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RITUAL PITS IN THRACE (END OF 2nd-1st MILLENNIUM B.C.)

RUMJANA GEORGIEVA

ABSTRACT. Georgieva Rumjana, *Ritual pits in Thrace (end of 2nd-1st millennium B.C.)*. Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia, VII, Poznań 1995, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, pp. 21-36. ISBN 83-232-0617-1. ISSN 0239-4278. Text in English.

This article discusses the significance of "ritual pits" as places of offerings and the cult in Thracian society. They are found both by the Thracian tumulus graves and in sanctuaries. The appendix contains a catalogue of places ("of ritual pits") discussed in the article.

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"Ritual" pits is a definition uniting a group of monuments known in archaeological publications as "sacrificial" or "cult" pits. These are beehive-shaped pits, less frequently cylindrical or round, usually discovered at the base of the earth piled on some Thracian tumular tombs and in Thracian sanctuaries. In these pits there often appear broken or intact vessels, animal bones, ash and charred remains; some of the pits show signs of being plastered and fired.

The first information about ritual pits in Bulgaria appeared in the publication about the necropolis in Duvanlii was published; more than 100 pits were studied there in only one tumulus (Kukova Mogila).¹ Later on reports about such pits became more frequent; similar pits have been discovered in Koprinka, Mirkovo, Varna, Kralevo, etc., while recently a complex of ritual pits are investigated in Debelt and Stalijska Mahala. Naturally, not all of the pits mentioned have been identified as being ritual. Their interpretation varies, being even disputable in some cases. Opinions have been expressed, for example, that these pits served as storage facilities for vessels, food stores, or that they were burial or even garbage pits.

¹ B. Filov, *Nadgrobnite mogili pri Duvanlij*, Sofija 1934, p. 12-16.

The pits investigated so far are dated back to different periods from the end of the 2nd throughout the entire 1st millennium B.C., being most actively used between the 6th and 3rd century B. C. It is obvious that they were used in ritual practices lasting possibly for millennia and this fact alone justifies taking interest in them.

Ritual pits differ among themselves by their **localization** (in tumular embankments, at the base of tumuli or outside tumular necropolises), **shape** (ordered according to their frequency of occurrence pits are beehive-shaped, cylindrical or round) and **content** (empty, with cinders, animal bones, ash, intact or broken vessels, small objects, etc.). Some of these differences are of a formal nature, while others are important for determining the character and the purpose of the pit.

Incidentally, the question about the purpose and dating of the pits found in or below a tumular embankment, has not been raised at all practically. They have been identified as "sacrificial" or "cult" pits, because their localization indisputably suggests a link with the cult of the dead. Their dating has not been discussed, with the exception of B. Filov's commentary that the piling up of Kukova Mogila, the digging of pits there and the burials were not synchronous.²

When and why were these pits made?

It seems apparent that Kukova Mogila was accumulated long before the burials in it took place – most probably at the end of the Early Iron Age. It was accumulated gradually, not at once. The earth of the tumulus had already become compact when the stone tomb was dug into it. Ritual pits were made at all levels, predominantly in the lower part of the tumulus. It was possible to make such pits only after the embankment had subsided, because their shape (wide at the base and strongly narrowed at the top) could not be situated in loose soil. If we add to the above arguments the claim that some of the pits are at the base of the tumulus, i. e. they precede its accumulation, it follows that the ritual pits in Kukova Mogila were made in one, two or all of the ways indicated above: before the tumulus was accumulated (cf. the pits at its base), in the embankment before the burial (i. e. pits made in the course of the accumulation of the tumulus, after the subsiding of the earth in each of the small tumuli making up the big one) during the burial ceremony (?) and after it, when the deceased was commemorated (probably these are the pits with the highest localization, being chronologically the latest pits).

A similar example is also offered by the tumulus near the village of Koprinka, Stara Zagora district.³ Here two of the pits precede chronologically or coincide with (?) the burial (if we accept that the tumulus is indeed a burial

² Filov, o.c.

³ K. Žuglev, *Razkopki i proučvanija na mogila № 1, Koprinka*, GSU-IFF, 1952, p. 217-289.

mound) while the third pit, which is in the embankment, was made later, while the tumulus was accumulating.

The situation is slightly different in Bašova Mogila, Duvanlii:⁴ the burial was performed first, and then, after the earth of the tumulus became compact in the process of accumulation of the tumulus, the pit was dug in below the top. The fact that it was discovered at a depth of 2 m below the surface shows that it was made before the tumulus was completed.

Everything suggests that the pits in the necropolis near the village of Kočan, Blagoevgrad district,⁵ as well as those in Ginina Mogila near the village of Sveštari, Razgrad district,⁶ were made after the burials and after the tumular embankment became compact.

Among the known examples of ritual pits found below a tumular embankment, in one case (in the village of Borovo, Ruse district⁷) no burial was performed in the tumulus covering the pits, while in two other cases the villages of Doiranci, Loveč district and Staroselec, Sliven district)⁸ the tumulus contains groves whose dating is considerably later than the dating of the pits.

