in the context of the Balkan late Chalcolithic communities.

*Emergence of a prehistoric urban center.* From methodological point of view it would be correct to begin defining the early urban centers of the Balkans by testing the criteria, deduced in the lengthy discussions on Western Asia.

The economic activity that was defining, with results that were the precondition for the development of Provadia-Solnitsata as a central place of particular socio-economic significance in the Eastern Balkans, was the specialized production (of salt). The emergence of a specialized production was a phenomenon

related to the second major division of labor, which in its turn was a mandatory precondition for the emergence of cities. The specialized production of salt made the agglomeration of Provadia-Solnitsata a unique phenomenon in Europe.

The successful salt trade that enjoyed constant demand was a precondition for the prosperity of Provadia-Solnitsata and its surroundings that became, in result of the specialized production of salt, a very active trading center that focused the labor of a significant number of people. And obtaining the specific features of a trading center was a mandatory precondition for the status of a prehistoric town.

The middle and late Chalcolithic settlement of Provadia-Solnitsata was particularly well fortified. The massive stone walls that enclosed it from all sides offered the best protection both for the riches that were accumulated in result of the production and trade of salt and for the life of their owners. The presence of a stone fortress was not only a symbol of prestige, but an actual necessity, therefore another mandatory attribute of the prehistoric town.

Immediately next to the late Chalcolithic settlement, two ritual sites

have been excavated. There were practiced rituals that differed in appearance and apparently in meaning and goals. One of the sites was probably dedicated to the traditional farming rituals, while the other was dedicated to the new rituals, related to salt production. The late Chalcolithic cemetery should also be added to the picture. The rich landscape of ritual features complemented the functions of the prehistoric city as an ideological center.

The complex hierarchical social system and the complex production system, reconstructed on the grounds of the archaeological evidence, testify that Provadia-Solnitsata was a center of organization and management of the production and social structures in a vast area. This presumed aspect of Provadia-Solnitsata also finds its place among the specific features of the prehistoric urban center.

These preconditions provide valid arguments to suggest that the specialized production of salt and the successful long-distance trade of this good that was vital for people and livestock alike transformed the prehistoric settlement of Provadia-Solnitsata into a prehistoric urban center that functioned throughout the middle and the second half of the fifth millennium BC.