

Burial Practices and Customs in Macedonia in the Transitional Period from the Bronze to the Iron Age

by Dragi Mitrevski

The last three centuries of the 2nd millennium BC are considered to be a transitional period from the Bronze to the Iron Age in Macedonia. The archaeological evidence shows that in three centuries several processes stopped the evolution of the Bronze Age and provoked the beginning of the new Iron Age culture.

The big economical, social and cultural changes, which are distinctive for any transitional period, were also evident in this transitional period, manifested mostly in the burial practice. Consequently, the instability and interference of different cultural and ethnic elements have resulted in practicing two opposite rites of burying in the same period, i.e., cremation and inhumation.

At the present stage of exploration on the territory of R. Macedonia, archaeological activities have been undertaken on 15 necropolises from this period, 7 of which are with cremated deceased and 8 with inhumed ones¹.

A common impression concerning these necropolises is that there is a considerable uniformity in regard to the basic burying rituals. Related elements associate the necropolises with inhumation and the same rules have been confirmed in the necropolises with cremation.

The basic grave type in the necropolises with inhumation is the cist-grave of massive unflied stone slabs in which the burial was carried out in crouched position. The most extensive research

of necropolises of this type has been carried out in Vodovrati and Ulandi near Gradsko, in the middle Vardar Basin, where a total number of 74 graves have been discovered showing almost identical features. In Vodovrati, a total number of 24 undisturbed graves have been discovered, including well preserved skeletal remains. Inhumation in crouched position has been confirmed in all the graves, which have been formed to a different extent, from a grave pit to a perfectly constructed structure of stone slabs (fig. 1).

The deceased were oriented with the head to the West and legs to the East. The same orientation was also adhered to in the cases when two or more deceased were laid in one grave, which was not so rare (figs. 2 and 3). The constructions were slightly wider in the west side where the head was laid, and they were formed in a unique manner in all the burials. The way of laying the grave offerings was also identical, as well as the mode of repeated use of the same grave construction. Nevertheless, the most significant rule in the strict burial customs was certainly the way in which the deceased were laid, which depended on the sex. Namely, the women were laid in the crouched position on their left side, facing north, whereas in the male graves the position is opposite. It has confirmed in all the graves discovered in Vodovrati, as well in the neighboring necropolis in the village Ulandi.

A total number of 50 graves have been explored in Ulandi, which, in addition to the trenches in the related settlement, make a substantial contribution to the observations on

¹ Many of these necropolises were excavated during the last years, still unpublished; Mitrevski 1995, 109 - 122.

the organization and chronology of this type of necropolises, including their relation to the settlement (fig. 4).

In regard to the organization, the graves were arranged in rows stretching from the north to the south, the oldest graves being closer to the settlement. The site in Ulanci provides the most explicit example of the relation settlement-necropolis. At some 200 meters south of the graves, the related settlement was located on a dominant hill. The settlement was protected by a rampart of crushed stones and slabs occupying the flat top of the hill, with the dimensions of 80 x 30 meters and a minor terrace below it. Associated finds dated to the 13th - 11th centuries BC connect the necropolis and settlement.

Among the grave finds from these necropolises the local matt painted pottery and local copies of Late Mycenaean vessel are prevailing. The long bronze needles for textiles are most outstanding among the metal artifacts, in addition to the diverse bronze blades (fig. 5).

Regarding the external marking of the graves with inhumation from the Transitional Period there is no sufficient evidence, except for the only one find of stone stele from Ulanci, discovered so far. It was secondarily used as a lateral slab in the construction of grave No 32 (fig. 6). A male figure in a full military or parade equipment has been engraved on the stele. Although of the earlier date, the stele certainly points to a tradition of marking the graves, presumably and most frequently with wooden markers. This kind of stone steles must have been used in exceptional cases, probably for the tribe chiefs.

