

Neolithic ritual pits near Miladinovtsi, region of Targovishte

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Abstract. The archaeological site lies in the eastern part of the Danube Valley, between the cities of Targovishte and Razgrad. The investigated area provides evidence of habitation and the use of the place spanning four historical periods. This article focuses on dug-out ritual features from the end of the Early Neolithic or the beginning of the Late Neolithic. In addition, it includes results from the anthropological study of a Neolithic skeleton, as well as registered AMS dates.

Considerable attention has been directed toward a Neolithic ritual pit with a skeleton that belonged to a man aged about 40 years. What is new is that the skeleton was found inside a ritual pit in an extramural context, specifically a pit sanctuary. The skeletal remains were unearthed among burnt pieces of construction daub. Numerous sherds of crushed pottery are available in the fill of the pit. The pit was examined in the context of similar features from the Northern Balkan Neolithic dated to the middle of the 6th millennium BC.

Keywords: Neolithic, pit sanctuary, ritual pits, grave, ceramic assemblage

The archaeological site is located 1.2 km northwest of the village of Miladinovtsi, Municipality of Targovishte (Fig. 1 I). It lies in the eastern part of the Danube Valley, between the cities of Targovishte and Razgrad. It occupies two slopes separated by a dry gully - one sloping to the southeast and the other sloping slightly to the southwest and besides has a flat eastern part. The area has a favourable position facing south and is thus protected from northern climatic influences. There are a few springs gushing in its vicinity.

The site was partially studied in 2020 in connection with the construction of the gas pipeline infrastructure of Bulgartransgaz EAD¹ (Nikolov et al. 2020,

¹ The rescue archaeological investigation of the site near the village of Miladinovtsi was carried out in connection with the “Expansion of the gas transmission infrastructure of Bulgartransgaz EAD parallel to the north (main) gas pipeline to the Bulgarian-Serbian border”, stage: Linear part, sub-stage B. The site was indexed as A3/5001. The heads of research

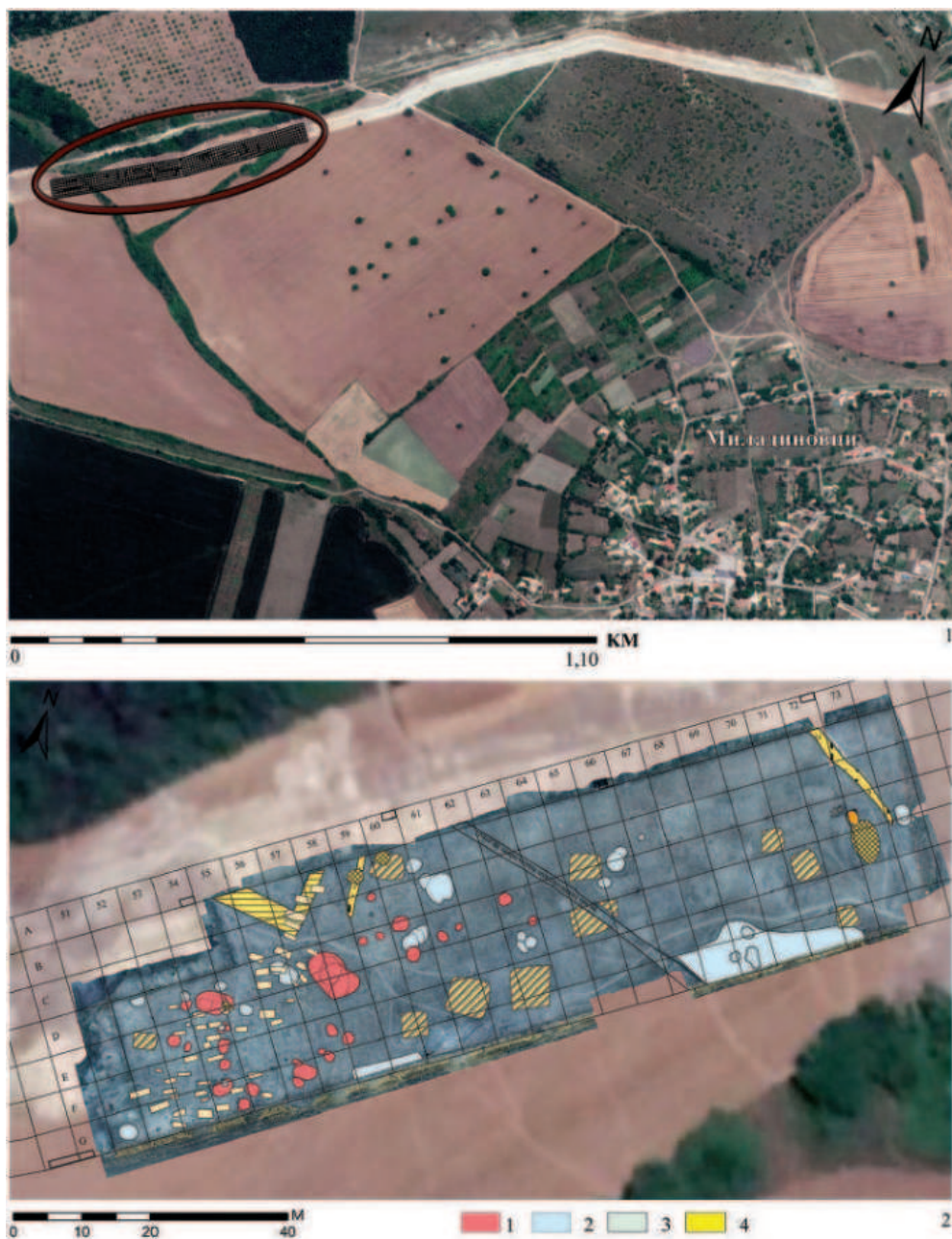


Fig. 1. Miladinovtsi. 1 - location of the pit complex; 2 - registered features: 1 - features from the Neolithic period; 2 - features from the Post-Chalcolithic period; 3 - features from the Late Antiquity; 4 - features from the Middle Ages

357-361; Nikolov et al. 2021, 203-207). Before the archaeological studies geomagnetic mapping of the terrain was conducted² which suggested that the archaeological features are concentrated in the high, flat eastern part of the vicinity, over an area of about 0.3 hectares. Single features were found in its western and central parts.

