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## THE EARLY BRONZE AGE GRAVES FROM DEVNYA (NORTHEAST BULGARIA). 50 YEARS LATER

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**Abstract:** In this article, the three Early Bronze Age graves from Devnya (Northeast Bulgaria) known from a 1972 publication are reviewed. A possible date in the range 3100-2900 BC for the graves is argued, with the necropolis being related to an EBA submerged site located south of it. Three more possible relationships Early Bronze Age settlements - flat necropolis from the area (Ezerovo, Topoli and Varna) are also discussed herein. Some other finds related to flat EBA graves from Balchik, Durankulak and Malak Preslavets, are also presented. Questions about the relationships between the flat and Yamnaya EBA graves in Northeast Bulgaria and North Dobruja are set within the frame of the last discoveries.

**Rezumat:** În acest articol sunt reanalizate cele trei morminte din perioada timpurie a epocii bronzului descoperite la Devnya (nord-estul Bulgariei). Autorii propun pentru acestea o datare cuprinsă între 3100-2900 a.Chr. și le asociază cu o așezare localizată la sud. Alte astfel de asocieri între așezări și cimitire plane de la începutul epocii bronzului au mai fost documentate la Ezerovo, Topoli și Varna. În acest context sunt discutate și decoperirile de la Balchik, Durankulak și Malak Preslavets. În final sunt discutate o serie de probleme legate de relația dintre mormintele plane și cele de tip Yamnaya din nord-estul Bulgariei și nordul Dobrogei.

**Keywords:** Early Bronze Age, Lower Danube, flat necropolises, mortuary practices.

**Cuvinte cheie:** perioada timpurie a epocii bronzului, Dunărea de Jos, necropole plane, practici funerare.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1969-1970, rescue archaeological excavations of the Early Medieval (Proto-Bulgarian) bi-ritual necropolis "Devnya-3" were carried out. The necropolis was located south of Poveľyanovo, a suburban quarter of Devnya town<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1; 2/1). During the excavations, two Chalcolithic dwellings and a pit, and three Early Bronze Age (EBA) graves were explored as well, (Fig. 3), thus establishing that the necropolis itself was situated above a prehistoric settlement which, according to the pottery analyses, has recently been dated to phase II of the Late Chalcolithic Varna Culture.<sup>2</sup> The prehistoric materials and the EBA graves were published in a short article in 1972, the EBA graves being related to the submerged Bronze Age settlements Strashimirovo

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<sup>1</sup> Димитров 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Parvanov 2021.

and Ezerovo in the region, dated to the “...first half of the Bronze Age”, and synchronized with Ezero and Mihalich EBA materials in Thrace.<sup>3</sup>

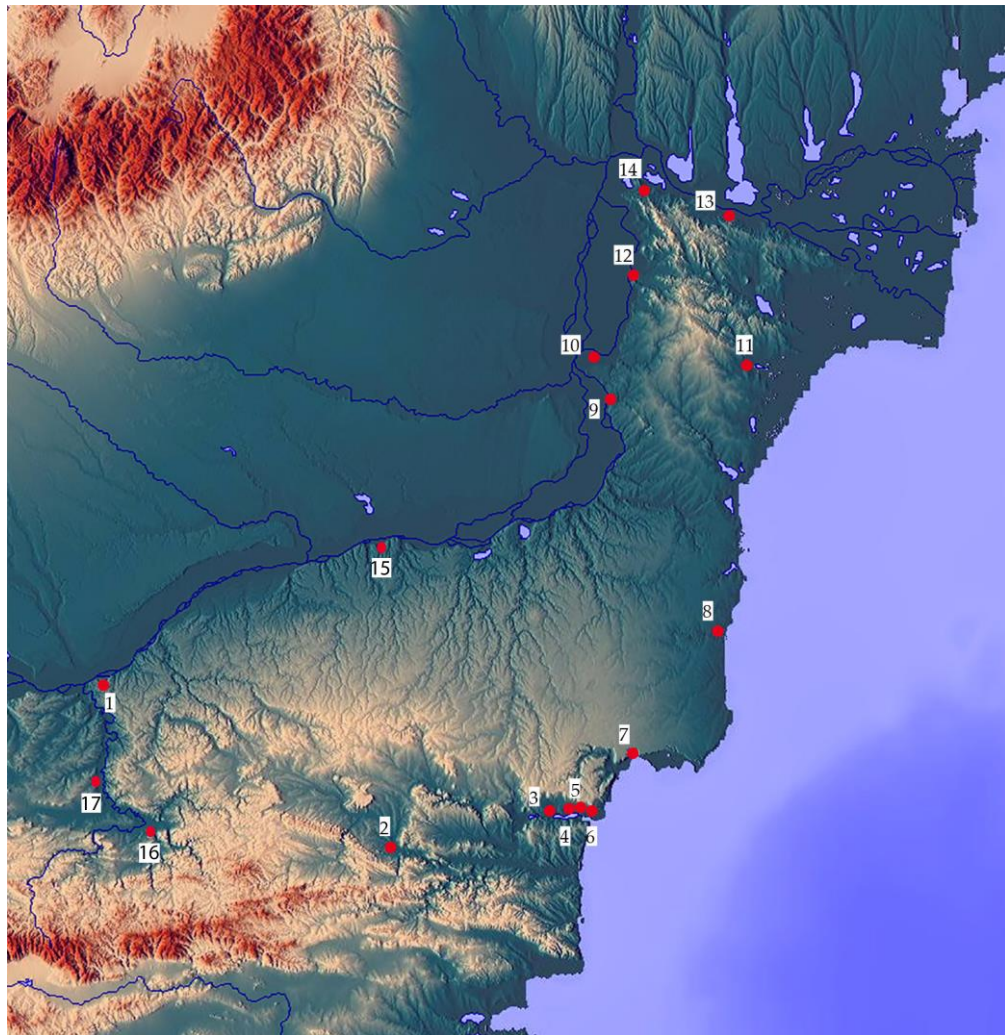


Fig. 1. Flat necropolises/graves from Northeast Bulgaria and North Dobrudja mentioned in the text. 1. Batin; 2. Smyadovo; 3. Devnya; 4. Ezerovo; 5. Topoli; 6. Varna; 7. Balchik; 8. Durankulak; 9. Cernavodă; 11. Panduru; 10. Hârșova; 12. Ostrov; 13. Isaccea; 14. Jijila. 15. Malak Preslavets; 16. Dzulyunitsa; 17. Polski Senovets (9-13. after Ailincăi et alii 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Иванов 1972, 250-253.



Fig. 2. Early Bronze Age sites on the Northern shores of the Varna lakes (based on Ivanov 1993 and Dimitrov *et alii* 2020). 1. Devnya necropolis; 2. “Baltata” settlement; 3. Povelyanovo settlement; 4. Beloslav settlement; 5. Strashimirovo settlement; 6. Ezerovo settlement; 7. Ezerovo necropolis? 8. Topoli settlement; 9. Topoli necropolis? 10. Varna necropolis; 11. Varna-Morflot settlement; 12. Varna–Hristo Botev settlement; 13-14. Barrows with anthropomorphic stelae.