The necropolises with inhumations from the Transitional Period indicate a rather stable culture, based on the traditional Bronze Age values, but also inclining to the acquirements of the Late Mycenaean culture. On the other hand, the introduction of inhumation in Macedonia was a rather long process going on in the Bronze Age and throughout the entire Traditional Period. Its final formation into a standardized ritual with inhumation in a stretched position in cists-constructions of stone slabs was completed in the Iron Age, when this practice of burial became the common ritual in all the communities in

Macedonia². The burial with inhumation from Transitional Periods is, consequently, only a phase, though an extremely important one, in the continual evolution of this kind of burying from the Bronze Age to the beginning of the Classical Period.

The most substantial data on the necropolises with cremated deceased have been preserved in the necropolis Hippodrome near Skopje, which is the only necropolis of this kind where more extensive archaeological research has been carried out³. All deceased, regardless of sex and ages, were cremated in the frames of the necropolis, at the place assigned specifically to that purpose. They were burned in a big fire together with the grave offerings, i.e., with their personal belongings. The remains of the cremation were left to get cool, after which the best preserved skeletal remains were selected and neatly washed. Without adherence to certain order, they were finally laid in a vessel designed as an urn together with the remains of the personal belongings and grave offerings (fig. 7). The urns were laid in pits dug in virgin soil and special protecting constructions of arranged river pebbles were formed around them. Smaller vessels were laid near the urns as graves offerings. The formed grave construction was subsequently covered with pebbles, one of which was presumably put on top of the urn to mark its position. Among the covering pebbles above the actual urn-grave, a lot of pottery fragments, most often dishes, have been discovered, as well as pieces of animal and bird bones, shells etc., which points to certain ritual activities performed after the burial.

These are the basic characteristics of the burials with cremation, which have become common features of all the necropolises in Macedonia. Nevertheless, in contrast to the necropolises with inhumation, the forms distinctive for areas north of R. Macedonia, i.e., along the Morava and Lower Danube river, were prevailing in the material from Hippodrome. In the first place, it includes cannelated pottery and

² Vasič 1987, 690 - 723; Mitrevski 1991, 40.

³ Mitrevski 1994, 115 - 125.

“turban” dishes, as well as the numerous finds of coarse pots decorated by pressing with fingers, which did not exist in Macedonia in the earlier culture of the Bronze Age. Among these finds are also the typical ball-shaped khantaros decorated by engraving and filled up with white color⁴.

Consequently, unlike the necropolises with inhumation, the cremations appeared as a new practice introduced under some foreign influence in the course of the Transitional Period. The necropolises and material of the Hippodrome type are associated with the impact of the northern elements brought from the area along the Morava-Vardar communication line by communities that fired and destroyed the Lower Vardar settlements (Vardino, Vardarophca, Kastanas) toward the end of the 12th and throughout the 11th centuries⁵. These processes can easily be associated with the migrations of the Lower Danube communities to the south and southeast after the decay of the luxurious culture of the so-called incrustated pottery. Therefore comes the manifest similarity among the necropolises of type as Hippodrome and the related sites from the East part of the Balkan, as far as Black Sea. The most apparent similarity is the one with the necropolises of the so-called Transbalkan horizon (Zimnicea, Plovdiv, Cerkovina, Esenice, etc.)⁶.

In any case, the necropolises with cremation as foreign elements in Macedonia were about to be overcome very soon. Despite that, a whole range of new forms from the Northern and Central Balkan would be adopted in the domestic material culture to play a significant part in the creation of the values of the new Iron Age.

We could, accordingly, conclude that a specific cultural synthesis was formed in Macedonia in the Transitional Period by fusion of the traditional and external values (Balkan and Aegean), which resulted in origination of the Iron Age culture.

On the other hand, during the Iron Age, the most striking element in the sphere of burial was

the appearance of tumuli. They show explicit local features and continual typological development throughout the whole Iron Age, following the social, economic and cultural rise of the proto-historic communities. Nevertheless, we have to note that the beginning of the tumulus practice of burial goes back to the Transitional Period.

The most apparent example for this is the renowned tumulus from Beranci near Bitola (fig.8)⁷. There the earliest central grave, as well as the others, was a cist of stone slabs, yielding inhumation in crouched position and earlier grave goods corresponding to the sub-Mycenaean times in Greece⁸. On top of this grave, a small tumulus mound was laid in the first instance. The other members of the community were buried around it rather later, during the Iron Age, thus forming a tribal tumulus.

