Notes on the Study of Early Social Reproduction in Thrace
(Based on Data from Neolithic Mortuary Practices)

Introduction

Our knowledge of cultural development in the Neolithic testify models of social reproduction in the various microregions of Ancient Thrace which shed light not only on the early cultural history of the region but on the comparative study of its neighboring areas as well.

The contemporary development of the concept of cultural reproduction is associated with the work of P. Bourdieau and the growing interest in everyday social practices (Jenk 1991:1). It is generally assumed that social reproduction is the process of reproduction of social relationships in both its synchronic and diachronic aspects (Foster 1995: 165; Sanderson 1995:15). Though occupying a central place in anthropological literature, this issue is new to the study of the prehistoric Balkans, lacking a developed methodology for the analysis of archaeological records.

Social reproduction is an aspect of social development and social structures which allows us to analyze the life of prehistoric population as a system of social strategies for the reproduction of certain social relationships. We have to emphasize that reproduction does not mean the reiteration of certain traditions: in most cases social strategies are based on different kinds of innovations. These two aspects of reproduction were documented in the study of Neolithic mortuary rites (Nikolova, in print), while the newly published data presented by K. Buchvarov (2003) from Southern Bulgaria can be used to update some of the theses or formulate new ones.

The purpose of this article is to analyze and compare the mortuary practices in two Tells – Kazanlak and Karanovo – from the perspective of their possible interpretation as social strategies for ensuring the stability of the household and the village community through an association of the funeral with the home and the settlement. Their aspects include both the cult of the ancestors and the idea of generational continuity (the diachronic aspects of social reproduction) and intersocial contacts and relationships (the synchronic aspects of social reproduction). The argumentation will lead to the conclusion that Neolithic mortuary practices are characterized by a dynamic development and represent an aspect of the institution of early complex societies in Thrace.

Settlement Burials as a Social Strategy in Prehistory

The newly published data from Kazanlak Tell and the updated data from Karanovo Tell (Buchvarov 2003) allow us to argue hypotheses for the meaning of settlement burials (see e.g. Nikolova 2002a; Nikolova 2002b) and for the grouping of Tells, as well as to compare the data regionally and diachronically.

Kazanluk
The development of mortuary rituals in the settlements of Kazanluk Tell can be divided into two periods: Early and Late Neolithic.

According to the existing data, in the period of the Karanovo I culture settlement burials were not popular as a ritual practice in Kazanlak Tell, with the exception of one burial in the 17th horizon, two burials in the 6th horizon and one burial each in the 11th and 12th horizon. A skull fragment has been documented in the 12th horizon. The burials were discovered in different parts of the Tell, which means that they cannot be associated with any particular territory within the settlement, but it is possible to assume that the earliest burials in lines 6 and 7 were related to the traditions of a particular household or clan. At the time of the 16th horizon the ritual was performed by another household as well and only by the end of the Early Neolithic we see one burial and a skull fragment, as well as one burial in J9. The interruption between the 15th and the 13th horizons and the later reappearance of the ritual could mean that it was imprinted in the memory of generations of households but was only practiced on specific occasions. What’s more, the closeness of the burials prompts us to seek a possible relationship between certain household traditions. The alternative explanation could be population changes in the structure of the micro-settlement, the migration of households or an early destruction of burials.

It is important to point out that by the end of the Neolithic in lines 12 and 13 the site of the burial might have acquired a ritual and symbolic meaning, which explains the concentration of burials in the next periods. Besides, the spatial proximity of mortuary practices is also documented in N7-8 despite a difference of 9 settlement horizons (between burials Kz-1 and Kz-12). It is even possible that the skull fragment near Tell 9 (Kz-9) represents a connection between the same household traditions interrupted in Tell 7.

For the study of mortuary practices from Kazanluk Tell the concentration of burials and human bones in the central part of lines 12 and 13 might mean that a nest necropolis was formed there in the Late Neolithic. In the beginning of the Late Neolithic burials are still found at different sites in the settlement or even close to previous burials without any indications for a chronological continuity of traditions. In later settlements, however, burials are concentrated in lines 12 and 13. The double grave was found precisely in N12. Unfortunately, the absence of any indications for the age of most of the buried permits only the general conclusion that there are children among them.