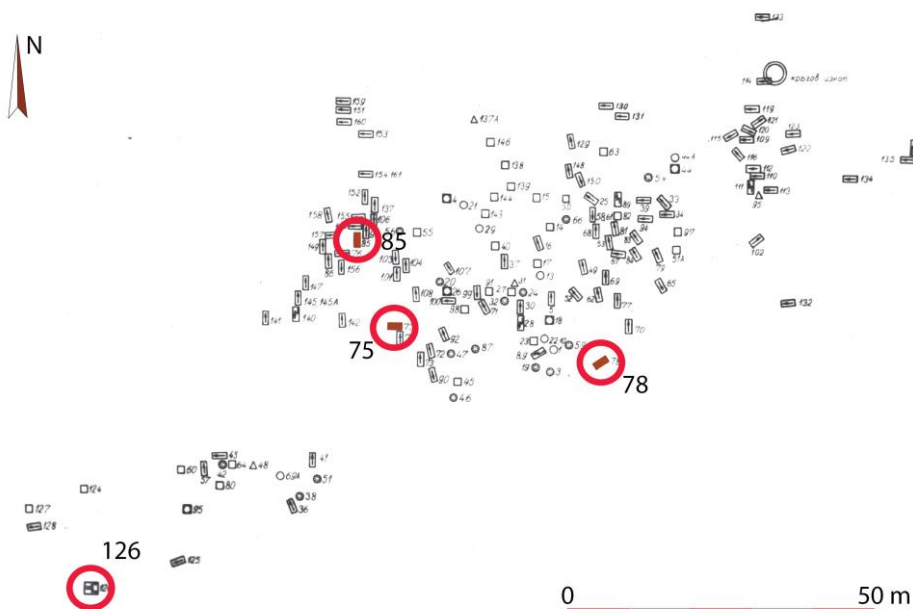


Fig. 3. Devnya-3 necropolis. Horizontal plan of the Medieval and EBA graves (adapted from Иванов 1972).

Although published 50 years ago, the graves somehow remained outside the attention of the researchers who focus on the Bronze Age in the region. They were only briefly mentioned in several works that overview the EBA mortuary practices in North Bulgaria, accepting the date of the graves in the EBA-2 period, and their relation to submerged settlements of “*Ezerovo II Culture*” proposed in the original publication.<sup>4</sup> In his monograph on the Bronze Age mortuary practices in the Middle and Lower Danube regions I. Motzoi-Chicideanu discussed the Devnya graves in the chapter dedicated to the EBA “*Zimnicea Culture*”, thus relating them to this archaeological phenomenon. However, the author mentioned some “... *differences*” for the graves under discussion, most of all related to the lack of *askoi* forms there.<sup>5</sup> Recently, in an article dedicated to the Jijila necropolis (North Dobrudja), the Devnya graves were included in a list of EBA flat necropolises in the eastern part of Lower Danube region.<sup>6</sup> The above mentioned inspired the authors to open a more profound discussion regarding those graves, along with some other grave-finds from the region, their relationships to the “submerged” EBA settlements in Varna lakes, and generally to the EBA in Northeast Bulgaria and North Dobrudja.<sup>7</sup>

### THE GRAVES

The EBA graves were discovered in the southwestern part of the Proto-Bulgarian necropolis area (Fig. 3) as follows:

#### **Grave no. 1 (75 in the necropolis enumeration)**

*Stratigraphic position & location:* Box-grid 16-M, 0.70 m below the surface (Fig. 3).

*Grave facility and pit-fill:* No data.

*Method of disposal:* Inhumation.

*Number and condition of the skeletons:* 1. The vertebrae, pelvis, palms and feet were missing. Only few ribs preserved.

*Anthropological data:* Judging from the measurements of the bones in the excavations' journal – *Adultus/Maturus*.

*Position & orientation:* Articulated inhumation. The individual was aligned E-SE-W-NW, head facing N.<sup>8</sup> Knees are flexed; right arm alongside the body, left *humerus* alongside the body, left *ulna* perpendicular to *humerus*,<sup>9</sup> left *radius* was missing (Fig. 4/1).

<sup>4</sup> Nikolova 1994, 132-133; Nikolova 1995, 273-274; Nikolova 1999, 368; Menkova 2006, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 94, 286-288.

<sup>6</sup> Ailincăi *et alii* 2021.

<sup>7</sup> The authors would like to express their gratitude to dr. Vladimir Slavchev and Olga Pelevina from Varna Archaeological Museum for their generous help in the course of preparing this study.

<sup>8</sup> In the original publication the position of the deceased is defined as W-E; the real one is set according to the excavations' journal.



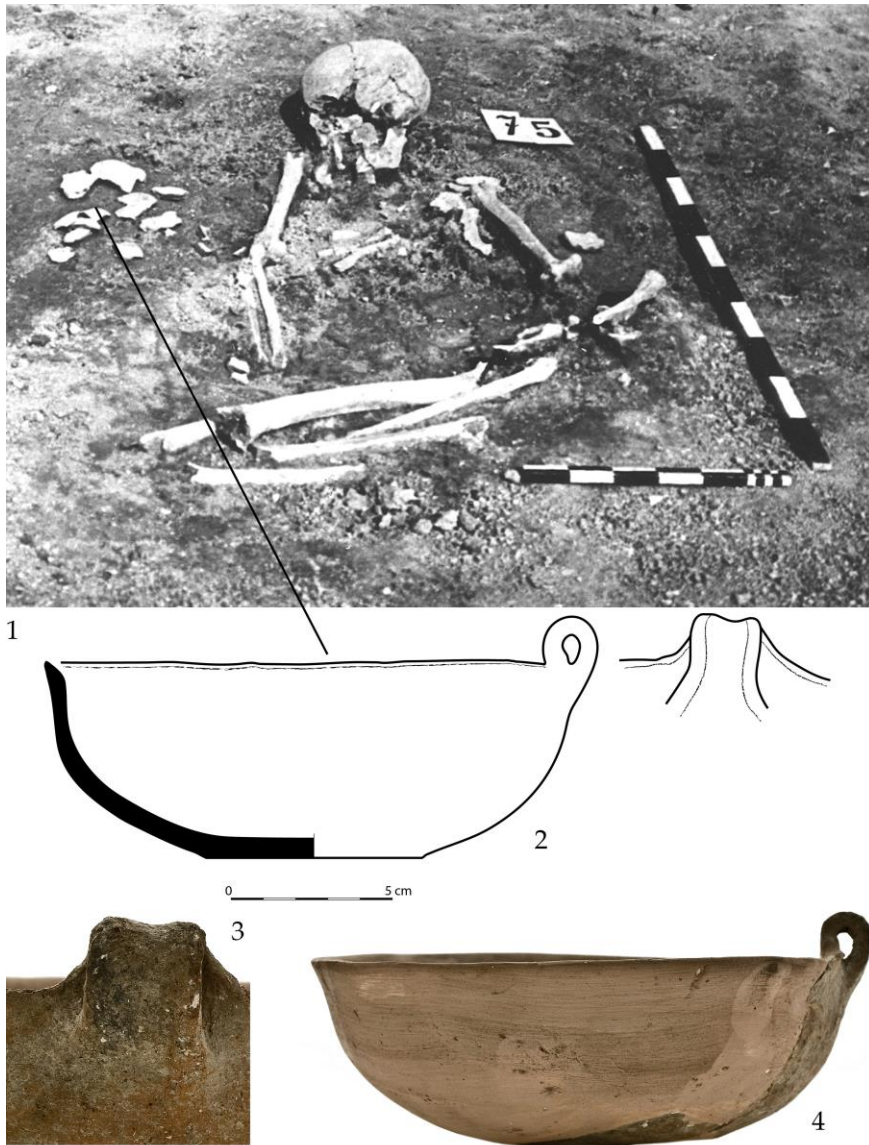


Fig. 4. Devnya-3 necropolis, EBA grave 1 (75). 1. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive); 2-4. Vessel from the grave (Photo Romyana Kostadinova).

<sup>9</sup> The position of the left arm is defined according to the photos of the grave.