The investigated eastern part of the archaeological site provides evidence of habitation and the use of the place spanning four periods - the Neolithic (end of the Early or beginning of the Late Neolithic - mid-6th millennium BC), the Post-Chalcolithic (end of the 5th and 4th millennia BC), the Late Antiquity (the 4th century), and the Early Middle Ages (second half of the 9th and 10th centuries). Registered features are 137 in total (Fig. 1 2). Of these, 28 pits belong to the Neolithic; 29 pits and one ground feature, possibly a dwelling - to the Post-Chalcolithic; two pits - to the Late Antiquity; and eight pits, four trenches, one large dug-out facility, one ground feature, 12 pit-houses, and a cemetery with 46 unearthened graves - to the Early Middle Ages. Five of the investigated pits have undetermined dating.

All four periods show evidence of features with ritual functions, and the Post-Chalcolithic and Medieval also show features related to settlements. In scientific terms, the archaeological complex turned out to be quite noteworthy, offering evidence about four eras in a previously little-known area.

This article expounds the preliminary results of investigated dug-out ritual features (pits) from the end of the Early Neolithic or the beginning of the Late Neolithic. In addition to analysing data obtained from archaeological research, the article also includes the results from the anthropological study of a Neolithic skeleton, as well as registered AMS dates.

Depending on the specifics of the form and the manner of fill accumulation, investigated Neolithic pits can be divided into three groups: pits with an oval or round mouth part, and with a wall either vertical, sloping or curved to the bottom; pits with an oval or round mouth part, with a wall which is step-like on one side; pit complexes with outer outlines shaped by several separate, sometimes intersecting dug-out features.

First group of pits (Fig. 2)

Fifteen Neolithic pits can be attributed to the first of the groups defined above. The dimensions of the pits with an oval opening range from 1.10 x 1.50 to 2.60 x 3.60 m, and the diameter of those with a round mouth - from 1 to 1.50 m. On the surface they are often marked by clusters of burnt construction daub and small to medium-sized stones. The cluster is typically located in the central part

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² The geophysical study was conducted by Associate Prof. Nikola Tonkov, PhD (National Archaeological Institute and Museum - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences).

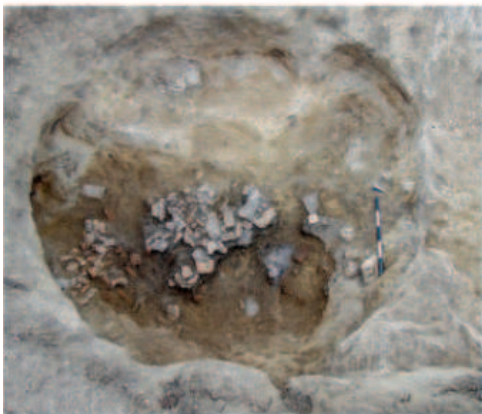
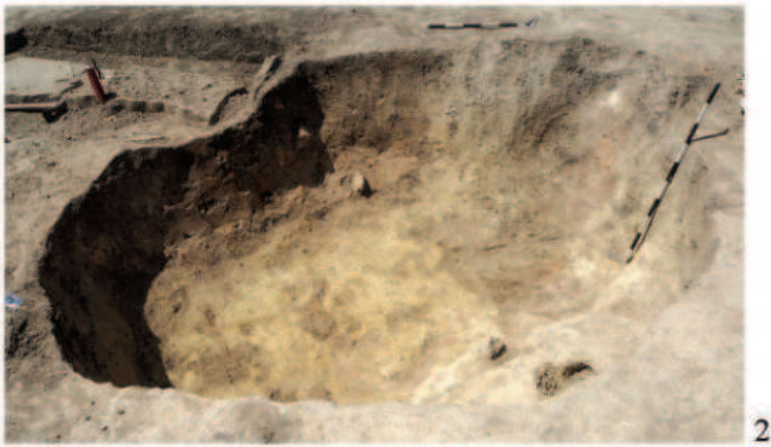
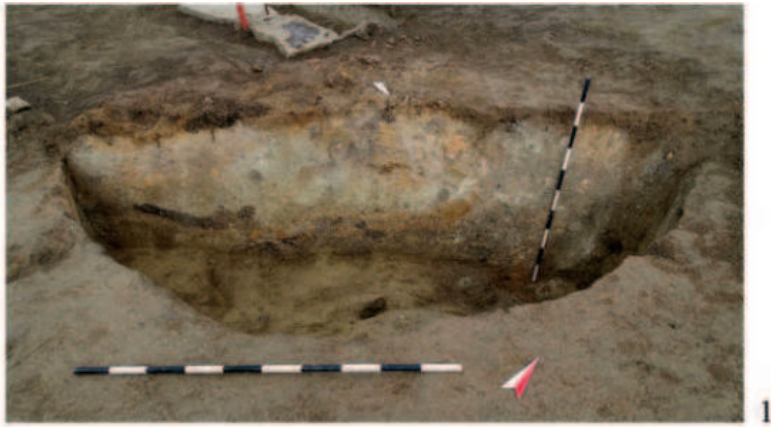


