

# PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON A PREHISTORIC SITE NEAR THE VILLAGE OF BRANKOVTSI, DISTRICT OF VIDIN, NORTH-WESTERN BULGARIA

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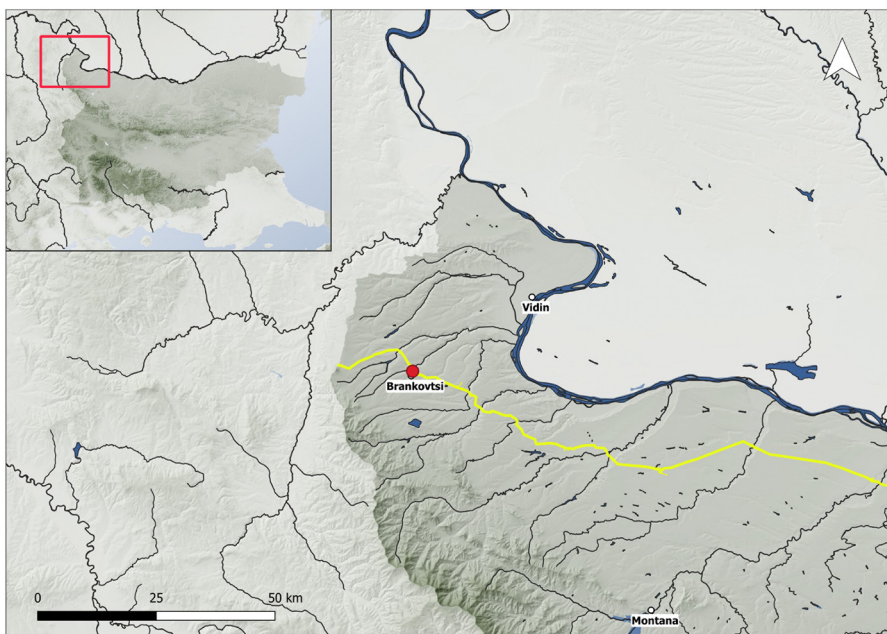
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**Abstract:** *Rescue excavations on the South Stream gas pipeline route during the spring and summer of 2019 revealed a single-layered prehistoric Late Neolithic – Early Eneolithic site near the village of Brankovtsi, North-western Bulgaria. Geophysical survey showed several anomalies. Four above-ground and two dug-in features were recorded and excavated. Diverse artefacts were found including high concentrations of globular ceramic weights in some of the excavated features. The location of the site and the characteristics of the recorded artefacts suggest that cultural affiliations with the Vinča and Gradeshnitsa cultures could be assumed.*

**Keywords:** *Late Neolithic, Late Neolithic – Early Eneolithic transition, end of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, North-western Bulgaria*

## Introduction

Rescue excavations in North-western Bulgaria on various gas pipeline and transport infrastructures assisted in the collection of more information on prehistoric settlements and way of life in the region. One of the excavated sites is situated near the village of Brankovtsi, municipality of Gramada, district of Vidin (Fig. 1). A heavily burned, single-layered site was excavated with several dwellings and other features dating to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

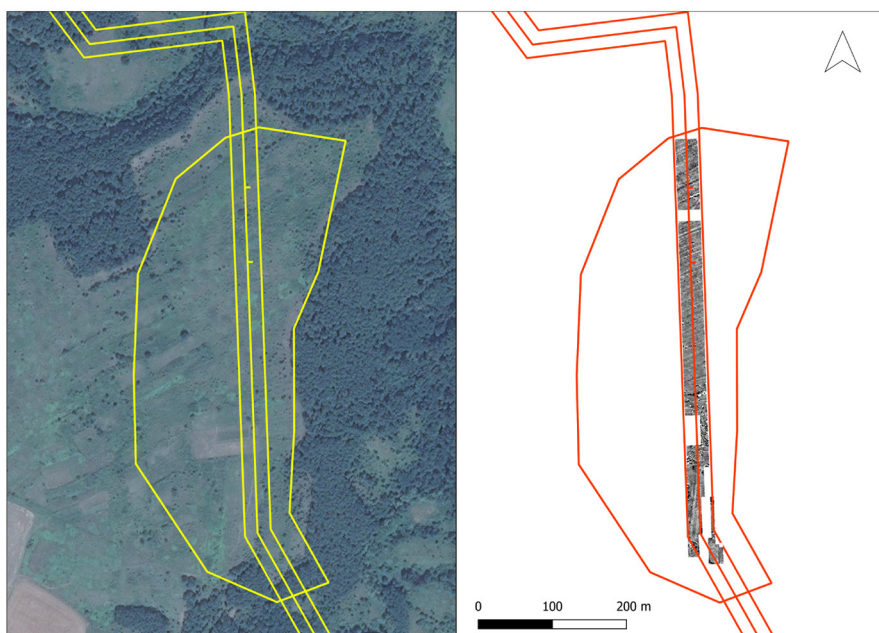


**Fig. 1.** Map of site location (large red dot) on the South Stream gas pipeline route (yellow line) and modern settlements (small white dots) in North-western Bulgaria; background map: *SRTM 90 m Digital Elevation Model* (figure by N. Kecheva)

**Сл. 1.** Мапа локације налазишта (велика црвена тачка) на траси гасовода Јужни ток (жута линија) и савремена насеља (мале беле тачке) у северозападној Бугарској; позадинска карта: *SRTM 90 m Digital Elevation Model* (слика: Н. Кечева)

The archaeological site in the vicinity of the village of Brankovtsi was recorded during field surveys along the South Stream gas pipeline route conducted in November 2012 (Кечева 2013). The rescue excavations of the site on the gas pipeline route, which measures approximately 2.2 ha, were carried out over two field campaigns in 2019 (Кечева и др. 2020). The excavations revealed a single-layered site dating to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, covering an approximate area of 1 ha.