*Grave goods:* Pottery fragments in front of the skull, near the right shoulder. In the excavation journal the fragments were distinguished as belonging to "...three different vessels".

One bowl has been restored. It has a hemispherical form, and a flat bottom; the rim is slightly everted, thickened from the inside; a vertical handle rising above the rim connects it to the body; light brown burnished surface.<sup>10</sup> Dimensions: Diameter rim = 15.5 cm; Height = 6.3 cm; Diameter bottom = 6.7 cm. Approximately 50% has been restored (Fig. 4/2-4). Varna Archaeological Museum, inventory no. 4499.

### **GRAVE no. 2 (78 in the necropolis enumeration)**

*Stratigraphic position & location:* Discovered in box-grid 9/1, at 1.60 m below the surface; 34 m southeast of grave no. 1 (Fig. 3).

*Grave facility and pit-fill:* Grave-pit dug into the ancient humus and the virgin soil. Pit with step? Lower pit – rectangular form with dimensions 1.60 × 0.90 × 0.30 m. Upper pit encircled with one row of stones and covered with a rectangular stone slab with dimensions 2.15 × 1.55 × 0.25 m (Fig. 5/1-2).

*Method of disposal:* Articulated inhumation.

*Number and condition of the skeletons:* 1; Preserved were only the skull, left humerus, the two femurs and part of a radius.

*Anthropological data:* No data.

*Position & orientation:* Semi-supine/hocker to the right? Alignment SE-NW, head facing NW; in the publication, the position was described as "...lying to the right" but it cannot be definitively defined (Fig. 5/3-5).

*Grave goods:* Three vessels were discovered in the grave-pit: two bowls placed in the middle of the northern step, and an amphora-like vessel – in the western corner of the lower pit.

1. Bowl. Hemispherical body with everted rim, thickened from the inside with an oblique cut; flat bottom; a vertical handle rising above the rim connects it to the body; light brown burnished surface. Dimensions: Diameter rim = 22.8 cm; Height = 8.0 cm; Diameter bottom = 9.5 cm (Fig. 6). Varna Archaeological Museum, inventory no. 4500.
2. Bowl. Conical form with everted rim, flat bottom; a vertical lug with two horizontal holes rising above the rim; light brown burnished surface. Dimensions:

<sup>10</sup> In the original publication, another bowl was presented as coming from the grave (Иванов 1972, 250, Fig. 8). In fact, it was found inside the necropolis boundaries. The bowl that was actually found in the grave is presented in the same publication as coming from the necropolis boundaries (Иванов 1972, 252, Fig. 12)

Diameter rim = 19.9 cm; Height = 7.1 cm; Diameter bottom = 7.7 cm (Fig. 7). Varna Archaeological Museum, inventory no. 4501.

3. Amphora-like vessel. Oval body, cylindrical neck with everted rim, flat bottom. Four perforated lugs at the upper part of the body, light brown burnished surface. Dimensions: Diameter rim = 12.9 cm; Height = 29.2 cm; Maximum diameter = 23.8 cm. Diameter bottom = 8.4 cm (Fig. 8). Varna Archaeological Museum, inventory no. 4502.



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Fig. 5. Devnya-3 necropolis, EBA grave 2 (78). 1-5. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive).

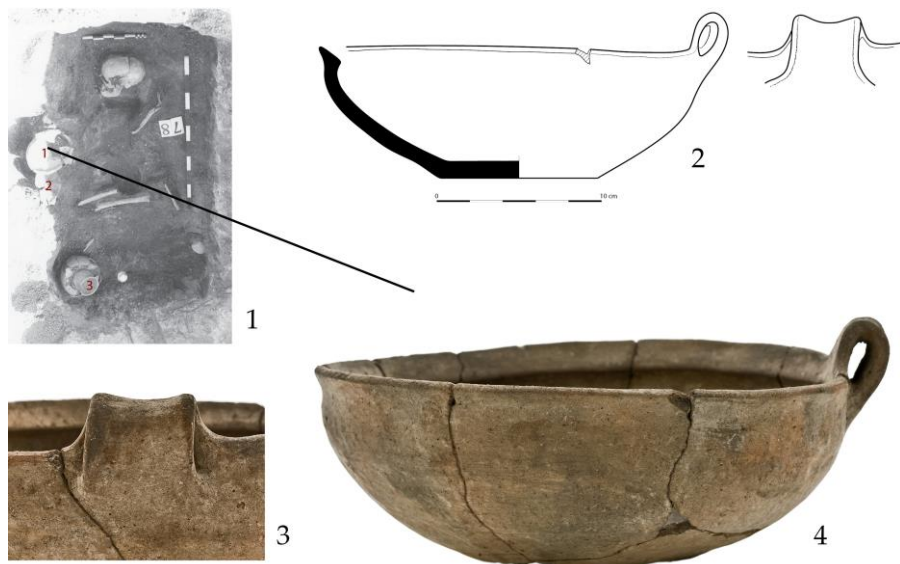


Fig. 6. Devnya-3 necropolis, EBA grave 2 (78). 1. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive); 2-4. Vessel no. 1 from the grave (Photo Rumyana Kostadinova).



Fig. 7. Devnya-3 necropolis, EBA grave 2 (78). 1. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive); 2-4. Vessel no. 2 from the grave (Photo Rumyana Kostadinova).



