

## RESCUE EXCAVATIONS OF BRONZE AGE BARROWS IN VETRINO REGION, NORTHEAST BULGARIA

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to present the results of the rescue excavations of three Bronze Age barrows in Vetrino region, Northeast Bulgaria. Fourteen Early Bronze Age graves (4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC), two of Middle Bronze Age date (first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC) and one Late Bronze Age grave (second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC) were excavated in the region in 2020. The majority of the Early Bronze Age graves were relaxed hocker inhumations dating to the periods 3100–2900 calBC and 2900–2600 calBC. Their nature, characteristics and relationship to contemporary burials in other regions to the north and west are discussed. The dating of 2000–1500 calBC period of the tightly-contracted hocker inhumations from Northeast Bulgaria is argued as well.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Dunărea de Jos, epoca bronzului, morminte tumulare, cultura Yamnaya, cultura Usatovo, grupul Zhivotilovka

**Rezumat:** Scopul acestui articol este prezentarea cercetărilor arheologice de salvare desfășurate în trei tumuli atribuiți epocii bronzului în regiunea Vetrino din nord-estul Bulgariei. În 2020 au fost cercetate în această regiune 14 morminte atribuite epocii timpurii a bronzului (mileniile IV–III î.Hr.), două epocii mijlocii a bronzului (prima jumătate a mileniului II î.Hr.) și unul atribuit epocii târzii a bronzului (a doua jumătate a mileniului II î.Hr.). Majoritatea mormintelor conțineau indivizi în poziția chircit pe o parte, atribuite perioadelor 3100–2900 calBC și 2900–2600 calBC. Sunt discutate tipul lor, caracteristicile și relația lor cu morminte contemporane din alte regiuni la nord și vest. Este pusă în discuție și datarea unor morminte cu indivizi în poziția chircit puternic în perioada 2000–1500 calBC din nord-estul Bulgariei.

In 2019–2020, a large scale campaign of archaeological rescue excavations along the expansion of the gas-transmission infrastructure of the “Bulgartransgaz EAD” company in North Bulgaria was carried out, led by the National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS. During these two years, more than 120 archaeological sites dating from the Neolithic to the Late Medieval periods were explored<sup>1</sup>. Five of the sites investigated were Bronze Age barrows located in Northeast Bulgaria, three of them were in the region of Vetrino (Pl. I).

Vetrino is located in the center of the closed hilly valley of the Zlatina River. The north–south and the east–west axes of the area are approximately equal – about 15 km. The valley has an easy slope from northwest (highest point about 300 m above sea level) to southeast (lowest point – about 50 m). It was formed on Lower and Upper Cretaceous marls and limestones, covered with a thin stratum of loose-textured soils. Today, the lands are almost completely arable, but in the past they were covered with grassy vegetation. The climate is humid continental, with relatively cold winters and warm summers. The Vetrino landscape is characterized by numerous Early Bronze Age (EBA) barrows, their number exceeding one hundred. The barrows themselves are

organized in extensive necropolises (Pl. II). The region itself is situated on the road that connects the northeastern part of the Lower Danube area to Thrace through the passes of the eastern Balkan range. It became of particular interest for studying the EBA mortuary practices after the excavations of the barrow necropolis near Belogradets, carried out by Goranka Tončeva in the 1970s, and the publication of the stone anthropomorphic stela from Nevsha, both situated in the immediate western vicinity of the barrows investigated in 2020<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the region is connected through the water catchment of the Provadiyska River (Pl. I/2) to the well-known Varna lakes submerged prehistoric settlements<sup>3</sup>. All these particular elements of the archaeology of the region made the authors wish to publish as soon as possible the results of the investigations, hoping that this will contribute to a better understanding of the mortuary practices, cultural identity and relationships of the people that lived in the northeastern part of the Lower Danube region during the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC.

As mentioned above, three barrows with a total number of 17 Bronze Age graves were investigated in 2020. The features discovered will be presented in geographical order from west to east as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Popov 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Tončeva 1978; 1980; 1981b.

<sup>3</sup> Tončeva 1981a; Roman *et alii* 1992.