

A Late Chalcolithic Burial from Pomoštica, near Popovo

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The Late Chalcolithic burials from Bulgaria have been subject of intensive study for the last few decades. A large number of cases has been studied with the main part of those having been published. In this article the author considers a single burial from northeast Bulgaria that complements the information about mortuary practices of the Kodžadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI culture and lends opportunities for their further interpretation.

During the excavations of the Early Neolithic site at Pomoštica, near Popovo, the late Chalcolithic burial of a young female (16-18 years of age) was discovered in one of the trenches. The deceased was buried in a flexed position on her left side with the head oriented to the east/southeast (fig. 1). The bones of the left hand and the fingers were missing. A clay bowl was placed in front of the face and on top of the left forearm (fig. 2). Two copper rings were found in the mouth of the deceased (fig. 3). No other burials were discovered in the neighboring area. However, the Pomoštica grave most probably belongs to the cemetery of the late Chalcolithic settlement situated about 300 m to the southeast from the early Neolithic site.

Grave goods attract special attention in this case. The grave goods of the Kodžadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI Culture includes objects which differ in kind, number and symbolic meaning. They always placed by or on top of the body, as was the case with the bowl in front of the face of the skeleton from Pomoštica. However, two copper rings were found in the female's mouth. The well-preserved skull, the fact that the jaws were fully shut as well as the telltale residuum of copper oxide on the left side teeth bear strong evidence as to the fact that the rings had been purposely put into the girl's mouth and did not appear there as a result of later interference.

Obviously, they do not relate to the copper rings found round the dead individual's teeth either, as were the cases with some of the burials at the Durankulak cemetery. This conclusion has been confirmed by the anthropological evidence.

This practice can logically, however tentatively, be related to the much later ritual of placing the so-called Charon's obolus. Burials from Argos and Cyprus, dating back to the geometrical age, present evidence of the use of ὄβελοὶ which were put in the mouths of the dead. According to the mythological interpretation they were perceived as a naalon, the fare for the boatman, who took the souls of the dead across the river, the boundary of the afterworld.

This ritual practice, however, has been traced back to the early Neolithic. Various objects were inserted in the mouth of the deceased in three intramural early Neolithic burials. It is quite logical to assume that there is a definite relation between the ritual practice which appeared in the early Neolithic, and the late Chalcolithic case from Pomoštica on the one hand, and the ancient myth about Charon on the other. The transition from the world of the living into the afterworld was obviously considered as passing through some kind of barrier, a characteristic feature of the mythological way of thinking of the ancient man. The process of separation of the mortuary space from the domestic space, and the world of the dead from the world of the living respectively, began as far back as the early Neolithic. It continued during the whole Neolithic period and finally came to an end in the Late Chalcolithic. Obviously, at the close of this process with the standardization of the mortuary practices of the Kodžadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI culture there existed the religio-mythological ideas of an afterworld with its own well-developed structure and form.