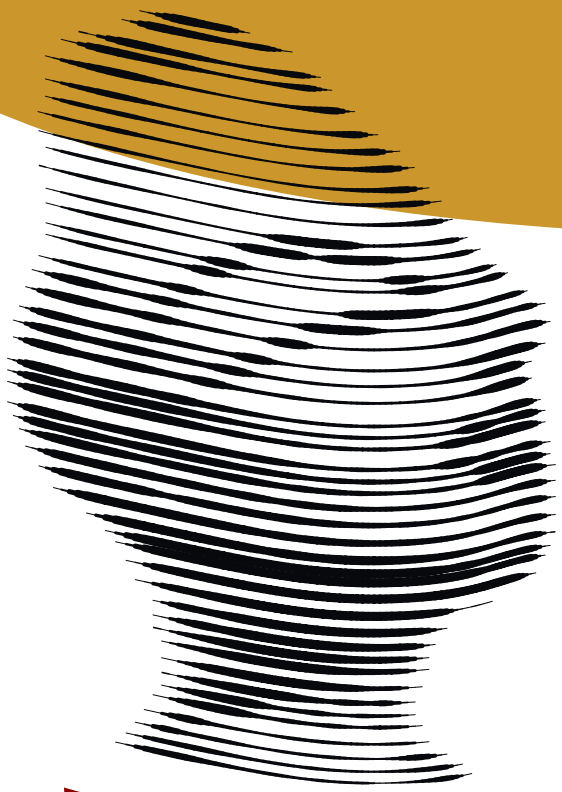


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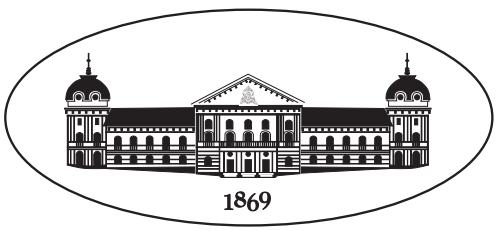
The Prehistoric Archaeology of Southeast Europe: Perspectives from a New Millennium

26-27 November 2026, Sofia

PROGRAM AND ABSTRACTS



Sofia Regional Museum of History



Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

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Wednesday, 25 November 2026

Conference Hall 1, Serdica Ancient Cultural and Communication Complex

03 PM – 05 PM **Registration**

Thursday, 26 November 2026

Conference Hall 1, Serdica Ancient Cultural and Communication Complex

08:30 AM **Registration**

09:00 AM **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

Chairs: Barbara Horejs & Krum Bacvarov

A Mesolithic Overture

09:10 AM Hidden in plain sight: The Holocene hunter-gatherer record and legacy in southeastern Europe
Dušan Borić

09:30 AM Building with stone: Human-stone interactions and the emergence of Lepenski Vir
Dimitrij Mlekuž Vrhovik & John Chapman

Prehistory of Eastern Thrace and the Marmara Region

09:50 AM Tracing the local and non-local Neolithic populations in the southeastern Marmara region? In the context of Aktopraklık
Necmi Karul

10:10 AM Aşağı Pınar: A Neolithic settlement in Eastern Thrace
Eylem Özdoğan

10:30 AM An overview of Eastern Thrace in the context of Eastern European prehistory
Mehmet Özdoğan

10:50 AM **Coffee Break**

Prehistory of the Aegean

11:10 AM Living in Neolithic Aegean Thrace
Dushka Urem-Kotsou

11:30 AM Landscape archaeology in Thessaly (LAiT): Paleolakes and prehistoric sites
Agathe Reingruber

11:50 AM	Dispilio before and after EXPLO Kostas Kotsakis
12:10 PM	**Lunch Break**
	Chairs: Svend Hansen & Eylem Özdoğan
	PREHISTORY OF THE EASTERN BALKANS
01:40 PM	Diverging paths: Following rivers and crossing mountains in Early Neolithic Thrace Atanas Tsurev & Petar Leshtakov
02:00 PM	Reading the patterns: Painted pottery and the Balkan Early Neolithic Tanya Dzhanfezova
02:20 PM	Absolute chronology, pottery and flints in conceptualizing Neolithization: A case study of Bulgaria Maria Gurova
02:40 PM	Early Neolithic ditch enclosures twenty years on: New perspectives from Yabalkovo Nikolina Nikolova
03:00 PM	Vinča and Akropotamos-Topolnitsa, peaceful coexistence or competition for supremacy? A case study from south-western Bulgaria from the last quarter of the 6th millennium BC Małgorzata Grębska-Kulow
03:20 PM	Jewellery from osseous raw materials in the Late Neolithic in northern Thrace Selena Vitezović
03:40 PM	**Coffee Break**
04:00 PM	New evidence for the Neolithic and Chalcolithic occupation of Western Upper Thrace: Insights from Skutare Georgi Katsarov & Elena Bozhinova
04:20 PM	The prehistoric site of Blaskovo: Dynamics of material culture during the second half of the Late Neolithic and the transition to the Early Chalcolithic Galina Samichkova
04:40 PM	Cultural interactions between southern Dobruja and Longoza in northeastern Bulgaria at the turn of the 5th millennium BC (based on ceramics from the site of Boryana, Varna region) Viktoria D. Petrova

05:00 PM | Is there something inside? Early Chalcolithic enclosures at Sredets in Northern Thrace
Desislava Takorova

05:20 PM | Chalcolithic Drama: Intra-site analysis and regional setting
Ralf Gleser

06:30 PM | **Official opening of the poster exhibition exploring *The Prehistoric Archaeology in Bulgaria: Perspectives from a New Millennium***

07:00 PM | **Welcome Reception**
National Archaeological Museum, 1 Atanas Burov Square

Friday, 26 November 2026

Conference Hall 1, Serdica Ancient Cultural and Communication Complex

Chairs: Dušan Borić & Nikolina Nikolova

09:00 AM | Durankulak – Tell Golemiya Ostrov: Architectural Characteristics of the Early and Late Eneolithic Settlements
Ivan Vajsov, Vladimir Slavchev & Petar Zidarov

09:20 AM | Das Salz von Provadia-Solnitsata als Zahlungsmittel in der späten Vorgeschichte
Vassil Nikolov

09:40 AM | Buried in splendor: The Late Copper Age cemetery of Tell Tranak
Krum Bacvarov, Georgi Katsarov, Nikolina Nikolova, Atanas Tsurev & Kathleen McSweeney

10:00 AM | Tell Yunatsite: Recent research and new insights on the Chalcolithic in Upper Thrace
Kamen Boyadzhiev

10:20 AM | **Coffee Break**

10:40 AM | Chalcolithic gold finds from southern Bulgaria: Context, formal and technological characteristics
Petar Leshtakov

11:00 AM | Reassessing the *chaîne opératoire* at the prehistoric copper mines of Ai Bunar in Upper Thrace
Hristo Popov, Plamen Georgiev, Ivan Ivanov & Petar Minkov

11:20 AM	The dynamics of cultural processes during the Eneolithic Period in the southern Bulgarian Black Sea coast region Margarita Popova & Stanimir Parvanov
11:40 AM	New research on the submerged prehistoric settlements In the Port of Sozopol Kalin Dimitrov
12:00 PM	The final stages of the Balkan Chalcolithic: A view from the mountains Nadezhda Todorova & Vanya Petrova
12:20 PM	**Lunch Break**

Chairs: Necmi Karul & Agathe Reingruber

Prehistory of the Central Balkans

02:00 PM	Amzabegovo revisited: The Neolithic development north of the Aegean Darko Stojanovski
02:20 PM	A new multispecies approach for analyzing the Neolithization of the central Balkans Barbara Horejs
02:40 PM	Revisiting the demography of the Late Neolithic communities in the Central Balkans between 5500 and 4500 BCE Marko Porčić
03:00 PM	Anchored in time: Unveiling submerged Balkan lake-dwellings through dendrochronology and radiocarbon analysis Albert Hafner

Prehistory of the Lower Danube and the Carpathian basin

03:20 PM	The Neolithic–Copper Age cultural sequence in the Lower Danube region – where do we stand today? Raiko Krauß
03:40 PM	22 years of excavations at the Copper Age settlement mound near Pietrele (Romania) Svend Hansen
04:00 PM	**Coffee Break**

04:20 PM — From form to function: Assessing ceramic volume and morphology shifts across Gumelnița A2–B1 at Sultana–Malu Roșu under Bond 4 climatic pressures
Cătălin Lazar, Sebastian Dumitrescu & Theodor Ignat

04:40 PM — Spatial patterns and social organisation of 6th millennium cal BC settlements in the south-western Carpathian basin
Krisztián Oross, János Jakucs, Eszter Bánffy & Tibor Marton

05:00 PM — Towards sustainable lifestyles in the early farming communities between the Balkans and Central Europe. Herding, dairy products and household rituals
Eszter Bánffy

Theory & Methodology

05:20 PM — A new chronological framework for the new millennium
Zoï Tsirtsoni

05:40 PM — Open spaces and the dilemma of the “cultural level” (“kulturen plast”)
John Chapman & Bisserka Gaydarska

06:00 PM — Of figurine and fragmentation
Bisserka Gaydarska

06:20 PM — **Closing Discussion**

07:00 PM — **Conference Dinner**
Art Club Museum, 2 Saborna Str.

Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

Buried in splendor: The Late Copper Age cemetery of Tell Tranak

Krum Bacvarov, Georgi Katsarov, Nikolina Nikolova, Atanas Tsurev & Kathleen McSweeney

Some 30 Copper Age cemeteries have been excavated in the Eastern Balkans thus far, notwithstanding the extensive fieldwork in the last decades, including targeted research. Moreover, all but one of the sites are clustered in the northeastern part of this region – even though they are distributed unevenly over the area – making the rest of the Eastern Balkans a *terra incognita* in the study of the Chalcolithic burial practices. The evidence for Northeast Bulgaria, Dobruja, and Muntenia is also sketchy, but this seems to reflect past and current research capacities and strategies. Adequate investigations on the recovered evidence are insufficient in view of the vast possibilities offered by the application of conventional, social, and scientific approaches, even though some efforts to that end have been made in the last two decades.

This presentation will discuss the recent excavation results at the Late Copper Age cemetery of Tell Tranak in the foothills of the Eastern Balkan Range. Eleven burials were uncovered close to the tell site comprising the western edge of the cemetery, as well as a single burial next to the mound itself that provide new insights into the mortuary and social practices of the local Chalcolithic community, and into the contacts between the Black Sea littoral and the hinterland in the Copper Age.

Towards sustainable lifestyles in the early farming communities between the Balkans and Central Europe. Herding, dairy products and household rituals

Eszter Bánffy

Following the 6th millennium cal BC changes in settlement patterns, architecture, and subsistence, which adapted to a more Atlantic environment compared to the Balkans, the paper presents a case study: the shift towards cattle keeping in the southern half of modern Hungary. It aims to summarise results from recent analyses of animal bone assemblages, aDNA, stable isotopes, seasonality and milk protein residues. Assessments indicate that the consumption of *secondary products* began no later than the early farming phases, and that not only carcass products but also the use of live animals, such as draught power and milking, are in question. Due mainly to environmental factors, cattle are becoming increasingly important at the expense of sheep and goats in the southern Carpathian basin.

Although livestock must have been raised on a smaller scale during the early Neolithic, cattle keeping became pivotal in the lives of Körös and Starčevo communities in the first half of the 6th millennium cal BC, as evidenced by its infiltration into figural art and household ritual activities. This change points at the Central European Neolithic subsistence strategies and cattle keeping societies in later centuries of the 6th millennium cal BC. In the meantime, the important role of cattle husbandry, increasing in space and time, appears to distinguish the Balkan-Danube Valley route from the Mediterranean Neolithisation route.

Hidden in plain sight: The Holocene hunter-gatherer record and legacy in southeastern Europe

Dušan Borić

Over the past two decades, our understanding of pre-Neolithic populations in southeastern Europe has increased steadily, although it still lags behind that of several other European regions with better-documented Mesolithic records. Recent discoveries have expanded both the number of known sites and our understanding of the diversity and regional variability of hunter-gatherer settlement systems across the area. At the same time, certain features of Neolithic and Copper Age mortuary practices have long hinted that the transition to farming did not entirely erase local forager traditions.

More recently, genomic research has provided unexpected evidence for the enduring biological legacy of Holocene hunter-gatherers, revealing substantial forager ancestry in populations and contexts where it had not previously been anticipated. These findings challenge long-standing narratives of demographic replacement and highlight the persistence of hunter-gatherer communities and identities well into the Neolithic and later prehistory.

In this paper, I review the current archaeological, bioanthropological, and genomic evidence for Holocene hunter-gatherers across southeastern Europe and present new data from several regions. I also discuss avenues for improving the visibility of these often-overlooked populations through the integration of multiple lines of evidence, including settlement patterns, mortuary practices, isotopic signatures, and ancient DNA.

Tell Yunatsite: Recent research and new insights on the Chalcolithic in Upper Thrace

Kamen Boyadzhiev

The prehistoric tell at Yunatsite in the Maritsa River valley (Southern Bulgaria) is among the largest tell-sites in the Balkans. During large-scale excavations a Medieval cemetery, fortification from the Roman period, and layers from the Iron Age, Early Bronze Age and Chalcolithic have been revealed.

The studies in the last years are concentrated on the thick Chalcolithic layer, which covers most of the 5th millennium BC. They reveal a complex settlement and social structure. The tell itself is actually the fortified part of a larger settlement that emerged around the beginning of the 5th millennium BC. An area used in some economic activities was discovered to the south of the tell. Complex research on entire buildings at the tell reveal information on subsistence and storage practices, architecture, etc. Long-distance trade and craft specialization have been attested. Analyses of recently discovered golden artifacts suggest local metallurgical production, and a small golden bead dated to the mid-5th millennium BC is one of the earliest golden artifacts known so far worldwide. The final Chalcolithic settlement was destroyed by an enemy attack around 4200 cal. BC and provides important evidence for the end of the Copper Age cultures in the Balkans.

The presentation highlights the most interesting results from the latest excavations and their significance for understanding the cultural processes, technological innovations and social dynamics in the 5th millennium BC Balkans.

Open spaces and the dilemma of the "cultural level" ("kulturen plast")

John Chapman & Bisserka Gaydarska

Built structures such as houses, store-rooms and workshops are foundational aspects of the Neolithic village. By comparison, the nature and functions of open spaces are far more ambiguous, defined by vague physical parameters, too large to be satisfactorily excavated and artifact-poor. Yet open spaces were fundamental to settlements. In the Bulgarian context, often >50% of a site figurine assemblage was discarded in the open spaces of the 'cultural level' (Bulgarian: "*kulturen plast*").

The concern that deposits in general do not carry cultural meaning is rebutted in Hodder and McAnany's (2009) manifesto of "social stratigraphy" as a medium for the performance of social practices. In this paper, we seek to interpret occupation deposits in social terms by focussing on three aspects: their constituents, formation processes and temporality.

Cultural levels are formed from adding more than subtracting deposits. The constituents of a cultural level can vary widely from decayed construction materials to waste products. Dumping and trampling added more bulk than sweeping and raking of house deposits. The temporality of the cultural level was vital in defining its thickness and life-cycle. Human activity can produce a single stratigraphic unit only if repeated many times. We review the relatively rare soil micromorphological analysis (SMM) studies of open space deposits at Çatalhöyük and two Neolithic sites in Serbia – Svinjarička Čuka and Drenovac. We conclude this paper by suggesting ways of approaching future excavations with techniques that would help us to make more social sense of cultural levels.

New research on the submerged prehistoric settlements in the Port of Sozopol

Kalin Dimitrov

In 1927, during dredging operations in the basin of the present-day Port of Sozopol, around 400 ceramic fragments and whole vessels from the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods were recovered. In the 1950s, several jugs among these finds were identified and attributed to the Early Bronze Age (EBA), making it clear that a submerged prehistoric site existed in the bay. In the late 1980s, diving surveys discovered in the same area materials dated to the Late Chalcolithic. Between 1987 and 2005, underwater archaeological excavations conducted in the central part of the port established the existence of submerged settlement remains from the Early Bronze Age and the Final Chalcolithic.

Since 2020, underwater archaeological research has been resumed. A sector with highly preserved stratigraphy and structures from the Final Chalcolithic has been investigated in the central part of the harbour. It was established that the settlement buildings were of pile-dwelling type and were located at the northern edge of a shallow marine paleo bay. Based on newly discovered archival bathymetric records, the configuration of the seabed prior to the 1920s dredging works was reconstructed, and a new interpretation was proposed regarding the layout of the prehistoric settlements within the context of the 5th, 4th, and 3rd millennium BC environment of the present-day Sozopol Bay between the Island of St. St. Kirik and Julita and the Skamni Peninsula.