The situation is rather more complex in tumulus No3 in the necropolis in the village of Kralevo, Tŕgovište district.⁹ It will be very difficult to differentiate chronologically the finds in the pits from those found in the tomb: a difference of ± 20 or 30 years can prove to be very difficult to establish in practice, even in cases when there are Greek vases among the finds. However, if it is certain that the tomb was dug into the tumular embankment, then the tumulus in Kralevo will become analogous to that in Kukova Mogila. In the opposite case, the only possible explanation is that the pits were made simultaneously with the burial.

As regards the tomb in the village of Lŕvino, Razgrad district,¹⁰ the problem is even more difficult to solve, because no materials have been found in any of the pits.

⁴ I. Velkov, *Mogilni grobni nahodki ot Duvanlij*, IBAI, 1930-1931, p. 1-44.

⁵ D. Gergova, I. Kulov, *Razkopki na trakijskija mogilen nekropol pri s(elo) Kočan, Blagoevgradski okr''g*, AOR, 1976, p. 43-44; idem, *Razkopki na trakijskija mogilen nekropol pri s(elo) Kočan, Blagoevgradski okr''g*, AOR, 1979, p. 51-52.

⁶ M. Čičikova et al., *Razkopki na Ginina mogila kraj s(elo) Sveštari, Razgradski okr''g*, AOR, 1984, p. 55-54; idem *Razkopki na Ginina mogila kraj Sveštari, Razgradski okr''g*, AOR, 1986, p. 58-59.

⁷ D. Ivanov, *Razkopki na mogilen nekropol kraj s(elo) Borovo, Rusenski okr''g*, AOR, 1978, p. 59-60; see also: I. Velkov, *Mogilni nahodki ot brezovo*, IBAI, 1938, p. 270.

⁸ G. Kitov, P. Pavlov, *Trakijski mogili kraj Dojranci i Smocan v Loveški Okr''g*, AOR 1985, p. 90-91; D. Nikolov, M. K''nčev, B. Borisov, *Razkopki na nadgrobni mogili v energijnija kompleks "Marica-Iztok"*, AOR, 1979, p. 50-51.

⁹ G. Ginev, *Razkopki na mogilen nekropol pri s(elo) Kralevo, T'rgoviščki okr''g*, AOR, 1979, p. 60; idem, *Razkopki na trakijska nadgrobna mogila pri s(elo) Kralevo, Okr''g T'rgoviščki*, AOR, 1980, p. 60-61; idem, *Razkopki na mogila N° 3 pri s(elo) Kralevo, T'rgoviščki okr''g*, AOR, 1981, p. 44; idem, *S''kroviščeto ot Kralevo*, Sofija 1983.

¹⁰ T. G. Ivanov, *Razkopki na nadgrobna mogila pri s(elo) L''vino, Razgradski okr''g*, AOR, 1976, p. 36-37.

The examples from Doiranci and Staroselec are very important. In the early publications the pits in Doiranci were identified as being ritual, while those in Staroselec – as garbage pits. The scepticism of the authors in the second case is easy to explain, because at a first glance the content of garbage and ritual pits does not differ and moreover the tumulus is located close to an Early Iron Age settlement. However, such grouping of pits inside or close to the settlement during that period is rather unlikely (usually the pits were around the dwellings). I would like to note also that at a distance of about 0.5 km from Kukova Mogila there are also remains of a settlement (8th-5th century B. C.), but nobody claims that the pits found in Kukova Mogila were garbage pits.

In my opinion, it is likely that the pits in Staroselec and Doiranci were made in places which were considered to be sacred. They were open-air sanctuaries which existed for a long time (Late Bronze to Late Iron Age in Staroselec, respectively). It is possible the tumuli above the pits were piled up by the population which maintained these sanctuaries; the motivation for these actions are not clear for the time being, but similar examples can be found also in Kukova Mogila and in the tumuli from Borovo and Kralevo. The ready tumular embankments were used for later burials: Doiranci in the 1st century, Staroselec – 4th century, Kukova Mogila 5th century B.C., etc.

The second possible theory, i.e. that the tumuli were accumulated accidentally in these places, seems highly unlikely. A very tempting explanation is that some memory about the sacred nature of the place was the reason for the tumulus to be made in a place where sanctuaries had existed for centuries, but so far this is difficult to prove.

In other words, the pits in Borovo, Staroselec and Doiranci under tumuli which were not intended to be used for burials. Similarly to Kukova Mogila, the tumulus in Kralevo was not piled up for burial purposes either. The unusual grave found in the tumulus near Koprinka can only confirm the assumption that all these tumuli, accumulated within the boundaries of necropolises (Borovo, Duvanlii, Kralevo, Koprinka and Kočan), may have been connected with the cult of the dead, but initially they were not intended as burial facilities. The use of some of them for such purposes was secondary, because there were gaps of several decades or even several centuries between the accumulation of the tumuli and the digging in of the pits.

Each burial is an act representing the first step of the deceased to the world of the dead. The road to this world had to be made easier, and according to the beliefs in ancient times, this was done through the rituals accompanying the burial.¹¹

The notions about the "life beyond" varied in the different communities. It is generally accepted that the Thracians believed in immortality,¹² but research

¹¹ Fr. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, Paris 1942, p. 351.

