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## Medieval ritual pits at Sedlari near Momchilgrad (Abstract)

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The article discusses the specifics of medieval ritual pits, investigated in the vicinity of the village of Sedlari, about 3-4 km to the west of Momchilgrad, Kadzhali Region. The site is in the East Rhodope Mountains, in the valley of the river Arda. On a wide terrace, sloping to the west bank of the river Varbitsa, a tributary of Arda, there was a large 11<sup>th</sup> – early 13<sup>th</sup> c. necropolis. In its south periphery and to the west of it, pits were dug in the 11<sup>th</sup> and mostly in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. They are located among the graves and away from the contemporary settlement, thus excluding any household or waste interpretation. This fact makes the pits very unusual and puts them out of the general cultural milieu of the period that followed Christian ideology and practices. Their location within the necropolis suggests they were used by the same population. These are the first medieval ritual pits to be investigated within the limits of Medieval Bulgaria. They resulted from at least two coexisting models of human behavior within the same community – one in accordance with the official rules and the other influenced by a still unknown pre-Christian practice. All pits contain a uniform set of elements.

**Stone.** Stones of various shape, size and number were found in all pits. They were situated in various parts of the pit and normally sealed its mouth in the end. There is no apparent arrangement and they seem to be thrown in the pit at various stages of the ritual. Many stones have traces of burning. Undoubtedly, no fire was lit in the pits. Therefore, the stones were brought from the domestic fireplace or from a fire that was lit on purpose somewhere else. Indeed, the stone is the most consistent element of the ritual – and of the structure of the pits.

**Charcoal.** The soil that filled the pits was mixed with numerous large pieces of charcoal. Just as the stones, charcoal was intentionally brought to be

thrown in the pit. A sufficient number of pits enable the reconstruction of the practice. A pit was dug, usually with a round mouth, about 1 m in diameter and 1 m deep. A handful of charcoal and several stones were thrown on the bottom, earth was heaped, and then more charcoal and stones were thrown – until the pit was filled. More stones were piled on the top and it is possible that at least some pits were visible on the ground.

**Pottery.** Ceramic fragments were found in the fill, as well as amongst the stone on the surface. Normally, they are very small and date from different periods. The latest fragments are precisely from the 12<sup>th</sup> c., which is a positive chronological indicator. Their interpretation is complicated by the diverse dates and the condition of the fragments. So far, not enough fragments of a single vase were identified to enable its reconstruction. This would mean that no intact vessels were used in the ritual. Possibly, pottery fragments got into the pits accidentally, with the soil that was excavated and then returned in the pit. The terrace was actively inhabited for a long period of time before the 13<sup>th</sup> c. and even today it is strewn with ceramic fragments. However, there are no fragments in the pits' fill that could be dated later than the 12<sup>th</sup> c.

Most pits contain *animal bones* of the usual domestic animals – sheep, cattle, pigs. Only fragments of bones were left in the pits. We cannot say whether it was raw meat, but there are no traces of smoke on the bones. In all cases, pieces of meat would mean a meal that was shared between the living and the dead. Probably, the rest of the animal was meant for the living.

**Iron.** Among the stones on the surface and sometimes in the fill, a piece of iron was normally found along with the ceramic fragments and the bones. It is usually amorphous, burned, corroded and out of use. In other cases, there was a knife, a nail or another element of the construction of

the house. The presence of iron and the better preserved objects also support the arguments in favor of the medieval date of the pits.

The context indicates that iron is present in the ritual not as an object, but as material. Numerous ethnological studies on the beliefs and practices of the population of the Rhodope Mountains (and other communities) identify iron as one of the most powerful apotropaic amulets. This is the role of the iron piece in the pits under consideration. Unlike pottery fragments that remain of uncertain interpretation, the iron certainly takes part in the ritual.

On the grounds of the archaeological context, an attempt is made to reconstruct the ritual that left behind the pits.

The date in 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c. is beyond any doubt. The ritual nature of the pits is also indisputable.

The interpretation of the rite that created the pits is sought for in folklore traditions.

One of the most popular roles of the pits is as a passage to the Underworld (a hole in the ground, in the same semantic group with the cave). Another universal possibility is to hide a secret, to confide it to the earth itself, with the belief that it would not spread among people.

It would seem that the strongest connection is between stone and fire, as many of the stones in the pits have traces of severe burning. Fire is also a universal element. It is most often related to the cult of the Sun. In present-day Bulgaria, practices with fire continued until the Late Medieval Period and left traces in many Christian necropoleis. One can find descriptions in various theological texts, denouncing dual faith.