

The Circumpontic cultural zone during the 6th millennium BC

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ABSTRACT - *The Circumpontic cultural zone developed during the time of the Balkan Neolithic and covered the territories around the southern and western coast of the Black Sea. The new data presented describes it as a zone of active two-way contacts between north-western Anatolia and the eastern Balkans during the 6th millennium BC. The paper emphasises the role of Thrace as a generator of formative and ornamental ideas for the pottery production of the gradually enlarging Circumpontic zone.*

POVZETEK - *Obpontska kulturna cona se je razvila v času balkanskega neolitika in je obsegala območje južnih in zahodnih obal Črnega morja. Novi podatki jo kažejo kot cono aktivnih dvosmernih stikov med severozahodno Anatolijo in vzhodnim Balkanom v času 6. tisočletja BC. V članku poudarjamo pomen Trakije, ki je bila "generator" oblikovnih in ornamentalnih idej pri izdelovanju keramike v postopno naraščajoči obpontski coni.*

The system of chronological relations lies at the basis of every cultural and historical study. New archaeological excavations, as well as the study of old collections, create a steady accumulation of facts that, from a certain point on, lead to a more or less significant change in ideas about the pattern of past material culture in a given region or area. A change in ideas about the chronology of settlements, layers or finds usually leads to a need to up-date or fundamentally change existing cultural and historical interpretations. Therefore, the recurrent "improvement" of the chronological pattern is of heuristic importance.

The most complete (according to our potential) study of the pottery related or possibly related (under the pattern valid until recently) to the Karanovo III culture, brought about the development of a new periodisation and chronology of post-Early Neolithic cultural phenomena in Thrace, and to an approximate definition of the territorial range of the culture known already, as well as of the newly defined cultural periods (Николов 1998).

The Early Neolithic pottery assemblage of Karanovo I covered the whole territory of Thrace, from Vetren and Kovačevo to the west, to Glufiševo and Asagi

pinar to the east, from Banja and Kazanlak to the north to Muldava and Hoca Çesme to the south and south-east, i.e., covering almost the whole Maritsa basin and the region at the Mesta's upper course. The chronologically following pottery assemblage in the western and southern parts of this region was Karanovo III-IV, belonging to the middle stage of the Late Neolithic. It also covered the north-eastern parts of Thrace, but it had been preceded by three other, consecutive pottery assemblages in the region: the Early Neolithic Karanovo II, the Middle Neolithic Protokaranovo III and Karanovo III, related to the beginning of the Late Neolithic. These three periods chronologically matched, therefore, later and the latest phases of the Karanovo I period in the rest of the region. The last stage of the Late Neolithic in the western parts of Thrace was represented by a variant of the pottery assemblage Karanovo III-IV, which continued to develop, while at the same time the pottery assemblage Karanovo IV existed in the eastern parts of Thrace, to the east from the Kazanlak-Has-kovo line, including Asagi pinar.

The introduction of a new Thracian chronological system in the chronology scheme of North-western Anatolia and South-eastern Europe is causing and will continue to cause revisions of ideas about the

chronology of the material culture of the area during the second half of the 6th millennium BC. This paper is only an attempt at an introduction to the chronological system of the Thracian Neolithic and the related pottery assemblages and the great problems of the relations between Anatolia and the Balkans during the time of the Balkan Neolithic.

This problem has various dimensions for each pre-historic period. The most debatable aspect of the chronological period under study is the concept of the origin and distribution of the black (grey-black), very well smoothed, burnished and sometimes polished pottery. Research on this subject followed at least some main directions related to the origin of the cultural communities with dark pottery in South-eastern Europe that replaced (with a few exceptions) the early cultures with coloured (predominantly red) painted pottery in the middle and the third quarter of the 6th millennium.

