

THE PROTO-BRONZE AGE CEMETERY AT DURANKULAK: A LOOK FROM THE EAST

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The publication of the prehistoric cemetery at Durankulak (Todorova 2002) has been expected to become a new solid and basic record on northeast Balkan Prehistory. It introduces rather detailed information on various aspects of prehistoric mortuary ritual in the northeast Balkans, which is especially valuable for further analytic works and generalizations. The majority of the material at the cemetery is represented by burial complexes of the Hamangia and Varna cultures of the late Copper Age according to the Balkan chronology. Additionally a small group of later graves was uncovered on the territory of the cemetery (Vajsov 2002). Despite their insignificant number the burials are of especial interest in terms of cultural situation in the end of the Copper Age and beginning of the Bronze Age in the northeast Balkans.

The later cemetery consisted of 17 graves arranged in small groups or disposed separately. It was suggested that all graves had been covered with burial mounds although the latter did not preserved to present day. It was among the graves in the groups that primary and secondary complexes were detected. Some of burial pits had stone covers and the grave 1126 was surrounded by a stone ring (a cromlech-?). All skeletons in the graves laid either in contracted position on the side or in supine position with the legs flexed. Most of the graves had no grave goods but some of them contained clay vessels, metal objects and flints. Chronologically all graves were dated to the Proto-Bronze Age whereas culturally they were attributed to the Proto-Yamnaya (=Drevneyamnaya) type. One possible exception is grave 448 which was assigned to the Cernavodă I culture (Vajsov 2002: 165-168).

The chronological and cultural attribution of the graves suggested by I. Vajsov is based on the correlation of different traits of burial rite and grave inventory. However more thorough consideration of the same traits can allow rather different interpretation of chronological position and cultural characteristics of the graves. Depending on this reevaluation stratigraphic relations of the graves can be changed as well.

According to specific combination of various attributes the graves can be divided into four chronological horizons which embrace a time span from the late Copper Age to the Early Bronze Age IB.¹ It can be supposed that the earliest grave is that no 164 in supine position with the legs flexed orientated to north-east. It is considered to have been secondary one in the kurgan G (Vajsov 2002: 165, Abb. 183 and 185.3). One of the most characteristic traits of the grave is the position of the deceased, especially the slightly bent arms with the hands on the pelvis. Such a position is one of main attributes of the burial rite of the Eneolithic Skelyanskaya culture (Rassamakin 1994: 35) in the North Pontic steppes and the Suvorovo group in the Northwest Pontic region (Manzura 1994; Govedarica 1998) which are synchronous to

the Cucuteni A culture and Kodzhadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI complex (fig. 1.7,9). Similar graves are evidenced in the northeast Balkans, e.g. Casimcea (Popescu 1941) and Kyulevcha (fig. 1.8) (Vážarova 1986). The precise dating of these burials is quite unclear so far (Manzura 2000: 247-8). Some of them can be dated even later than the Kodzhadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI culture. In any event they are much earlier than the Early Bronze Age complexes or those of so-called proto-Bronze Age. As a rule, graves of this period have no burial mounds so the grave 164 also can be of the flat type. It is quite possible that it was made at this place long before the erection of a burial mound above another later grave. Such stratigraphic situations are well known in the archaeological record of the North Pontic region (Rassamakin 1998; Govedarica 2004).

The next period in the history of the cemetery can be confidently connected with the grave 448 in the assumed kurgan H with the deceased in the contracted position on the left side (Vajsov 2002: 165, Abb. 182). One arm was bent with the palm in front of the face and other arm was stretched to the legs (fig. 2.1). The grave was equipped with three vessels made of shell-tempered clay (fig. 2.2-4). According to their technological and morphological traits the vessels can be attributed to the Cernavodă I culture. Especially characteristic is the jug with a knee-shaped handle (fig. 1.2) which has direct parallels in the ceramic assemblage of different settlements of the Cernavodă I culture (fig. 2.5-7) (Morintz, Roman 1968: Abb. 16.4,8,10; 18.5,7,8). Another diagnostic trait is a horizontal grooved line under the necks of two vessels (fig. 1.2,3). Such decorative element is especially frequent in the Cernavodă I pottery.

The grave 448 seems to be particularly important for understanding of the Cernavodă I burial rite. So far, except the cemetery at Brăiileța (Harțuche 2002), there were known very few interments which could be supposedly assigned to the Cernavodă I culture (Manzura 1999: 115-6). They were registered mostly in the northern part of Dobroudja and Muntenia and included both the kurgan and flat types of burial sites. The graves contained contracted skeletons on the side with one extended and one bent arms, that is in the same position as at Durankulak.

Additionally, very similar burials are evidenced in the Northwest Pontic region where they are associated with complex monumental constructions consisting of kurgans, stone enclosures, ditches, etc. (figs. 1.5,6; 2.8-13). Some of them were accompanied with Cucuteni B and Cernavodă I vessels, gold, silver and copper objects. It has been earlier supposed that these graves appear to represent a local Bessarabian variant of the Cernavodă I culture (Manzura 1994: 95-9). After discovery of the settlement "Kartal" at Orlovka on the Lower Danube (Odessa County, Ukraine), it became clear that the Northwest Pontic steppes indeed can be included in the area of the Cernavodă

¹ In present paper the modified chronological scheme of L. Nikolova (1999) is accepted. According to this scheme, in the northeast Balkan the late Copper Age corresponds to the Kodzhadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI complex, final Copper Age includes the Cernavodă I and Khotnitsa cultures, Early Bronze Age IA is connected with the Cernavodă III and Usatovo cultures and Early Bronze Age IB corresponds to the Cernavodă II, early Coțofeni and Early Yamnaya cultures.