¹² A. Fol, *Vjarata v bezsm'rtieto*, in: *Trakijski legendi*, Sofija 1981.

carried out so far shows that different ideas existed in Thrace about the world beyond the grave, one or another of which dominated in a concrete region or during a concrete period. The living maintained their contacts with the world of the dead and this is evidenced by the traces of post-funeral rites: the accumulation of a burial mound, lighting fires, food offerings near the grave, sacrifices, etc.

The digging of pits into tumular embankments undoubtedly occupies an essential place in the post-burial rituals. In all probability the act of their digging coincides with the anniversary of the death of the person buried (let us recall that there are known cases when the pits were dug before the tumulus was completed, actually in the process of its accumulation). It could be assumed that they were perceived as a peculiar "window" to the other world, a place from and through which the living could communicate with the world of the dead through fire and offerings.¹³

Earlier it was assumed that the ritual pits found below tumular embankments, before they were piled up, were in fact sanctuaries. This idea finds support in several groups of pits, discovered in different places in Bulgaria, e.g. Varna, Debelt, Mirkovo, Stalijska Mahala, etc.

The pits discovered in Varna¹⁴ resemble 42 pits found in the temenos of the sanctuaries of Apollo Delphinios and Zeus in Olbia.¹⁵ First there, and later in Varna, on the analogy with the *bothros* (βοτρός) known from the Greek sanctuaries, they were identified as places in which the discarded objects used in the temples were buried. These objects were ceremoniously buried apparently periodically, either because the temple was to be reconstructed, or on holidays connected with the temple. This act was accompanied by libations and sacrifices.

Both in Olbia and in Varna there appears a periodicity in the piling of the earth: this is evident not only from the date of the materials found in the pits, but also by the hiatus or the sealing plastering between several successive pilings of earth. The latter fact confirms the assumption that the pits were left open and that they were covered with earth gradually.

The pits in Debelt, Burgas district,¹⁶ resemble to a certain extent those in Varna and Olbia, because they also contain architectural details, graffiti,

¹³ Certainly it is not unimportant that the ritual pits found in and below the tumular embankments are discovered in tumuli containing rich burials and in necropolises identified as being „royal”.

¹⁴ G. Gončeva, *Arhaični materiali ot Odesos*, IAI, 1967, p. 157-180; eadem, *Keramika ot antična jama v Varna*, Izvestija na Narodnija Muzej-Varna, 1972, p. 263-268.

¹⁵ E. I. Levi, *Materialy Olvijskogo temenosa (obščaja karakteristika)*, Olvija 1964; A. N. Karasev, *Monumentalnyje pamjatniki Olvijskogo temenosa*, Olvija 1964, p. 27-130.

¹⁶ S. Demjanov et al., *Spasitelni razkopki v rajona na s(elo) Debelt, Burgaski okr”g*, AOR, 1982; idem, AOR, 1984, p. 63-64; idem, *Spasitelni razkopki v m(estnostta) „Kostadin češma” kraj s(elo) Debelt, Burgaski okr”g*, AOR 1985, p. 106-107; idem, *Spasitelni razkopki kraj s(elo) Debelt, Burgaski okr”g*, AOR, 1986, p. 49.

amphora fragments with seals, etc.¹⁷ However, the data appearing in the literature so far concerning their shape and architecture, as well as the information about the activities accompanying their shaping (e. g., "...ritual burial of equine pieces), makes a closer comparison with the pits discovered in the interior of the country. If they are accurately dated, the beginning of the complex should be determined to have been nearly a century earlier than the pits from Olbia and Varna, i.e. around the 7th century B. C. on the other hand, the impressive number of these pits seems to exclude their having been used for storing discarded objects from the temples.

The ritual pits in Mirkovo¹⁸ and Stalijska Mahala¹⁹ contribute to our knowledge of the sites of this type. Among them there are pits plastered with clay, as well as pits whose bottoms are shaped as fireplaces; some of the pits touch each other and even overlap, and this is perfectly natural in view of the millennial ritual practices of this place. It seems obvious that the complexes in Mirkovo, Stalijska Mahala and Debelt belonged to sites with identical characteristics. They did not occupy parts of a sacred perimeter of a sanctuary (cf. Olbia), but they shaped the sanctuary itself.

The beginning of this practice, i.e. the digging of a pit and the performing of different ritual acts in and around it, can be traced to the end of the Late Bronze Age. Direct evidence for this are the sites in Doiranci and Stalijska Mahala, indirect evidence – the pits in Plovdiv, Esenica and Čerkovna.²⁰

¹⁷ The scratching of letters, parts of words, whole words, sentences or other signs on ceramic fragments, as well as the intentional selection of those fragments of amphorae which bear the producer's seal, are a frequent occurrence and they apparently played some role in the popular beliefs and magic rites. Probably in this case they were used instead of a votive inscription or represented a peculiar magic formula; see: V. R. Jajlenko, *Grečeskaja kolonizacija VII-III vv. do n.e.*, Moskva 1982. A similar interpretation should also be given to the fragments of vessels found in the pits that were intentionally rubbed so as to acquire a round shape.

¹⁸ A. Milčev, *Arheologičesko proučvane v okološtite na s(elo) Mirkovo, Prirodopska*, in: *Izsledovanija v čest na Karel Škorpič*, Sofija 1961, p. 417-434.