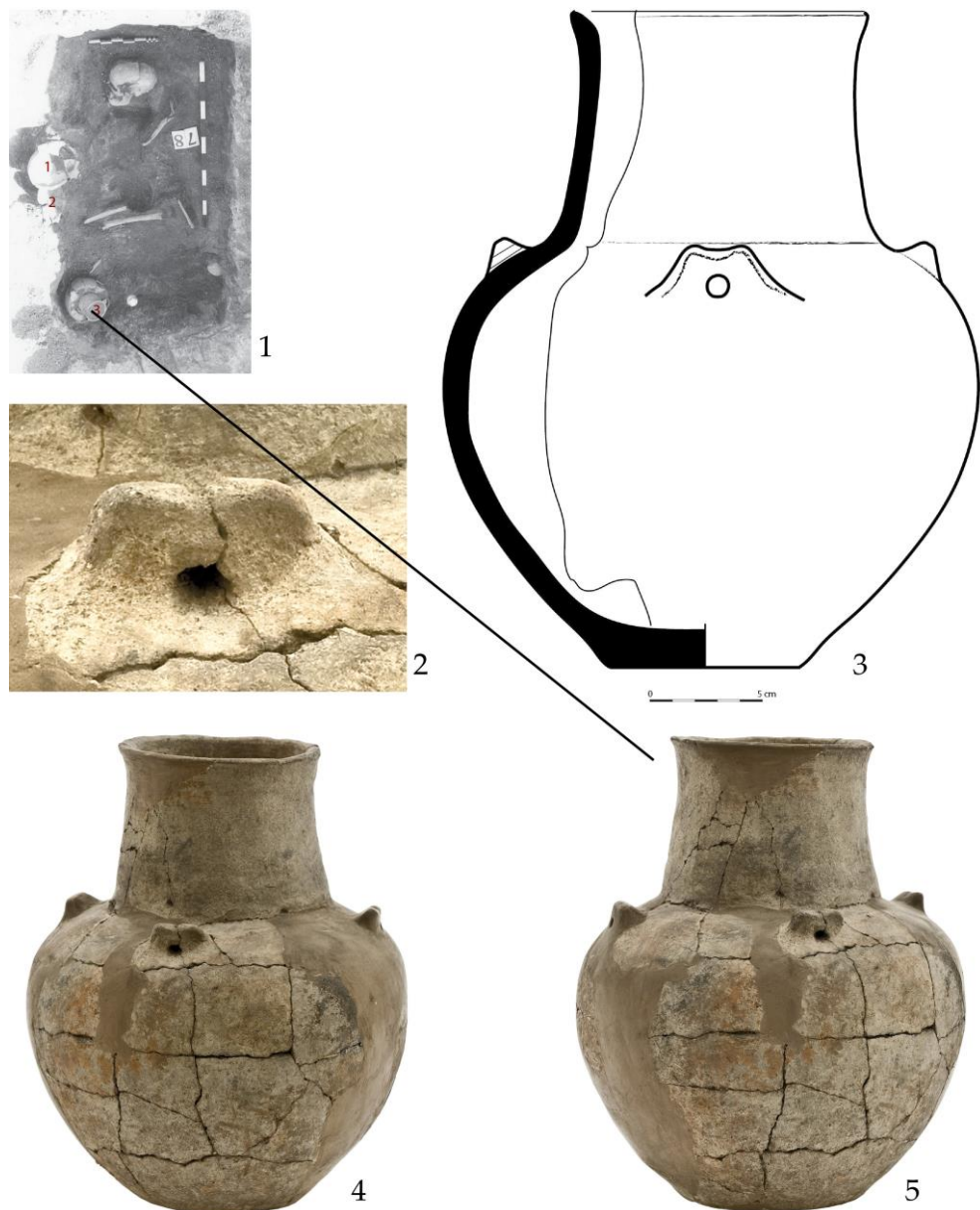


Fig. 8. Devnya-3 necropolis, EBA grave 2 (78). 1. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive); 2-5. Vessel no. 3 from the grave (Photo Rumyana Kostadinova).

**GRAVE no. 3 (85 in the necropolis enumeration)**

*Stratigraphic position & location:* Discovered in box-grid 17/Π, at 0.75 m below the surface; 15 m northwest of grave no. 1 (Fig. 3).

*Grave facility and pit-fill:* No data.

*Method of disposal:* Articulated inhumation.

*Number and condition of the skeletons:* The vertebrae, palms and feet were missing, only few ribs preserved.

*Anthropological data:* Judging from the measurements of the bones in the excavations journal – *Infans*.

*Position & orientation:* According to the photos available, the position of the deceased seems to be flexed on the right, aligned N-S. Both legs are strongly flexed, right arm alongside the body, left arm bent at the elbow (Fig. 9/3).

*Grave goods:* Pottery fragments east of the skull (Fig. 9/3).

In the article from 1972 another grave - no. 126, was discussed with possible attribution to the EBA necropolis. It was described as a double hocker grave.

**GRAVE 4? (126 in the necropolis enumeration)**

*Stratigraphic position & location:* Discovered in box-grid 26/B, at 0.40 - 0.50 m below the surface; 65 m southwest of grave no. 1 (Fig. 3).

*Grave facility:* No data; the grave was covered by a "...layer of stones" with dimensions 2.70 × 5.05 m.<sup>11</sup>

*Method of disposal:* Articulated inhumations; Aligment E-W, head to E.

*Number and condition of the skeletons:* 2; skeleton 1 in relatively good condition, missing ribs, palms and feet; skeleton 2 – parts of the skull, pelvis and lower limbs preserved.

***Skeleton 1 (126a)***

*Anthropological data:* Judging from the measurements of the bones in the excavations journal and the photos – *Adultus/Maturus*.

*Position & orientation:* Flexed position with flexed legs fallen down to the left; head – straight, facing West; right arm bent at the elbow, lower limbs at the abdomen; left arm bent at the elbow, lower limbs towards the skull (Fig. 10/2).

***Skeleton 2 (126b)***

*Anthropological data:* no data.

*Position & orientation:* Flexed on the right; flexed legs fallen down to the right (Fig. 10/2).

*Grave goods:* Flint end-scraper on blade, north of the skeleton 1 skull, 0.30 below it (Fig. 10/1).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Data recovered from the excavations' journal.

<sup>12</sup> It was not found in Varna Archaeological Museum. The drawing presented here was adapted from the original publication.



Fig. 9. Devnya-3 necropolis. 1, 3-5. EBA pottery discovered in the necropolis; 2. EBA grave 3 (85). Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive).

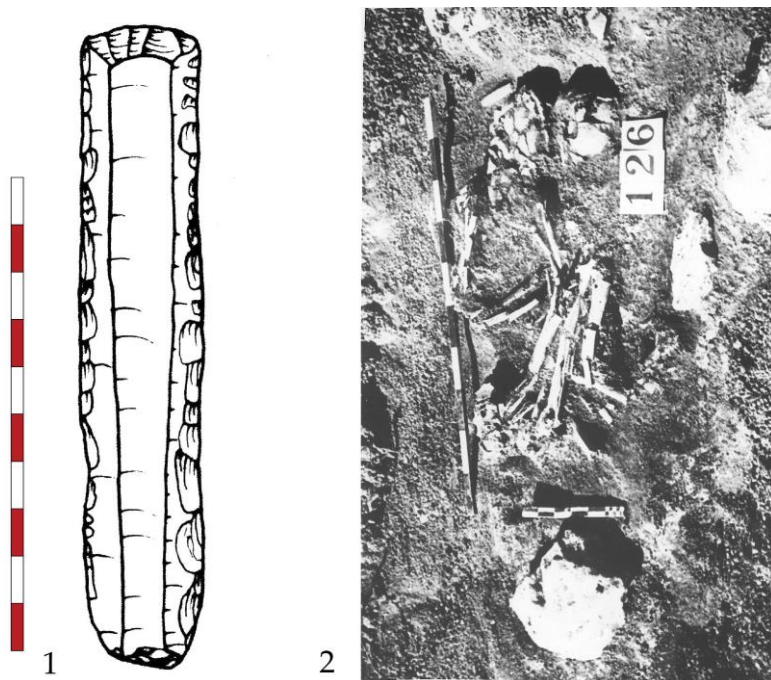


Fig. 10. Devnya-3 necropolis, grave 126. 1. Flint end-scraper; 2. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive).

*Notes:* Skeleton 1 (126a) was situated north of and partly above the skeleton 2 (126b). The flint end-scraper, according to the depth of discovery should be connected to skeleton 2 (126b). It has all the characteristics of the Copper Age flint industry,<sup>13</sup> in which period should be dated the grave 126b.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it is situated not far from the Copper Age necropolis northwest of the settlement excavated by H. Todorova.<sup>15</sup> Skeleton 1 (126a) is later, but its date to the EBA is still arguable. Several more graves from the necropolis (without grave goods) had the same body position, and they were related (by D. Dimitrov) to the Proto-Bulgarian necropolis.<sup>16</sup>

During the excavations in 1969-1970 a "...complete vessel and sherds from other two vessels" were found as well, all of them with EBA characteristics.<sup>17</sup> In Varna Archaeological Museum only one complete vessel is preserved, a bowl. It is of hemispherical form, with

<sup>13</sup> Observations made by Dr. Stanimira Taneva (NAIM-BAS), to whom the authors express once again their gratitude.

<sup>14</sup> Such conclusions were made by I. Ivanov as well (Иванов 1972, 252).

<sup>15</sup> Тодорова-Симеонова 1971; Иванов 1972, Table V.