These types of so-called “double tumuli” are actually the earliest tumuli and they have been discovered in two necropolises on the territory of R. Macedonia (Beranci near Bitola and Karaorman near Stip). According to them and the other tumuli of this kind from Albania (Pashok, Vodhine and Burrel) or in Arnisia in Greece, we could say that the beginnings of the tumular series in Macedonia are associated with the mythical times, from the end of the Bronze Age, i.e., with Transitional Period⁹. The formation of the earliest tumuli was, consequently associated with certain sacred places and with the old graves of the mythical *heroes* (founders of the tribe), around which the large tumulus necropolises were gradually formed by later burials in the course of the Iron Age.

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⁴ Mitrevski 1994, fig. 3, fig. 12.

⁵ Hochstetter 1982; Stefanovich 1973.

⁶ Bonev 1988, 55.

⁷ Mikulcic 1966, 16; Hammond 1982, 644 - 645.

⁸ Garašanin 1983, 791.

⁹ Hammond 1982, 625, 644.

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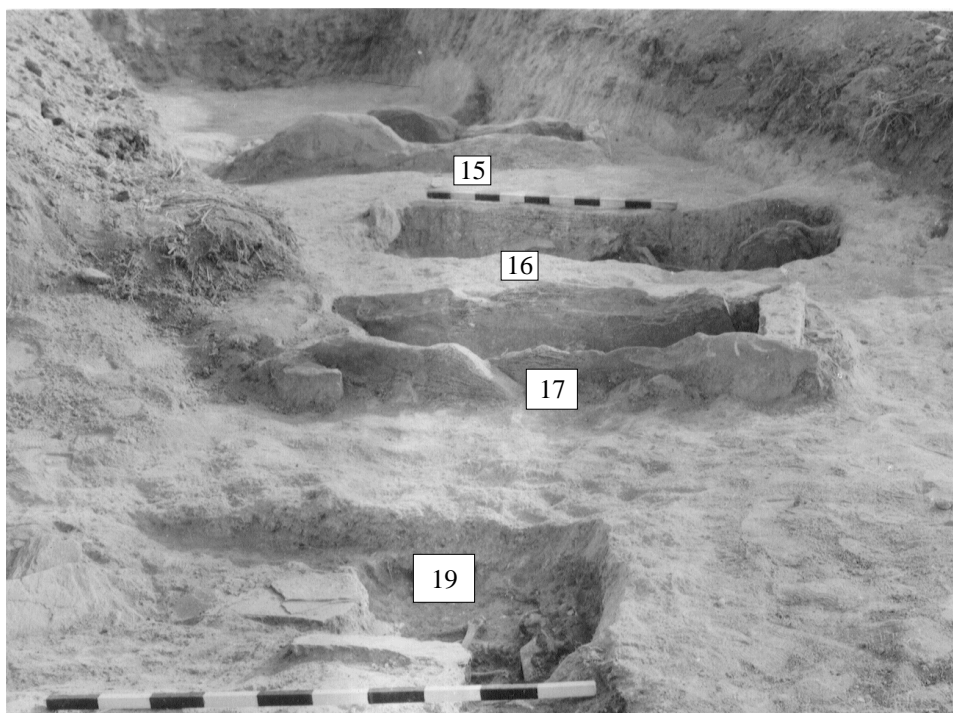


