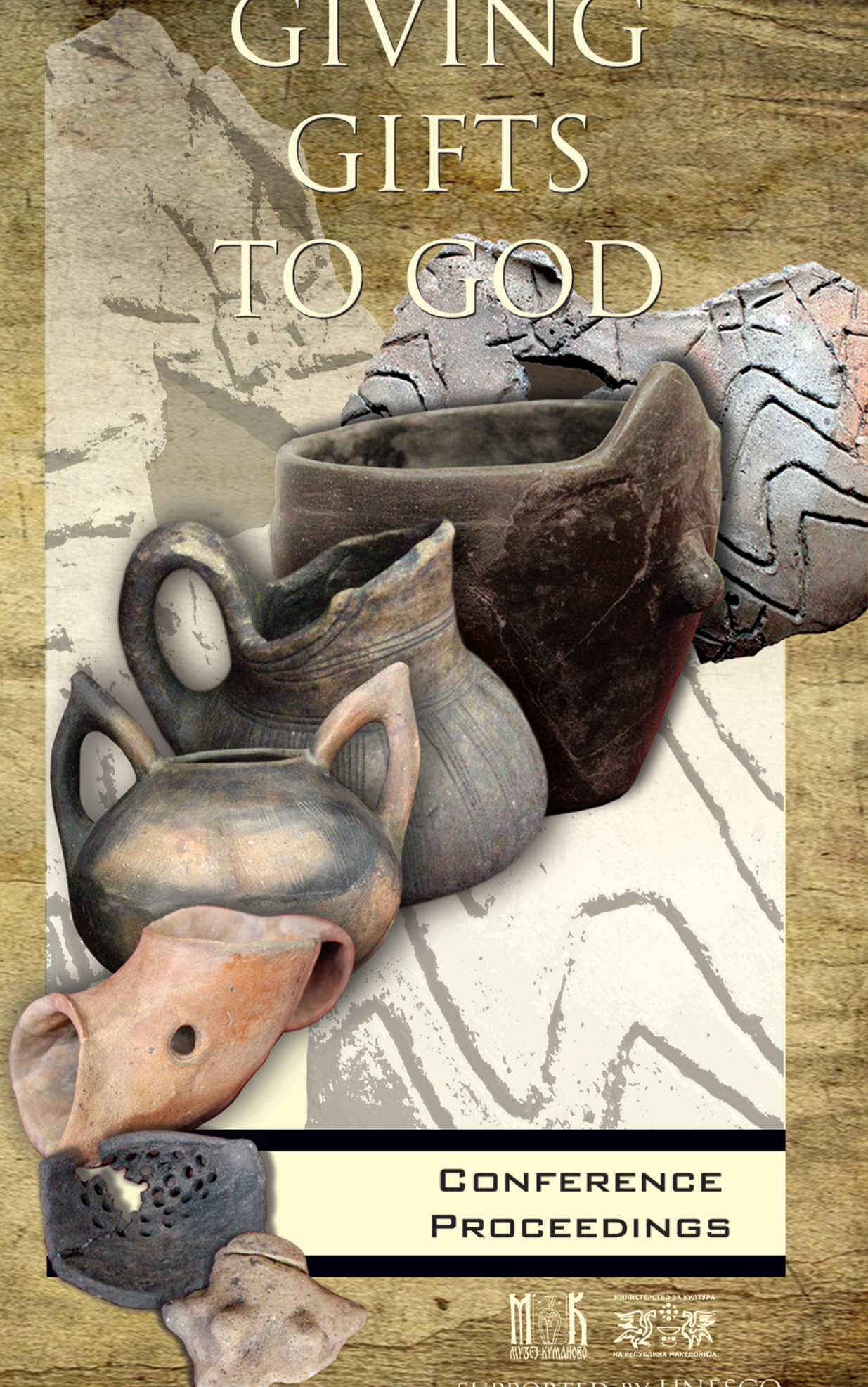


EVIDENCES OF VOTIVE OFFERINGS  
IN THE SANCTUARIES,  
TEMPLES AND CHURCHES

# GIVING GIFTS TO GOD



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# **GIVING GIFTS TO GOD:**

**EVIDENCES OF VOTIVE OFFERINGS IN THE  
SANCTUARIES, TEMPLES AND CHURCHES**

*Proceedings of the 1st (Kokino: archaeological and astronomical aspects  
- parallels and experience) & 2nd (Kokino: Giving gifts to God)  
International Conferences held in Skopje & Kumanovo, 2016-2017*



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# RITUAL PITS IN THE CENTRAL BALKANS – THE CONTINUITY OF A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Aleksandar Bulatović

*Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade*

One of many definitions of a ritual proposes that a ritual is a set of activities performed with the aim of fulfilling its social purpose, whereby the activities themselves are not important, it is the message that they convey, that is – the meaning and symbolism behind them that are crucial. Among the different perceptions of rituals, which I described previously, this one is perhaps the most relevant for the case under study, i.e. the ritual of depositing votive offerings in pits.<sup>1</sup> Symbolic deposition of goods in pits is one of the earliest prehistoric rituals, perhaps practiced as early as the Palaeolithic.<sup>2</sup> This is a ritual of sacrifice in which the act of sacrificing, or gift offering, is essential; the offerings vary depending on the circumstances. The purpose of this ritual is the offering of sacrifices in order to appease the divine forces, the presence of which humans have always felt around them. The main motive for this ritual is the fear and the sense of helplessness, that is, the feeling of dependence upon these forces.

However, as has already been emphasized, it is essential to be cautious when defining certain pits as sacral or ritual because, in prehistory, pits were often used for disposing rubbish, storage, residing as well as for other purposes.<sup>3</sup> A ritual function can be attributed to a pit not simply on the basis of the lack of elements associated with a residential use or with rubbish-disposal; it is necessary that the pit represents a context characterized by specific patterns or symbolism.<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