¹⁹ A. Bonev, G. Aleksandrov, *Razkopki na seliščeto v mestnostta „Bagačina“ kraj s(elo) Stalijska mahala, Mihajlovgradski okr“g*, AOR, 1984, p. 44; idem, *Razkopki na kultovija kompleks v m(estnostta) „Bagačina“ kraj s(elo) Stalijska mahala, Mihajlovgradski okr“g*, AOR, 1985, p. 88; idem, AOR, 1986, p. 51.

²⁰ P. Detev, *Kolektivna nahodka ot glineni s“dove v Plovdiv*, *Arheologija*, 1964, p. 66-70; V. Nikolov, V. Žekova, *Kolektivna nahodka na keramični s“dove ot k“snata bronzova epoha v s(elo) Esenica, Vernenski okr“g*, *Izvestija na Narodnija Muzej-Varna*, 1982, p. 87-92; B. H ä n s e l, *Beiträge zur regionalen und chronologischen Gliederung der älteren Hallstattzeit an der unteren Donau*, I-II, Bonn 1976, p. 77-78. Here we can also mention the find from Govora in Romania. Seventeen intact vessels dated to the end of the Late Bronze Age were found in a deep pit around which there are no traces of ash, cinders or bones. According to the archaeologists performing the excavations, the pit was a store for vessels. The find is accidental, see: D. Berciu, P. Purgarescu, P. Roman, *Săpături și cercetări arheologice în raionul R. Vilcea*, *Materiali și Cercetări Arheologice*, VII 1961, p. 131-136.

From the point of view of the latter can indeed be explained as storage facilities for products or vessels. However, their synchronousness, common elements (shape of the pits, careful arrangement of the vessels or fragments of vessels, the traces of usage and even of discarding of the vessels, the darker colour of the soil in them, etc.), the sealing plastering and the animal bones in the pit from Plovdiv – these are facts which make these monuments comparable to pits close to them in time, as well as later in Thrace.

What was the purpose of these pits?

Ancient literature provides evidence of such rites, two examples of which will be cited here. They do not concern specifically Thrace, being mentioned in connection with the travels of Ulysses and the Argonauts.²¹ Ulysses made a pit before the kingdom of shadows, made libations successively with milk, honey, wine and water, sprinkled barley flour and offered a black sheep and a black ram as sacrifices. The animals burnt in the fire are for the festive table of Aïdes and Persephone. According to Ovid's narrative, in order to bring Jason's father back to life, Medea dug two round holes next to two fireplaces made of turf out in the open (the one on the left being for Hecate, on the right – for Hebe). Then she sacrificed a black-fleeced animal, poured its blood over the walls of the pits and made libations with pure wine and milk, invoking the chthonic deities.

These examples indisputably suggest that in Greek religious notions pit rituals are associated with the faith in the world beyond the grave, and that they have a chthonic orientation. The persons performing the ritual acts were usually supposed to be gifted from above with magic abilities or with superhuman skills.

In Greece similar pits have been found in necropolises dated to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Mycenae, Orchomene, the Island of Fantorin (Thira), as well as in sanctuaries.²² It is obvious that here, too, as in Thrace, there was an essential difference between the wells, i. e. *bothroi*, storing objects discarded from the temples, and the pits within the boundaries of the necropolises. This difference ensues from the purpose for which the pits were used, as well as from the activities accompanying the digging of the pits of both types.

According to data from the sources and from archaeological excavations, ritual pits were among the elements of a cult involving not only the digging of the pits, but also the lighting of fire, libations and offerings of sacrificial animals, food and gifts.²³

²¹ Hom., *Odys.* (Mouro-Allen), XI, 20-45; Ovid., *Met.* VII, 227-267.

²² I. Velkov, *Mogilni grobni nahodki ot Duvanlij*, p. 1; G. Daux, in: BCH, II 1959, p. 729-730, fig. 9.

²³ The presentation of the cult elements follows the sequence indicated in the sources, i.e. digging of the pit, libations, firing of the pit, offering, etc.

Shape. The most frequently occurring shape of the pits followed a model that is rather difficult to achieve in practice: a wide base and a narrow top. This is how the pits from Kukova Mogila, Koprinka and Mirkovo were shaped; here one can see pits with clay plastering inside, as well as pits reinforced with bricks. In the remaining cases the pits are pear-shaped, rather than beehive-shaped, but this shape seems to be a variant of the above model. The existence of a direct connection between the shape and the date of the pits is not excluded, but for the time being it cannot be investigated on the basis of the available published material.

The shape of the pits impressed all researchers. B. Filov believed that it was intentionally sought after, indicating its possible prototypes in the round prehistoric dwellings and the beehive-shaped tombs in Mycenae.²⁴ V. Mikov compares them with the *tholoi* in Thrace and the rock niches in the Rhodopes.²⁵

The recurrence of this shape indicates that it was not accidental. A considerable part of the pits are empty, which suggests that even their digging was a ritual act, and that the lighting of fire, libations, sacrifices and offerings are acts of secondary significance.

The outer similarity between the beehive-shaped pits and the rock niches, suggested by V. Mikov, has another aspect as well. It is possible that the rock niches, hewn close to or outside the outlines of the rock sanctuaries, to have had the same function as the pits within and outside the tumular embankments.