The first assumptions about the significance of the black, burnished pottery as a reliable mark for migrations within the Balkan territory (from Greece to the Danube region) were those of H. Frankfort and W. Heurtley, but the globalisation of the problem of the origin of this pottery in the Balkans as a result of migrations from the Near East was stated by V. G. Childe (1936–1937) and supported later by V. Milošević (1949). Three decades later, M. Garašanin presented his concept of the Balkan-Anatolian complex of the Late Neolithic, a concept which, though modified, is maintained up to now (Гарашанин 1966; 1973; Garašanin 1979). The concept included as a specific element a slow, continuous migration from Anatolia to the Middle Danube area. Close to this comprehensive idea were the views of other archaeologists studying particular details of the problem (Тимов 1974; Lichardus, Lichardus-Itten 1989–1990). The idea that the origin of the Vinča culture was the result of migrations from the east (via Thrace) is shared by D. Srejić (1963), B. Jovanović (Јовановић 1962–1963), V. Dumitrescu (1980), G. Lazarović (1973), T. Efe (1990), etc. The origin of the black, burnished pottery that appeared in Middle and Northern Greece during the transition from the Middle to the Late Neolithic was related traditionally to migrations from the east (Holmberg 1964; Gallis 1987). The appearance of the Late Neolithic, dark, burnished pottery (and the origin of the Dudești culture) to the north of the Danube was ascribed also to migrations via the valleys of the Vardar and Morava, or to a movement of groups of population over the large area from the Black Sea to the Central Balkans

(Comsa 1987). The origin of the black, burnished pottery of the Paradimi group was sought also in Anatolia (Bakalakis, Sakellariou 1981). Some pre-historians also accepted that the Karanovo III culture was not of local origin in Thrace (Raduncheva 1978).

The concept of the autochthonous origin of the black, burnished pottery in the Balkans and the cultures reproducing it has had far fewer supporters. G. I. Georgiev always insisted on the local origin of the Karanovo III culture in Thrace (Georgiev 1971; Георгиев 1974). H. Todorova suggested that at the end of the Early Neolithic (i.e. at the time of the Karanovo II culture) there was a break in the contacts between Thrace and Anatolia, and the culture of the former area continued to develop without eastern influence (Тодорова, Вайсов 1993). J. Chapman stated his belief in an autochthonous development that led to the emergence of the Vinča culture and its black, burnished pottery (Chapman 1981). Similar conclusions were presented by V. Leković (1990). Other experts also shared “autochthonous” views regarding the origin of this culture (and its pottery) (e. g. Boroneant 1990; Séfériadès 1990).

The concept proposed in recent years by M. Özdoğan for the existence of a prehistoric Anatolian-Balkan cultural zone also had its supporters. This was his personal opinion on the problem: “... from the beginning of the Neolithic period in the Balkans, up to the beginning of the Bronze age, we tend to consider most of the Balkan peninsula, Western and Central Anatolia as a single cultural formative zone, distinct from the areas of the Levanto-Mesopotamian tradition. In considering vast geographical areas, extending from Central Anatolia to the Danube, we imply neither that identical cultural assemblages existed throughout this region or that a cultural homogeneity was due to the impetus of diffusion. The model we are suggesting manifests a large cultural formation zone, developing together with the same trend, but also displaying a considerable diversity in the composition of cultural and artificial assemblages.” (Özdoğan 1993:177). The evidence presented by M. Özdoğan was completed and partially developed by L. Thissen (1993) in his analysis of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic pottery from Northwestern and Central Anatolia, and by S. Steadman (1995) on the basis of publications on the prehistoric development of the same region.

It is not possible to mention all the components of the above-mentioned aspect of the problem of cultural and demographic relations between Anatolia

and the Balkans during the second half of the 6th millennium, but what has already been stated reflects the three main trends in the scientific efforts at using black, burnished pottery as an argument or reason for solving the problem. The possibility, however, of expressing different and even self-contradictory theses concerning one and the same subject indicates insufficiently strict methodology or a crisis in the research approach. This concerns mainly pure "migrationists" and "autochthonists", which is why the idea of the existence of an Anatolian-Balkan cultural zone, although it could not be a cure-all in itself, is certainly an example of a fruitful, non-traditional idea.

The problem of the reasons, the nature, and the mechanism of the serious changes that caused the emergence of cultures with black, burnished pottery in South-eastern Europe could be the subject of a comprehensive study. I would like just to present briefly some of my observations concerning the problem that resulted both from my recently completed study of post-Early Neolithic pottery and my long research work on Early Neolithic development in the area.