The site is located on a ridge which forms a relatively flat plateau to the south-west of the watershed of the Smradla and Kalchovets rivers, on the left bank of the Smradla River. Its altitude varies between 210 and 216 m using the Baltic coordinate system. Its surface is covered with pasture, comprising grass and scrub vegetation, as well as some trees. In 2012, a low concentration of artefacts was recorded – around 15 small-sized handmade pottery fragments. The surface visibility was very low due to the contemporary conditions of the terrain, and diagnostic fragments were not found. The geophysical survey was conducted



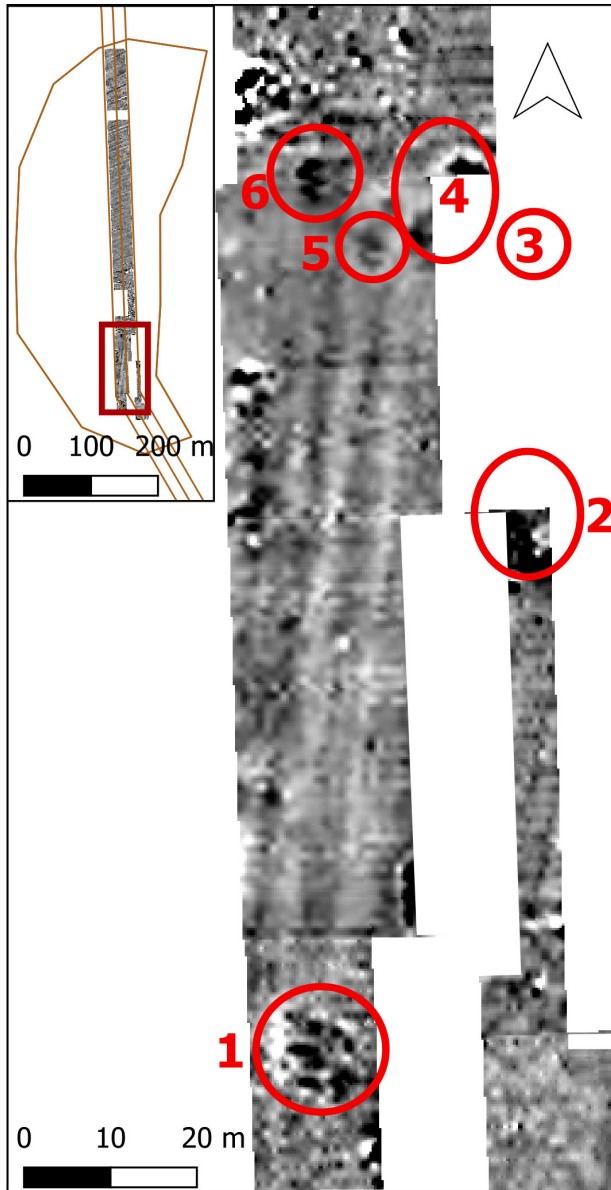
**Fig. 2.** Map of the site borders recorded during field survey in 2012 and the gas pipeline route; left map – surface condition visible on Google maps satellite imagery; right map – geophysical survey in the gas pipeline route (figure by N. Kecheva)

**Сл. 2.** Мапа са границама налазишта, снимљена током рекогносцирања терена 2012. године, и трасом гасовода; лева мапа – стање површине, видљиво на сателитским снимцима са *Google maps*; десна карта – геофизичко рекогносцирање трасе гасовода (слика: Н. Кечева)

using a caesium magnetometer in the spring of 2019 inside the proposed area of the gas pipeline route. The planography of the site scatter revealed traces of features in the southern quarter of the surveyed area (Figs. 2 and 3). The first trenches were placed to include the locations of the marked anomalies, and the burnt features were recorded.

### Archaeological excavations

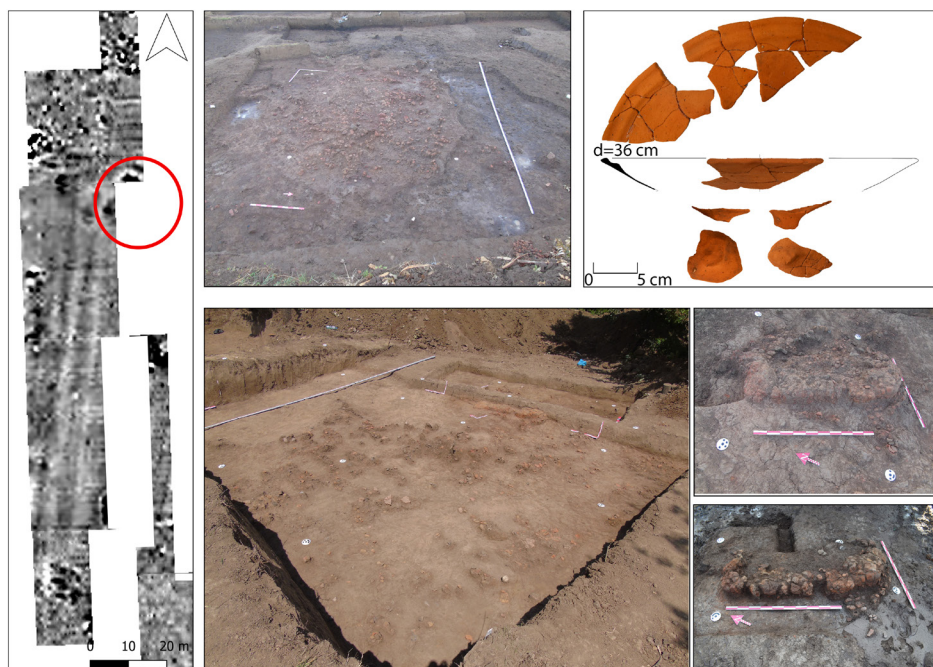
Artefacts and features were recorded below the ploughzone, with the cultural layer having accumulated up to a thickness of 0.30 m. Six features were excavated – three buildings (probably houses) (Fig. 3: 2, 4, and 6), a separate, almost destroyed burnt feature (probably an oven or a clay-built storage container) (Fig. 3: 3), a feature with a dug-in lower part (Fig. 3: 1), and a pit (Fig. 3: 5). They were situated at a distance between 10 and 100 m from each other, at an altitude of 211.80–212.90 m.