Fig. 2. Miladinovtsi. Pits from the first group: 1 - vertical profile of Pit 14; 2 - horizontal plan of Pit 14; 3 and 4 - stages of investigation of Pit 39

of the pit or occupies one of its halves. The walls of the pits are vertical, sloping or curved to the bottom. The fill is grey or dark brown with a high density, sometimes mixed with small coals. It reveals pottery sherds, animal bones in low concentration, as well as individual shapeless pieces of burnt construction debris, fragments of the floor clay of a domed oven, and small stones. In Pit 13 alone two small objects were found: a fragment from a loom weight and a ceramic disc with a hole.

In some of the pits, close to the bottom or at the very bottom, there are clusters of highly eroded stones, large pieces of burnt construction daub, or animal bones. Such a cluster is registered in Pit 15. The seven stones are about 15 x 15 cm in size and were found in its northwestern half. The cluster has an elongated shape and dimensions of about 80 x 30 cm. A large stone lying horizontally and measuring about 30 x 40 cm was cleared at the bottom of Pit 18. In Pit 21, just above the bottom, there is a cluster of animal bones and a deer antler located horizontally.

In Pit 44, two stages of fill were distinguished. The lower layer about 50 cm thick consists of grey-black soil with high density. A relatively high concentration of pottery sherds, animal bones, and pieces from burnt construction daub were found in it. In the upper part of the pit, the fill is lighter in colour, and on the surface, there is a cluster of fragments of floor putty of a dome oven, pottery sherds and animal bones. There is an animal skull, probably of a deer, almost in the centre of the cluster.

Pit 20 had more specific functions and will be presented separately and in greater detail below. In that pit, a human skeleton was found in a bent position pressed by compactly situated pieces of burnt construction debris.

Second group of pits (Fig. 3)

The second type of Neolithic pits comprises ones with a round or oval shape with one side step-like, so as a result, the pits get narrower in depth. Studied pits are six in total. They are small or medium-sized. The oval-shaped pits have sizes from 1 x 1.40 m to 1.80 x 2.10 m, and the diameters of the ones with a round opening are up to 2.80 m. On the surface, a few pits are marked with pieces of burnt construction daub, some of which display wattle imprints. Their fill is lighter in colour and barely distinguishable from the sterile soil. It contains few pottery sherds and many pieces of burnt daub.

Either the eastern or the southern side of the pits has a step-like shape, and in one case - the northern side too, but due to the small number of investigated pits from the group, no regularity can be established so far. There are one, two or three step-like indents, 20 to 80 cm wide and 20 to 40 cm high. When a pit has only one step-like indentation, it is typically located in the upper or middle section, approximately 40-50 cm below the upper edge. The wall above it is either slightly sloping or vertical. When two or three indents have been formed, they are located one below another, the top being in the high part, and the bottom reaching the middle part of the pit's depth. The uppermost one or two

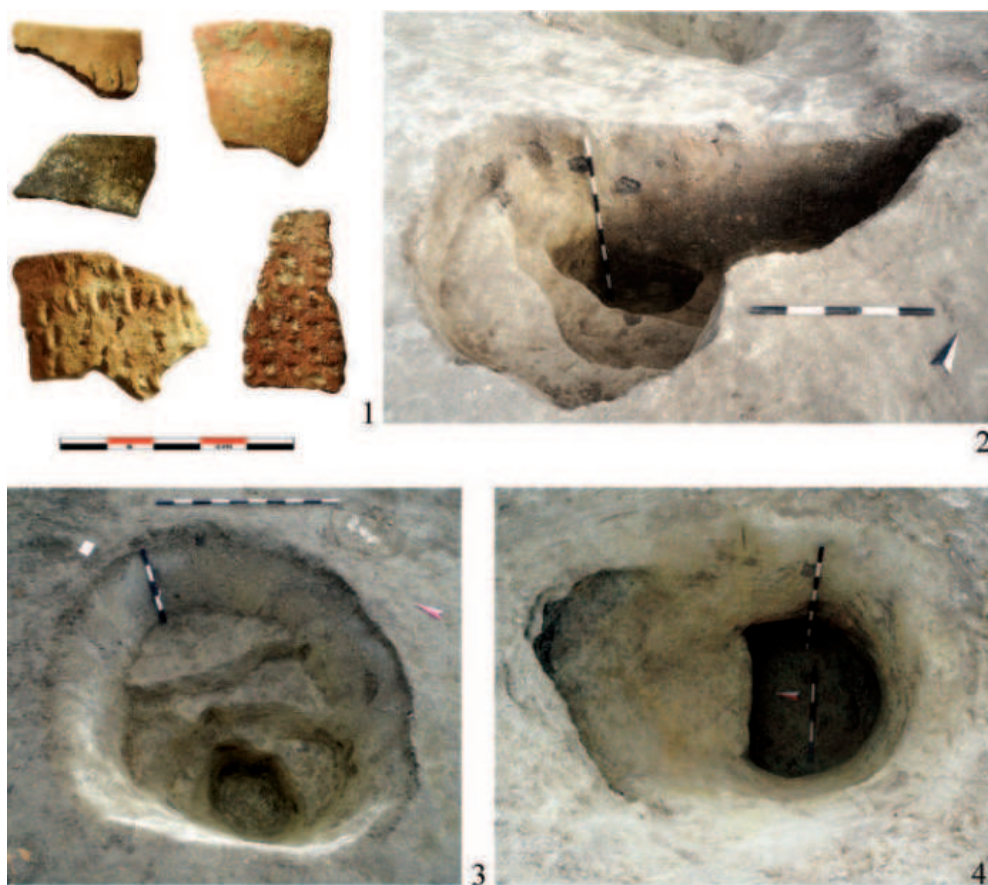


Fig. 3. Miladinovtsi. Pits from the second group: 1 - pottery sherds from Pit 26; 2 - horizontal plan of Pit 26; 3 - horizontal plan of Pit 23; 4 - horizontal plan of Pit 25