Reading the patterns: Painted pottery and the Balkan Early Neolithic

Tanya Dzhanfezova

The category of the emblematic painted wares, characteristic of the Early Neolithic period in Southeast Europe, has long been among the most essential tools to establish cultural group identities and relative chronologies. However, its potential to effectively tackle key concepts such as the ways of adaptation, the transfer of knowledge, the complex web of interactions underlying past societies (to name a few), has not been fully explored.

This paper demonstrates how a detailed technological study of painted wares found in diverse Balkan Neolithic settlements may reveal intriguing aspects of such major research themes. The *chaîne opératoire* associated with this multi-stage and complex pottery technology has shaped the fundament of processes to trace the conservative traditions and the innovative approaches, as well as to detect and 'read' the *modus operandi* of Neolithic craft people.

The latter is examined by the application of systematically targeted multi-method chemical, macro- and microscopic analyses – thus making it possible to approach the subject from a new perspective, to further augment the set of consistent data resulting from cross-disciplinary approaches, and to thoroughly explore the narratives associated with complex prehistoric processes.

Of figurine and fragmentation

Bisserka Gaydarska

Miniature human clay figurines are a frequent occurrence on Neolithic and Copper Age sites in Bulgaria. Narratives about their function and meaning often leave the impression that such images are complete and mostly female. Recent research has revealed that neither premise is actually correct. Complete figures are rare and female images do not always predominate and appear alongside various other socio-sexual categories. It is more useful, then, to consider the fragment as the basic unit of figurine analysis.

This presentation will explore the relationship between fragmentation and the variety of changes in socio-sexual categories that might appear as a result of this social practice. It is based on the study of more than 2,000 figurines from over 50 Neolithic and Copper Ages site in Bulgaria. It explores the notion that both the making and the breaking of figurines provided the maker and the breaker with the potential for creating and changing socio-sexual identities.

Chalcolithic Drama: Intra-site analysis and regional setting

Ralf Gleser

This contribution considers the excavations carried out between 1983 and 2002 at the tell site of Merdzhumekya near the village of Drama, SE Bulgaria. The settlement remains date to the Karanovo V and the very beginning of the Karanovo VI period (Early and Late Chalcolithic). The excavated house ruins and pits represent several phases of a small village protected by a circular ditch enclosure. All in all, the remains of more than 60 houses from the Early Chalcolithic and at least 25 houses from the Late Chalcolithic were excavated and recorded. It was already demonstrated that the Karanovo V period structures had been arranged in two different spatial patterns and that both represent several stages in the settlement's development. 29 houses aggregated in the center were built close together and partially overlapped each other. This central concentration was surrounded by a peripheral rectangular belt consisting of 31 houses. This settlement pattern seems to have been preserved in the Karanovo VI period. No comprehensive final publications are available for the settlements. Only 'special' artifacts with symbolic or maybe religious function have been analyzed so far, e. g. anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, miniature clay vessels, miniature tables, clay pendants, etc.

In this presentation, I will evaluate the project's database to analyze a broader spectrum of artifacts. The dataset is available as an Excel file and contains more than 30,000 data records. Mappings of artifacts that reflect daily life (e. g. millstones, stone tools, spindle whorls, loom weights, plant and faunal remains, etc.) and those that indicate long-distance connections (such as Spondylus and Dentalium shells) will be presented for the individual houses within the settlement layout. My goal is to establish a basis for the interpretation of the two distinct building concepts within the settlement in a regional context.

Vinča and Akropotamos-Topolnitsa, peaceful coexistence or competition for supremacy? A case study from south-western Bulgaria from the last quarter of the 6th millennium BC

Małgorzata Grębska-Kulow

During the last quarter of the sixth millennium BCE, profound changes in cultural development occurred in south-western Bulgaria. The number of settlements increased, and large, flat settlements such as Damyanitsa and Topolnitsa appeared near the Struma River. The most powerful culture to develop in south-eastern Europe, the Vinča Culture, inhabited this geographical region. During the same period, another powerful culture emerged along the northern Aegean coast and especially in the Lower Struma Valley: the Akropotamos-Topolnitsa Culture, which had a tradition of making painted pottery. The two cultures had different economic profiles. While the Vinča Culture developed agriculture and livestock farming, primarily raising cattle, the Akropotamos-Topolnitsa Culture focused on crafts, such as pottery production and the manufacture and trade of jewelry made from Spondylus shells. By the end of the sixth millennium BCE, the Akropotamos-Topolnitsa Culture had expanded along the Struma Valley to the north. The encounter between these two powerful cultures was imminent. How did it unfold? Did it lead to conflict, or did a peaceful acculturation take place? Or perhaps both? Archaeological data suggest different scenarios in different parts of the Struma Valley. South of

the Kresna Gorge, the Akropotamos-Topolnitsa Culture prevailed over the Vinča Culture, giving a new impetus to cultural development around 5000 BCE. North of the Kresna Gorge, however, the Vinča Culture remained dominant, with the Akropotamos-Topolnitsa Culture having a significantly weaker influence.

Absolute chronology, pottery and flints in conceptualizing Neolithization: A case study of Bulgaria

Maria Gurova

One of the postulates of Neolithization (as formulated by M. Özdoğan) is that in this gradual demographic movement, each settled zone may be considered as a 'core area' for those further along the way. In the chain of consequent human groups' mobility, this raises the question: what was the 'core' role of Bulgaria, and in what process? From my perspective, I think I have found an answer (among others) – it is at least in the domain of Balkan flint supply and distribution from the outcrop clusters in north Bulgaria to the surrounding (pre)Neolithic *oikoumene* in the Balkans at the boundary between the 7th and 6th millennia BC. And I hope that, in my research, I have succeeded in presenting arguments for the involvement of Balkan flint (and formal tools) in the Neolithization of the eastern Balkans.

Undoubtedly, Bulgarian mediation involved demic (group movement and interactions), cultural (artefacts, know-how and skills exchange) and natural (raw materials such as Balkan flint) factors, all of which played a significant role in the transformative processes in Southeast Europe at the end of the 7th and beginning of the 6th millennium BC. In fact, this is an appropriate time to consider all new ^{14}C dates and to reassess the conventional chronological framework in order to justify the adequacy and accuracy of the dating and interpretation of cultural interactions between human groups based on pottery, flint assemblages, and other cultural features. Moreover, the leading role of pottery should no longer be favoured on purely gnoseological grounds.

Anchored in time: Unveiling submerged Balkan lake-dwellings through dendrochronology and radiocarbon analysis

Albert Hafner

Neolithic and Bronze Age lake-dwellings in wetland and underwater environments have been well documented in the circum-Alpine region since the mid-19th century. Yet, their occurrence in the southwestern Balkans has only recently attracted systematic scientific attention. Between 2018 and 2025 the ERC Synergy Grant project EXPLO ('Exploring the dynamics and causes of prehistoric land use change in the cradle of European farming'), led jointly by the Universities of Bern, Oxford, and Thessaloniki, investigated waterlogged lakeshore settlements and performed palaeoecological coring in various lakes across the region. Sites at Lake Ohrid (Albania, North Macedonia), Lake Kastoria (Greece), and the former Lake Maliq (Albania) demonstrate that the area harbours some of the oldest prehistoric lake-dwellings in Europe. Key sites including Ploča Mičov Grad, Vbrnik and Lin on Lake Ohrid, Dispilio on Lake Kastoria, and Sovjan and Dunavec on former Lake Maliq, have proven exceptional for both

archaeological and palaeobiological research, owing to the outstanding organic preservation characteristic of submerged contexts. Through the integration of dendrochronology, radiocarbon dating, and Bayesian modelling, the EXPLO project has established robust absolute chronologies spanning the Neolithic through the Bronze and Iron Ages across multiple sites. The southwestern Balkans are thus again confirming its role as a pivotal region for understanding the origins, spread, and long-term dynamics of early farming communities in prehistoric Europe.

22 years of excavations at the Copper Age settlement mound near Pietrele (Romania)

Svend Hansen

In my presentation, I will discuss the most important findings from the excavations at the Copper Age settlement mound in Pietrele. By 2024, a complete 11-meter-thick stratigraphic sequence of the settlement had been uncovered. This sequence spans a period from approximately 4600 to 4250 BCE, during which the settlement mound was continuously inhabited.