Living aside the traces of ritual sacrifice in pits from the Palaeolithic, which is very hard to prove

given the time distance and the thin evidence from this period, the current research confirms that ritual sacrificing in pits was practiced from as early as the Neolithic and, in some parts of the world, the practice has survived almost until today. However, in the central Balkans, which roughly encompasses present-day western Bulgaria, northern Macedonia and Serbia south from the Sava and the Danube, the Neolithic pits that can be securely identified as ritual are absent; there are, nonetheless, pits for which a ritual purpose can be inferred.

This is the case with the pit from the site of Žitkovac, which is c. 9 m in diameter and over 1 m deep. Its stratigraphy is quite complex and so it could not be defined as ritual with certainty.<sup>5</sup> However, after the discovery of some very similar Neolithic pits in Thrace, described as ritual pits,<sup>6</sup> the ritual character of the pit from Žitkovac is highly likely.

A number of ritual pits deriving from the Eneolithic have been documented in the central Balkans – for instance at the sites of Bubanj, Beligovo, Vinča. The pits differ in terms of dimensions, contents, location within or in relation to the settlements, etc. Thus, for instance, a pit at Bubanj is about 1.5 m deep, whilst others at this site are quite shallow, but their fill is very similar and includes fragmented pots, figurines, various pieces of weapons, animal bone (dominated by the remains of pig and dog) and so on (fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the pit from Vinča, which derives from a later phase of the Eneolithic, is very different as it contained only several pots placed upside down at the bottom of the pit. A similar pit, containing several pots but somewhat larger, was

<sup>1</sup> Булатовић 2015, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Janićijević 1986, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Булатовић 2015, 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> Hodder, Hutson 2003, 9; Miret i Mestre 2014, 339-354.

<sup>5</sup> Tasić 1958, 19-21.

<sup>6</sup> Nikolov 2011, 91-119.