The rock niches are not rock graves. Very few of them are large enough to hold the urn of the deceased or his ashes; however, even if they were, traces of such burials would have been visible. With the exception of the scanty and unreliable evidence of fragments of vessels discovered in the niches, there are no such traces.²⁶ And this is improbable, especially in the cases when the number of niches in a complex exceeds, e.g. 200. It seems even more improbable to assume that the preparation of each niche-grave and the placing of the remains of the deceased in it were actions repeated many times – it is known in what places the rock niches are found. The act of hewing groups of niches on some concrete occasion and at a definite time was one thing, while their shaping as graves was quite a different thing. An important observation in this respect is that the number of niches hewn simultaneously within one complex is perceptible.²⁷

The niches are complementary to the rock tombs not only because they belong to the common megalithic form or as an architectural achievement. Hewn next to them, they resemble the combination of pits and graves in tumuli, and outside them they are like the sanctuaries of Debelt, Stalijska Mahala, Mirkovo, etc.

²⁴ Filov, *o.c.*, p. 16.

²⁵ B. Mikov, *Proizhod na kupolnite grobnici ot B'lgarija*, IAI, 1955, p. 28.

²⁶ P. Delev, *Trakijski pametnici*, III, Sofija 1982.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 414.

Similar to the caves and rock tumuli, rock niches are present in the life-death complex;²⁸ their shape, consciously chosen (and repeated in the pits, burial chambers and even the entrance to the *tholoi*), is replicated on the rock massifs. It is certain that precisely this shape – truncated quadrangular pyramid – lies at the basis of this religious practice, similar to other geometric symbols.²⁹

The empty rock niches (reports that fire had been lit in some of them are not reliable) and the empty ritual pits resemble one another and this similarity ensues not only from their close shapes, but also from the meaning and act of their creation.

There is no discrepancy between the date of the sanctuaries and the date of the rock niches. Their common origin is at the end of the Late Bronze Age and they reached a common upsurge in the period between the 6th and 3rd century B. C. The reducing of the lower chronological boundary of the rock niches is in apparent disagreement with the opinion expressed so far³⁰ but it explains the existence of the later monuments in other regions as well (Southwestern Bulgaria, Southern Greece, etc.).

Libations. In the ancient sources there is evidence about libations with wine and milk in Thrace.³¹ The libations, similar to the sacrifices, were made for a successful campaign or battle, in honour of a deity, for commemoration of the dead, etc.

Assumptions about libations in the pits are supported both by above-mentioned data from the sources, and by the intact or fragmented deep vessels and amphorae discovered in them. The presence of amphorae is an indication that one of the liquids used in the libations was wine. It is not clear whether wine was considered as identical with human blood or as a symbol of fertility.³²

Fire. Traces of fire, or cinders and ashes are frequently discovered in the pits. Fire was apparently lit in some of them, while only ashes or cinder from fires lit nearby were found in other pits; Bottoms of pits shaped as fireplaces are known in Kukova Mogila, Debel, etc.

In Thrace fire was one of the basic elements in the religious practice (cf. the sacrificial altars in Seuthopolis, the stylized figurines of horses and rams, considered to be parts of fireplaces, etc.).³³ Its role in the funeral rites is proved by the eschars and cinders near and inside the graves, the traces of burning,

²⁸ V. N. Todorov, *Peščera*, in: *Mify narodov mira*, II, Moskva 1982, p. 311.

²⁹ Idem, *Geometričeskie simvoly*, in: *Mify narodov mira*, I, Moskva 1980, p. 272-273.

³⁰ The lower chronological boundary is assumed to be the end of the early Iron Age.

³¹ Xenophon, *Anab.* (Vollbrecht), VI, 1, 2-7.

³² V. V. Ivanov, *Vino*, in: *Mify narodov mira*, I, p. 236-237.

³³ M. Čičikova, *Žertveniki ellenističeskoj epohi v Frakii*, in: *Frako-skifskie kulturnye svjazi*, Sofija 1975, p. 180-194; M. Domaradski [Domaradzki], *Keltite na Balkanskija polustrov*, Sofija 1984, p. 146.

ashes and fireplaces in the tumuli without graves, the ritual fire places in the embankments of the tumuli.

The fire is most frequently considered to be the symbol and protector of the family (cf. the idea of the family hearth), a carrier of healing and purifying powers. It is associated both with death and with life, serving as a mediator between the world of the living and of the dead.³⁴ Its discovery in ritual pits should be associated above all with the notion of its purifying force, perhaps also with its role as an element linking the world on earth with the world beyond.

Sacrificial animals. There are relatively frequent data in the sources about sacrifices in Thrace,³⁵ and among the images on metal there is also a scene depicting the sacrifice of a ram (cf. the helmet from Kofofeni).³⁶

The presence of animal bones in the pits is usually reported without indicating the animals to which they belong, the details connected with their dismembering, the way in which they were sacrificed, etc. Nevertheless, research carried out so far has shown that the sacrificial animals were: domestic and wild mammals, fishes, seashells and clams, crabs, and less frequently – birds. The preferences for one animal species or another depend on several factors: geographic position of the regions, the livelihood of the population, the purpose of the sacrifice, and – last but not least – some totemistic notions. The existence of taboos with respect to some animal species is very probable, as indicated by data both from the sources and from terrain studies.