There is no doubt that the origin of the Early Neolithic cultures with painted pottery in the central parts of the Balkan Peninsula was related to South and especially South-western Anatolia. Important indications for this include not only the indisputable typological similarities between the material cultures, but also the geographic link between the two regions that, together with the Aegean Islands, form a clearly detectable arc from the Taurus Mountains to the Carpathian basin. Two other regions, Northern, and especially North-western Anatolia, and the eastern parts of the Balkan peninsula (up to Moldavia), remained between this "exterior" arc and the Black Sea; the Early Neolithic in the "interior" arc was characterised by dark, unpainted (with certain exceptions) pottery. Theoretically, there could be three possible Balkan contact areas of the two zones (from south to north): Western Thrace/Eastern Macedonia, Thrace, and the Lower Danube basin. In fact, only Thrace developed in this way.

The European part of the so called "exterior" arc or the South Anatolian-Central Balkan zone developed a little bit later than the Anatolian part, but within a comparatively short period. The interactions within the range of the "exterior" arc are demonstrable for the whole period of its existence, i.e., for the period of the production of the early painted pottery, which

lasted for at least a millennium in almost the whole area of the zone. After that time, a material culture with black, burnished pottery (Vinča and Vinča groups) originated and dominated for a rather long period in the most northerly parts of the zone; in the other parts of the zone (to the south and south-east), painted pottery continued its development (though with some innovations).

The formation processes of the "interior" arc (Northern Anatolian/Eastern Balkan or the Circumpontic zone) started a little bit later, and their development was considerably slower. The formation area of the Circumpontic zone was probably somewhere around the Sea of Marmara and in Northern Anatolia to the east.

According to the present stage of research, I can relate the sites Fikirtepe I, Pendik I, Ilıpınar X, Çanak-kale (the early materials), Demircihüyük (at least the so-called Fikirtepe ware), Orman Fidanlığı I-III, etc. to the earliest period (Karanovo I) of that zone (see Fig. 1 for all sites mentioned in this paper). Some contemporaneous sites will probably be discovered in the future further to the east. During the Karanovo I period, a culture with painted pottery (Karanovo I) spread gradually from western to eastern Thrace, up to the lower Tundza and Maritza rivers (*Nikolov 1989*). Meanwhile, though on a small scale, the reproduction of dark grey and grey-black, very well smoothed to burnished pottery also started to appear in the settlements of the eastern reaches of this cultural phenomenon (*Nikolov 1997*).

During the following period already (Karanovo II) the zone of the "interior" arc covered Eastern Thrace (a region where the process had probably started a little bit earlier, e. g. Yarımburgaz 5-4), the north-eastern parts of Thrace (Karanovo II) and reached the Fore-Balkan fields of North-eastern Bulgaria (Ovčarovo-platoto and Ovčarovo-gorata). Painted pottery vanished completely in the north-eastern parts of Thrace (i.e. the Karanovo I period ended) and the Karanovo II cultural phenomenon, with dark pottery, developed; the painted pottery tradition (Karanovo I) continued in the remaining parts of the same area (*Nikolov 1993.185-186; Nikolov 1993a.168-169*).

There is no data indicating a territorial expansion of the Circumpontic zone during the following two periods (Karanovo II-III and Karanovo III), especially as far as its European part is concerned. The relation of the Anatolian material culture to these periods is at

present unreliable. The Karanovo II–III and Karanovo III cultural phenomena, with dark (black) pottery, developed consecutively in the north-eastern parts of Thrace, and in the rest of Thrace the culture with painted pottery (Karanovo I) was reproduced (Nikolov 1993a.186).

The Karanovo III–IV period was a time of territorial expansion of the zone. It is difficult to estimate the dimensions of the expansion to the east because of

unreliable data on previous periods; however, at the end of the period, the culture with black burnished pottery was already present in the central, inner and Black Sea part of Anatolia, as seen, for example at the beginning of Alaça Hüyük IVa, the beginning of Büyük Gülücek, and İkiztepe II, at least layer 6. The European part of the zone expanded in the west and spread over the whole of Thrace, to Yasatepe and Kapitan Dimitriev, for example (the Karanovo III–IV period), and also to the north, reaching the Da-



