

ANNUAL REPORT: BUGLARIA-ILINDENTSI 2017 FIELD SCHOOL

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The excavations at the Neolithic settlement Ilindentsi-“Masovets” have been conducted since 2011 in collaboration with the Balkan Heritage Foundation, the Blagoevgrad Regional History Museum, New Bulgarian University and the Municipality of Strumyani. The project aims to study the culture of the first agriculturalists that appeared in the Struma River valley, in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula during the first half of the VI millennium BCE.

The field school associated with the research project was attended by 9 students (one of them came through the BHF-IFR Program for the Balkans).

The scientific goals of the project include:

- 1) A study of the material remains from the culture of the first agriculturalists who appeared in the Struma River valley to determine the rate of intensity of their contacts with Anatolia and the Middle-East, and with that of the neighboring sites in the region, best known being earliest Early Neolithic settlement in the region – Kovachevo, as well as

2) To elaborate on specifics of the Neolithisation process in this part of the Balkan Peninsula by providing critical information about the economic and social activities of the inhabitants of the prehistoric village ranging from the reconstruction of the settlement plan to the specific farming, craft production and level of integration in the regional exchange networks.

The Struma River valley, in Southwestern Bulgaria, is considered an important route through which early agriculturalists (c. 6500-5500 BCE) made their way from the Aegean into Temperate Europe. The settlement of Ilindentsi-Masovets is one of the earliest such agricultural villages in the region. The cultural layer has a thickness of 0.60 m while dug-in structures can reach up to 1+ m in depth. Its northern side is surrounded by a two-meter-wide 1.80-meter-deep ditch with a clay coated stone wall in the middle. On the outside of the ditch, a wooden palisade was constructed as was identified by traces of evenly distributed post-holes along the southern edge. Two smaller concentric ditches (trenches) documented at roughly five meter intervals southwards further reinforce the impression of deliberate enclosure. The innermost one was topped by the collapsed remains of already excavated burnt house and a geomagnetic survey revealed the location of many more. In a test trench located some 20m southwards from the innermost enclosure and the burnt house, there has been documented a single linear concentration of undressed stones that looked very much like the foundations of a wall but remained a puzzle since the use of stone foundations for houses is not common during the Early Neolithic in the region.

The field research in 2017 addressed two main issues:

- 1) Whether the remains of another house or a segment of a circular enclosure southwards of the burned house in square C5 could be located in the adjacent square D5,
- 2) Whether the remains of more stone walls could be located southwards of square H5 into the adjacent square I5.

The excavations in sq. D5 confirmed that the burnt house in C5 was not only free standing but had no neighbour in its immediate proximity not only to the north and west, but also to the south. The southernmost enclosure trench also remains unparalleled in D5. Thus, the concentric enclosure is proven to have consisted of three lines as documented through geophysical survey at other Early Neolithic sites and the settlement pattern shows considerably lower density of habitation compared to contemporary tells and flat settlements in the neighbouring regions of Thessaly, Republic of Macedonia and Upper Thrace in SE Bulgaria. The only manmade features were several pits – including emptied storage pits and a few pits backfilled with broken pots, animal bones and occasional tools and ornaments made of polished stone, marble, flint and bone.

The excavations in sq. I5 fulfilled our expectations in revealing new linear and parallel stone foundations, oriented NW-SE just like the stone foundation in H5 and the main axis of the prehistoric houses documented at the magnetic map of the settlement. This makes the hypothesis for documenting specific architecture style at Ilindentsi even more likely. Unfortunately, the walls were severely damaged by intrusive pits with characteristic Middle Neolithic pottery, making it barely possible to tell which is the interior and which the exterior side of the wall. The stratigraphic superposition of those features documents at least three phases of activity at this part of the site. How do these relate to the construction phases of the excavated triple enclosure in the northern part of the site remains a debatable question requiring future excavation campaigns.

The most predominant ceramic style is the white-on-red painted vessels with two distinct styles characteristic for the second phase of the Early Neolithic in the Struma River valley. Among the most characteristic finds are pieces of terracotta figurines, marble and marine shell bracelets and beads, as well as flint tools of non-local provenance, showing that the people who lived in prehistoric Ilindentsi were very well integrated into an exchange network covering several hundred kilometers, ranging from the Danube to the north, the Western Rhodope Mountains to the east and the Aegean coast to the south.

The results of the field work conducted in 2017 will be published in the annual journal "Archaeological discoveries and excavations" issued by the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 2018. Furthermore, the team is preparing an article on the results of previous studies of the site in an electronic-journal format that will be widely distributed over the internet. The team also intends to prepare the first volume of a monograph: "*The Prehistoric Settlement of Ilindentsi and its Surroundings*" based on the excavations and archaeological studies carried out from 2004 to 2017.