Animal bones are not a compulsory element in the pits. For example, animal remains have been found in only 85 out of 137 pits in Kralevo,³⁷ i.e. in 62.04 per cent of the pits. Most numerous among them are the pits containing bones of two or three animals belonging to one species. In one of the pits there were even bones of two cows or oxen, four sheep, three dogs and three horses.

There is scanty evidence about the types and numbers of sacrificial animals found in other sites, but it seems that the most frequent sacrificial animals were cattle (Plovdiv, Kukova Mogila, Kralevo, Varna), swine (Kukova Mogila, Kralevo, Varna), dogs (Kralevo), game (Mirkovo, Kralevo, Debel). It is apparent that birds were used less frequently, being totally absent in Kralevo.

Not only edible but also animals unfit for food were sacrificed, e.g. some animals with valuable fur (foxes and martens in Kralevo), as well as horses and

³⁴ Dž. Frejz'r [J. G. Frazer], *Zlatnata klonka*, Sofija 1984, p. 793; S. A. Tokarev, *Ogon'*, in: *Mify narodov mira*, II, p. 239-240; O. J. Bessmertnaja, A. L. Rjabinin, *Predki*, ibidem, p. 334.

³⁵ Herodot. (Stein-Hude), V, 8.1; Pindarus (Schröder), IV 203-211; Xenophon, o. c. VI, 1, 2-7.; Athenaeus (Kaibel), XII, 531e-532a.

³⁶ I. Venedikov, T. Gerasimov, *Trakijskoto izkustvo*, Sofija 1973, fig. 237, 249.

³⁷ On the data cited here and below, see: V. K. Vasilev, G. D. Georgiev, *Domašnite i divite životi ot trakijskata nagrobna mogila N° III pri s(elo) Kralevo, Trgoviščki okr'g*, *Arheologija*, 1985, p. 1-12.

dogs. The absence of culinary evidence on the dogs' bones has given grounds to the researchers of the bone material from Kralevo that there was no ground to conclude they were used for food.

Unlike the animals buried together with the deceased which were placed intact in the graves (only dogs were decapitated in some cases),³⁸ only definite parts of the sacrificial animals were placed in the pits, with few exceptions (cf. again Kralevo: shoulder and leg of dogs, legs of foxes, foreleg and the part of the leg below the thigh of a marten, badger's head, etc.).

In all probability, the animals were slaughtered and their blood was drained in the pits;³⁹ such a method of sacrifice is also demonstrated in the scene on the Kofofeni helmet. The meat of the edible animals was used for preparing food (according to observations from Kralevo), which was placed untouched in the pits. If the claim that the bones found in some pits were charred is correct (Mirkovo), this means that in individual cases the food prepared or – which seems more probable – the raw meat, was thrown into the fire lit in the pits. It is also possible that some pits contained the bones of the animals used for food by the participants in the ceremony.

The animals sacrificed in the pits suggest that the sacrifices were intended for a deity (deities) with solar and chthonic functions.

Food. Feeding and food offerings were not the only elements of the feast arranged to mark a religious holiday or a burial ceremony. Feeding is a ritual act through which its participants revealed their beliefs in death and in resurrection. This act is part of the „sacrifice” ritual, being itself a sacrifice. Food is associated with the „death-fertility-life” complex, therefore food offering is that act which – through the death of the sacrificial animal or through some other sacrificial meal, by its dismembering – should bring about fertility and abundance, i.e. a multiplication of the sacrificed.⁴⁰

In this sense a definite culinary code should be sought in the food remnants found in the pits. The elements of this code are the preferences for one animal species over another, the selection of the parts of the carcass to be placed in the pits, the number of parts into which the animal is dismembered, the mode of its death, etc.

Assuming that the pits were made immediately prior to the burial, the researchers of the bone material from Kralevo assumed that the animal bones found in the pits and in the embankment of the tumulus are here remnants of

³⁸ It is assumed that the horse and the dog buried with their master were to serve him in the world beyond. In my opinion the placing of these animals close to the graves indicates that they were meant to guide the soul of the deceased to the world beyond.

³⁹ It should be noted that the earth in the pits is often darker in colour and rather oily to the touch. I believe this to be due not only to the deposition of organic substances from the animal remains there, but also to the blood and libations.

⁴⁰ V. N. Toporov, *Eda*, in: *Mify narodov mira*, I, p. 427-429.

the food prepared for the deceased.⁴¹ The assumption put forward earlier here that the tumulus covered pits that were either made simultaneously or over a certain period of time, but anyway long before the burial, makes it possible to interpret these animal bones as remnants of food to be offered to a deity (or deities), i.e. an attempt to establish contact with them through sacrifices and fire.

Other offerings. Intact or fragmented vessels have been found in a large part of the pits, as well as small metal objects (articles of adornment, weapons, coins, etc.), clay (weights, spindle whorls, etc.) and architectural details (roof tiles, parts of eschars and fragments of plastering).