The spatial analysis of the burials from Kazanluk Tell demonstrate a development in the mortuary practices of the Tell. The tradition of child burials is manifested even in the earliest settlement, though this can be considered an exception. It was sustained until the beginning of the late Neolithic when, as we stated above, a nest necropolis was probably formed in a specific part of the settlement. This moment in the history of the settlement leads to the hypothesis that at certain times a necropolis might be formed in part of the settlement where the burials might even have the meaning and the function of extramural necropolises. If this interpretation is true, it supports the idea that extramural necropolises in Neolithic Thrace might be related to household traditions, that they were small-scale, possibly subject to destruction and therefore hard to document. Bones from destroyed graves can also be found on the sites discussed here.

Unfortunately, the absence of published architectural plans does not allow us to relate the burials to documented dwellings. The only burial undoubtedly located near a dwelling is an Early Neolithic child burial (Kz-6). The data about burial Kz-21 is of
particular interest. This is the only double burial of a woman and a child. The head of the woman was touching an oven of the same horizon (Buchvarov 2003:69). On the other hand, the publication does not mention a floor, which means we cannot yet be certain that the burial was located within a dwelling. The greater part of the burials from Kazanlak Tell are described as located in the space between the dwellings (Buchvarov 2003:61-71).

**Karanovo**

Only two burials of young persons have been discovered in sector II of the earliest settlements of Karanovo Tell from the Karanovo I culture. Therefore, according to the available data, settlement burials gained popularity in the Karanovo II culture (13). Child burials predominate discovered both in the southwestern and the northeastern investigated sectors.

The child burials from the period of the Karanovo II culture are particularly characteristic. This is a period of intensive innovations in Northeastern Thrace. In is interesting to point out that the comparatively numerous child graves stand out against the low popularity of this kind of ritual in Early Neolithic Upper Tundzha where decorated pottery continued during the period of Karanovo II in Northeast Thrace. This contrast implies a pattern whereby the child burials from Karanovo II are an element from the complex system of cultural reproduction in Northeastern Thrace, which can even be associated with Anatolian direct or indirect interactions. In the extreme variant of this pattern we could assume that in the Karanovo II period Tell Karanovo included households with Anatolian origin.

According to the available data in the Karanovo III periods the tradition of child burials was not commonly practiced, whereas the burials of young and adult individuals are more frequent than the early Neolithic.

The double burial from the Karanovo III period of Tell Karanovo connects the rituals in this settlement to those of Tell Kazanlak and the village of Bulgarchevo (Nikolova, in print). The practicing of this specific household tradition in the settlement probably had a special social significance.

The archaeological findings in Karanovo included also a pit of human bones (Buchvarov 2003:58), which might represent a secondary burial of bones from an extramural necropolis or even original settlement burials.

Unfortunately the data from other Thracian settlements are less numerous, but they still confirm that settlement burials were practiced in the Neolithic but there were specificities within each individual settlement (Nikolova in print; Buchvarov 2003).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The study of mortuary practices in Thracian prehistory has several different aspects: reconstruction of the ritual (see e.g. Buchvarov 2003), establishing the social and cult significance and the relationships between the ritual practices from neighboring and more distant settlements and so on (Nikolova 2002a; 2002b; in print).

The settlement burials from Kazanlak and Karanovo Tells can generally be related to household and clan traditions, but it is still possible that some of them were common village rituals. The absence of any contextual information does not allow us to
study this problem in greater detail. One rather general hypothesis that could explain the burial of babies within dwellings was the possible social and symbolic function of assisting the mother in the process of procreation (Nikolova, in print).