**Fig. 3.** Map of the location of the six features on the geophysical map/plan:  
 1 – feature with dug-in lower part; 2 – Dwelling 1; 3 – clay container/furnace;  
 4 – Dwelling 2; 5 – pit; 6 – Dwelling 3 (figure by N. Kecheva)

**Сл. 3.** Мапа локације шест објеката на геофизичкој мапи: 1 – објекат са укопаним доњим делом; 2 – Станиште 1; 3 – глинени spremnik/пећ;  
 4 – Станиште 2; 5 – јама; 6 – Станиште 3 (слика: Н. Кечева)





**Fig. 4.** Location of Dwelling 2 and the clay container/oven on the geophysical plan (left map); upper two images – a photo of the southern part of Dwelling 2 (left) and a ceramic vessel found there (right); lower three images – various stages of clay container excavation; the left image represents its upper part (figure by N. Kecheva)

**Сл. 4.** Локација станишта 2 и глиненог спремника/пећи на геофизичкој мапи (лева карта); горње две слике – фотографија јужног дела Станишта 2 (лево) и керамичка посуда пронађена тамо (десно); три доње слике – разне фазе ископавања спремника; слика лево приказује његов горњи део (слика: Н. Кечева)

Burned house rubble and pottery fragments were highly thermally altered and had a bright red colour. Daub which had been subjected to a very high temperature was recorded in some places inside the site area. The lack of differences in the characteristics of the pottery fragments found in the various features suggests that the dwellings were roughly contemporaneous, and that they might have been destroyed by one and the same conflagration event. The analysis of the soil in the site area indicated a high level of acidity. This, combined with low water permeability, could be considered as the primary factor contributing to the poor preservation of pottery and other remains found in various features.

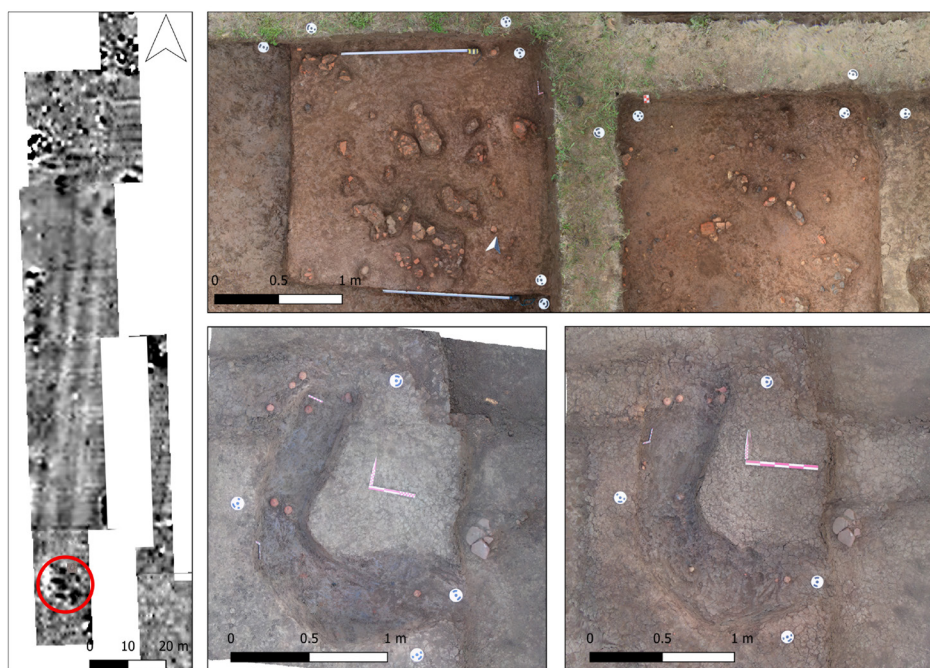
The anomalies representing dwellings/buildings were situated in the middle and in the northern area of the geomagnetic plan (Fig. 3: 2, 4, 6). There was no reliable information about the exact plans of the dwellings. They were recognised



**Fig. 5.** Location of Dwelling 1 on the geophysical plan (left map); aerophoto of the dwelling (middle); part of the excavated finds (right) – globular ceramic weights in the north-western part of the dwelling (up) and a fragment of a cult table (down) (figure by N. Kecheva)

**Сл. 5.** Локација Станишта 1 геофизичкој мапи (лева карта); аеро-фотографија Станишта 1 (средина); део пронађених налаза (десно) – лоптасти керамички тегови у северозападном делу станишта (горе) и фрагмент култног стола (доле) (слика: Н. Кечева)

by the burnt debris, under and among which many vessels and other artefacts were found. Judging by these clusters, the floor plans were rectangular. The dwellings had varying dimensions, ca 2 m width and 12 m length, and they were oriented north/north-east – south/south-west. Burned house rubble comprised small and medium-sized pieces of daub, and pieces of wall plaster with impressions from wooden structural elements (beams, laths etc.). Within the destruction layer of the burnt structures, diverse artefacts were found: secondarily burned pottery fragments, a fragment of a ceramic cult table (Fig. 5: down), stone tool fragments, stone bracelets, globular ceramic weights, chipped stone artefacts, and quern stones (Fig. 4 – upper two images; Fig. 5). There was no evidence of ovens, hearths, postholes or floors inside the dwellings. It is possible that none were preserved well enough to be recognised because of the aggressive soil characteristics.



**Fig. 6.** Location of the feature with dug-in lower part on the geophysical plan (left map); SfM models of three of the stages of excavation – some of the recorded whole globular ceramic weights are visible on the lower two SfM models (figure by N. Kecheva)

Сл. 6. Локација (полу)укопаног објекта на геофизичкој мапи (лева карта); *SfM* модели три фазе ископавања – неки од снимљених целих лоптастих керамичких тегова су видљиви на два доња *SfM* модела (слика: Н. Кечева)

A separate burnt facility was discovered to the east of Dwelling 2 (Fig. 3: 3). Only a part of it was preserved, and its purpose could not be determined with certainty. It could be interpreted as an oven or a large storage container made of clay (Fig. 4, lower three images). Its length was 1.50 m and its maximum preserved height was 0.16 m. Assuming that this was a container, its floor was not preserved. Similar clay storage containers were recorded in excavations at Late Neolithic Vinča sites in Serbia: two at Crkvine near Stubline (Crnobrnja *et al.* 2010, 16; Crnobrnja 2012, 54; Spasić and Živanović 2015) and one at Drenovac (Perić 2017, 4–5).