<sup>16</sup> Димитров 1972, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Иванов 1972, 252.

an everted rim thickened with an oblique cut from the inside; flat bottom; a vertical lug with one horizontal hole rising above the rim; light brown burnished surface. Dimensions: Diameter rim = 14.3 cm; Height = 5.3 cm; Diameter bottom = 6.6 cm (Fig. 9/3-4); Varna Archaeological Museum, inventory no. 4503.<sup>18</sup>

In the article, sherds from two more vessels were mentioned: neck and rim from an amphora and the lower part of a large vessel decorated with corded impressions (Fig. 10/1). The discussed vessels were probably connected to EBA graves destroyed by later anthropogenic activities.<sup>19</sup>

The above mentioned information indicates that during the excavations of the Proto-Bulgarian necropolis Devnya-3, part of a small EBA necropolis was investigated. The excavated graves show some common elements: inhumation is semi-supine to the right position; the legs bent at the knees, turned to the right; the right arm extended alongside the body, the left one – bent at the elbow with palm at the abdomen/pelvis area. Although the anthropological evidence is limited, we can assume that buried were persons of all ages. The grave-pits were not distinguished in the case of two of the graves. The pit of grave no. 2 was elaborated, with a stone plate covering the pit. Red ochre was not used in the mortuary practices. Grave goods were found in each grave – vessel/s, placed near the skull (two graves) or alongside the body. The number of the graves in the necropolis is uncertain but, judging from the EBA pottery sherds found without context, at least several more graves were destroyed by later anthropogenic activities in the area.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NECROPOLIS AND SETTLEMENT

The settlement that could be related to the graves under discussion was discovered in 1969; known as “*Baltata*” site, and located south/southeast of the Devnya-3 necropolis<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 2/2). Unfortunately, the materials from the site are not published so this assumption is based on I. Ivanov’s article from 1993 only.

## CHRONOLOGICAL POSITION OF THE GRAVES

Due to the lack of radiocarbon dates, the chronological position of the Devnya graves could only be established by using the typological characteristics of the vessels discovered in them. Three main shapes were discovered there - bowls with one vertical handle; bowls with one lug and an amphora. The bowls with one vertical handle have their good analogies in the Ezerovo II settlement, sometimes decorated

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<sup>18</sup> See note 10.

<sup>19</sup> ИВАНОВ 1972, 252.

<sup>20</sup> Ivanov 1993, 23.



with incised, dotted or corded decoration.<sup>21</sup> So far, such shapes are not present/published from the south Bulgarian Black Sea coast EBA settlements.<sup>22</sup> Conical bowls with one lug were also found in Ezerovo II<sup>23</sup> and south of it, in the Kiten - Urdoviza site, for example.<sup>24</sup> A similar bowl comes from the Smyadovo flat necropolis as well – grave 27, *adultus, male*, buried in semi-supine position. The grave inventory there consisted of 3 vessels – an askos, a bowl with lug and a pot. A radiocarbon date (Ly-5519: 4305 ± 35 BP) set the grave in the 3014-2882 calBC interval (95.4% confidence).<sup>25</sup> The amphora from grave no. 2 (78) has no exact parallels amongst the published ceramic materials from submerged EBA settlements so far. Certain analogies could be found with an amphora from grave no. 9 from the EBA Zimnicea necropolis<sup>26</sup> that, in our opinion, could be dated to the EBA-1b period (Ezero A1 phase).<sup>27</sup>

The above mentioned parallels of the pottery from Devnya graves lead towards a synchronism between it and some of the materials from the submerged EBA settlements in Varna lakes region, a fact that was generally accepted by all the researchers so far. The precise position of the graves into the EBA frame of the region depends on the chronological position of the “submerged” settlements to which the graves were related. The task is quite difficult considering the fact that the ceramic materials published so far have no stratigraphic context and that the only partly excavated settlement – “*Arsenala*”, at the south coast of Varna lake, presented a 3.5 m thick EBA layer,<sup>28</sup> comparable to that from Ezero-tell in Thrace with its’ 13 building horizons.

In fact, the investigations on the internal chronology of the Varna lakes EBA materials share the fate of the Devnya EBA graves: quite a few works that generally assign the materials to the EBA. For example, the chronological position of Ezerovo materials was set by G. Tončeva in “*Mihalich*” period of the EBA, with parallels in Ezero-tell, mainly in VII-VI building levels from there.<sup>29</sup> P. Roman related the materials from Ezerovo to the “*West Pontic Cultural Circle*”, the bowls discussed above being assigned to the “*third chronological period of corded ware*” in the Lower Danube

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<sup>21</sup> Tončeva 1981b, 54, Fig. 20/1-3; Roman *et alii* 1992, Taf. 41/1-3; 44/4; Slavchev 2018, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Vasileva 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Tončeva 1981b, 53, Fig. 18/1-2; Roman *et alii* 1992, Taf. 39/1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Vasileva 2018, 139, Fig. 4/6,9.

<sup>25</sup> Chohadzhiev, Mihaylova 2014, 44; Fig. 34/4, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandrescu 1974, Pl. 6/1; 7/5. The authors would like to thank dr. Radu Băjenaru for indicating them these analogies.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandrov 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Peev *et alii* 2020, 402.

<sup>29</sup> Tončeva 1981b, 61-62.

region, which was generally related by him to the EBA but, still later than Cernavodă II Culture.<sup>30</sup> I. Panayotov assigned Ezerovo sites to his Bronze Age II period, synchronous to Cernavodă II and Yamnaya Cultures<sup>31</sup> while, according to L. Nikolova, the site belongs to the latest EB I–EB III period.<sup>32</sup> Recently, Vl. Slavchev set the Varna lakes sites in the 3200–2500 BC timespan.<sup>33</sup>

So far, there are only two radiocarbon dates from Ezerovo, both coming from charcoal samples: Bln 2391 - 4155±60 and Ki 89 - 4210±60.<sup>34</sup> The calibrated dates enter the 2900–2600 BC period (Fig. 11) but, in our opinion, they cover only a part of the chronological development of Ezerovo site. For example, while some of the ceramic sherds decorated with “*cannelures*” published by G. Tončeva in 1981 could date prior to 3100 BC,<sup>35</sup> other forms could be securely dated after 2500 BC. This is valid most of all for the so-called “*tea-pots*” from there<sup>36</sup> that are characteristic for the end of the Early Bronze Age and the Middle Bronze Age in Thrace,<sup>37</sup> as well as for the big cups/jugs from Ezerovo<sup>38</sup> that have good analogies in MBA hocker barrow graves from Thrace, for example.<sup>39</sup>

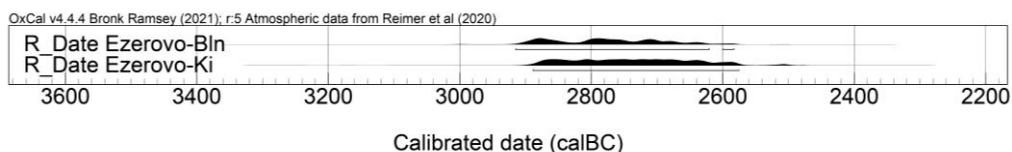


Fig. 11. Ezerovo. Radiocarbon dates.

The southern Bulgarian Black Sea coast sites provided more data for the absolute dating of the EBA submerged settlements. The earliest dates come from the Ropotamo site from where nine <sup>14</sup>C samples are available “... from 3 wooden posts that dated the Ropotamo EBA settlement in the transition between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> mill. BC (3080–2970 cal. BC (95.4% probability)”<sup>40</sup> The Kiten–Urdoviza site provided calibrated <sup>14</sup>C dates data between 2850–2600 BC, or generally EBA-2 period according to Bulgarian periodization system of the

<sup>30</sup> Roman *et alii* 1992, 57–92.

<sup>31</sup> Panayotov 1995, 248.

<sup>32</sup> Nikolova 1999, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Slavchev 2018, 79–81.

<sup>34</sup> Boyadziev 1995, 186.

<sup>35</sup> Tončeva 1981b, Fig. 22/11–12.