According to the most general information contained in the publications, the ceramic material from the pits consists of vessels used at the table, as well as coarser types of vessels (both local and imported). In some cases they bear traces of prolonged wear, in other cases – only fragments of vessels broken a long time ago were thrown into the pits, while in a third group of cases – intact or almost new vessels were placed in the pits (Plovdiv, Duvanlii, Varna, etc.).

No studies have been carried out on the recurrence of forms found in the pits, but nevertheless several facts are interesting: the large number of amphorae (intact or broken, specially arranged or indiscriminately thrown into the pits) in archaeological sites close to the sea coast, more than 500 fragments of vessels-tripods, dated back to the end of the Early Iron Age, found in Kukova Mogila (compared by B. Filov with the vessels-tripods used on the dining table of the Thracians, described by Xenophon), as well as the numerous cups of „Dacian” type, discovered in the sanctuary near Stalijska Mahala.

It may be assumed that the pits contained those vessels which the participants in the ritual used for preparing and offering food or for libations, as well as vessels connected with the religious activities outside the sanctuary. The placing of fragments of vessels or their intentional breaking seems to have repeated the act of dismembering of the sacrificial animal; this dismembering is to bring about the abundance and the multiplication of the sacrificial offering.

As regards the small metal and clay objects, they should be considered to be offerings; this element of the cult was probably chronologically the latest.

If everything stated so far should be summarized in several sentences, then the following should be said:

– The ritual pit is not a Thracian phenomenon, being known and used in the Balkans as a form of expression of the cult of a deity (deities) with chthonic and solar functions.

– The beginning of pit rituals in Thrace can be traced to the end of the Late Bronze Age.

⁴¹ Vasilev, Georgiev, *o.c.*, p. 5-6.

– In Thracian religious practice ritual pits can be: a place through which the living communicate with the world of the dead (cf. the pits in the tumuli); a form of offering to the deity (deities) guaranteeing fertility and abundance; in rare cases – a place for storing discarded objects used in the temples.

Pit sanctuaries and pits in the tumular embankments can be compared in their nature and their dating with the rock niches.

– The cult in the sanctuaries was practiced in the open. After the libations, the lighting of fire, etc., the pits were left open; some of them were apparently used many times.

– One of the possible dates for the ritual activities in the pit sanctuaries coincides approximately with the summer equinox. This is proved by the established age of the small ruminants used as sacrificial animals in Kralevo:⁴² six of them are 3-4-months old, i. e. an age that they (belonging to the primitive breeds) would reach in the months of May or June.

APPENDIX*

1. Borovo, Ruse district

Platforms with irregular shape, on which four fireplaces with diameters of up to 1 m were built, have been found at the base of two of the tumuli in the necropolis. Pear-shaped pits, 1.40 to 1.90 m deep, were dug around them. On two of the platforms there is a thick layer of ash-grey burnt earth, cinders, ash, fragments of clay vessels, animal bones, pieces of plastering, all this being covered on top with a layer of pure clayey soil. No graves have been found in either of the two tumuli.

The materials are dated to the 4th century B.C.

2. Čerkovna, Razgrad district. Accidental find

No details about the find are known. The vessels discovered at the bottom of an old well are dated to the end of the Late Bronze Age.

According to B. Hänsel, the find represents a "sacrificial offering."

3. Debelt, Burgas district

According to the information available so far, the total number of pits discovered in Debelt exceeds 150. The pits are beehive-shaped and cylindrical, and they contain cinders, intact or fragmented vessels, amphorae, coins, small metal objects, etc. The materials found in them are dated to the Early and Late Iron Age.

The pits were initially identified as graves, later as cult facilities.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 7.

* The Appendix comprises a description of the sites referred to in the text (in alphabetical order).

4. Doiranci, Loveč district

Twenty-seven ritual pits containing materials dated to the end of the Bronze Age – the beginning of the Late Iron Age have been found below a tumulus in which there is a burial performed during the 1st century.

5. Duvanlii, Plovdiv district

a. Kukova Mogila. The tumulus was accumulated gradually, with small tumuli being shaped in some places in the course of the piling up of the tumulus, later united by a common tumular embankment. Traces of scarifices and ritual fireplaces are observed in some places.

The pits occupy the periphery of the tumulus, being dug at almost all levels. They are beehive-shaped, 0.50 to 2.50 m in diameter, sometimes exceeding 2 m in height. Except in the embankment, pits are discovered at the base of the tumulus as well.

Most of the pits contain only loose earth, but at the bottom of many of them there are: ash, cinders, animal bones and broken vessels.

The stone tomb discovered on the southern slope of the tumulus was dug into the embankment during the 5th century B.C.

b. Bašova Mogila. The ritual pit was discovered in the middle of the tumulus, at a depth of about 2 m below the top. It repeats the shape of the pits from Kukova Mogila. The pit contains insignificant fragments of vessels.

The grave was dug below the base of the tumulus and is dated to the end of 5th – the first decades of the 4th century B.C.

6. Ešenica, Varna district

Six vessels half-filled with charred wheat were found to be arranged in one row close to one another in a pit with assumed diameter of 1.50 m. No bones, ash or cinders have been observed around them.

According to the archaeologists excavating the pit, it was a food store dated to the Late Bronze Age.