I culture (Bruyako et al. 2003). Now, this inference can be supported by apparent similarity between the Cernavodă I grave 448 at Durankulak and those from the southern Bessarabia. Beyond any doubts we are dealing with the same mortuary tradition extended from the southern Dobroudja to the Dnestr in the final Copper Age. The emergence of this tradition seems to be connected with the beginning of the adaptation of steppe territories by farming communities of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture where the population of the Cernavodă I culture was involved as well (Manzura 2004).

At the same time, most of the deceased of the Cernavodă I culture at the Brailita cemetery were buried in supine extended position (Harțuche 2002). It can signify that the burial rite of the Cernavodă I culture could embrace two different traditions. The first of them could originate in the mortuary customs of the Varna culture. At the Varna I and Durankulak cemeteries of this culture male grave were disposed in extended position. This trait could be inherited by the population of the Cernavodă I culture. It is interesting that at both Brăiilița necropolis and cemeteries of the Varna culture most of burial pits are over 2 m deep. Such a feature also can point to possible links between mortuary traditions of the both cultures. On the other hand the contracted position on the left side perhaps is connected with or influenced by the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture. Such suggestion can be supported by numerous similar burial complexes discovered as far as the Lower Dnepr Basin. They are considered by some authors as the evidence of the penetration of steppe territories by Cucuteni-Tripolye communities (Movsha 1993: 42; Levițki et al. 1996: 69-74; Rassamakin 2004: 15-16).

Besides the grave 448 at Durankulak some other burial complexes of the same cemetery can be related to the Cernavodă I culture, for instance the graves 985 and 1028 in the kurgan E (fig. 1.4) (Vajsov 2002: 165, Tab. 86). The deceased in the graves were disposed in the same position and had similar orientation in eastern direction. Despite the assertion of the author of the publication concerning the existence of burial mounds above the graves there is no convincing documentation for such a conclusion (Vajsov 2002: 166). It is not excluded that these were flat interments.

The third period in the development of the cemetery is connected with the grave 982 which contained a contracted child skeleton accompanied with a bronze dagger and flint tools. I. Vajsov (2002: 168-72) finds relevant parallels to the dagger in the material of the Usatovo culture. Nevertheless the dating of the grave by the Proto-Bronze Age seems to be unconvincing. Taking into account the typological traits of the dagger the grave 982 has to belong to the Cernavodă III culture which is synchronous to the Usatovo culture and can be dated to the Early bronze Age IA according to L. Nikolova. As in previous case there are some doubts concerning the presence of a destroyed kurgan above the grave.

The fourth period of the cemetery is represented by the grave 1126 surrounded by a stone ring (fig. 1.3) (Vajsov 2002: 165, Abb. 185A.4, Tab. 200). It was in a rectangular pit with the skeleton in supine contracted position slightly turned to the left and orientated with the head to the west. A stone anthropomorphic stele was found near the burials. The position of the deceased and its orientation completely correspond to the later group (Budzhak) of the Yamnaya culture in the Northwest Pontic region (Dergachev 1986). The presence of the stone ring and stele even can point to the latest phase of the early group of this culture (the Dnestr group). In any event the grave 1126 should be dated to the Early Bronze Age IB. It well corresponds to other Yamnaya burials uncovered in the northeast Balkans and must be synchronous to them (fig. 1.1,2). Unlike other graves of the Durankulak cemetery

the grave under consideration had to be covered with a kurgan since this is the most characteristic attribute of the Yamnaya culture.

Some later burials at Durankulak cannot be identified very precisely. They can belong either to the final Copper Age or to the Early Bronze Age or even to the Late Bronze Age. For instance graves 119 and 190 according to traits of the burial rite can be dated to the Cernavoda III culture. However their real chronological position could be determined by radiocarbon dates. At the same time any discussed grave at Durankulak cannot be attributed to so-called Proto-Yamnaya culture according to I. Vajsov. There are graves which precede the Yamnaya culture proper and those which related to it. The term "proto-Yamnaya" seems to be inappropriate because it would suggest historical connection between final Copper Age and Yamnaya sites in the Northeast Balkans and consequently could show this region as a core area of the Yamnaya culture. Nevertheless, at present there is no confident evidence for such suggestion.

The term "proto-Bronze Age", especially for the Usatovo-Cernavodă III period, looks similarly misleading from technological, economic and cultural points of view. Precisely at this time the technology of arsenic bronze indeed became a Circumpontic phenomenon stretching from the Caucasus via the North Pontic steppes and Anatolia to the Balkans. Precisely then such new technological invention as wheeled transport was introduced into the Near East and Europe essentially modifying economic and social activities of prehistoric societies. In economic domain, this was a period when a new form of production developed in the steppe zone of Eastern Europe which was mainly based on stock-breeding instead agriculture. Finally, the intensification of links between different European regions resulted in the emergence of new extensive cultural entities such as the Cernavodă III-Boleráz complex in the Balkans and Carpathian Basin, the Globular Amphorae culture in north Central Europe and a range of similar cultures in the south of Eastern Europe connecting the Caucasus and the Carpathians in united cultural system. Despite existence of numerous local periodizations in different parts of Europe we can recognize that the chronological border c. 3500 B.C. seems to be the beginning of new era in European cultural development which corresponds to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age.

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