step-like indentations are vertically shaped, and the lowest one is slightly sloping descending smoothly to the bottom of the pit.

At the bottom of some pits, a small excavation had been made with a diameter of about 80 cm and a depth of up to 40 cm. The fill is dark grey, saturated with small coals and pieces of burnt construction daub.

One of the investigated pits (24) displays a more specific layout. It has a round opening and a diameter of about 1.20 m. Its western wall displays an arched niche, 90 cm high and 50 cm wide at the base. In its eastern part, opposite the niche, a step-like indent had been formed with a maximum width of about 40 cm. In the southern and northern directions, it merges with the walls of the pit. Its height is about 30 cm. Two levels are distinguished in the fill of this pit. Right on the bottom of the pit, there is a thin grey-brown layer about 2 cm thick, above which is the first layer - a grey-yellow clay one. It reaches the

upper level of the niche. There is almost no archaeological material in it. Above it lies a layer of relatively low density containing numerous fragments of burnt construction daub and small stones. In the northeastern part, a higher concentration of burnt daub fragments was observed. Among these fragments are small pieces of floor putty from a dome oven, wall daub with wattle imprints, and slightly burnt wall sections from repositories. In the fill of another pit (25), two clusters were identified. At 15 cm below the detection level in the northern part, a concentration of medium-sized stones was unearthed, with the stones following the pit wall depth-wise. Additionally, at the same level, a cluster of pottery sherds was discovered, likely part of the same vessel that had broken on-site. On the surface, poorly preserved, shapeless fragments of burnt construction daub were uncovered.

Third group of pits (Fig. 4)

The third group of Neolithic pits comprises two dug-out complexes (12 and 22). They are large and consist of several excavations - a large central one and several smaller lateral ones. Due to their specifics, they will be presented separately.

Feature 12. It consists of a total of three levels. The pit in the central part of the complex (12) is the largest. It has an approximately elliptical shape and dimensions of about 3.10 x 1.70 m. It is about 1.60 m deep. At the top, its walls are vertical, and near the bottom, they curve and smoothly connect to it. A cluster of small, crushed stones with a round shape and a diameter of about 1 m was found at the bottom. The fill is homogeneous, clayey, with relatively high density and a gray-black colour. It contains a large number of pottery sherds (Fig. 6), animal bones, and broken stones of small size, as well as pieces of burnt construction daub. The materials in the layer are disorderly. In the northeastern part of the pit, under the piling of materials, a small dug-out area 15 cm deep and with a concave bottom was studied. It has a roughly circular shape and a diameter of about 30 cm. Ten small crushed stones in total were uncovered in it.

Feature 12.1. Located in the western part of the complex, the pit is nearly circular, measuring approximately 1.40 meters in diameter and 0.90 meters in depth. Its walls are vertical at the top, gradually curving as they approach the bottom, merging seamlessly with the flat base without a distinct border. The fill is homogeneous, with a relatively high density, and is grey-black in colour, containing only a few materials. This excavation is likely contemporaneous with Pit 12.

Feature 12.2. It is located in the eastern part of the pit complex. Almost circular in shape, it has a diameter of about 1.20 m and is about 1 m deep. The walls are vertical, and the bottom is flat. The fill of the pit is homogeneous, with a relatively high density, and is grey-black in colour. In all likelihood, this level is synchronous with Pit 12.

Feature 22. Its dimensions at the detection level are 7.50 x 4.80 m, and the upper level is marked by a grey-black layer of medium density, with a very high concentration of pottery sherds and animal bones. At about 0.60 m from