Another interesting feature was recorded at a distance of 65 m to the south-west of Dwelling 1 (Fig. 3: 1). It also had been burned at a high temperature. There was a layer, up to 40 cm thick, of clay debris above and around the feature, which had been burned to an orange colour. The lower part of the facility was dug into the ground. It had a circular shape in plan, an outer diameter of 1.90 m and a depth of 0.50 m (Figs. 6 and 7). There was an undisturbed area in





**Fig. 7.** Drone aerophoto of the feature with dug-in lower part (photo by A. Yordanova)

**Сл. 7.** Аеро-фотографија дроном етапе ископавања објекта са укопаним доњим делом (слика: А. Јорданова)

the middle with no archaeological artefacts in it, with a cylindrical shape and a diameter of about 0.60 m. In simple terms, the feature had a similar shape to that of a doughnut. In addition to the burnt debris of walls, many globular ceramic weights were found in it – a total of 76 objects. Some of them were whole, others were fragmented. They were found at different depths: 10 whole weights were recorded at a depth of only 0.33 m in the reddish soil (Fig. 6, lower two images). The other 66 whole and fragmented weights were recorded, including those from the ploughzone. There were almost no potsherds. This feature was definitely not a dwelling. It is possible that it was a pottery kiln that had weights in it at the time of the fire. The serious amount of debris implies that a large part of the feature was above ground at the time of use. It could even have been some sort of a fishing net-making or reeling facility. Up until this moment no parallels for it have been found. A significant number of completely analogous globular ceramic weights were also found all around the site but several specific concentrations were recorded – Dwelling 1 (98), Dwelling 3 (25) and the feature with the dug-in lower part (76) (Fig. 3: 2, 4, 1).

In addition to these features, a pit was excavated. The artefacts from its fill were not damaged by the fire. The pit had a diameter of 2.20 m and an approximate depth of 1.30 m. Its shape was similar to an inverted, truncated cone. Its fill contained black soil with a dense concentration of artefacts, including individual charcoal fragments, disarticulated animal bones, pieces of unburned clay, small and medium-sized pieces of burned daub, pottery fragments with better-preserved surfaces, and chipped stone tools.

### **Portable findings and cultural-chronological attribution**

Almost all pottery fragments discovered in the various features had damaged surfaces. Due to the condition of the fragments not much can be said regarding the treatment of the surface areas. A couple of fragments had evidence of surface polishing. No reliable data could be gathered about the colour of the surface either. The clay has mainly non-organic admixtures of small (< 0.3 cm), medium (0.3–0.5 cm) and large (> 0.5 cm) size.

The vessels are represented by four categories, as follows: plates/bowls (Figs. 8 and 9), bowls (Fig. 8), pots and storage vessels (Fig. 10). Plates/bowls are vessels with a reversed truncated form and slimmed down (Fig. 8: 1), even rim (Fig. 8: 2), curved outward rim (Fig. 8: 5) or thickened on the inside of the rim (Fig. 8: 6). Some of the variants have a concave wall and slimmed down (Fig. 8: 3) or thickened rim (Fig. 8: 4). Plates/bowls with a folded outward rim (Fig. 9: 1–8) have the most variants.

Other forms are deep, hemispherical (Fig. 8: 7) and biconical (Fig. 8: 8) bowls, as well as pots with an upper conical part (Fig. 10: 1) or pots with a hemispherical body (Fig. 10: 2). The last category is that of storage vessels with a truncated (Fig. 10: 3) or open (Fig. 10: 4) neck.

Only around 25% of the analysed ceramic material has ornamentation. It is of two types – incised and relief. The incised decoration is presented by fluting, spiral/spirals, meanders, inscribed circles/spirals, parallel horizontal, vertical or slantwise straight lines and pricked dots.

The above-mentioned incised elements were most often on the upper part or the transition between the upper and lower part of biconical bowls. Most often, it is decorated with slantwise or vertical fluting. Pots and thick wall vessels have decoration on the lower and upper part.

Relief ornamentation is presented by buttons with different shapes and sizes. They are located on the transition of vessels from categories of bowls, pots and storage vessels. Examples with one or two relief “buttons” next to one another were found. It is the dominating decoration and one could assume that most vessels had more than one relief button.