Fig. 1. Neolithic sites in the Circumpontic zone and neighbour regions: 1. İkiztepe; 2. Büyük Gülücek; 3. Alaça Hüyük; 4. Yazır Hüyük; 5. Orman Fidanlığı; 6. Demircihüyük; 7. Ilıpınar; 8. Pendik; 9. Fikirtepe; 10. Kumtepe; 11. Gülpınar; 12. Agio Gala; 13. Emporio; 14. Tıgani; 15. Yarımburgaz; 16. Toptepe; 17. Aşağıpınar; 18. Paradimi; 19. Drama; 20. Karanovo; 21. Yasatepe; 22. Kapitan Dimitriev; 23. Kaçica; 24. Samovodene; 25. Hotnica; 26. Koprivec; 27. Ovčarovo; 28. Ussoe; 29. Goljamo Delčevo; 30. Malāk Pre-slavec; 31. Dudești; 32. Circea; 33. Gradešnica; 34. Supska; 35. Predionica; 36. Anzabegovo; 37. Vršnik; 38. Kremenik-Sapareva banja; 39. Bălgarčevo; 40. Sitagroi; 41. Dikili tash; 42. Arapi (made by S. Goshev).

nube via the Yantra and Russenski Lom valleys (e. g. Koprivec AI).

The last of the studied periods, Karanovo IV, marked a time of great territorial expansion of the Circumpontic zone in South-eastern Europe. The black, burnished pottery displaced the painted type from almost the whole of the Central Balkan region (to the north from Thessaly, with a few exceptions), covered the whole of the Lower Danube region, Moldavia and Western Thrace/Eastern Macedonia. Its production in Northern Anatolia is also well documented, and to the south the zone covered almost the whole of the eastern Anatolian coast as well as Crete. Thrace was entirely within the range of the zone, as it had been during the previous period (the Karanovo IV cultural phenomena to the east and the final stage of the Karanovo III-IV to the west).

At the end of the Balkan Neolithic, the territory of the "exterior" arc no longer existed as a contact cultural zone. As well as in the Konya plain (Southern Anatolia), painted pottery continued its development in Southern and Central Greece, Thessaly, and the Lower Struma valley; in the European parts of the zone it is always found together with black-burnished ware.

Interregional interaction within the Circumpontic zone was only supposed, albeit very cautiously, in the third trend of ideas described above about the nature of Balkan-Anatolian contacts, but their directions and nature remain completely unexplored. The possibility of investigating this essential aspect of the character of the Circumpontic zone could be found in certain common, formative elements of the pottery assemblages in the area; two are especially significant and could be detected almost during its whole chronological range. These are vessels with one vertical pronged handle, and dishes with a thickened, inner part of the rim. Their significance had been noted many times in the literature (cf. *Efe 1990.110*). These or other vessels sometimes have cylindrical feet. The two main, significant formative elements appeared in the north-eastern parts of Thrace, which is why their distribution within the zone is an indisputable indication for directions of cultural interaction.

Vessels with vertical pronged handles (probably mugs only), dishes with thickened inner part of the rim and vessels on cylindrical feet appeared for the first time during the Karanovo II-III period in north-eastern parts of Thrace. At this time they developed

only there, as a local phenomenon in the formation region. During the Karanovo III period these formative elements became indicative of the character of its pottery assemblage. They were still a local phenomenon of parts of north eastern Thrace, but their earliest sporadic distribution could be detected to the north, in the Yantra Valley (Samovodene).

The significant elements pointed out covered the whole of Thrace during the Karanovo III-IV period. Moreover, they reached the Struma Valley to the south-west (Kremenik - building levels IV) and probably the Vardar Valley (Vršnik IV); they spread to the Fore-Balkan fields in the north (Samovodene - building levels VI-V, Goljamo Delčevo I) and via the Yantra and Russenski Lom valleys reached the Danube (Koprivec AI); except for Eastern Thrace (Yarımburgaz 0), at the end of the period they penetrated the Anatolian part of the Marmara region to the south-east (the beginning of Ilıpınar VI, the beginning of Fikirtepe II, the beginning of Pendik II, Demircihüyük) and even further inland in Northern Anatolia (layers 6-5 of İkiztepe II, the beginning of Büyük Gülücek, the beginning of Alaça Hüyük IVa).