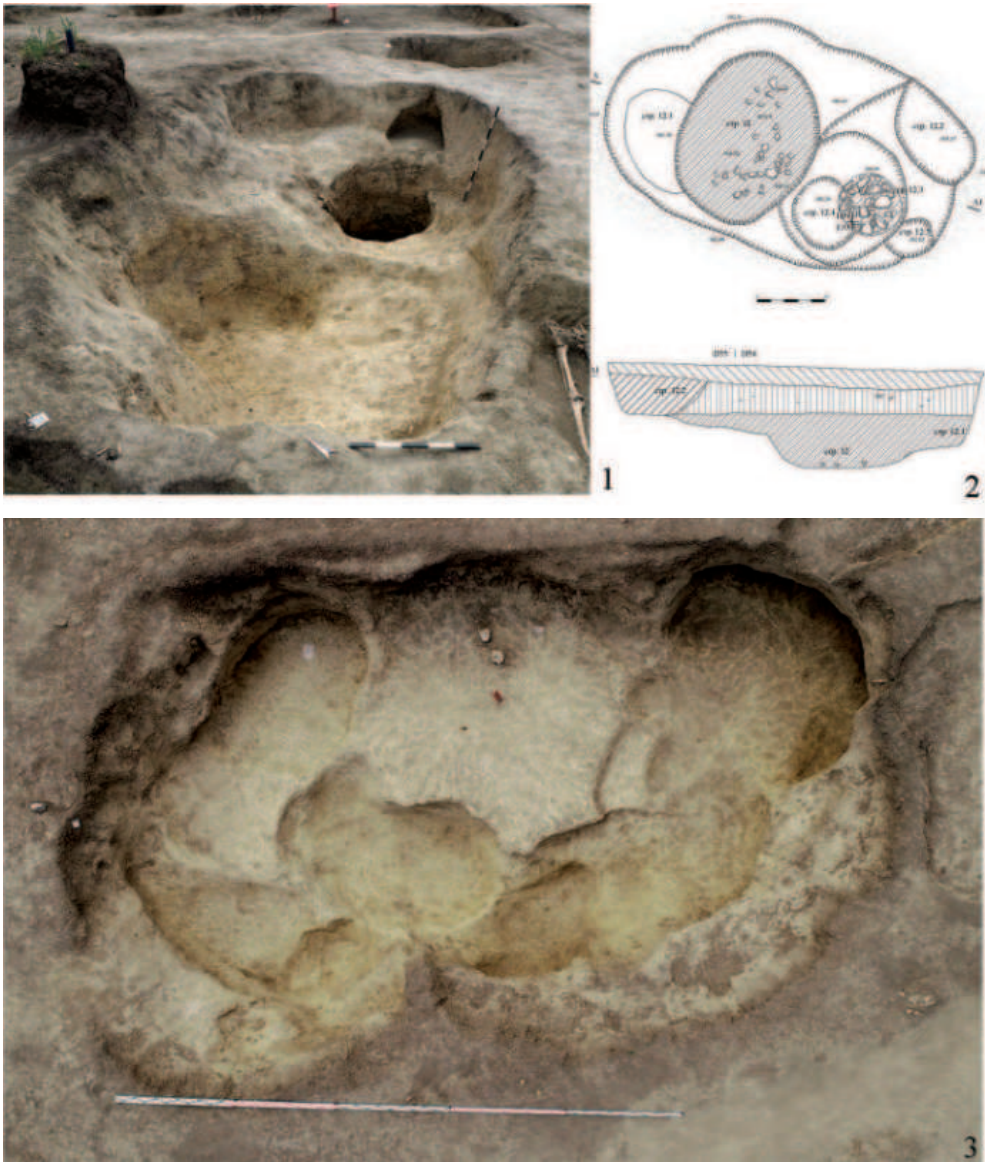


Fig. 4. Miladinovtsi. Pits from the third group: 1 - horizontal plan of pit complex 12; 2 - graphic plan and section of pit complex 12; 3 - horizontal plan of pit complex 22

the surface, there are three separate excavations with Neolithic archaeological material.

Feature 22.2 is located in the central part of the complex. It is a pit with an irregular oval shape, sloping sides, and an uneven bottom. Its dimensions are 2 x 1.60 m. The fill is grey, has high density, and displays yellow inclusions. The

concentration of pottery sherds is quite low. Animal bones are almost completely missing.

Feature 22.3 is located in the northeastern part of the complex. It represents a pit with an elongated oval shape, sloping sides, and a flat bottom. Its dimensions are 1.80 x 1.20 m. The fill is grey, has high density, and displays multiple pottery sherds and a medium concentration of animal bones.

Feature 22.4 is in the southwestern part of the large excavation. It represents an irregular oval-shaped pit, with straight walls and a flat bottom. Its dimensions are 1.80 x 1.40 m. The fill is grey, with medium density and a medium concentration of pottery sherds and animal bones. A large number of rim fragments from vessels was registered, including jugs, bowls, biconical and pot-shaped bowls, as well as fragments of vessel walls with a coarse surface, incised decoration, shallow and narrow vertical flutes, and a few featuring red ochre.

Summary of the ceramic assemblage from the Neolithic ritual pits

The discovered fragments of ceramic vessels are few, most of them being undecorated wall sherds. However, sufficiently significant fragments of rims, bottoms and handles with a lighter or darker surface were also found. Among the fragments in the lighter range, ones with light brown and red-brown colour predominate, while in the darker range, most are black, grey, or dark brown. Their surfaces vary from coarsely smoothed to polished. The clay is mixed with a significant amount of quartz grains and sometimes traces of organics can be noticed. The fracture is most often tripartite, with a gray or gray-black core and two lighter outer zones.

These vessels are sparsely represented. All of them are thin-walled with slightly arched walls, undecorated. The rim is thinning, but in one case, it is slightly thickened from the inside. Their surfaces are well-smoothed, with a red-brown or dark grey colour.

Bowls are the best represented, significantly more in quantity compared to other forms. Sherds of shallow, deep pot-shaped, and biconical bowls were found. Their surface varies from coarse to polished, and light brown, grey-brown or orange-brown in colour.

Plain shallow bowls. Their walls are slightly to strongly arched, with straight rims, subtly defined on the outer side, or outwardly profiled. The thick-walled examples predominate, though thin-walled ones were found too. Their surfaces range from smooth to very well smoothed, with light brown, grey-brown, and, less often, dark brown or brown-red colours.

Typically, the thick-walled bowls have a straight rim and rough surface, and their outer side displays impressed decoration - fingernail pinches or incisions made with a sharp tool (fingernail). The fingernail incisions are located vertically or on one side, at an angle. The decoration usually begins a short distance below the rim.