<sup>7</sup> Булатовић 2015, 9-13.



registered at the site of Beligovo.<sup>8</sup> These examples demonstrate differences in the dimensions, shape and contents of the pits, even within the same period and in a relatively small area. There are though some elements (e.g. the type of deposited materials) common to all of the described examples, such as the whole pots, placed mainly at the bottom of the pits.

Based on the current knowledge of this phenomenon, it appears that the number of ritual pits increased in the later periods of prehistory. Hence in the Bronze Age, these pits occur in a greater number of locations in the central Balkans compared to the previous periods. Also known from this period are sacral spaces composed of dozens of this type of pits, for example at the sites of Dve Mogili in Pelince and Tatikey Kamen in Kokino in northern Macedonia.<sup>9</sup> Within these prehistoric “shrines”, there are different types of pits of varied contents, dimensions and architecture (e.g. some have above-ground stone constructions and at the bottom of one a funnel was registered inside a beaker). This diversity complicates the reconstruction of their specific usage or the associated ritual.

Besides the sacral spaces, there are also solitary ritual pits, like the one at the site of Davidovac in SE Serbia; here, several pots from the Early Bronze Age were discovered in the northwest part of the pit (fig. 2), of which one may have represented a musical instrument – a drum of some kind.<sup>10</sup> Of particular interest is the situation encountered below the tumulus in Krivajica near Loznica in western Serbia.<sup>11</sup> In the centre of the tumulus, there was a sort of a horizontal surface cover constructed of river stone tiles; underneath it was an accumulation of earth. Below the earthen mound, at the base of the central part of the tumulus, two adjacent, circular, shallow pits were located, filled with fine light yellow clayish soil (fig. 3). No grave was discovered in the tumulus. The finds from the tumulus and the stone-built cover date this structure to the Late Bronze Age. The position of the pits in the centre of the tumulus, as well as their carefully prepared infill which is markedly different from the surrounding soil, indicate the special purpose of the pits, that is, their ritual character.

The largest number of ritual pits recorded in prehistory of the central Balkans derives from the Iron Age, and a similar situation applies to Europe.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Tasić, Tasić 2003, 94-95; Николић, Ђуричић 1997, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Трајковска 1998, 5-30; Станковски 2002, 29-48; Булатовић, Станковски 2012, 268-279.

<sup>10</sup> Bulatović 2014, 61, Pl. II/25-28, III/29, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Istraživanja su obavljena 2016. godine u okviru međunarodnog projekta *Jadar*, kojeg realizuju Arheološki institut, Beograd i Brooklyn College, New York.

<sup>12</sup> Miret i Mestre 2014, 159-170, Taula 8.4.

Such pits were detected in eastern Serbia (Miroč),<sup>13</sup> middle Morava Valley (Panjevački rit near Jagodina),<sup>14</sup> southern Morava Valley (the sites of Krševica, Ranutovac and Pavlovac near Vranje),<sup>15</sup> Nišava Valley (the site of Crnoklište near Pirot)<sup>16</sup> and they are also highly frequent in the neighbouring regions – in Thrace and southern Romania.<sup>17</sup> Besides the finds of single ritual pits at these sites, a sacral area was discovered in Miroč with multiple ritual pits or rock crevices in which various goods have been deposited. The Iron Age pits differ in terms of their contents, dimensions and forms. There are, for example, pits in which a whole animal was laid (e.g. a horse in a pit at Ranutovac), pits for libation, or pits where the fill consist of various materials (fig. 4).

The ritual pits at Krševica near Vranje demonstrate the continuation of this tradition into the Late Iron Age and the time of the Scordisci, whereas new research in the area of Vladičin Han shows that ritual pits were also in use in this region during the Roman period. Even though the period of Antiquity was characterized by polytheistic religion imposed by the expanding Roman Empire, in addition to this, and parallel to the existence of some local cults and the emerging Christianity, primitive religious beliefs and practices from the preceding periods seem to have survived.