Fig. 1. A part of the necropolis from Vodovrati, Gradsko

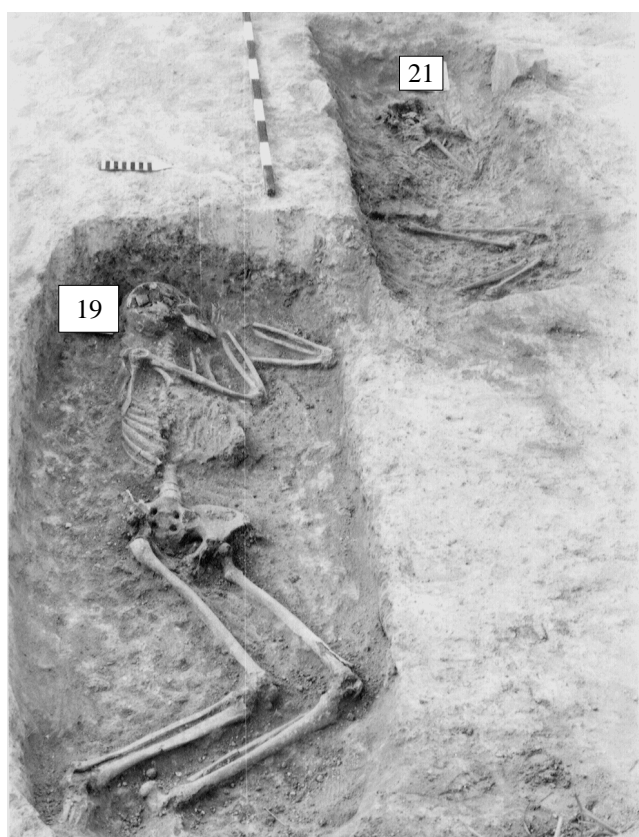


Fig. 2. Two pit-graves from Vodovrati, Gradsko



Fig. 3. Grave No 15 from Vodovrati, Gradsko

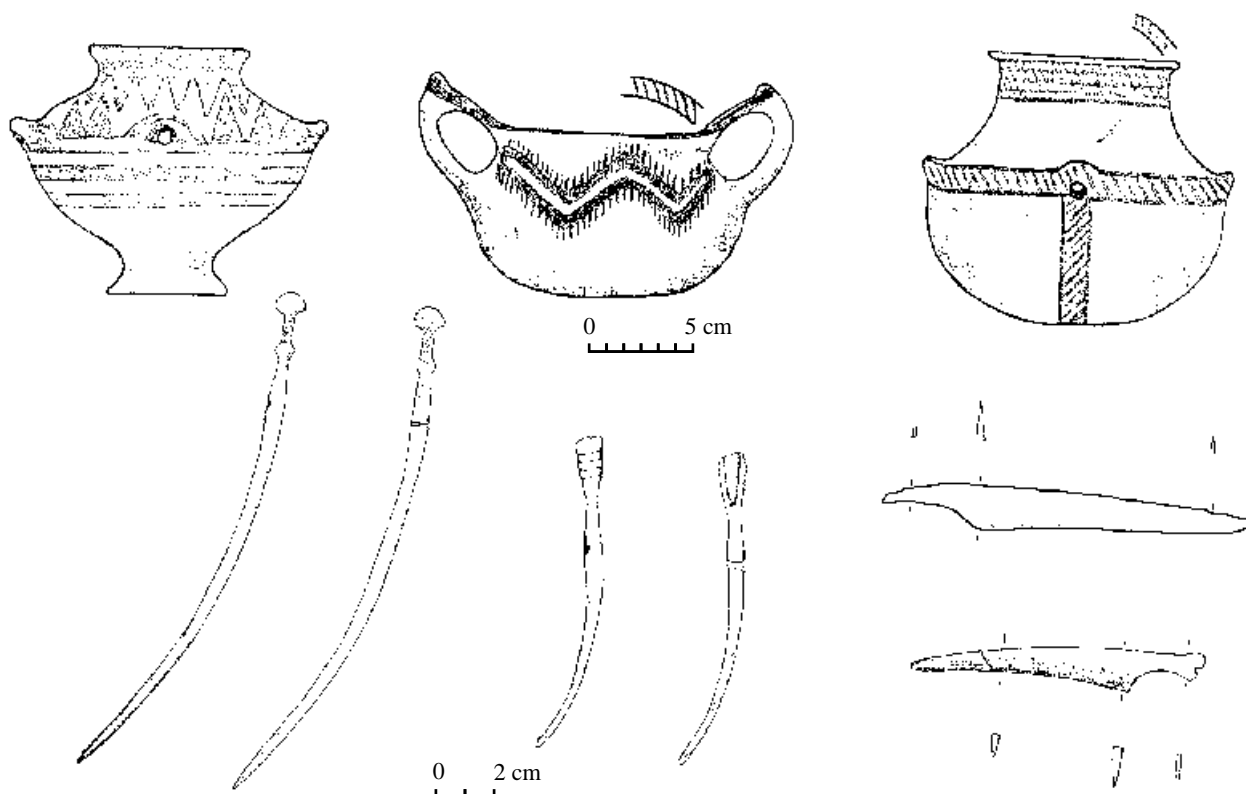


Fig. 5. Some finds of painted pottery and bronze objects from Ulanci, Gradska