During the Karanovo IV period (in the eastern parts of Thrace) the significant elements described remained typical of its pottery assemblage. They continued to be produced in the western parts of Thrace also (the final stage of the Karanovo III-IV period). They were typical of the pottery of Western (Paradimi I-III) and Eastern (Yarımburgaz 3-2) Thrace, though in smaller quantities. They could be found as single pieces in all areas around Thrace (as a whole): in the Anatolian part of the Marmara region (the end of Ilıpınar VI, the end of Fikirtepe II, the end of Pendik II, Demircihüyük) and in Northern Anatolia (Yazır Hüyük, İkiztepe II, layer 4-2, the end of Büyük Gülücek, the end of Alaça Hüyük IVa) to the south-east; almost along the whole eastern coast of Anatolia and on the islands (Kumtepe IA, Koskuntepe, Gülpınar, Agio Gala-the Upper Cave, Emporio X-IX, Tigani Ib-II, Kalimnos) to the south; in Thessaly and Macedonia (Arapi layer in Arapi, Vassilika I, Dimitra I, Sitagroi I-II, Dikili Tash I, Anza IV, Bălgarcevo II-IIIa, Kremenik, building levels III-1) to the south-west; in the northern central Balkan zone (Supska 9-8, Predionica, Circea-Viadukt, Gradešnica-Lukanovo dârvo) to the north-west; in Northeastern Bulgaria (Samovodene - building levels IV-I, Ussoe I-II, Malâk Preslavec) to the north.

The conclusions following the observations presented on the time and the range of distribution of the

vessels with vertical pronged handles, dishes with a thickened, inner part of the rim, and vessels on cylindrical feet which appeared first in Thrace are unambiguous. It is obvious that after the aesthetic-technological idea of an eastern origin for the production of dark, unpainted pottery had established itself in the eastern parts of Thrace, the same area turned gradually into a generator of formative and probably ornamental ideas for pottery production that influenced for a long period the pottery "fashion" of the enlarging Circumpontic zone. An independent pottery design was developed in the north-eastern parts of Thrace during the time of the Karanovo II-III and III periods, and during the Karanovo III-IV and IV periods, Thrace participated actively in the exchange of ideas concerning material culture with neighbouring regions and in a way influenced the formative abundance of the pottery assemblages developing there. The conclusion for the deep penetration of significant Thracian pottery elements into Northern Anatolia not as imports, but as influenced by Thracian local pottery production is especially important in view of the concepts presented above about Anatolian-Balkan relations in the middle and the second half of the 6th millennium BC. It is obvious that the idea of a one-way Anatolian influence should be revised, at least for the period in question. The most probable model should include multi-directional contacts within the Circumpontic zone, and Thrace was the motive power for these contacts, at least as far as the European part is concerned.

The same concerns the Karanovo IV period, too. I will add some more details about the interrelations within the Circumpontic zone. During the period under discussion, the Karanovo IV cultural phenomenon developed in the eastern parts of Thrace and in some parts of Eastern Thrace, based on the previous development common to the whole Thrace (the Karanovo III-IV periods); in the western parts of Thrace there continued the reproduction of the earlier Karanovo III-IV type culture, although with some innovations to be discussed later. The reason for the changes in the pottery assemblage that differentiated Karanovo IV complex to the east of the Kazanlak-Haskovo line should probably be sought in an intensified two-way cultural exchange at this time from north to south and from south to north (between the Carpathian Mountains and the Aegean Sea). This exchange definitely included the Anatolian part of the zone, but the limited research there does not permit essential conclusions about the transfer of ideas along the east-west axis (between the

Marmara area and the central northern parts of Anatolia).