Unlike the thick-walled bowls, most of the thin-walled ones feature a pronounced rim and a well-smoothed surface, and their body is covered with groups of inclined parallel flutes above and below the most bulging part. The groups of

flutes alternate with a slope to the right and to the left, forming negative triangles below the rim section.

The thin-walled bowls have straight rims, sometimes accentuated by an incised line on the exterior. Below their rounded middle section, a decoration of barely visible, narrow, and shallow horizontal flutes is arranged closely together. Alternatively, the body is adorned with groups of parallel flutes, with each group displaying a consistently changing orientation. Narrow, tall negative triangles form between the groups.

Pot-shaped bowls. They are thick-walled, with a coarse to smooth surface. Their rims are straight or slightly thickened. Some of the bowls have an outer surface decorated with vertical or sloping fingernail impressions. Sometimes there is an additionally attached horizontal embossed strip.

Biconical bowls. They are thin-walled, with a grey, brown or black surface ranging from smoothed to polished. They have a slightly biconical body with a rounded transition. Their rims are slightly everted and highlighted on the outside. Some vessels display vertical fingernail impressions on their bodies.

Low tulip-shaped vessels, probably on a hollow stool. They are thin-walled, with dark grey or dark brown, well-smoothed surfaces. One vessel is decorated with tightly spaced, shallow horizontal flutes, another one displays horizontal traces of smoothing, and a third one has a smooth surface.

The cups are very few. Their walls are thin, with brown-red or light brown, well-smoothed to very well-smoothed surfaces. They have a rounded body, densely covered with thin, shallow inclined flutes. Two small rod-shaped handles with protrusions have also been registered, from cups. One has a slightly pointed protrusion, while the other has a protrusion that bends outward.

The pot-shaped vessels are thin-walled or thick-walled, either open or closed.

Open pot-shaped vessels. They are less represented. Some have a conical upper part, which transitions down into a rounded body. One vessel is tightly covered from the rim down with wide shallow almost horizontal flutes. A sherd from such a vessel has also been registered featuring a relief band with dimples below the rim and fingernail impressions on the body.

Closed pot-shaped vessels. They are more often thick-walled, with some of them having slightly thickened bottoms. The rim is straight or profiled. The outer surface displays vertical impressed fingernail decorations. In one case, the rim area is well smoothed, while the body is covered with disorganized barbotine decoration. There is also decoration in the form of horizontal rows of incised vertical lines.

In addition, there are sherds from three thin-walled vessels with a vertical rim section and a slightly bulging deep body tightly covered with narrow and shallow horizontal flutes. In at least one case, the vessel had had a handle, most likely vertical, attached to the wide part of the body. On their outer surface, there are tightly spaced narrow and shallow horizontal flutes.

The uncovered bottoms of vessels of different shapes are plain or slightly thickened. Several dense low stools have also been registered.

Several rope-like, vertically perforated handles from pot-shaped vessels were found too, as well as the previously mentioned vertical rod-shaped handles with a protrusion.

Among the sherds with decoration, fingernail impressions prevail. These are most often vertical and sometimes sloping. Fragments featuring a relief band with dimples are also present, with the surfaces on either side of the band covered in horizontal impressions.

The brief characterization of the ceramic assemblage from the ritual pits near Miladinovtsi dates them to the time of the transition from the Early Neolithic to the Late Neolithic in the region. In addition to traditional rounded Early Neolithic vessels, it also features ones that gradually became typical of the Late Neolithic, e.g., biconical bowls and other vessels with a vertical rod-shaped handle with a protrusion.

Pit with a Neolithic grave (Feature 20) (Fig. 5)

In one of the Neolithic pits from the first group, a skeleton was found buried in a strongly bent position. The pit is dug into the sterile soil, has a slightly oval form measuring 1.80 x 1.60 m, and is 1.20 m deep. The bottom is flat. Two shallow layers were registered in the northern and southern parts of the bottom. They represent small holes filled with a grey layer of small pieces of construction daub and coal.

At the bottom of the pit, on an area of about 0.70 x 1 m, there is a black layer about 3 cm thick, which probably comprises charred timber. Above the layer and to the mouth of the pit, the fill displays different shades of brown, inhomogeneous and with normal density, mixed with light yellow to greenish clay, with a second black layer that divides it into two levels, with a high concentration of pieces of burnt construction daub. Some of the pieces show poorly preserved imprints of sticks and split trees, while others have a smoothed surface.

At 1.03 m from the upper edge of the pit, a human skeleton was uncovered. It lies next to the pit's southwestern wall amidst a layer of crushed burnt construction daub perhaps heaped while still hot. The dead person has been placed in a bent position to the right, with the head pointing south and with a look turned east, i.e., "looking" at the interior of the pit. The bones lie in anatomical order. The legs are strongly bent at the knees. The thighs and lower legs are parallel, the bones of the left foot are approximately perpendicular to the lower leg and they point north. The length of the femur is 44 cm. The arms are bent at the elbows. The bones of the left wrist lie immediately north of the mandible, under the chin, over the bones of the right wrist. The ribs and the long bones of the right arm were not found. The spine is very poorly preserved, with only the first three vertebrae and a few lumbar vertebrae surviving. The pelvis located near the western wall is also in a poor condition. Next to it, a millstone has been uncovered. Taking into account the characteristics of the skull, the long bones, and the measurements of the femur and talus, the skeleton was attributed to a male over 40 years of age (the age has been determined based on the degree of obliteration of the skull sutures and the degree of abrasion of the chewing surface of the teeth). The height of the individual had been 162.3 cm³.