In the course of the rescue excavations at the site of Piljakovac in Kržince near Vladičin Han in 2015, several pits were detected interpreted as ritual in character. Based on the number of pits and their spatial distribution, the area of the site could even have represented a sacral space, similar to the prehistoric ones documented at Pelince, Kokino, Ranutovac or Miroč. Within a very narrow zone of expropriated land of about 12 m in width, four sub-circular ritual pits were registered, of 1-1.5 m in diameter. They were organized in pairs located 1.5-2 m apart. In one of the pairs (pits 4 and 5), pit 4 was filled with brown soil, pieces of daub, crushed stone and carbonized wood, whilst it also contained finds such as lid of a pot and a Roman coin. The other pit in the pair (pit 5) was also filled with brown soil and contained a high quantity of large daub fragments, crushed stone and charred material; the finds included three woodworking tools made of iron and fragments of three amphorae and three lids made on a potter's wheel (fig. 5). The fill of pits in the other group (pit 12 and 13), located about 18 m to the west from the first group,

<sup>13</sup> Jevtić, Peković 2009, 208.

<sup>14</sup> Стојић 1998, 316-322.

<sup>15</sup> Popović 2009, 251; Булатовић 2015, 16-18; Bulatović et al 2016, 214.

<sup>16</sup> Bulatović, Mladenović forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> Nekhrizov, Tzvetkova 2012, 190, Fig. 1; Berzovan 2013, 309, Fig. 4-10.

was also filled up with brown soil mixed with pieces of daub, burnt matrix and large fragments of stone. In pit 13, underneath a layer of stone slabs, there was a cluster of ceramic vessels consisting of a pot and four lids (fig. 7). At the base of pit 12, an iron rattle bell was found, surrounded by large stones placed on their lateral side (fig. 6). The impression is that, the concentration of large stones covering the pit served to indicate the location of the pits, that is, they represented a kind of markers on the surface. This, too, suggests that the area was a sacral space, continually used for ritual purposes. The finds from the pits – the “offerings” (the coin, rattle bell encircled with stones, several pots covered with stones, large pieces of daub, etc) – imply a special treatment of the pits, which could thus be interpreted as ritual pits. Based on the diversity of the offerings, it can be assumed that the donors, i.e. the individuals practicing the ritual, were of different professions, but that the purpose of different pits was similar given that they all contained daub and burnt beams and bricks – elements of residential architecture. It is possible that the pits played a ritual role in the house construction. Similar pits from the Late Antiquity discovered at the site of Stalijska Mala (3<sup>rd</sup> century) were mentioned by R. Georgieva, whereas at other sites in Bulgaria pits of this kind are present mostly until the 1st century.<sup>18</sup>

The described examples of ritual pits from the central Balkans, along with the ubiquitous prehistoric pits in the neighbouring regions and whole Europe, indicate a once widespread ritual of depositing offerings in pits, a custom also known from the written sources. Thus in the *Odyssey*, Homer describes Odysseus digging a hole and putting various goods in it in order to appease the gods.<sup>19</sup> A slightly later source states how Medea, in an attempt to appeal to the gods to bring Jason’s father back to life, created two holes into which she poured blood from a black lamb, a jugful of wine and a jugful of milk.<sup>20</sup> The evidence from the written sources on the existence of ritual pits in the past, together with the special contexts that archaeologists encounter in the pits, should be sufficient to eliminate arguments against this ritual practice put forward by the sceptics and critics of this phenomenon, and also to confirm that this interpretation is not a result of claims made by archaeologists without any supporting evidence.