The settlement of the site by the people of the Gumelnița culture was a newly founded settlement that should be viewed within the context of a larger colonization process across a vast area of what is now Greater Wallachia, extending as far as Dobruja. From 4600 BCE, the elevation of the settlement mound can be traced, and from around 4450 BCE, the emergence of an associated outer settlement. The expansion of the settlement was accompanied by a significant increase in the production of a wide variety of goods. By this time at the latest, the emergence of a redistributive chieftain system is evident.

Among the most important findings of the environmental-geographical investigations is evidence of a large lake that stretched from Ruse to the present-day Danube Delta, through which the Danube flowed. It was likely a so called *ria* open to the Black Sea. This lake remained the dominant landscape feature well into the Iron Age.

A new multispecies approach for analyzing the Neolithization of the central Balkans

Barbara Horejs

This contribution will present the archaeological and methodological framework, ongoing analyses and first results of the new multispecies approach applied at Svinjarička Čuka, Serbia, with a view to establishing its role in the Neolithization of the central Balkans. After eight years of excavations in 2026, the site provides a substantial new body of primary data for the early Neolithic period, and can be identified as a southern outpost of the Starčevo-Körös-Kriş complex in southeast Europe. The well-preserved archaeological remains of several settlement phases extend over a time period of approximately half a millennium, following the first occupation by a pioneer group around 6000 BCE. The multispecies approach is aiming the broader contextualization of the new Neolithic lifestyle, encompassing animals, plants and bacteria, in addition to the adaptation of novel environmental and cli-

mate conditions. The presentation will comprise a short summary and the discussion of new data from archaeobotany, archaeozoology, micromorphology, geochemistry, molecular biology and geoarchaeology aiming a preliminary model for Svinjarička Čuka in the Neolithization along the Vardar-Morava river corridors into the Balkans.

Tracing the local and non-local Neolithic populations in the southeastern Marmara region? In the context of Aktopraklık

Necmi Karul

The Marmara Region, located at the northwestern tip of the Anatolian Peninsula, generally forms part of the cultural framework of Western Anatolia, following a trajectory parallel to developments there. However, the most significant aspect of the Neolithization process in southeastern Marmara is that it can be traced back to the pre-Neolithic period.

While data on the Mesolithic period are limited to surface surveys, the transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic has been well documented, as have the contributions of local communities during the Neolithic period. Indeed, recent ancient DNA studies have also provided concrete evidence that the local population coexisted with farmers presumed to have arrived from outside the region.

Evidence dating to the 7th and 6th millennia BC has been found at Aktopraklık, where the development of this process can be traced. This presentation uses Aktopraklık as a case study to discuss the distinct patterns created in the area's settlements by local communities and by the first farming communities.

New evidence for the Neolithic and Chalcolithic occupation of Western Upper Thrace: Insights from Skutare

Georgi Katsarov & Elena Bozhinova

This paper presents new evidence from the archaeological site of Skutare, located in the Middle Maritsa River Valley in Western Upper Thrace, Southern Bulgaria. The Maritsa flows here through a broad alluvial plain near the northern foothills of the Rhodope Mountains, forming numerous channels and islands. This dynamic fluvial environment has played an important role in shaping the prehistoric landscape.

The investigated area revealed nearly 122 pits and other cut features distributed across an area approximately 200 m in diameter. The assemblage is dominated by large cut features, often with flat bases, alongside pits of varying dimensions and depths. A segment of a Late Chalcolithic enclosure ditch was also investigated. Most excavated features date to the Early and Late Chalcolithic (113), when the occupied area was largest, while fewer belong to the Early Neolithic (5) and Late Neolithic (4). Archaeological materials dating to the 6th and 5th millennium BC extend to the west, south, and east, while field survey data indicate a distribution area of no more than approximately 500 x 500 m.

Particular attention is devoted to the ceramic assemblage, which provides the principal basis for the chronological attribution of the excavated features, and to their spatial characteristics. The new data

from Skutare are discussed in the context of previous investigations in Western Upper Thrace, contributing to a better understanding of prehistoric settlement patterns and landscape use in the Middle Maritsa Valley.

Dispilio before and after EXPLO

Kostas Kotsakis

Dispilio excavated yearly from 1992 to 2013, became well-known as a waterlogged Neolithic site, the first of this kind in Greece, since the time of ancient Pausanias and his description of the ancient settlement in Lake Prasias in what is today Eastern Macedonia, in Greece. Among the unique artefacts, the famous “Dispilio tablet” has been an international celebrity, even before publication, as a controversial specimen of Neolithic writing.

However, it had never crossed my mind that I would find myself the director of this excavation, and, furthermore, to see the project through to its fulfilment in the final publication of the site and its finds.

We received support to carry out this huge task from a first-rate international team of experts from many European countries, as well as from an ERC-funded project, EXPLO. The publication is now almost complete, and we expect to circulate three volumes in open access this coming winter.

However, the studies promoted by EXPLO present a complete reversal of the site’s picture: not a settlement built over the water, but one built on the dry ground.

It will be exciting to observe how this reversal of the view will be received by audiences in Dispilio and Kastoria. Finally, the scientific aspect is no less intriguing: Is archaeology a robust discipline? Are its conclusions verifiable and repeatable? By way of conclusion, some thoughts on these aspects will be presented and discussed.

The Neolithic–Copper Age cultural sequence in the Lower Danube region – where do we stand today?

Raiko Krauß

The lowlands of the Lower Danube, between the Carpathians in the north and the Balkan Mountains in the south, represent one of the most important areas in Europe where the Earliest Neolithic was able to evolve. The subsequent development up to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age has also been comparatively well researched in this region. Numerous tell settlements offer continuous stratigraphies, and there are numerous large scale excavations, both in northern Bulgaria and southern Romania. However, clear priorities can be identified in the history of research. In the past, considerable attention was paid, on the one hand, to the study of the beginnings of the Neolithic and, on the other, to the rich tell settlements of the Late Copper Age. The study of the so-called transitional period between the Copper and Bronze Ages has always posed a particular methodological problem. Consequently, there is a great deal of radiocarbon data from the beginning of the 6th and then again only from the end of the 5th millennium BC. Added to this are methodological problems resulting from

the course of the calibration curve. In my lecture, I would like to outline the current state of research and highlight some issues regarding the relative chronological sequence and the interpretation of radiocarbon data.

From form to function: Assessing ceramic volume and morphology shifts across Gumelnița A2–B1 at Sultana–Malu Roșu under Bond 4 climatic pressures

Cătălin Lazar, Sebastian Dumitrescu & Theodor Ignat

Bond 4 comprises a series of abrupt hydroclimatic perturbations, including the ~5.9 ka BP event, often linked to late fifth-millennium BC transformations among Lower Danube tell communities. Moving beyond correlation, this study examines whether ceramic morphology and vessel volumetry from Sultana–Malu Roșu (KGK VI, c. 4600–3900 cal BCE) can serve as measurable behavioural proxies within an uncertainty-aware analytical framework.

The dataset includes complete or reconstructible Gumelnița A2 and B1 vessels, recorded in a standardised relational database integrating technological, typological, and quantitative variables: paste composition, surface treatment, vessel type, weight, fragmentation, and volumetry. Vessel capacity was measured directly by filling or calculated from complete profiles. Phase attribution combines stratigraphic and archival controls with radiocarbon evidence. The A2–B1 transition aligns with demographic trends derived from summed probability distributions of KGK VI radiocarbon dates, marking growth and stabilisation around 4500–4400 cal BCE, followed by sustained decline from c. 4400/4350 to 3800/3750 cal BCE.

Results show that B1 differs significantly from A2 along three dimensions: changes in assemblage composition and surface treatment; a tendency toward more open vessel forms; and reduced, more tightly clustered vessel volumes. These patterns are compared with independently documented Bond 4-related phenomena in the same micro-region, including reduced anthropogenic pressure, changes in land-use intensity in the Mostiștea floodplain sequence, and isotopic evidence for altered crop water management at Sultana/Gumelnița. The study defines testable expectations for integrating ceramic volumetric data with high-resolution, chronologically robust palaeoenvironmental records, enabling causal assessment beyond apparent synchronicity.