³ The anthropological analysis of skeletal remains was performed by Associate Prof. Diana Toneva, PhD, and Associate Prof. Silvia Nikolova, ScD, from the Institute of Experimental



Fig. 5. Miladinovtsi. Pit with a Neolithic grave (Feature 20): 1, 2, 4 - views of the pit;
3 - ceramic vessel found near the skeleton in Pit 20

Directly above the skeletal remains, close to the southwestern wall of the pit, at 10 cm above the skull, a cluster of ceramic vessel fragments was uncovered - a deep pot-shaped bowl with finger-pinch decoration across its entire body. More than half of the vessel is preserved.

At a depth of 0.85 m from the level of the pit's detection, a layer of black colour was found that covers tightly the skeletal remains. Its thickness varies within the range of the pit: in the western and central parts it is 2-3 cm, and in the eastern part it is up to 10 cm. A layer with a high concentration of burnt construction daub pieces lies at this level including the periphery, where the pieces are larger.

From a depth of 0.75 m to the level of the pit's detection, the layer is light brown, saturated with large and medium-sized pieces of burnt construction daub piled compactly.

The pottery sherds found in the fill of the pit are few in number. From the significant rim fragments, several forms have been identified: two deep bowls - one decorated with small fingernail impressions beginning below a plain band under the rim, and the other with the same type of decoration but featuring larger fingernail impressions; two dishes - one of them with slightly arc-shaped walls and a rim accentuated by slight thickening on the inner side, and the other one with arc-shaped walls and a tapering rim; two tulip-shaped vessels - one thin-walled, with dense horizontal narrow and shallow flutes on the outer very well-smoothed grey-brown surface, and the other one of the "low tulip" type with a dark grey surface and barely visible dense horizontal traces of smoothing; a closed pot-shaped vessel with a spherical body and a low cylindrical rim; and a deep closed pot-shaped vessel with a thickened bottom shaped like a low solid stool. In addition to the rim fragments, several walls of ceramic vessels with decoration were found. Among these are a fragment with a well-smoothed light brown surface showing two approximately parallel bands outlined by incised lines and filled with stabs, as well as a sherd from another vessel with a well-smoothed brown surface and the same type of decoration, however with bigger stabs.

The Early Neolithic skeleton uncovered in Feature 20 at Miladinovtsi lies in a wider ritual context - the pit in which it is located is much wider than would be necessary for a single grave. Early Neolithic graves are typically found within the boundaries of the settlement, under residential structures or in inter-residential areas. Often, it is not possible to determine the outlines of the burial pit, but in cases where the boundaries are identifiable, the pit is small. Only in Vaksevo, Kyustendil region, in a small elliptical pit with a "mixed" fill within the boundaries of the settlement, skeletal remains of a man aged 45-50 years have been registered, though it is not clear whether the case is different from a normal burial (Chohadzhiev 2001, 171-172). As a meaningful parallel to Pit 20, one can point to the ritual complex on the periphery of the Early Neolithic set-

Morphology, Pathology and Anthropology with Museum - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and we thank them here.



Fig. 6. Miladinovtsi. Neolithic pottery sherds from the pit complex 12

tlement of Slatina-Sofia where human burials had been carried out in a ritual context.

What makes the Early Neolithic grave in Miladinovtsi different is that it was found in a ritual pit in an extra-settlement context, namely in the context of a pit sanctuary. The location of the settlement the buried person originated from is not clear, but it is obviously not far away. The skeletal remains were found among burnt pieces of construction daub and were covered tightly with them. The crushed daub was piled into the pit while still hot which explains the presence of a charred layer over the skeleton.

Skeletal remains uncovered in Neolithic pits that are not connected to settlement features seem to be an exception to the rule, for the time being. The site which is chronologically closest is the dug-out ritual feature with five graves of children and adults buried in a bent position (one of the graves has two skeletons) in the region of Krum, Haskovo region (Vandova 2012; Vandova et al. 2013). There is no data about the nature of the pit's fill except for the presence in it of pottery sherds and a fragment from an anthropomorphic figurine. The complex is dated to the beginning of the Late Neolithic, Karanovo II-III period.

During the second half of the North Balkan Early Neolithic, or in more general terms, during the second quarter and the middle of the 6th millennium BC, extra-settlement pit sanctuaries emerged, and in some of their pits, human burials were performed. Here are some examples which can provide chronological and meaningful parallels of a ritual Feature 20 from Miladinovtsi.

In the Early Neolithic pit sanctuary near Ohoden, Vratsa region, in the middle of a highly elongated shallow dug-out feature, a deeper pit was dug, in which a woman was buried in a bent position. The fill of the feature, as well as of the burial pit, contains burnt animal bones, coals, pottery sherds, and burnt daub pieces. As an extension of this feature, a shallow pit was dug out, in which a child in a bent position was buried. The fill of the burial pit is like the one described above. Three more graves have been unearthed near this large feature - of a baby, a juvenile, and an adult, in separate pits (Ganetsovski 2009; Ganetsovski 2013; Nikolov 2011, 209-214).

Dated to the end of the Early Neolithic - the cultural phenomenon of Starčevo, is a feature in an extra-settlement context dug into the sterile soil, lying under the Late Neolithic layer of the Vinča-Belo Brdo settlement, the so-called tomb with dromos, in which nine skeletons of adults, mostly men, have been found (Vasić 1936, 8-14). According to some, they were buried simultaneously after a certain catastrophe or epidemic (Peric, Nikolic 2006, 65-66); others argue that they were laid there as a result of ritual actions (Garašanin 1968, 256-257).