One additional argument is provided by the examples of ritual pits in the central Balkans that date from the recent past. S. Petrović, for example, describes a peculiar custom of placing sacrifices in pits in Serbia over the previous century. In order to de-

lay rain and extend the season of dry, sunny weather that facilitates the drying of brick, brick-makers from the area around the towns of Vranje and Pirot would bury a live cat; in the surroundings of the town of Kruševac, they would drown a cat in water prior to burying it – this with the aim of stopping the rain.<sup>21</sup> A ritual burying of a black rooster in a crop field to prevent hail was recorded in Kosovo.<sup>22</sup> That the ritual deposition of offerings (sacrifices) in pits was not inherited from the Paleo-Balkan peoples of the pre-Roman period is indicated by the presence of a similar practice in the Slavic communities of Central and Eastern Europe. Here, the celebration of the end of the harvest (“Obžinki”) in late autumn, associated with many symbols of fertility and lighting of fires, also included burying in the ground of parts of sacrificial animals. A similar practice was documented among the Serbs during the religious holiday of Đurđevdan (St. George’s) when bones of the sacrificed “totemic” lamb would be buried inside an ant hill, along with hoofs of sheep and lambs.<sup>23</sup> These examples illustrate how the ritual use of pits is not a tradition associated only with some specific historical periods, but that it relates to the level of religious awareness of people living in a certain region.

\* \* \*

In an extensive study of ritual pits published several years ago it was emphasised that the classification of these pits is almost impossible because they occur in different parts of the world and in different periods, and they vary greatly with respect to their size, shape, fill composition, types of offered objects and materials, associated structures and constructions and so on.<sup>24</sup> Even so, based on the data included in the study, and the unpublished information presented in this paper, especially the one referring to the recent past in the central Balkans, some conclusions can be reached on the nature and development of this ritual practice.

Most importantly, in order to define a pit as a ritual feature, the context of the pit must be in some way special, that is, there should be a distinct symbolism that it displays or a pattern that it follows. The ritual and ritual pits served to enable communication with inexplicable supreme forces upon which the survival of a society depended. They originate from very early periods of prehistory and were particularly common up to the time of the emergence of the dominant present-day religions of the world; some of their elements, however, were retained in the central Balkans and other regions until the last

<sup>18</sup> Георгиева 1991, 4, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Homer, *Od.* XI, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Ovidije, VII, 238-248.

<sup>21</sup> Петровић 2015, 837.

<sup>22</sup> Петровић 2015, 816.

<sup>23</sup> Петровић 2015, 820.

<sup>24</sup> Булатовић 2015, 26.

century and have perhaps survived even until today.

Ritual pits became more common in the later periods of prehistory and so they appear most abundant in the Iron Age, both in the Balkans and Europe as a whole. An attempt at a classification (based on function, dimensions, use period, type of offerings, fill composition, etc) of these features in the central Balkans is problematic because very few pits have so far been registered and their characteristic are quite variable, even within a single sacral area. One exception is the Late Antiquity pits from Kržince which, apparently, indicate a ritual accompanying house construction. The sacrificial role of pits dating to the previous century is established based on the oral tradition; the pits themselves were not documented. The practice of depositing complete pots, normally at the bottom of pits, as seen in the Eneolithic of the central Balkans, could be taken as a possible rule or a pattern.

The concept of sacrificing valuable offerings (including human sacrifice) for a greater good or in or-

der to terminate a period of ill fortune and to "secure" happiness is not linked with a particular religion, culture or period of the past. It has been present all over the world, from prehistory until modern times and, in a way, it reflects the level of religious awareness and spirituality of individuals and of a community. The ritual of sacrificing in pits is an individual act or an act of a small group of people and, as such, it does not presuppose complex social organisation.

Finally, this (sacrificial) ritual could be defined as one of the earliest, but also one of the longest-lasting, routes of communication with unknown divine powers of which people were respectful and fearful. Although it developed as an element of primitive religions, this symbolic behaviour survived into modern times and is detectible even in present-day societies, in the form of, for example, the habit of throwing a coin into a well.