Chalcolithic gold finds from southern Bulgaria: Context, formal and technological characteristics

Petar Leshtakov

Gold and copper are the earliest metals used by humans and play a significant role in the development of Chalcolithic societies. While copper was widely used for tools and implements and, less frequently, ornaments, gold was primarily used for the manufacture of prestige objects and symbols of social status.

The most impressive evidence for the early processing and use of gold in the Balkan Peninsula comes from the Varna Chalcolithic Necropolis, where several thousand gold artefacts with a total weight of more than 6 kg have been discovered. Against this background, Chalcolithic gold finds from Southern Bulgaria remain considerably less well studied and, in most cases, are either chance finds or originate from uncertain archaeological contexts. The lack of excavated Chalcolithic cemeteries in the region and the absence of secure burial assemblages containing gold objects raise several issues concerning the dating, function, and social significance of these artefacts.

The paper presents Chalcolithic gold finds from more than twenty sites in Southern Bulgaria, focusing on their archaeological context, formal characteristics, and technological features. It aims to summarize the available data on Chalcolithic gold artefacts from the region and to outline the main issues related to their dating, function, and interpretation.

Building with stone: Human-stone interactions and the emergence of Lepenski Vir

Dimitrij Mlekuž Vrhovik & John Chapman

Lepenski Vir has been interpreted through its houses, sculptures or settlement plan. We propose instead to begin with the rocky terrain itself. Situated within the dramatic rocky landscape of the Iron Gates Gorge, the site occupies a complex three-dimensional talus slope composed of exposed bedrock, fixed rock outcrops and large limestone boulders that long predate the construction of the trapezoidal houses. Rather than treating these features as a passive setting, we explore how they structured successive forms of occupation.

The houses represent only one episode within a much longer history of engagement with this rocky place. Before, during and after the construction of the houses, people continually interacted with the stone landscape. They occupied spaces around outcrops, constructed hearths, buried dead, rearranged stones, built houses and introduced sculpted boulders into this densely structured environment. The archaeological record documents close associations between rocks, houses and burials, suggesting that these relationships were fundamental to everyday life. Lepenski Vir preserves the cumulative outcome of repeated human interactions with stones and rock formations, while the incorporation of sculpted boulders marks a new stage in these long-term relationships with stone.

Using archival documentation and a new three-dimensional reconstruction of the original topography, we examine the changing spatial relationships between houses, rock outcrops, large boulders and stone constructions. We investigate how the settlement gradually emerged through continuing engagement with a pre-existing rocky landscape.

Das Salz von Provadia-Solnitsata als Zahlungsmittel in der späten Vorgeschichte

Vassil Nikolov

Neben ihrer physiologischen und kulturellen Funktion besitzt Speisesalz auch eine „gesellschaftliche" Rolle als Zahlungsmittel. Steinsalz ist in Europa und Vorderasien ungleichmäßig verteilt, was seine Bedeutung als Tauschmittel in Regionen ohne ausreichende natürliche Salzvorkommen erklärt. Die Salzquellen der Salzlagerstätte von Mirovo bei dem heutigen Provadia bildeten die Voraussetzung für die Entstehung und Entwicklung dieses Ortes zu einem Salzproduktions- und urbanen Zentrum während der späten Vorgeschichte. Durch das Eindampfen von Sole wurde „loses" Salz hergestellt, während in kleinen Keramikgefäßen „Salzbarren" gebrannt wurden. Gerade diese „Barren" unterschiedlicher Nominale weisen spätestens seit dem Chalkolithikum auf das Auftreten eines Handelsäquivalents hin, dessen Funktion sich durch Fernhandel über weite Teile des östlichen Balkangebietes verbreitete.

Ein Ergebnis des erfolgreichen Salzhandels von Provadia-Solnitsata ist das außerordentlich reiche Grabinventar der „goldenen" chalkolithischen Nekropole von Varna, die sich etwa 40 km vom Produktionszentrum entfernt befindet und von derselben ethnokulturellen Gemeinschaft hinterlassen wurde, zu der auch die Salzproduzenten gehörten.

Speisesalz spielte im prähistorischen Handel eine besonders wichtige Rolle, wobei ihm eine doppelte Funktion zukam. Einerseits besaß Salz einen Gebrauchswert als Produkt des täglichen Bedarfs, und ein Teil der produzierten Salzmenge wurde genau zu diesem Zweck „gekauft". Andererseits fungierte Salz jedoch auch als Austauschäquivalent, als Geld, und konnte nach seinem Eintritt in den „Markt" über lange Zeit in dieser Funktion zirkulieren, bevor es konsumiert wurde. Gerade das Auftreten eines Äquivalents verwandelte den prähistorischen Austausch in Handel.

Early Neolithic ditch enclosures twenty years on: New perspectives from Yabalkovo

Nikolina Nikolova

Over the past two decades, large-scale excavations, geophysical prospection, remote sensing, and integrated archaeological approaches have considerably expanded the evidence for Early Neolithic ditch enclosures across the Balkans. Despite the growing number of identified enclosures, their construction, maintenance, modification, and depositional histories remain insufficiently understood. This paper addresses these issues through the case study of Yabalkovo in Upper Thrace, South Bulgaria. The site represents the first extensively investigated Early Neolithic enclosure system in the eastern Balkans.

The site comprises two settlement locations, probably representing successive stages of occupation. While the settlement of Yabalkovo 1 was enclosed by a double-ditch system, Yabalkovo 2 was established on slightly higher ground and surrounded by three concentric ditches. The study focuses on the latter and reconstructs the development and functioning of its enclosure system through the integrated analysis of ditch stratigraphy, recutting and cleaning episodes, spatial relationships, depositional sequences, ceramic evidence, and a new set of radiocarbon dates.

The results demonstrate that the enclosure system was not the product of a single construction event but developed through repeated interventions over several generations. Initially, successive recutting maintained established ditch alignments, whereas later stages involved new ditches farther outward, progressively modifying the extent of the enclosed space. The ditches also contained recurrent structured deposits, indicating that deposition formed part of their continued use. The study thus highlights the value of enclosure ditches as dynamic archaeological archives and provides new insights into the changing organisation and use of enclosed space within Early Neolithic communities in the Balkans.

Spatial patterns and social organisation of 6th millennium cal BC settlements in the south-western Carpathian basin

Krisztián Oross, János Jakucs, Eszter Bánffy & Tibor Marton

It has long been recognised that the southern areas of present-day Hungary were tightly integrated with south-east European socio-economic networks throughout the Neolithic. In many respects, they served as the northernmost extension of that cultural sphere. At the same time, they undoubtedly constitute integral parts of central Europe, both geographically and culturally. Although systematic archaeological research in the region dates back more than a century and a half, our knowledge of 6th millennium cal BC settlement layouts has remained limited until recently.

Three factors have driven a qualitative shift in the available scholarly insights into the spatial arrangement of settlements and their structures. First, over the past 30 years, large-scale excavations – often conducted as development-led projects – have taken place, primarily investigating the settlements of the later and late 6th millennium cal BC communities. Second, geophysical surveys became widespread during the 2010s, introducing non-destructive methods to reveal the full extent of these settlements. Finally, multiple series of AMS radiocarbon dates and their formal modelling have provided a solid, absolute chronological framework for all further evaluations.

The aim of this presentation is to discuss recent 6th millennium cal BC discoveries. In addition to analyses of settlement structures, it is fundamental to examine the communal structures and social organisation that can be reconstructed from these settlement patterns. It is of particular interest to identify possible common patterns among sites of the investigated regions and to compare them with those bordering the research area to the south, such as the northern fringes of the Balkans.

Aşağı Pınar: A Neolithic settlement in Eastern Thrace

Eylem Özdoğan

Situated within the southern foothills of the Istranca Mountains in Eastern Thrace, on the ridges sloping down toward the Ergene Basin – one of the tributaries of the Meriç River – Aşağipınar occupies a strategically advantageous location in terms of food and raw material resources. The settlement here began around 6000 BCE and continued without interruption until the early part of the following millennium. From its very beginnings, Aşağı Pınar has been a settlement in close interaction with its extensive natural surroundings. Excavations conducted over a wide area have enabled a comprehensive understanding of the architecture and artifacts of each stratigraphic level within the settlement.