An important site for the topic is Zlatara in Srem, Vojvodina - an Early Neolithic pit sanctuary from the late period of the cultural phenomenon of Starčevo (Lekovič 1995, 27-34) unrecognized during brief rescue digs. Two large elongated features deeper in their wider southwestern part have been explored in it. It was in this area that funerals were carried out in both cases. The first feature has a fill with pottery sherds, small and medium-sized stones, and pieces of construction daub in which two skeletons in a bent position to the left have been found at a small distance from one another - of a child and of a young man. In

the second feature, in a similar context, a skeleton of an elderly woman in a bent position to the left has been uncovered.

In the region of Srem, Vojvodina, the exploration of two more sites from the end of the Early Neolithic allows to draw up a possible parallel. The problem with their trustworthy interpretation as pit sanctuaries in an extra-settlement context stems, on the one hand, from the fact that they have been investigated over a small area by means of drilling, and on the other hand, above all from the prevailing paradigm in Serbian prehistory, notably that all larger Early Neolithic pits represent remnants of residential dugouts. Despite insufficient published data from field observations, there is a good reason to identify the sites of Golukut on the western slope of Fruška gora and Baštine near Obrež as pit sanctuaries. In Golukut, a medium-sized pit has been explored, at the bottom of which a grave of an elderly woman in a bent position to the right has been found. The fill includes pottery sherds, animal bones, coals, layers of ash, mussel shells, and a layer of burnt pieces of construction daub (Petrovic 1986-1987). Two connected pits have been excavated in Baštine and their researcher claims that these are not residential dugouts. A child skeleton in a bent position to the right has been found in the feature's fill. The fill comprises pottery sherds, animal bones, stone and bone tools, mussel shells, coals, a large amount of pieces of construction daub and ovens (Brukner 1960).

An Early Neolithic pit with a grave from Sarorac near Smederevo has also been found in an extra-settlement context. The situation is unclear regarding two pits "with waste" in the Starčevo site, Vojvodina, where a child was buried in each of the pits, as well as regarding two other pits with skeletons of adults in a bent position from the same site (cf. Galović 1967, 169).

Researchers have interpreted the Early Neolithic complex of Galovo near Slavonski Brod in the northern parts of Croatia as a settlement with burial ritual features near it and, based on numerous radiocarbon dates, have referred it to the second and third quarters of the 6th millennium BC (Minichreiter, Botić 2010). Since the evidence of the presence of remains from a settlement with pit-houses does not seem convincing, it is most likely an extra-settlement ritual pit complex. It belongs to the cultural phenomenon of Starčevo. There are also two dug-out features with graves - one is approximately round and contains a male burial. The second is quite long and relatively wide, with three graves inside - two male and one female. The skeletons are in a bent position to the right or left, facing the interior of the feature.

In addition to dozens of ordinary round pits, the Early Neolithic pit sanctuary Cristian I in the region of Sibiu, Romania (cultural phenomenon Starčevo-Criș, late stage), includes a large but relatively shallow dug-out feature with a rounded four-sided shape, at the bottom of which several deeper pits have been dug in (Luca et al. 2013, 7-11). Seven skeletons in total have been identified in the feature. A man was buried in a pit, with his body stretched out to the left, his arms raised up and his legs bent backward. Behind his back is a female in a hocker position to the right. Large river stones, pottery sherds, flint artefacts, animal bones and pieces of red ochre comprise the fill of the burial space. In another pit of the feature, a male with slightly bent legs and a child in a stretched position were buried. The fill of this facility also comprises river

stones, animal bones, pottery sherds, flint artefacts, an obsidian plate, as well as pieces of red ochre. Between the two pits, at the bottom of the feature, two adults in a bent position to the right were laid side by side, and a third, found at their feet, was probably that of a child.

Presented quite schematically, the dozens of extra-settlement ritual features in the Northern Balkan region are dated approximately in the middle of the 6th millennium BC and account for the chronological and meaningful context of Feature 20 from Miladinovtsi. However, finding them within the confines of a pit sanctuary immediately raises the question about the meaning of performing a funeral in this context. There is no reason to interpret this act as a sacrifice in the literal sense of the word. However, its interpretation can hardly derive from the context of the objectives of early agricultural rituals in pit sanctuaries, which bound the living, their deceased ancestors and the fruit-bearing forces person-alized by the fertile earth in which the ritual pits were dug.

Three of the Neolithic pits studied were dated by examining three animal bone samples, respectively. These are Features 17, 21, and 44. Due to the considerable unity of the presented ceramic assemblage, the obtained dates can be interpolated on all dug-out features and accordingly allow dating the pit complex in the last phase of the Early Neolithic or the beginning of the Late Neolithic: 5562-5381 BC. The characteristics of the ceramic assemblage correspond to the radiocarbon dates (Table 1).

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from Miladinovtsi

SITE	DATE BP	CAL. BC	CON-TEXT	TYPE OF SAMPLE	METHOD	LABORATORY INDEX
Miladi-novtsi	6574±28	5562-5478	Pit 17	Animal bone	C14-AMS	SUERC-99554 (GU58384)
Miladi-novtsi	6528±21	5557-5471	Pit 21	Animal bone	C14-AMS	SUERC-99555 (GU58385)
Miladi-novtsi	6511±22	5441-5381	Pit 44	Animal bone	C14-AMS	SUERC-99556 (GU58386)

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