Aleksandar Bulatović

Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade

### *Rezime*

Praistorijske jame u kojoj se ritualno pohranjuju darovi kako bi se umilostivile neobjašnjive sile, odnosno mitska bića koja upravljaju svetom oduvek su privlačile pažnju arheologa. Treba, međutim, razlikovati jame čija namena nije definisana, pa je to jedini argument zbog čega su opredeljene u ritualne, i one čiji specijalni kontekst ukazuje na njihov ritualni karakter.

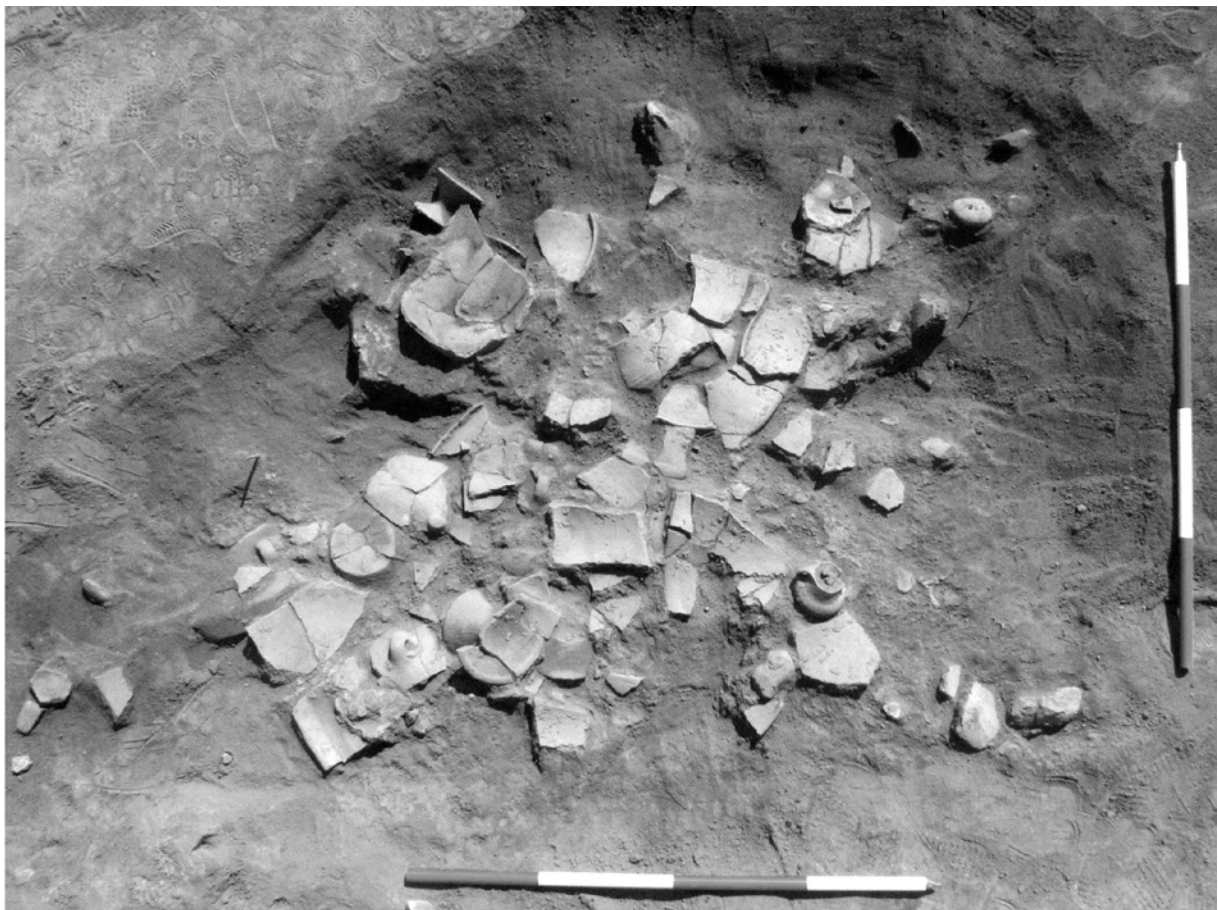
Ovaj rad se bavi definicijom rituala i ritualnih jama i kratkim pregledom ovh jama na centralnom

Balkanu kroz periode praistorije, ali i donosi nove informacije o antičkim ritualnim jamama, koje su veoma slične praistorijskim, kao i o ritualnim jamama iz prošlog veka.