<sup>36</sup> Tončeva 1981b, Fig. 16/1–4, 7; Roman *et alii* 1992, Taf. 35/1–2.

<sup>37</sup> See for example Leštakov 2015, 44–45.

<sup>38</sup> Slavchev 2018, 80.

<sup>39</sup> Agre 2015, 150, Fig. 21–22.

<sup>40</sup> Димитров *et alii* 2019, 745.

BA. For the pottery from that site, parallels with the archaeological material from Cernavodă II, the submerged settlement of Ezerovo II, Ezero VIII-V, Yunatsite XIII-IX, late Troy I and Troy II were suggested.<sup>41</sup> The Sozopol settlement "...existed for a period of about 150 to 200 years." A synchronism with Ezero-tell horizons VI-V or even with the earlier horizons VIII-IX from there was proposed for the site.<sup>42</sup>

Summarizing the above-mentioned, one can say that according to the radiocarbon dates, the EBA sites on the Bulgarian Black sea coast and Varna lakes date between 3100-2500 calBC or "Ezero" and "Mihalich" phases of the EBA according to the Bulgarian periodization of the Bronze Age in Thrace.<sup>43</sup> Some of the sites, especially Ezerovo, expand the timespan of their existence prior to 3100 BC and later than 2500 BC. Returning to the Devnya graves, a general date between 3100-2500 calBC seems quite appropriate. However, considering the shape of the bowls with thickened rims obliquely cut from the inside (Fig. 4/1; 6/2-5), as well as the date from grave no. 27 from Smyadovo necropolis, we are inclined to consider even a closer date, between 3100-2900 BC for the graves in discussion, but, this assumption still needs additional arguments.

#### DEVNYA GRAVES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EBA SITES IN VARNA LAKES

The pattern settlement-necropolis established for Devnya EBA graves and "Baltata" settlement is not unique for the period in Varna lakes region. The existence of at least three more such complexes there could be argued as follows:

*Ezerovo.* In 1967 G. Tončeva published 3 anthropomorphic stelae from the Ezerovo area (Fig. 12-14) found during the excavation works for construction of a water-channel for the Varna Electric Power Station.<sup>44</sup> They were found on the northern slope of the Varna lake, east of the Ezerovo village and approx. 50 m north of the nowadays Varna lake-shore (Fig. 2/7). According to G. Tončeva, the three stelae were found at a depth of approximately 2 m below the surface, at a distance of 2-2.5 m one from each other. Beneath each stele human bones were found, as well as ceramic sherds dated by the author to the Bronze Age.<sup>45</sup> Although the pottery fragments found below the stelae are not available nowadays, the chronological position of the stelae themselves in the EBA is quite clear.<sup>46</sup> The descriptions of the complexes the stelae came from, although scarce, reminds the one of grave no. 2 (78) from Devnya – an inhumation in deep pit

<sup>41</sup> Dimitrov *et alii* 2020, 234-235.

<sup>42</sup> Dimitrov *et alii* 2020, 222.

<sup>43</sup> Alexandrov 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Тончева 1967, 3; Tončeva 1981a, 130.

<sup>45</sup> Тончева 1967, 3.

<sup>46</sup> The stelae have been subject of many stylistic, typological and chronological analyses, all dating them to the EBA (most recently Kaiser 2019, 205-213).

covered with stone plate/stela, with pottery in the grave. It is quite possible that the stelae actually come from inhumation graves. In fact, in the same article, G. Tončeva mentioned other “hocker” graves in the area,<sup>47</sup> so we can argue the existence of an EBA necropolis east of Ezerovo village. It should be connected to the submerged settlement Ezerovo II, located approximately 200 m SW of the graves (Fig. 2/6-7).



Fig. 12. Ezerovo. Anthropomorphic stela no. 1 (VAM inv. no. I.1194). 1. Drawing (after Tončeva 1967, Fig. 1); 2-3. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive).

<sup>47</sup> Tončeva 1967, 12.

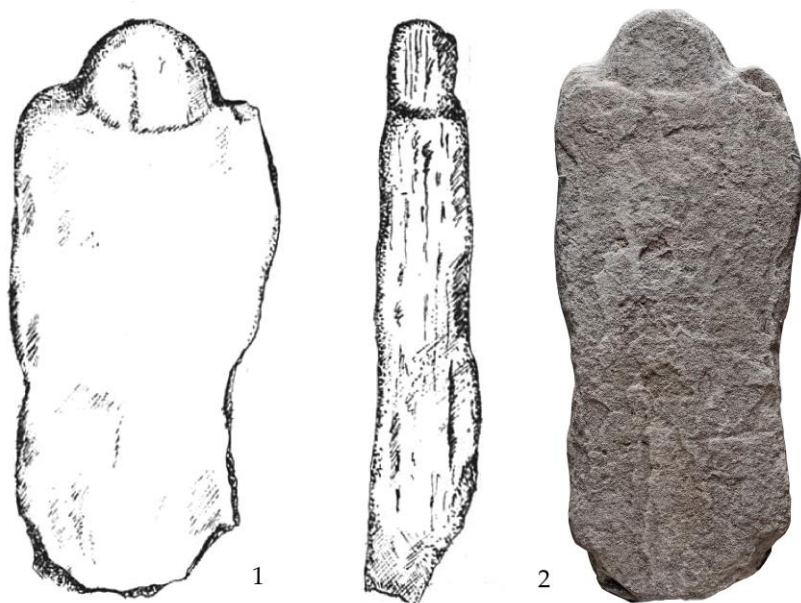


Fig. 13. Ezerovo. Anthropomorphic stele no. 2. 1. Drawing (Тончева 1967, Fig. 2); 2. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive).

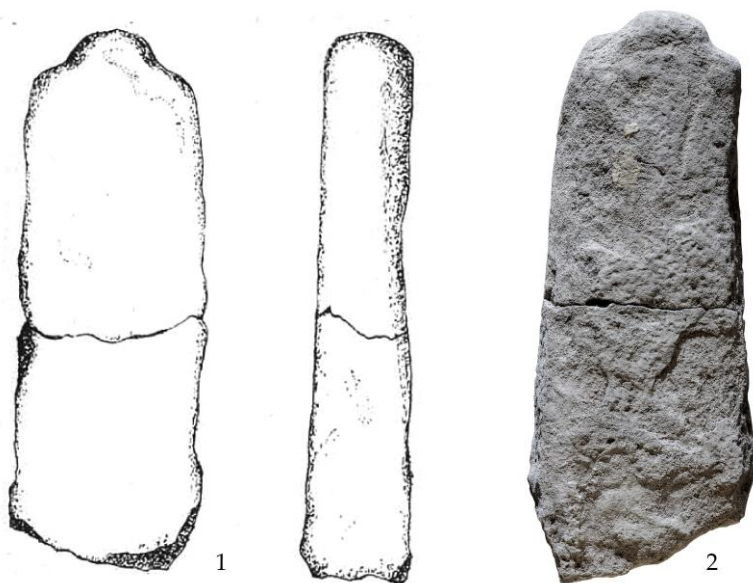


Fig. 14. Ezerovo. Anthropomorphic stele no. 3. 1. Drawing (Тончева 1967, Fig. 3); 2. Photo (Courtesy of Varna Archaeological Museum Archive).



