

ANNUAL REPORT: *BIRTH OF EUROPE* – Excavations at the Neolithic settlement of Ilindentsi 2018 FIELD SCHOOL

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The Early Neolithic site Ilindentsi in SW Bulgaria – aerial view at the site with the trenches.

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 scientific goals of the project include:

- 1) To study the material remains from the culture of the first agriculturalists who appeared in the Struma River valley and determine the rate and intensity of their contacts with Anatolia, the Middle-East, and with that of the neighboring sites in the region, the best known being the earliest Early Neolithic settlement in the region–Kovachevo.
- 2) To elaborate on the 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 techniques, craft productions, 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.

In sq. D5 the students and their instructor were tasked with completing the excavation of the remaining features in the trench and to draw the final horizontal plan and profiles. Numerous pits were discovered last season, many of which remained entirely or partly unexcavated. Following the excavations, we together prepared the final plan drawing and drew the East profile.

After the work in sq. D5 was complete, we proceeded to excavate a new trench that was opened this year – sq. D4. The topsoil had already been removed to expose the archaeological layer. We found notable features in the trench, namely, three linearly arranged (NW-SE) piles of ceramic, daub, and stone were discovered that are also in line with another such concentration that was earlier found in square D5. On their north-east side, a lightly burned floor level composed of white clay and daub inclusions is apparent, part of which is accrued and abutted against the base of one of these concentrations. While excavating the archaeological layer in this area, several polished stone axes and adzes, a single preform, a Karanovo blade, and numerous other flints were recovered that together suggests the economic importance of this space. The students were actively engaged throughout the entire process and participated in excavation, field documentation, initial interpretation, and finds processing.

The excavations in sq. I5 revealed new linear and parallel stone foundations, oriented NW-SE and NE-SW. It is highly possible that the stones formed the foundation of a wall and that the upper part was traditionally constructed using the wattle-and-daub technique. The wattle-and-daub technique is further evidenced by the remains of a burnt clay wall found in the northern part of the square. Stone architecture is not typical for the region and as such the evidence of this architectural style in Ilindentsi is of great importance. Unfortunately, the walls were severely damaged by two pits in the eastern part of the square. Next to the fallen clay wall and under the floor, a small pit with was found that contained an almost entire vessel and animal bones. The latter may represent a prehistoric ritual connected with house construction.

The results of the field work conducted in 2018 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 2019. 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 is also beginning to work on the first volume of a monograph: “The Prehistoric Settlement of Ilindentsi, Southwest Bulgaria” based on the excavations and archaeological studies carried out from 2004 to 2018.