The settlement comprises eight successive layers. From the outset, the settlement exhibited features such as rectangular wattle-and-daub structures. Initially constructed in a contiguous layout, the structures were later built in a detached layout and in standardized forms. The pottery tradition and artifacts from the settlement demonstrate close parallels with contemporary examples from the Balkans, particularly Bulgaria. This presentation will summarize the excavation work conducted at Aşağı Pınar and its results, and examine the development of the Neolithic period in the region.

An overview of Eastern Thrace in the context of Eastern European prehistory

Mehmet Özdoğan

Compared to other regions of Eastern Europe, where cultural regions and processes have been extensively delineated, our understanding of the prehistoric cultures of Eastern Thrace remains considerably limited. Nevertheless, through comprehensive surface surveys and excavations at sites such as Yarımburgaz, Toptepe, Hoca Çeşme, Aşağı Pınar, Kanlıgeçit, and Istanbul Beşiktaş, it has become possible to outline the region's prehistoric sequence, at least in broad terms, and to elucidate its connections with other regions. Though Eastern Thrace serves as a natural extension of the Balkans, without significant natural barriers, the cultural entities of Eastern Thrace have evolved over time, sometimes aligning with those of the Balkans – particularly during the Early to Middle Neolithic – while at other times displaying a markedly different archaeological record. For instance, whereas the Eastern Balkans were at the peak of cultural development during the Gumelnița-Cucuteni era, Eastern Thrace was predominantly inhabited by migratory shepherd communities. Furthermore, the near absence of evidence from the 2nd millennium and the influence of large-scale migratory movements, such as those of the Kurgan groups, render the cultural landscape far more complex than previously anticipated. This paper aims to present an overview of the evolving archaeological picture of Eastern Thrace through various periods.

Cultural interactions between southern Dobruja and Longoza in northeastern Bulgaria at the turn of the 5th millennium BC (based on ceramics from the site of Boryana, Varna region)

Viktoria D. Petrova

At the end of the 6th and the early 5th millennium BC, cultural phenomena with a specific appearance and different geographical scope developed in Longoza and southern Dobruja (Usoe I-II, Hamangia I-II, Sava I, Hamangia III). The dynamics of their development reflect various influences and interactions of varying intensity. The results of these processes are noticeable in the characteristics of the ceramics from a recently excavated site at the village of Boryana, 4 km west of the town of Dalgopol, Varna region. Together with its location next to a tributary of the Golyama Kamchia River, about 50 km from the Black Sea coast, these factors connect the site to the cultural phenomena of Usoe I-II and Sava I, which developed in the Longoza area. At the same time, some of the ceramic shapes and decoration share common features with the Hamangia culture, illustrating the interweaving of charac-

teristics from different cultural phenomena in the area.

This presentation is based on ceramics from the site of Boryana, whose chronology was also supported by radiocarbon dating. It contributes to the existing knowledge about the geographical distribution and directions of influence of cultural characteristics in the late 6th and early 5th millennium BC in southern Dobruja and Longoza.

Reassessing the *chaîne opératoire* at the prehistoric copper mines of Ai Bunar in Upper Thrace

Hristo Popov, Plamen Georgiev, Ivan Ivanov & Peter Minkov

In the early 1970s, the discovery of the prehistoric copper mines at Ai Bunar (near Stara Zagora in Bulgaria) became a sensation. The evidence obtained by the Soviet-Bulgarian team shed light on important economic aspects of mining and metallurgy, on the technological sophistication, and social organization of the Chalcolithic communities in the Balkans.

Fieldwork at Ai Bunar resumed several years ago, significantly widening the scope of the research questions on prehistoric mining. Trench excavations in the area between some of the ancient mining works revealed the remains of a workplace for initial processing and dressing of the copper ore.

In the early 1970s, E.N. Chernykh's team uncovered a large number of fragments from antler pickaxes and wedges in the technological waste from the mining works. These tools were directly related to the initial mining and the first stages of the operational chain. However, the early investigations and publications did not present other tool types that would have helped offering a more complete reconstruction of the technological process not only of the mining, but also of the processing of the copper-rich minerals.

The numerous stone tools that were discovered in 2021–22 provided new insights into the organization of the production process and the array of tools that were used during its successive stages. The diverse stone tool assemblage, as well as the variety of rock types that were used for making them add to the analysis of the various stages of the *chaîne opératoire* at the mining sites.

The dynamics of cultural processes during the Eneolithic Period in the southern Bulgarian Black Sea coast region

Margarita Popova & Stanimir Parvanov

The Eneolithic period in the Southern Black Sea region is amongst the least studied periods in Bulgaria. Historically, the majority of available data, is predominantly derived from chance discoveries and local historical research. It is noteworthy that researchers have identified the presence of various cultural influences in the area, particularly during the Late Eneolithic period. Consequently, based on limited and often unpublished materials, the region has been associated with various cultural phenomena, without any discussion of the processes surrounding the formation and development of the Eneolithic.

The preceding three decades have witnessed a new phase in research, associated with the accumulation of data from archaeological studies. These originate from several sites – the settlements near Burgas, Poroy, Sozopol, and the settlement and necropolis at Kozareva Mogila, investigated through systematic archaeological excavations as well as intensive field surveys. Despite their current limited scope, the data offer a substantial advancement in clarifying the stratigraphic and chronological sequence of the Eneolithic in the region. Concurrently, they facilitate a more profound examination of the particular characteristics of material culture and a more precise identification of the cultural affiliation of the local population.

The present study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the available data and to offer an interpretation of the cultural processes in the region, emphasizing the interactions between the various cultural traditions and their role in the development of the Southern Black Sea coast during the Eneolithic.

Revisiting the demography of the Late Neolithic communities in the Central Balkans between 5500 and 4500 BCE

Marko Porčić

The transition from the Early Neolithic (6200–5400 BC) to the Late Neolithic (5400–4500 BC) in the Central Balkans, beginning after 5400 BC, represents an important cultural phenomenon. Small hamlets of the first farming communities, in which pit houses were the dominant form of architecture, gave way to relatively large villages composed of substantial above-ground wattle-and-daub houses. The Late Neolithic also brought important technological innovations, such as copper metallurgy and black-burnished pottery.

From an anthropological-demographic perspective, two questions stand out as particularly intriguing: 1) did the transition from the Early to the Late Neolithic also involve demographic change, such as migration or shifts in population size? 2) what were the population dynamics during the Late Neolithic itself? These questions were addressed almost a decade ago using the frequencies of radiocarbon dates as demographic proxies, but those analyses were limited because the primary focus of that research was Early Neolithic demography.

Over the last seven years, the number of radiocarbon dates from the Late Neolithic period in the Central Balkans has increased substantially, significantly expanding the empirical basis for paleodemographic reconstructions. In this presentation, I compile both the earlier and the newly available radiocarbon evidence from the Central Balkans and use it to model population dynamics between 5500 and 4500 BC in order to address the aforementioned questions concerning the emergence and development of Late Neolithic communities in this region.

Landscape archaeology in Thessaly (LAiT): Paleolakes and prehistoric sites

Agathe Reingruber

Given the technological possibilities of the 21st century, we are in the fortunate position of being able to combine innovative and traditional methods, thereby gaining new insights into prehistoric processes. One such innovative field of research is landscape archaeology, within which our interdisciplinary project LAiT is situated. One of its objectives is to reconstruct the environment, particularly water bodies, and to disclose possible connections between prehistoric sites and paleolakes.

In ancient times, Eastern Thessaly was rich in standing water bodies, and as part of our project we have provisionally reconstructed two paleolakes using simulations. We have visualised their potential outlines using historical maps, which we combined in a Geographic Information System (GIS) with a precise Digital Elevation Model (DEM), our own topographical observations and 3D measurements. In addition, the smaller lake, Lake Bara Toibasi, has been reconstructed using hydrogeological calculations, whilst the larger lake, Lake Nessonis, is being investigated through boreholes.

Systematic and intensive archaeological surveys in the vicinity of the paleolakes have enabled us to re-locate already known prehistoric sites and to discover several previously unknown flat sites. Before the relationship between the prehistoric sites and the two paleolakes had been explored, the connection between them was unclear. By bringing together the findings to date, we are gaining a better understanding of how people in prehistoric times used and adapted to their environment.