**Topoli.** In several articles G. Tončeva mentioned the existence of an EBA necropolis east of Topoli village. It was discovered in 1964 east of the "...greenhouses of the village"<sup>48</sup> approximately 2 km SE of it, and 100 m from the lake shore (Fig. 2/9).<sup>49</sup> According to G. Tončeva hocker inhumations were found there with grave goods allowing their synchronization to "...Ezerovo II period".<sup>50</sup> The materials were not published, but a ceramic *askos* coming from one of the graves was graphically presented in a plate with askoid pottery forms from Ezerovo settlements.<sup>51</sup> The form itself is one of the most emblematic for the EBA sites in Varna lakes region.<sup>52</sup> It is also characteristic for the EBA period in the eastern part of Balkan Peninsula and northwest Pontic area, found in settlements, flat and barrow graves.<sup>53</sup> Although some *askos* and askoidal forms appear around 3300 BC, the earliest appearance in securely dated in EBA complexes of the particular shape of the *askos* presented as coming from Topoli necropolis can be placed at a date around 3100 BC – Chudomir barrow, feature no. 5 (double grave), with a <sup>14</sup>C date between 3104-2920 calBC,<sup>54</sup> as well as the already mentioned grave no. 27 from Smyadovo necropolis, with a <sup>14</sup>C date between 3014-2882 calBC.<sup>55</sup> They probably disappear from the EBA pottery production in Northern Balkans around 2600/2500 BC, as shown by the *askos* from grave no. 13 from *Movila Mare* near Smeeni (Valahia). The grave was related to chronological phase IIb in the barrow dated between 2900-2600 BC.<sup>56</sup> Following the above mentioned, we could generally date the Topoli necropolis in the 3100-2600 BC interval. Its relation to a particular settlement is not so clear. There are two settlements known so far in the vicinity of the discussed necropolis. The first one is located approximately 4 km southwest of it – the *Topoli* settlement, positioned south of the present day railway station of the village, and the second one, the *Varna-Morflot* settlement, located 2 km to the southeast (Fig. 2/8, 11). Considering the long distance between the settlements mentioned above and the necropolis, the authors think it quite possible that the Topoli necropolis could be connected to a still-unknown settlement located south of it.

**Varna.** The analyses of the grave complexes from the famous Chalcolithic necropolis revealed at least four graves that, according to their characteristics and the <sup>14</sup>C data,

<sup>48</sup> Tončeva 1967, 12; Tončeva 1972, 309; Tončeva 1981b, p. 59.

<sup>49</sup> The location of the necropolis was made according to topographic maps from 1970s.

<sup>50</sup> Tončeva 1981b, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Tončeva 1981b, Fig. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Tončeva 1981b, Fig. 7; Roman *et alii* 1992, Taf. 32; 33.

<sup>53</sup> Last in Бруяко *et alii* 2015; Frînculeasa *et alii* 2017, 95-103; Минков 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Alexandrov 2020, Fig. 5, cat. no. 371; Alexandrov 2021, Plate 1.

<sup>55</sup> Chohadzhiev, Mihaylova 2014, 44; Fig. 34.

<sup>56</sup> Frînculeasa *et alii* 2017, 74-76, 110.

belong to the EBA.<sup>57</sup> The graves should probably be related to the submerged Late Chalcolithic and EBA settlement (known as Varna–*Morflot*) located south of the necropolis (Fig. 2/10-11).

The discussion presented so far outlines a clear settlement – necropolis pattern on the northern shores of the Varna lakes during the EBA. The necropolises were located at a distance of 200 m or more north of the settlements; the mortuary practices were represented by flat inhumation graves; where it is possible to distinguish - in semi-supine position with flexed legs; one of the arms alongside the body, the other one bent at the elbow with palm at the abdomen/pelvis area. No predominant orientation has been noticed so far. The number of the graves in the necropolises seems to be relatively small, both adults and infants being buried in them. The grave-pits were simple, without covering, or up to 2 m deep and covered with stone plates/anthropomorphic stelae. Ceramic vessels were placed in some of the graves. There are no data, for now, regarding the use of red ochre as part of the burial customs.

One of the questions that should be asked, regarding the topic of this article, is connected to the relations between the barrows that are located at the elevations above both shores of the Varna lakes and the EBA flat graves and submerged settlements. In some of the barrows (Fig. 2/13-14) anthropomorphic stelae were found,<sup>58</sup> and one of them is related to the Yamnaya Culture.<sup>59</sup> If the barrows discussed are to be related to Yamnaya groups, this being the authors' opinion as well, then the Varna lakes region could be regarded as one of the key regions for understanding the nature of the relationship between the Yamnaya and the local populations in NE Bulgaria.<sup>60</sup>

The Varna lakes EBA complex of settlements and necropolises is a unique phenomenon for the époque in the Northern Balkans. So far, alongside the four necropolises discussed here, 13 submerged settlements located “...along both banks of *Devnenska River mostly on mouths of small rivers and creeks coming into the Devnenska river*” have been registered,<sup>61</sup> and more sites are expected to come to light in the future. This fact defines the Varna lakes region as the leading center in the EBA development in the NE Balkans, and not only there. The nature of the emergence, development and the end of this complex is still to be explored and discussed.

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<sup>57</sup> The authors would like to express their gratitude to dr. Vladimir Slavchev and dr. Kalin Dimitrov for kindly given information regarding Varna necropolis.

<sup>58</sup> Тончева 1967, 6-7; Fig. 4; Tončeva 1981a, Fig. 1. The stela is a stray find from the Tepetarla locality in the elevation above Ezerovo village. It, probably, comes from the barrow located in this place (Fig. 2/13).

<sup>59</sup> Панайотов 1989, 39, 156; Fig. 157-158.

<sup>60</sup> Панайотов 1989, 50-51.

<sup>61</sup> Прахов *et alii* 2019; Dimitrov *et alii* 2020, 190, Fig. 2.

### VARNA EBA GRAVES AND THE PROBLEM OF THE EBA FLAT GRAVES IN DOBRUDJA

The discussed graves from Varna region are not the only flat EBA graves in NE Bulgaria and N Dobrudja. There are several sites, which provided some data about such graves in the region as follows:

*Balchik grave?* (Dobrich region). In both “*History of Dobruja*” editions (from 1984 and 2011), H. Todorova mentioned a destroyed EBA grave in the town of Balchik and related it to the Cernavodă II culture. No other information was given, but three vessels listed as coming from the area were published, and dated by the author to the EBA.<sup>62</sup> The vessels are kept in the Balchik Museum (Fig. 15), and according to the Museum’s inventory book, they were found in three different places outside the town. No other records are available, so, their connection to the destroyed grave is arguable. However, at least one of them (Fig. 15/3) has all the characteristics of the Cernavodă II pottery style.



Fig. 15. Vessels from Balchik region. No scale (after Тодорова 2011).

*Durankulak necropolis* (Dobrich region). Seventeen graves are published so far from the site. According to the excavators, they were grouped in eight small barrows. A special attention in the publication was paid to grave no. 982 (with a copper dagger). All the graves from the necropolis were assigned to “*Protobronzezeit*” period with the exception of grave no. 448, for which a possible date to the Cernavodă I period was

<sup>62</sup> Тодорова 1984, 60; Тодорова 2011, 112, Fig. 106.

argued.<sup>63</sup> According to I. Manzura, four chronological groups in the necropolis could be distinguished. These are related to the Suvorovo group, Cernavodă I, Cernavodă III and Yamnaya Cultures; grave 1126 being the only barrow grave there.<sup>64</sup> Without entering a larger discussion about the necropolis, we should mention that a group of 5 graves in the western part of the necropolis could be distinguished, consisting of semi-supine to the left inhumations with flexed legs; left arm alongside the body, right arm – bent at the knee, palm at the abdomen; red ochre on the bones. The already mentioned graves nos. 982 and 1126 enter this group as well.<sup>65</sup>