Bearers of the Linear Band pottery and, precisely, of so-called Notenkopf pottery appeared in the north-eastern parts of Muntenia during the Karanovo IV period (*Drasovean 1996.184-186*). The Bojan-Bolinteanu cultural phenomenon resulted probably from contact with the local bearers of the earlier phases of the Dudești culture. Certain elements typical of this pottery assemblage (for example, negative field framed by pricked dots in channelled composition) penetrated the south and could be seen on pottery in the eastern parts of Thrace (for example, at Tell Karanovo). The distribution of some very specific ornamental elements of Notenkopf pottery as far as the central parts of Anatolia is of special significance for the study of cultural contacts within the zone. These are the "note" elements in the pottery decoration from Karanovo, Kalojanovec (the north-eastern parts of Thrace), Yarımburgaz (Eastern Thrace), Alaça Hüyük, Büyük Gülücek (Central Anatolia). The direction of penetration is indisputable in this case and coincides with the direction and the depth of penetration of the other, aforementioned formative elements, typical of Thrace (pronged handles, thickened rims and feet). Other ornamental elements, typical of the Linear Band pottery culture were discovered again in Eastern Thrace (Asagi pınar, Yarımburgaz and Toptepe) and probably at Ilpınar also (to the south of the Sea of Marmara). By this I mean specific motifs consisting of connected spirals and meanders or wave motifs made by shallow incisions on the bodies of dark, thin-walled clay vessels.

E. Comsa suggested that the ornamentation, characteristic of the earlier phases of the Dudești culture – specific zig-zag bands hatched or filled with pricked dots – originated from similar decoration at Demircihüyük (*Comsa 1987.79-80*). This hypothesis is quite convincing, since such ornamentation was found at Tell Karanovo, though as an exception. The diffusion in this case was oriented undoubtedly from the south-east to the north-west.

A typical feature of some low, vertical, pronged handles (a "thumb-like", eccentric prong) appeared in Eastern Thrace (Asagi pınar). This peculiarity was also observed in the Yantra valley (Kacica, Hotnica). Here we must also mention some clay "altars" on three or four feet, having similar prongs at their corners. They appeared during the later phases of the Dudești culture in Muntenia, in North-eastern Bulga-

ria (Hotnica, Kacica, Maläk Preslavec), along the Lower Tundza valley (Drama) and Eastern Thrace (Asagi pinar). It is difficult to find supporting evidence of where these specific elements emerged in the region and the direction of their later distribution. The presented group of typical elements is, however, a very good addition to the abundant evidence for intensive cultural contacts within the Circumpontic zone and in this very case, its European part.

Predominantly in the Anatolian part of the zone, probably the region where the idea emerged, there are clay vessels with decoration, dry incised or incised after firing (Alaça Hüyük, Büyük Gülücek, İkiztepe II, Demircihüyük, Fikirtepe, Pendik). The same decoration technique is also registered in the neighbour south-eastern region of the European part of the zone (Paradimi, Asagi pinar, Drama). Obviously, this ornamental-technological element travelled from the east to the west and north-west.

It is probable that there are more examples of cultural influences with moving in opposing directions within the Circumpontic zone during the Karanovo IV period. Undoubtedly, the progress of the study would provide an increase in, and higher precision of, such evidence. I think it is a very important fact that such contacts existed during the period, and that the movement of culture-formation ideas went in the two directions. What is more, Thrace as a whole was not only a transmitter, but also a generator of innovations for the material culture of the zone.

The pottery assemblage of the final stage of the Karanovo III-IV cultural phenomenon that developed in the western parts of Thrace contemporary with the Karanovo IV period indicates intensive contacts with the Central Balkan region. However, the stratified materials available are insufficient to provide a more precise analysis of these contacts to the north-west and south, or of relations with the related Karanovo IV cultural phenomenon to the east.

The observations presented above argue against both the pure migration and the pure autochthonous theories on the origin of the black, burnished pottery in South-eastern Europe in the middle and during the second half of the 6th millennium BC. The theory on the Balkan-Anatolian cultural zone is a good basis for speculation, but it is more than obvious that during the earlier stages of the Neolithic period two cultural (contact) zones existed, covering large territories of the two regions; the Circumpontic

zone enlarged considerably in its European part as late as the last stage of the Balkan Neolithic, and this was the period of the Anatolian-Balkan cultural zone. Nevertheless, the classical range of the Circumpontic zone remained (as already described) autonomous to a great extent from the processes occurring in the western parts, and this perceptible cultural and territorial differentiation remained at least for the whole of the 5th millennium BC.

The aesthetics and technology of dark pottery production have their roots in Northern Anatolia. However, the implementation of this idea – the reproduction and development of dark and black-burnished pottery – was a very long process, that covered constantly expanding territory of South-Eastern Europe, and manifested itself as different cultural phenomena, all having two-way cultural contacts among themselves as well as with Northern Anatolia.

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