The prehistoric site of Blaskovo: Dynamics of material culture during the second half of the Late Neolithic and the transition to the Early Chalcolithic

Galina Samichkova

The prehistoric site is located on the first non-flood terrace on the left bank of the Glavnitsa River, within the territory of the village of Blaskovo, Provadia region. During the rescue archaeological excavations conducted in 2025 and 2026, structures dating to the second half of the Late Neolithic and the transition to the Early Chalcolithic were identified. This paper presents the results of the investigations and places them within the context of the known sites from this period in Northeastern Bulgaria, particularly in the area of the Royak-Provadia Plateau.

The recorded structures can be divided into above-ground and pit features. Although still under investigation, the above-ground structures provide important information about the spatial organisation and character of habitation. The pit features contain deposits with pottery fragments, fired daub fragments, animal bones, various small finds, and a significant quantity of flint artefacts.

Special attention is paid to the ceramic assemblage, whose characteristics clearly reflect the development of the second half of the Late Neolithic in the region. Within the investigated structures, two successive chronological levels have been distinguished. Their ceramic assemblages display differences in technological characteristics, vessel forms, and ornamentation, illustrating the gradual transition to

the Early Chalcolithic. Also noteworthy is the considerable quantity of flint artefacts, predominantly flakes, fragments, and exhausted cores.

The results contribute new data on the dynamics of life during the second half of the Late Neolithic and the transition to the Early Chalcolithic in a still insufficiently investigated area of Northeastern Bulgaria.

Amzabegovo revisited: The Neolithic development north of the Aegean

Darko Stojanovski

By the mid-7th millennium BCE farmers settled the valleys just off the western and north-western Aegean coast, thus establishing the first settlements of the European Neolithic. The next critical step on their expansion route was to overcome the Balkan hinterland. The challenges were not only of the landscape, but also of the climate and subsistence. Amzabegovo, positioned in the middle Vardar valley, was the northernmost outpost of the early settling phase and therefore the avant-garde in the north-bound inland expansion. Thriving for over a millennium, it witnessed the transformations between the Aegean on one side, and the Danube on the other. For a good reason, it served as one of the pillars of the Balkan Neolithic studies for the past five decades.

Here, based on the results of the new field campaign, we present the site in a new light. The revised stratigraphy, together with the first geophysical results, show a more complex and dynamic construction and spatial organisation strategies. The new radiocarbon sequence reveals previously undetected, initial phase of settling, pushing the Neolithic chronology in the region back for at least two centuries. Furthermore, at its zenith, the settlement reached an unprecedented size, with a complex internal organization. Contemporary methodological approach indeed sheds new and colourful lights to an old star.

Is there something inside? Early Chalcolithic enclosures at Sredets in Northern Thrace

Desislava Takorova

A recently investigated Early Chalcolithic site, dated to the first quarter of the 5th millennium BCE, near Sredets in Northern Thrace, brings to light a previously unknown type of monument in this part of Europe. The site consists of a system of concentric ditches, with entrances on all four sides, forming a complex enclosed space.

In terms of typology and chronology, the Sredets enclosures closely correspond to the characteristics of the rondels known from Central Europe. At the same time, similar ditched enclosures are well documented on the peripheries of Chalcolithic settlements in Southeastern Europe, where they have generally been associated with defensive functions or access control. The coexistence of these two interpretative possibilities raises the question of what the Sredets complex actually represents: a boundary or peripheral enclosure of a settlement, or a distinct ritual complex dating to the Early Chalcolithic.

This issue also leads to a broader consideration of the origin and development of such structures in Northern Thrace. Their emergence may be linked to local Neolithic architectural and social traditions, particularly in view of the relatively continuous development from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic. Alternatively, their origins and possible cultural connections may be sought further west, in relation to the development of the Central European rondel phenomenon.

The final stages of the Balkan Chalcolithic: A view from the mountains

Nadezhda Todorova & Vanya Petrova

The period between 4250/4200 and ca. 3300/3200 BC (the beginning of which is marked by the abandonment of the multilayered (tell) settlements in the lowland areas, and the end is defined by the traditional dates for the start of the EBA) is still one of the least well-known periods in the prehistory of Southeast Europe. In terms of cultural development, it encompasses the disintegration of the local Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic cultures and the formation phase of the subsequent Bronze Age. It is characterised by significant changes affecting settlement patterns, economic structures and social organisation, and spiritual life.

The period witnessed intense 'colonization' of previously scarcely occupied mountainous regions, an unprecedented decrease in the number of sites and the prevalence of short-termed settlements, followed by a transformation of material culture. Theories as to what caused these changes include migrations/invasions, societal and environmental stress, gradual internal changes, and climate change.

Traditionally, mountainous regions are considered less favourable for prehistoric habitation and yet preferred in times of instability. At the same time, they offer a wide range of vital resources, including copper and other metal ores, and summer pastures for the livestock. Last but not least, the natural passes located here provide quick and direct communication between the Northern Balkans and the Aegean.

The presentation provides a synthesis of the new data accumulated so far from the Rhodopes and the Mesta/Nestos River valley, concerning settlement models, relative and absolute chronology, and ceramic assemblages. It offers a broader perspective on the processes underlying the region's cultural development at the end of the Chalcolithic period.

A new chronological framework for the new millennium

Zoï Tsirtsoni

One of the major problems faced by archaeologists working on the Late Prehistory of Southeast Europe is the great diversity of chronological schemes used for the description of the observed phenomena. The lack of a common framework makes comparisons not only more complicated, but potentially false, since scholars frequently appear to rely more on names than on actual characteristics or absolute dates – and this despite the growing number and quality of the latter. Thus, comparing "Early Neolithic" assemblages from two different areas of Southeast Europe, for example Thessaly and Bulgarian Thrace, may come to put together phenomena that are distant from each other by

several centuries; conversely, the best parallels for some "Late Neolithic" assemblages from Northern Greece should be sought in Bulgaria not among the Late Neolithic but among the "Late Chalcolithic". To remedy such problems, I have recently proposed a new, neutral periodization scheme for the time-span from the 7th to the end of 4th millennium BC, which can be used independently or as a reference standard between existing systems. Presently limited to Greece, Bulgaria and Western Turkey, it could be extended to other neighbouring countries but also to other periods, namely to the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC, thus contributing to overcome some of the problems of synchronisms there.

The Sofia conference would be the ideal place to discuss the future of this initiative.

Diverging paths: Following rivers and crossing mountains in Early Neolithic Thrace

Atanas Tsurev & Petar Leshtakov

Communication and mobility in Early Neolithic Thrace have traditionally been understood through the distribution of settlements along river corridors, regarded as the principal routes of interaction. This view is well supported by settlement patterns, as communities consistently favored the fertile valleys of both major and minor rivers for habitation. While these waterways remained fundamental to settlement and communication, new field survey data from the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, combined with a critical reexamination of legacy archaeological and ceramic evidence, suggest a more complex picture of movement during the first half of the 6th millennium BC.

Although the ceramic assemblages of Early Neolithic Thrace share a broad tradition, regional distinctions point to a more varied picture than previously recognized and may reflect different patterns of communication across the region. The Middle Maritsa Valley and its watershed remain key contact zones where these traditions converged, underscoring the enduring importance of riverine networks.

At the same time, the growing body of evidence from the Eastern Rhodopes suggests that the mountain zone may have supported an alternative communication route linking Upper Thrace with Aegean Thrace. Unlike the Maritsa corridor, this pathway appears to have crossed the Rhodope Mountains through a natural pass, making use of smaller river valleys and local watercourses without closely following a single major river. By integrating legacy datasets with the results of twenty-first-century archaeological research, this presentation proposes a revised perspective on mobility in Early Neolithic Thrace, where multiple interconnected pathways shaped the movement of people, technologies, and ideas.

Living in Neolithic Aegean Thrace

Dushka Urem-Kotsou

This presentation focuses on the Neolithic period in Greek Thrace, where approximately 27 sites have been documented to date. Of these, 23 are located in the regional units of Xanthe and Rhodope, within a narrow plain stretching along the coast and bounded by the Rhodope mountain range to the north and the Aegean sea to the south. These sites are situated in a variety of environments including

the coastal zone, lowlands, and the gently rolling foothills close to the Rhodope Mountains. The earliest farming communities in Greek Thrace appear later than those in other regions of northern Greece, where settlements were established slightly before the 7th millennium BC.