*Malak Preslavets (former Kadâkioi) graves* (Silistra region). During the excavation in the 1950s in the Gorno Gradishte locality - a high elevation above the Danube river, two “hocker” graves were found. The first grave presented relaxed hocker/flexed inhumation, lying to the right. The right arm was alongside the body, the left one – bent at the ankle, palm at the abdomen. Alignment W-E. The second grave, with the same body position, was found 0.5 m north of the first one. Grave goods were found in the first grave – a ceramic cup at the right palm and a pendant made of a boar tusk in the neck area.<sup>66</sup> The cup has the characteristics of the EBA pottery from the region, but some elements could date it to the Tei I Culture as well. However, considering the position of the skeleton we are inclined to argue an EBA date for the graves. It is also worth mentioning that during the excavations, Cernavodă II and Tei I pottery sherds were found as well, possibly related to short prehistoric occupations at the site.<sup>67</sup>

A possible relation settlement–necropolis could be argued for both sites: Cernavodă II and Cernavodă III occupation at Durankulak,<sup>68</sup> and Cernavodă II and Tei I – at Malak Preslavets. It should be mentioned that the number of the already located EBA settlements in Northeast Bulgaria is still very small. Alongside the already mentioned ones, quite a few other sites are known so far – two Cernavodă III settlements near Mirovtsi (Shumen region)<sup>69</sup> and Kavarna, Chirakman cape as well as a Cernavodă II settlements near Cherna (Dobrich region).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Vajsov 2002.

<sup>64</sup> Manzura 2005, 52.

<sup>65</sup> Vajsov 2002.

<sup>66</sup> Георгиева 1952, 261, Fig. 235; 243; 251. Near the skeletons hand-made ceramic sherds and *unio* shells were found as well.

<sup>67</sup> Георгиева 1952, Fig. 237; 240.

<sup>68</sup> Тодорова 2011, 102; 112.

<sup>69</sup> Zmeykova I. 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Unpublished materials, mentioned in Тодорова 2011, 102; 112.

Flat EBA graves/necropolises are known from North Dobrudja as well. Without entering a large discussion, the authors base this short review on the recent profound investigation of the EBA flat graves and necropolises from there.<sup>71</sup> The *Jijila necropolis*, Tulcea county, seems to be one of the most important flat EBA necropolises from the region. It consisted of eight inhumation BA graves, of which nos. 1, 3, 5, 7 and 8 date to the EBA, covering the time-span between 3100-2350 BC. While the latest EBA grave – no. 1, presented a supine inhumation, the rest of the graves revealed adult males buried in semi-supine position with flexed legs, one arm alongside the body, the other one – bent at the elbow with palm at the pelvis/abdomen area. In two of the graves, ceramic vessels were found as well. This group can be assigned to the 3100-2600 BC time span.<sup>72</sup>

Other important finds come from *Panduru*, Tulcea county, with four graves in “supine” or “flexed” position, at least one of them – with a ceramic cup as grave good.<sup>73</sup> The vessel has exact analogies in the inventory of grave no. 9 from Barrow 1, Vetrino 3 necropolis (Northeast Bulgaria) with <sup>14</sup>C between 2883-2635 calBC (95.4% confidence).<sup>74</sup> Finds from *Ostrov*, *Cernavodă* and *Hârșova*<sup>75</sup> should be mentioned here as well. Considering the Sarichioi graves,<sup>76</sup> the authors are inclined to agree, based on the position of the skeletons there, with the proposed date of the necropolis in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.<sup>77</sup>

The short review presented above indicates that, so far in Northeast Bulgaria and Northern Dobrudja, during the 3300-2600/2500 BC period, flat necropolises/graves are located at the Varna lakes, the Black sea coast and alongside the Danube river only (Fig. 1). These were small groups of graves, consisting of up to 10 complexes. Buried there were persons of all ages and sexes. Semi-supine position with flexed legs dominates. Red ochre was rarely used in the mortuary practices. The grave goods, if present, consist most of all of ceramic vessels.

However, for the 3300-2500 BC period the barrow graves are the most characteristic feature of the mortuary practices in these territories; with inhumations in hocker-, supine- and semi-supine position with flexed legs and, very rare – extended position. While the barrow graves with supine- and semi-supine position in the region are to be related to populations included by I. Panayotov in the “Lower-

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<sup>71</sup> Ailincăi et alii 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Ailincăi et alii 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Ailincăi et alii 2021, Fig. 10.

<sup>74</sup> Alexandrov, Slavchev, Tonkova 2021, Pl. XXV/3-5.

<sup>75</sup> Ailincăi et alii 2021; Nestor 1937, 16; fig. 6-7; Morintz, Șerbănescu 1974, 49-51, Fig. 4-5.

<sup>76</sup> Oberländer-Târnoveanu, Oberländer-Târnoveanu 1979.

<sup>77</sup> Ailincăi et alii 2021.



*Danubian variant of Yamnaya Culture*,”<sup>78</sup> the hocker barrow graves are still subject of different approaches. A possible relations with the different EBA phases like Cernavodă III and Late Tripolye, “Bursuceni–Zhivotilovka” and, “Vânători–Bolotești” groups are discussed for the latter, with a “...tendency towards bending the body of the deceased into a more contracted position through time”.<sup>79</sup> The situation is quite different to the west, in Central North Bulgaria for example, where flat EBA necropolises/graves near the Danube river and in the “inside” territories: Smyadovo (Shumen region),<sup>80</sup> Dzulyunitsa,<sup>81</sup> Polski Senovets,<sup>82</sup> Batin<sup>83</sup> (Veliko Tarnovo region) and Telish-Lâga (Pleven region)<sup>84</sup> are to be found alongside EBA barrow necropolises or single barrows such as Goran-Slatina, Polsko Kosovo, Kozlovets etc.<sup>85</sup>

If we accept Dobrudja as the region where “...we can find the first larger concentration of typical *Yamnaya tumuli and burials*”<sup>86</sup> in the Northern Balkans, then the questions of the nature of the appearance and presence of the flat graves there need to be reconsidered. So far, these necropolises/graves in Northeast Bulgaria could be related to their respective settlements – Varna lakes ones, and settlements with Cernavodă III and Cernavodă II materials for the regions to the north. Perhaps, for the Cernavodă III period we could argue a possible *dualism* in the mortuary practices, as in the Usatovo burial complexes,<sup>87</sup> with both barrow and flat inhumation graves presented there. The archaeological picture for the later period (3100-2500 BC) is quite colorful, leaving many questions to be solved, one of them being related to the chronological/special correlation between “*Cernavodă II*” and “*Yamnaya*” phenomena that, it seems, overlap one another in both aspects.<sup>88</sup> In the authors’ opinion, the Varna lakes flat graves (the main subject of the present article) could hardly be directly connected to those two phenomena, and instead they should be regarded as part of the “*Early Bronze Age Varna lakes complex*”, a complex that needs further exhaustive investigations.

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<sup>78</sup> Panayotov 1989, 55-57.

<sup>79</sup> Alexandrov 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Chohadzhiev, Mihaylova 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Mathieson *et alii* 2018, Supplementary Note 1

<sup>82</sup> Inhumation grave in hocker/semi-supine? position. Excavations in 2020 made by Kalin Chakarov (Veliko Tarnovo Museum), to whom the authors express once again their great attitude for kindly given information.

<sup>83</sup> Станчев 1989.

<sup>84</sup> Merkyte *et alii* 2005, 140-154.

<sup>85</sup> Китов *et alii* 1991; Станчев 2002, Александров *et alii* 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Heyd 2011, 536.

<sup>87</sup> Дергачев, Манзура 1991.

<sup>88</sup> Frînculeasa 2020, 150-158; Fig. 1.

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