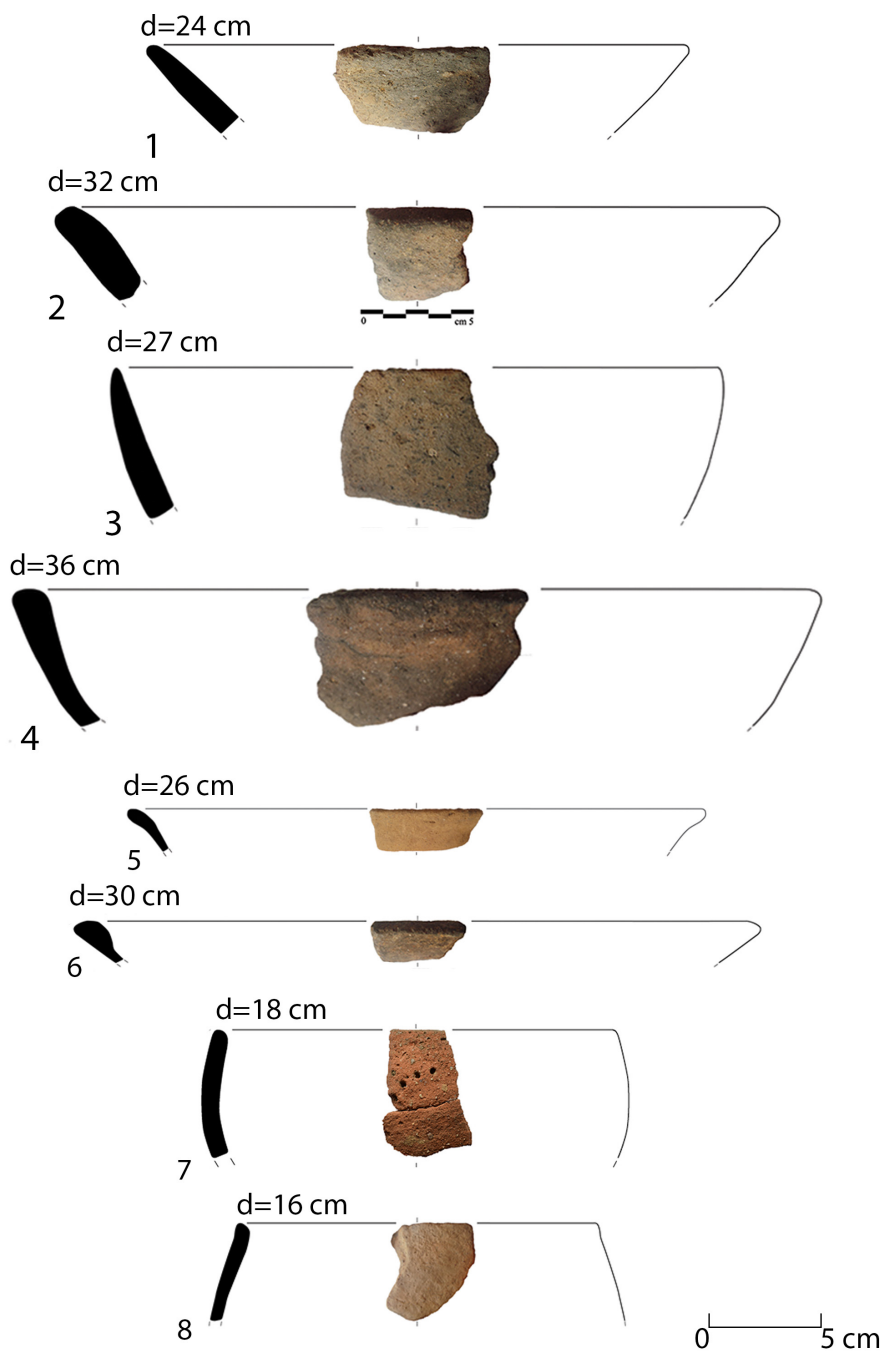


Fig. 8. Plate/bowls (1–6) and bowls (7, 8) (drawings and photos by Ts. Getovska)

Сл. 8. Тањери/зделе (1–6) и зделе (7, 8) (цртеж и слика: Ц. Гетовска)