The symbolic function of culture is manifested in a system of symbols, rituals and activities which form an integral part not only of cult practices but of everyday social reality as well (Billington R. et al. 1991). The performance of mortuary rituals within the settlements included some aspects of the symbolism of the body, of death, the home, the household, etc. The exceptional character of settlement burials leads to the general conclusion that they had a specific social and symbolic significance. We can even assume that some of them functioned as a metonymy of a certain social group and/or as a necessary element in the ritual and social practices associated with the symbolic binary oppositions life/death, pure/impure, we/they, mortal/immortal, in the legitimating of certain social norms and so on.

Settlement symbolic and social practices were highly dynamic and multidimensional (Rosman & Rubel 2001:75-78; Tripković 2003; Nikolova 2004). Life in the prehistoric settlement required social practices for the daily constitution and affirmation of the various social entities and relationships. The burials within the prehistoric village can be included in this system of social and symbolic practices that could be related both to periods of stabilization and crises of the household or other social entities.

A common feature of the ritual practices from Kazanlak and Karanovo Tells is that according to the available data settlement burials were extremely rare in the early stages of the development of both villages¹. Statistically speaking, however, both tells were not even congruent with the general tendency in the Balkan-Anatolian region, where the number of settlement burials diminished in the late Neolithic. According to the available data, the funeral practices of both tells and especially of Tell Kazanlak show a certain culmination of this tradition, though this might be explained by the appearance of a possible nest necropolis in a specific part of the tell. In Tell Karanovo the age characteristics of the buried changed after the beginning of the late Neolithic, and after the Karanovo III period the ritual deteriorated.

It can be proposed that child burials within the settlements represented an important aspect of the social strategies for reproduction in Prehistory. One possible explanation of their popularity was the reinforcement of the social concern for the children as a strategy for the unification of the household and the community, as well as the care for both mother and child (e.g. the two double burials from Karanovo and Kazanlak). In addition to the data from Upper Thrace analyzed above, it is important to mention the numerous child burials in Ilipinar IX (Roodenberg 1995). This is why we need plenty of additional contextual data to clarify the important issue of household, clan and common village ritual practices within the villages and the relationship of settlement burials to these three levels of social interaction. Generally speaking, their inclusion in

¹ This statement does not write out the possibility that some burials were dislocated or destroyed in prehistoric times, whereby the unearthed settlement would not represent a real cultural fact.
the social strategy of the community can be interpreted as an aspect of the establishment of complex societies in Thrace.

The polysemantic character of the term complexity raises a number of problems in the analysis of the formation and development of complex societies in Thrace. In classical social theory (e.g. H. Spenser, E. Durkheim) the idea of the complex society is associated with the evolutionary concept of society – from the most primitive social organizations to the interpretation of complexity as advancement. In the theory of E. Durkheim the idea of reproduction is presented in a comparatively elementary form whereby more complex societies contain elements from more primitive ones as a remainder from the ones immediately preceding them. The strength of this theory, however, is that this repetition facilitates the constant growth of social ‘capacity’. (Durkheim 2003:122).

M. Stefanovich defines complex society as ‘social groups varying in size and complexity but containing at least two family nuclei (2003:45). Generally speaking, complex societies vary in the stages of their development and in the social strategies they have adopted for the reinforcement of social hierarchy or for the establishment of equality between the different social strata. They can be set against the so-called ‘small-scale society’. The culture of small-scale societies is integral, whereas complex societies are characterized by heterogeneity and cultural diversity, or the so-called subcultures (Rosman & Rubel 2001:26). In other words, the heterogeneity of culture is one of the criteria for social complexity.

From an archaeological point of view, the study of Neolithic cultures in Thrace on the level of archaeological cultures does not create the optimal opportunity to define any 'subcultures', as that would require a detailed research of the differences and similarities between the unearthed households, whereas archaeological culture presents an integral material culture without a visible social hierarchy or visible differences. An additional problem is posed by the fact that in early complex societies the differences between the social strata and the social groups are hardly reflected in the archaeologized material culture. The fact that settlement burials constitute an exception gives us reason to think that they represent a specific element in the establishment of early complex social structures in various Thracian settlements as a social strategy of the household (predominantly), which could explain the variations of the ritual and its specificities within the different settlements and periods.

References


