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Early Bronze Age Barrow Graves in Thrace (55 years later) (Abstract)

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Fifty five years after the first archaeological excavations of an Early Bronze Age (EBA) barrow in Southeast Bulgaria, the number of the grave complexes excavated in Thrace has increased significantly. While Ivan Panayotov, in his 1989 monograph on the Pit-Grave Culture in Bulgaria, discussed only four barrows south of the Balkan range, the database available today contains 39 barrows with a total of 215 EBA graves, with remains of 246 individuals. That lot provides a good chance to answer some of the old questions asked as back as 1989 as well as to discuss some new

problems connected to the history of the northern Balkans in the fourth and third millennia BC.

In this article, the database of the barrow graves in Thrace is presented in geographical order from east to west divided into 3 main regions: 1) The Karnobat-Yambol-Sliven region with 13 barrows, 89 graves, 108 individuals; 2) The Nova Zagora-Radnevo region with 20 barrows, 93 graves, 101 individuals, and 3) The Thracian plain (Stara Zagora and Plovdiv / Pazardzik Plains) with 6 barrows, 33 graves, 37 individuals. A border line traced by Blatnitsa-Sazliyka rivers has been drawn.

East of it, there are 33 barrows (84.62%) with 182 EBA graves (84.65%); west of it, there are only 6 barrows (15.38%) with 33 EBA graves (15.35%). Two barrows only are located in the Stara Zagora Plain, and none in the Plovdiv / Pazardzik plain.

Chronologically, the graves in the eastern area cover the timespan of the EBA from approximately 3100 BC onwards (figs. 12, 13). However, two complexes have a different date. The primary grave from Targovishte (Radnevo region) could date to the end of the fifth or the beginning of the fourth mill. BC, and the features from Golyama Detelina, barrow 4 (Radnevo region) to 3500-3100 BC. It is quite possible that some of the primary graves lacking diagnostic grave goods from that region date to the same period. The graves in the western area date to EBA-2 and EBA-3 respectively.

Therefore, the region east of the Blatnitza - Sazliyka could be defined as a core area for the appearance of barrow graves south of the Balkan range. Its easternmost part (Karnobat - Sliven - Yambol) has yielded a mortuary pattern, which includes a primary grave with a barrow fill and secondary graves with additional fills or dug into the existing fill. This pattern seems to have changed in the Nova Zagora - Radnevo region where it includes several graves under a single fill. In both regions, the method of disposal is supine with flexed legs; 'extended' hocker burials; hocker burials; double/triple graves in rectangular or oval pits (figs. 1-10). Pit covering of wooden planks appears more often in the Karnobat - Sliven - Yambol region as against only three such barrows in the Nova Zagora - Radnevo region. The same is to be said for the use of red ochre. Grave goods include metal ornaments (hair rings and beads) and weapons as well as pottery (figs. 14-17). The number of the graves with metal ornaments decreases from east to west; on the contrary, the number of the pottery increases in the same direction. It seems that in the EBA-1, the barrows were grouped around a single forti-

fied settlement (e.g., Ovcharitza 2), while in the Stara Zagora plain, fortified tell sites were occupied (Ezero, Dyadovo etc.), and mortuary pattern included flat inhumation graves (Tell Bereketska, Zagortzi). In the EBA-2, barrow graves appeared in the former region, reaching the Chirpan hills in the EBA-3, where they demonstrate different mortuary pattern: 3-8 graves under a single barrow fill (fig. 11); grave pits with no covering; lack of ochre and almost complete lack of grave goods.

When considered in the larger context of Thrace, the Lower Danube, and the Eastern Hungarian plain, the EBA barrow graves show a similar pattern. Just a few of them appeared in the late fifth and early fourth millennia BC. Their number increases around 3300 BC in a possible Boleráz - Cernavodă III - Usatovo milieu, but their mass appearance in the three regions dates from 3100 BC onwards. In the Lower Danube, there are supine burials with flexed legs, extended and hocker burials. If compared to the presumably 'local' flat inhumation cemeteries (Zimnicea, Batin, Smyadovo), the barrow graves there show a 'new mortuary practice' connected to the Pit-Grave Culture.

Thus the appearance of barrow graves in Thrace around 3300 BC could be connected to the Cernavodă III - Usatovo phenomena, but the problem is far from being resolved. The appearance of barrow graves there around 3100 BC could have at least 3 possible explanations: 1) continuity with the previous period; 2) migration from the nearest region with the same mortuary practices (North-east Bulgaria); 3) *...a long-term European horizon of common phenomena roughly covering the 4th-1st mill. B.C.* The author's opinion is that the second scenario is the most probable explanation for the region east of the Blatnitza - Sazliyka rivers (without excluding the already existing 'barrow tradition' there), while the appearance of the barrow graves in the Stara Zagora plain and Chirpan hills in EBA-2 and EBA-3 could hardly be a result of migration.

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