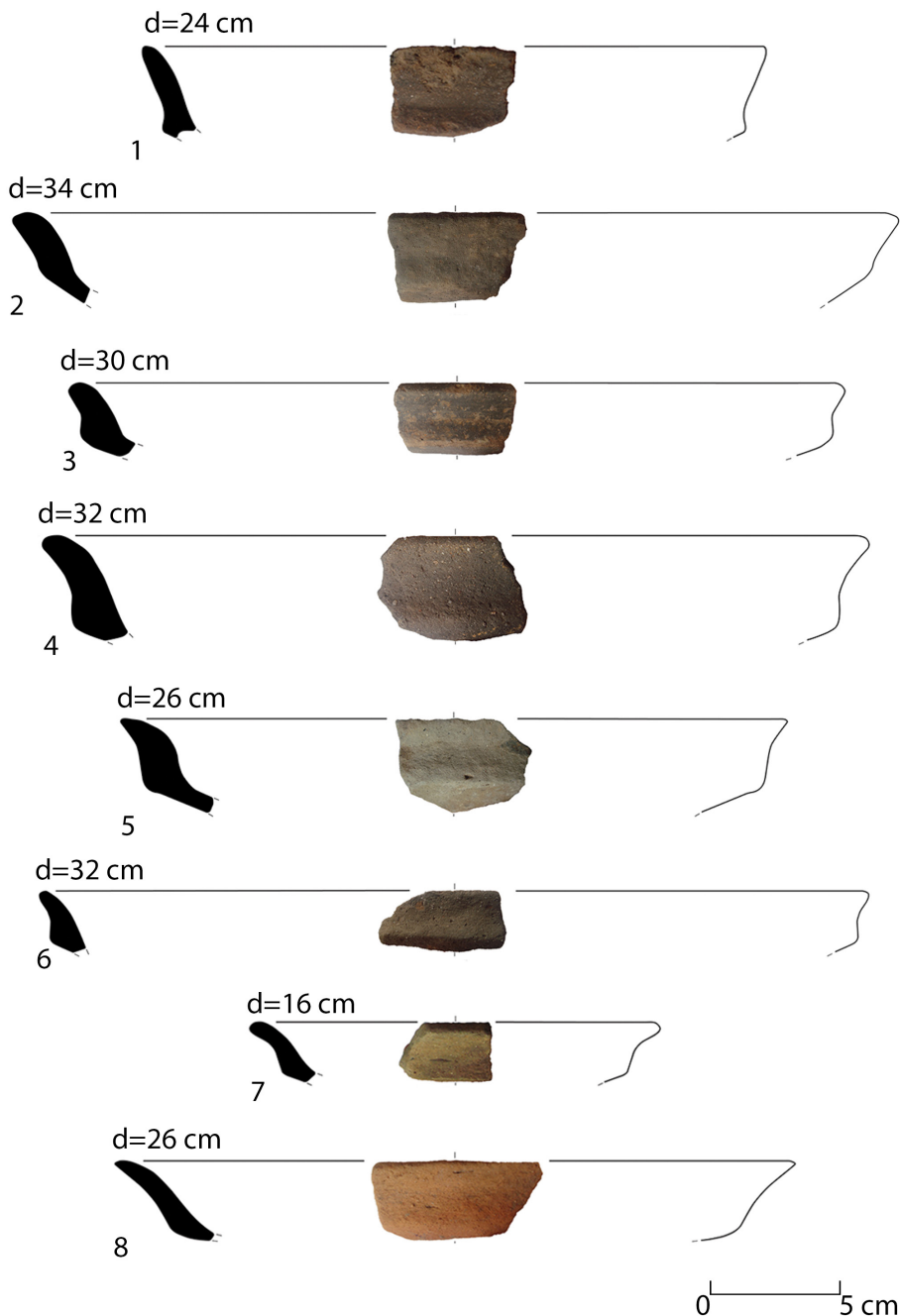
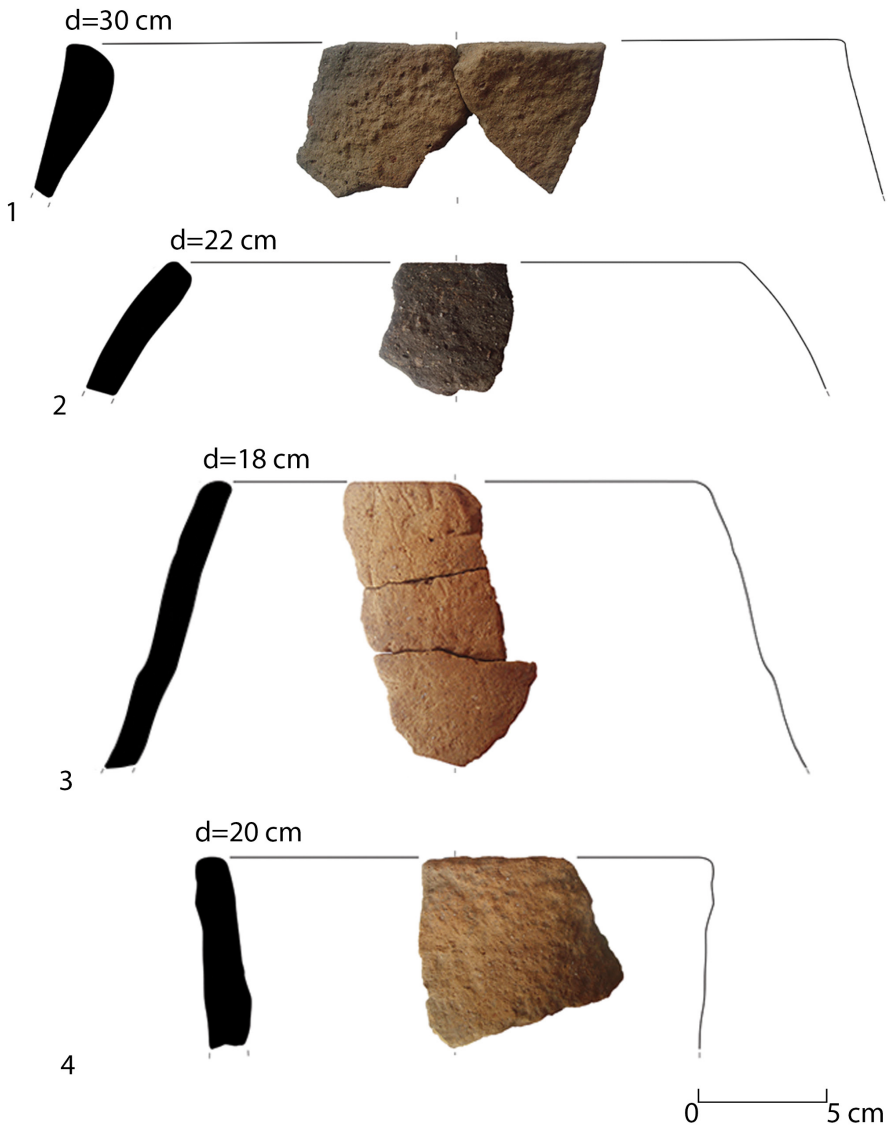
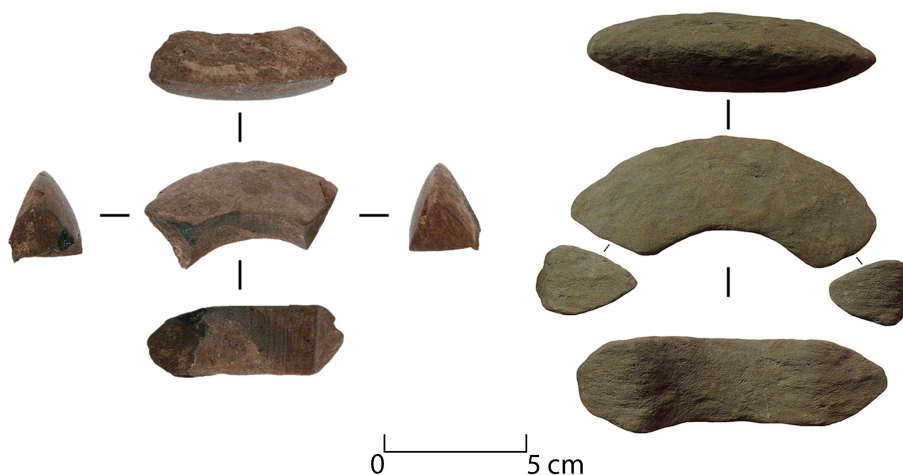


Fig. 9. Plates/bowls (1-8) (drawings and photos by Ts. Getovska)

Сл. 9. Таџири/зделе (1-8) (цртеж и слика: Ц. Гетовска)



**Fig. 10.** Pots (1, 2) and storage vessels (3, 4) (drawings and photos by Ts. Getovska)  
**Сл. 10.** Лонци (1, 2) и посуде за складиштење (3, 4) (цртеж и слика: Ц. Гетовска)