7. Kočan, Blagoevgrad district

A pit filled with black earth and stones was found in tumulus No 3 (3rd-2nd century B.C.). In tumulus No 7 the pits are at the centre of the tumulus, above the graves dated to the 4th century B.C., and they contain fragments of vessels, small metal objects and traces of burning. In tumulus No 7 the ritual pit is at the centre of the tumulus, to the west of a grave dated back to the 8th-7th century B. C.; there are traces of fire in the pit. Two pits are found in tumulus No 6: one in the centre, with traces of fire and filled with stones, and a second one in the embankment, also with traces of burning and with fragments of a vessel in it. No burial was performed in this tumulus.

8. Koprinka, Stara Zagora district

The accumulation of the tumulus resembles the method adopted for Kukova Mogila: small tumuli, later unified under a common tumular embankment, were piled up over a 2m thick layer of stamped clayey soil. Below one of these small tumuli made of stone, a grave was discovered. Two of the pits discovered below the grave were dug into the stamped layer of earth. The third pit was discovered in the embankment.

The pits are beehive-shaped and contain small cinders and ash. Fragments of broken vessels, cinders and traces of burning are noticed in some places in the embankment.

The small bones of a child's skull, cinders, ash and 42 teeth belonging to five human individuals of different age and sex, discovered in the so-called central grave, are identified as remains of a collective burial of the 4th-3rd century B.C.

9. Kralevo, Tărgoviște district

Below a tumular necropolis there are 137 ritual pits containing numerous cinders, fragments of vessels and animal bones. According to the osteological studies of the material from the pits and from the embankment, the bones found there belong to 300 domestic and 28 wild mammals. The existence of ritual fireplaces and a clay sacrificial altar in the embankment is reported.

A tomb dated to the 3rd century B.C. is dug into the tumular embankment.

10. Lăvino, Razgrad district

Two interconnected pits are situated in the centre of a tumulus. The pits are filled with many stones. Remnants of a fireplace are found in the stones piled on top of the first pit. A 4th century B.C. grave is found in the western part of the tumulus.

11. Mirkovo, Sofia district

Twelve beehive-shaped pits were found here, containing fragments of clay vessels, a lot of ash, cinders, fragments of burnt plaster, charred bones of domestic and wild animals, as well as human (?) bones. The pits are dug into sound terrain and are plastered with clay.

The pits are identified as primitive graves, they may have also served for offerings.

The archaeological site is dated to the 5th-4th century B.C.

12. Plovdiv. Accidental find

A deep pit has been found to contain 44 intact vessels arranged in six rows, as well as many fragments from other vessels, almost all of them bearing traces of prolonged use, separated by means of clay plastering. Among the vessels there were: bird bones, teeth and bones of cattle, as well as remains of wooden posts.

According to P. Detev, the pit was used to store vessels, while A. Bonev identifies it as a cenotaph for several members of one family.⁴³

The find is dated to the Late Bronze Age.

13. Stalijska Mahala, Mihajlovgrad district

Fifty-seven beehive-shaped pits have been studied on the territory of an Aeneolithic settlement which perished as a result of fire. They contain cinders, ash, fragments of vessels and metal objects. Remnants of fireplaces have been found in some pits. The ceramic material found here is dated to the Early Bronze, Middle Bronze Age (represented by only one fragment of a cup) and the Late Bronze Age, i.e. practically the entire 1st millennium B.C. until the 3rd century B.C. included.

The 6th-2nd century B.C. layer is the richest.

If the materials from the Early and Middle Bronze Age really belonged to the pits and were not a settlement layer destroyed while they were dug in (a perfectly plausible assumption), then the Stalijska Mahala site would be unique both with respect to its initial date and with respect to the duration of its existence.

Archaeologists excavating the site identify it as a cult centre.

⁴³ Detev, o.c. p. 66-70; A. Bonev, *K"snata bronzova epoha (po arheologičeski danni). Avtoreferat*, Sofija 1978, p. 21-22.

14. Staroselec, Sliven district

About twenty pits were discovered below a tumular embankment in which six 4th century graves have been found. Two relatively well preserved Early Iron Age vessels have been found in two of the pits.

The pits are identified as garbage pits.

15. Sveštari, Razgrad district

Two pits, one of them nearly 10 m deep, were found in the southern part of Ginina Mogila, close to its centre. Ritual fireplaces are reported to have been found in some places in the embankment.

The tomb discovered here is dated to the 3rd century B.C.

16. Varna

Four pits have been found in the place which was assumed to be the temenos of Demeter's sanctuary. In three of these pits there appeared seashells, snails, fish bones, as well as bones of birds and animals – all of them in earth strongly mixed with ash. Materials dated to the 4th-3rd century B.C. are found in the upper layer of pit No 1, among them there are many fragments with amphora seals, as well as archaic materials after a hiatus of about 30 cm. At the base of pit No 3 there is stamped clay, above which follows a compact layer of cinders, broken seashells and animal bones. The fourth pit contains only small fragments of vessels, moreover the earth is of a very light colour.

Another pit dated to the 4th-early 3rd century has been found in the temenos of the sanctuary assumed to belong to Heros Karabasmos. It contains cinders, ash, animal and fish bones, as well as fragments of vessels.