In Greek Thrace, the earliest farming communities appear to have settled around 6200 BC, according to radiocarbon dates from Makri and Paradimi. Most Neolithic sites in the region are known only from surface finds. Exceptions include five sites that have been partially investigated through trial trenches or small-scale excavations, and several others with borehole cores and geophysical prospection. The majority of the recorded settlements are of the tell type, although flat-extended are also known. The results of field investigations indicate considerable variability in settlement organisation. Some sites exhibit a high habitation density, while in others buildings appear to have been arranged more loosely and sparsely. Settlement size also varies significantly, ranging from very small sites of approximately 0.2 ha to large settlements covering up to 12 ha. Some settlements were additionally enclosed by ditches. These characteristics and their implications for understanding Neolithic habitation in Greek Thrace will be discussed in this presentation.

Durankulak – Tell Golemiya Ostrov: Architectural characteristics of the Early and Late Eneolithic settlements

Ivan Vajsov, Vladimir Slavchev & Petar Zidarov

The Large Island near Durankulak (Northeastern Bulgaria) is a key part of the Durankulak Archaeological Complex and one of the most significant prehistoric sites in Bulgaria. Archaeological excavations, which began in the 1970s, continue to this day. The site was inhabited during the Late Neolithic, Eneolithic, Late Bronze Age, Hellenistic period, and Early Middle Ages, making it a rare example of territorial continuity spanning more than six millennia.

The island consists of a natural limestone elevation on which a tell approximately 3.20 m high has formed. Several successive prehistoric settlement horizons dating to the Eneolithic have been uncovered. The settlements of the Hamangia IV and Varna cultures have been particularly well studied, with five and nineteen buildings, respectively, having been investigated.

A characteristic feature of the architecture is the use of massive stone plinths upon which the walls were built. The buildings are oriented along a north–south axis, arranged in parallel rows, and have entrances on the south side. The interior space is typically divided into two parts—with a main room in the northern section and a smaller room or a terrace-like extension in the southern section.

The Early Eneolithic settlement of the Hamangia IV culture is distinguished by large-area buildings with diverse functional arrangements, suggesting a complex social organization and likely cultic and/or representative functions. In contrast, the Late Eneolithic settlement of the Varna culture is characterized by buildings with standardized floor plans, indicating a high degree of social organization and a developed settlement structure.

Jewellery from osseous raw materials in the Late Neolithic in northern Thrace

Selena Vitezović

Prehistoric jewellery had not only aesthetic purpose, but also served as a powerful tool for transferring and displaying wearer's identity and status. The choice of raw materials for the production of ornamental items was driven by cultural preferences, and some raw materials were more valued or considered adequate than the others. Osseous raw materials (bone, antler, teeth, mollusc shells) were frequently selected for the production of ornamental items throughout prehistoric times. Their value was perhaps linked with their physical and mechanical traits – such as smooth, lustrous surfaces and bright white or whitish colours, but also may be derived from their origin – from specific animal or, in case of marine mollusc shells, from distant regions. Here we will focus on the evidence of jewellery from osseous raw materials from several Late Neolithic sites in northern Thrace: raw material selection, manufacturing techniques, typological repertoire and use wear traces will be included in the analyses. Some of the ornamental types were widespread in other areas of southeastern Europe and even beyond, such as bracelets made from valves of *Bivalvia* shells, while some display peculiar, even unique shapes, such as some decorative pins, revealing local traditions and perhaps even an individual craftsperson. These items in general were carefully crafted; significant labour, skill and time were invested in their production, and also often display intensive use wear traces, revealing prolonged use.

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Venue

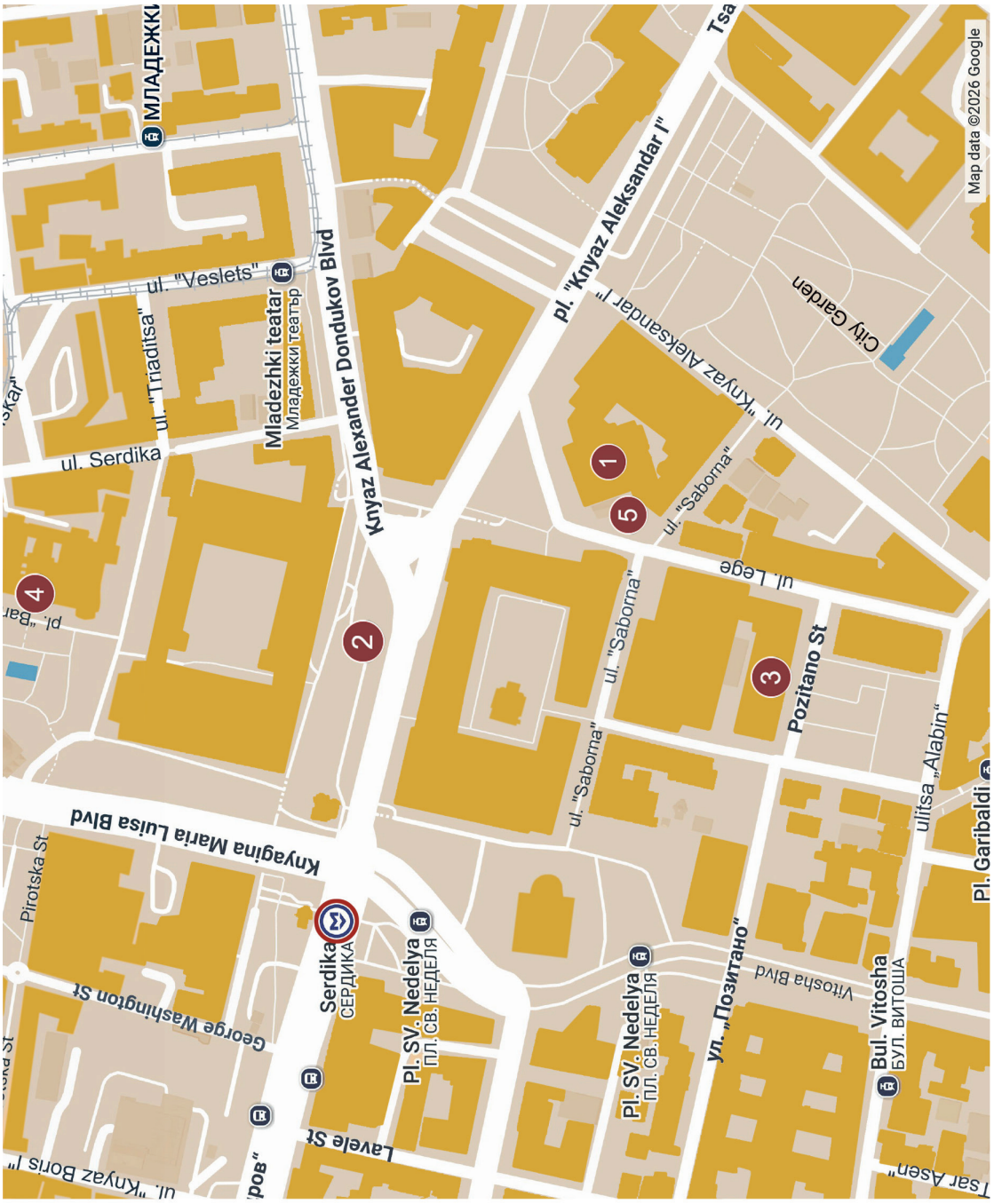
Accommodation is provided at the *Rila Hotel*, 6 Tsar Kaloyan Str.: https://hotelrila.bg/

From the Sofia Airport, you can get there either by taxi or by taking the subway's M4 Line (yellow) directly to Serdica Station: https://www.metropolitan.bg/en/scheme/operating-metro. The Sofia Airport Metro Station is located at Terminal 2. If your flight lands at Terminal 1, you will first need to take the free airport shuttle bus to Terminal 2 to catch the subway.

The conference will take place at *Conference Hall 1* in the *Serdica Ancient Cultural and Communication Complex*. It is located in the pedestrian underpass in the absolute center of Sofia, about a five-minute walk from the Rila Hotel.

The opening of the poster exhibition and the welcome reception will take place at the *National Archaeological Museum* (1 Atanas Burov Square). The conference dinner will take place at *Art Club Museum* restaurant (2 Saborna Street), at the back of the museum.

Conference participants are entitled to a 30% discount on lunch at the *Art Club Museum* restaurant. Just show your conference badge to the staff.



Conference Locations

1. National Archaeological Museum
2. Conference Venue
3. Rila Hotel
4. Sofia Regional Museum of History
5. Art Club Museum
6. Serdica Metro Station



https://prehistoricconference2026.naim.bg