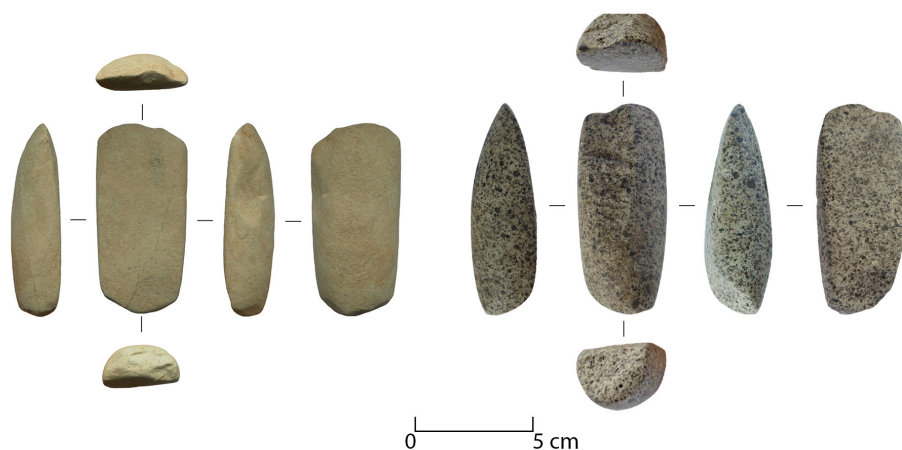
**Fig. 11.** Stone bracelets (figure by Ts. Getovska)

**Сл. 11.** Камене наруквине (слика: Ц. Гетовска)

Most of the vessel forms are very common for a long period and a large area. The fragments from plates/bowls with a folded rim are the ones that could be used to narrow down the dating span. Most often, they have analogies with sites dated into the Late Neolithic, Early Eneolithic and/or the transition between the two periods – Grivac in Serbia (Nikolić 2004, 9.16: j; 9.17: d, h; 213–214), Karanovo IV in Bulgaria (Božilov 2005, Taf. 44: 5–6; Taf. 46: 6–7; Taf. 48: 3), Motel–Slatina in Serbia (Perić 2006, 243, tab. III: 27), Brenitsa in Bulgaria (Найденова и Ганецовски 2002, 75–76; обр. 10) and Rast in Romania (Dumitrescu 1980, 97; Pl. XXI: 20).

As already mentioned above, a large number of globular ceramic weights was found during the archaeological excavations. In total, 218 were discovered, out of which 154 were preserved in their entirety. Individual weights were found almost all around the site but several concentrations were recorded – Dwelling 1 (98), Dwelling 3 (25) and feature with a dug-in lower part (76). Their diameters vary from 3.5 to 6.3 cm, and their weight – from 23 to 144 g. Although loom weights with similar shape and size are found in prehistoric sites (Петрова 2016, фиг. 5, 9 - 2), a cluster of 98 weights in an area of 4 m<sup>2</sup> in Dwelling 1 is most probably too much for a weaving loom. It is possible that they were used as fishing weights instead of loom weights.

Other artefacts groups recorded during the excavations included: fragments of stone bracelets (Fig. 11), stone adzes (Fig. 12), other stone tools, quern stones (Fig. 13), and chipped stone tools. The flint assemblage from the site



**Fig. 12.** Stone adzes (figure by Ts. Getovska)

**Сл. 12.** Камене тесле (слика: Ц. Гетовска)

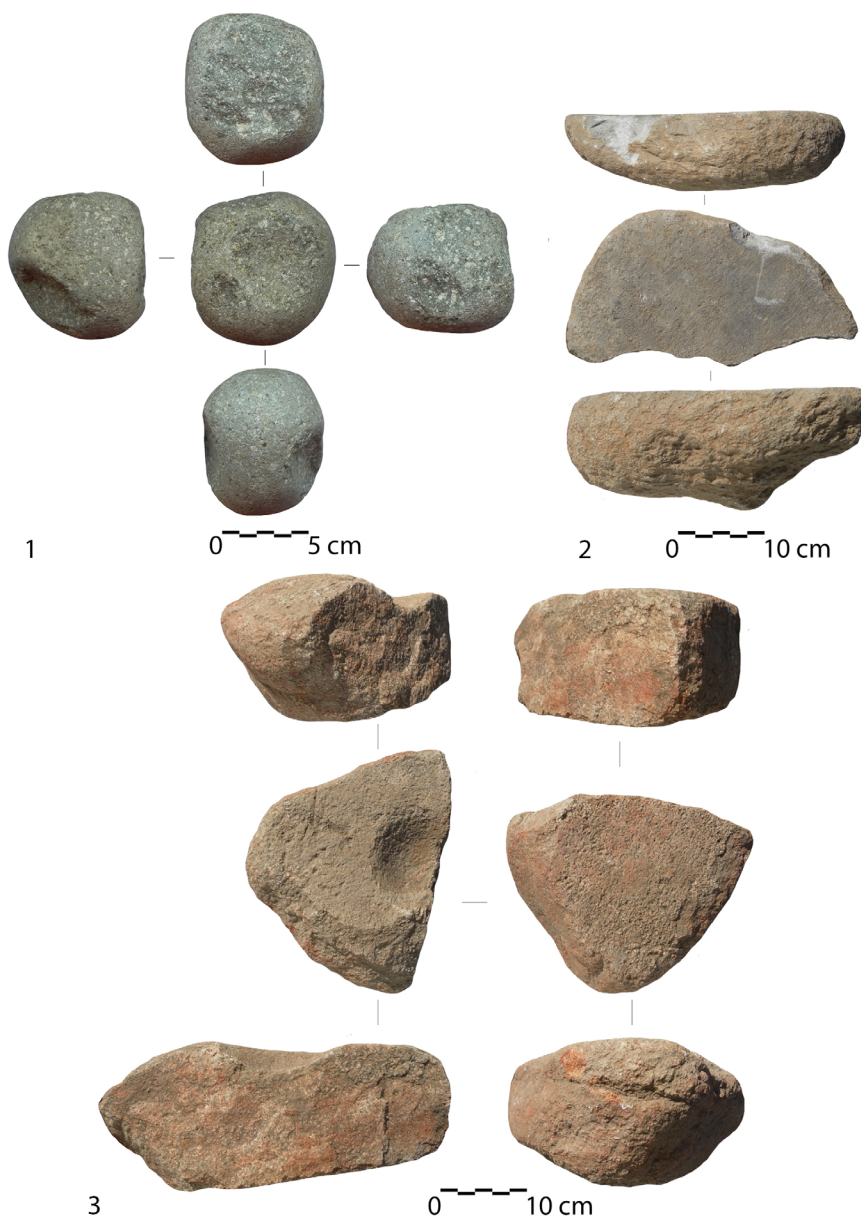
comprises 311 artefacts belonging to the following techno-typological groups: flint working cores (only 1), typological tools, blades, flakes, fragments, and chips. Their forms are specific to the Late Neolithic period. Stone bracelets with a triangular profile have exact parallels in the Vinča culture (Бабовић 1984, 127; Кат. 239; Антоновић 1992, 17; таб. XI, 2; Vitezović and Antonović, 2020, 91, fig. 2: 1; 94).