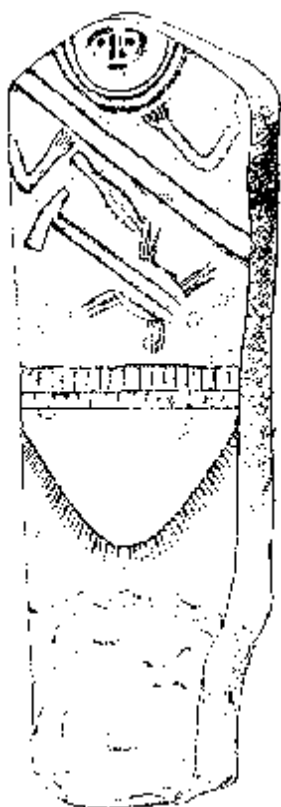


Fig. 6. Stone stela from Ulanci, Gradska

Fig. 4. A part of the necropolis from Ulanci, Gradska with the settlement at the top of the hill





Fig. 7. Some vessel-urns and lids from Hippodrome, Skopje

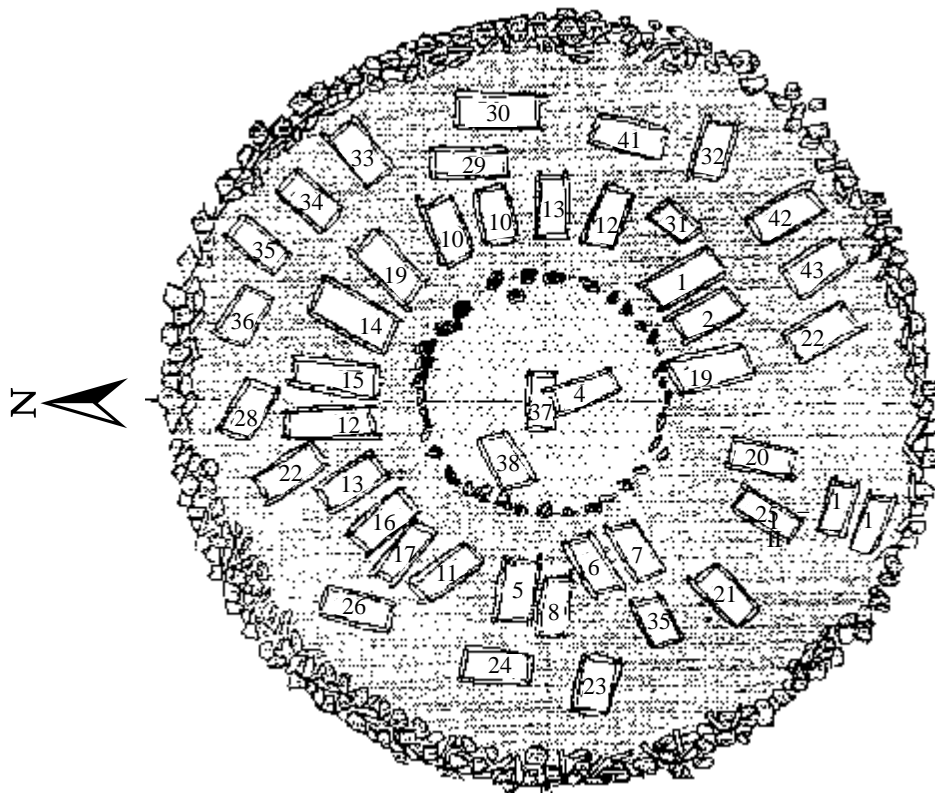


Fig. 8. The disposition of the graves in the tumulus from Visoi, Beranci