Only 9 incidences of badly preserved animal bones were recorded. Five charcoal fragments were sent for radiocarbon dating to the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory, Poland. The results of the radiocarbon dating of the 5 charcoal samples are shown in Table 1.

The pit and the northern part of the site are clearly divided into groups by their  $^{14}\text{C}$  age. The dates from the two groups overlap statistically so it could be assumed that they are part of one and the same chronological-cultural context.

Based on the excavated section of the site, it could be suggested that this was a single-layer settlement. The dwellings were constructed above the ground and were located at distances ranging between 20 to 40 meters from each other. The buildings likely had, so to speak, “courtyard spaces”. Farm facilities were located in the areas free of houses. There is no evidence of a massive fortification or walled facility. If there was one, it should have been recorded on the geophysical survey. There was probably a lightly built fence to keep out animals. It is possible to connect this type of settlement structure with a farm in which animal husbandry or fishing played a significant role.





**Fig. 13.** Stone tools: pestle (1), quern stone (2) and mortar (3) (figure by Ts. Getovska)

**Сл. 13.** Камене алатке: тучак (1), жрвањ (2) и аван (3) (слика: Ц. Гетовска)

| Laboratory code | <sup>14</sup> C-age [BP] | Material                       | CalBC p(95%) (CALPAL) | Location                  |
|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Poz-120640      | 6410 ± 40                | charcoal ( <i>Cornus sp.</i> ) | 5500–5300             | Pit                       |
| Poz-120639      | 6390 ± 40                | charcoal ( <i>Cornus sp.</i> ) | 5510–5270             | Pit                       |
| Poz-120752      | 6260 ± 40                | charcoal ( <i>Cornus sp.</i> ) | 5340–5140             | Northern part of the site |
| Poz-120751      | 6240 ± 40                | charcoal ( <i>Salix sp.</i> )  | 5360–5040             | Northern part of the site |
| Poz-120641      | 6210 ± 40                | charcoal ( <i>Cornus sp.</i> ) | 5320–5000             | Northern part of the site |

**Table 1.** Radiocarbon data from the site near the village of Brankovtsi. The above date ranges have been calibrated using the IntCal13 atmospheric calibration curve

**Табела 1.** Радиокарбонски подаци са локалитета код села Бранковци. Горенаведени распони датума су калибрисани коришћењем IntCal13 атмосферске калибрационе криве

### Concluding remarks

Publishing results from the excavations of the site near the village of Brankovtsi is one of the few opportunities in recent years to enrich the picture of the prehistoric period in North-western Bulgaria. The existence of archaeological artefacts with documented stratigraphy, as well as radiocarbon dates, prove the existence of a settlement in that part of Bulgaria that has analogies with sites affiliated with the Vinča and Gradeshnitsa cultures, i.e. the Late Neolithic, Early Eneolithic and the transition between the two periods in the region. There is very little information regarding the above mentioned periods in North-western Bulgaria and further investigation is of the utmost importance. There is still the need for more data regarding, for example, settlement types, construction of dwellings, livelihood, and organisation of life within the settlement. Future comparative analysis of pottery finds from other parts of Western Bulgaria could further show in detail how the region is connected to other prehistoric cultures on the Balkan Peninsula.

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**ПРЕЛИМИНАРНИ РЕЗУЛТАТИ У ВЕЗИ СА ПРАИСТОРИЈСКИМ  
НАСЕЉЕМ КРАЈ СЕЛА БРАНКОВЦИ, ВИДИНСКИ ОКРУГ,  
СЕВЕРОЗАПАДНА БУГАРСКА**

**Кључне речи:** *касни неолит, прелазни период из касног неолита у рани енеолит,  
крај 6. миленијума пре н. е., северозападна Бугарска*

Ово налазиште било је истражено у оквиру научног извештаја за планирану трасу гасовода. Заштитна ископавања су била спроведена у две кампање, током пролећа и лета 2019. Налазиште је смештено на гребену, југозападно од ушћа двеју река. Терен је био прекривен пашњаком и грмљем. Налази и структуре *in situ* су били откривени испод зоне ораница. Дебљина слоја са кућама је била до 0,30 м. Структуре су биле смештене на међусобној раздаљини од између 10 и 100 м, на висини од 211,80–212,90 м. На основу ископавања, процењено је да је површина насеља била око 1 ха. Није пронађено сигурних трагова пећи, рупа за стубове или подова. Од ископаних објеката, четири су била надземне структуре. Два објекта су била укопана у земљу. Пронађена је густа концентрација лоптастих керамичких тегова (укупно 218, од чега је 154 било потпуно очувано). Једна од укопаних структура је вероватно била коришћена за производњу лоптастих керамичких тегова. Пронађено је доста спаљених комада лепа са траговима дрвоног материјала, као и нагорелих комада керамике. Остали налази укључују фрагменте камених алатки, камених жрвњева и камених наруквица. На крају живота у насељу, оно је темељно изгорело. Сви налази имају уништenu површину због агресивне природе земљишта у коме су се пронађени. Налазиште се датира у касни неолит – рани енеолит и прелазни период између ова два доба, са карактеристикама винчанске и градешничке културе.