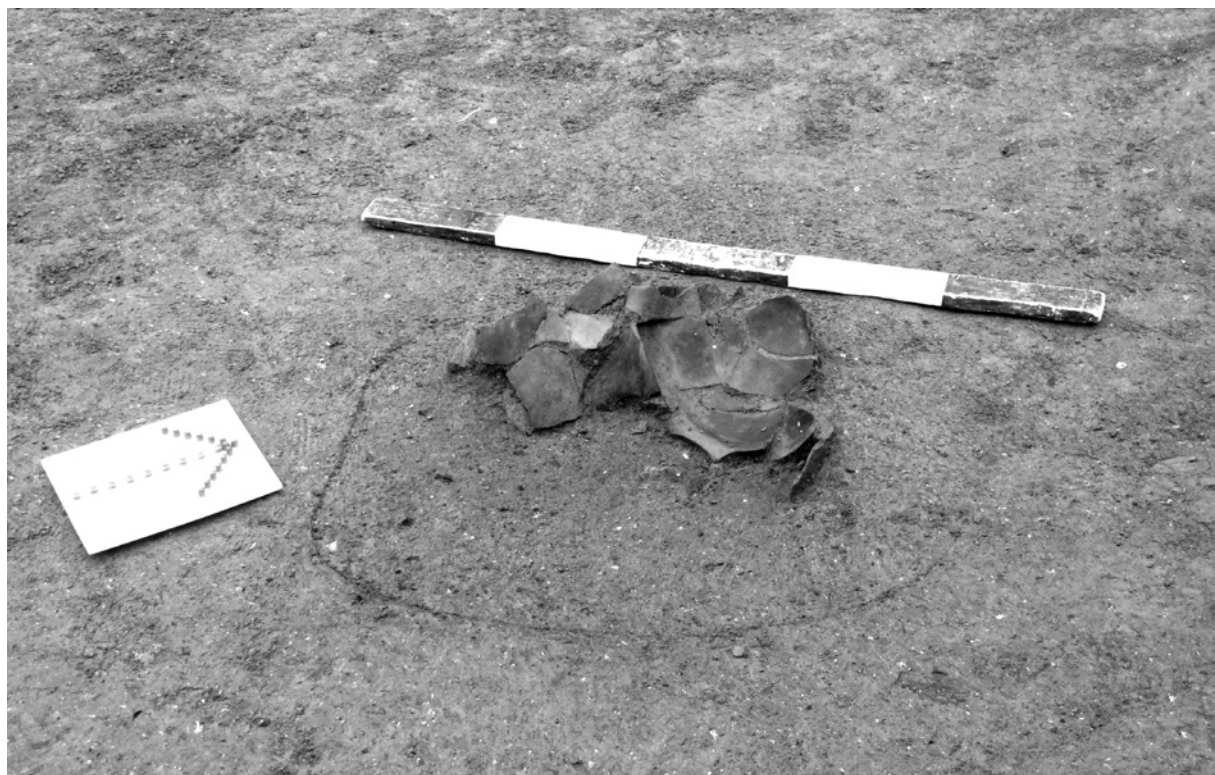
Zahvaljujući ovim podacima izvedeni su neki zaključci o ritualnim jamama uopšte, kao i njihovoj pojavi na centralnom Balkanu.

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**Fig. 1** - Bubanj site near Niš, SE Serbia, the eneolithic ritual pit.



**Fig. 2** - Davidovac near Vranje, SE Serbia, the Early Bronze age ritual pit.



Fig. 3 – Krivajica near Loznica, W Serbia, the Late Bronze age ritual pits.

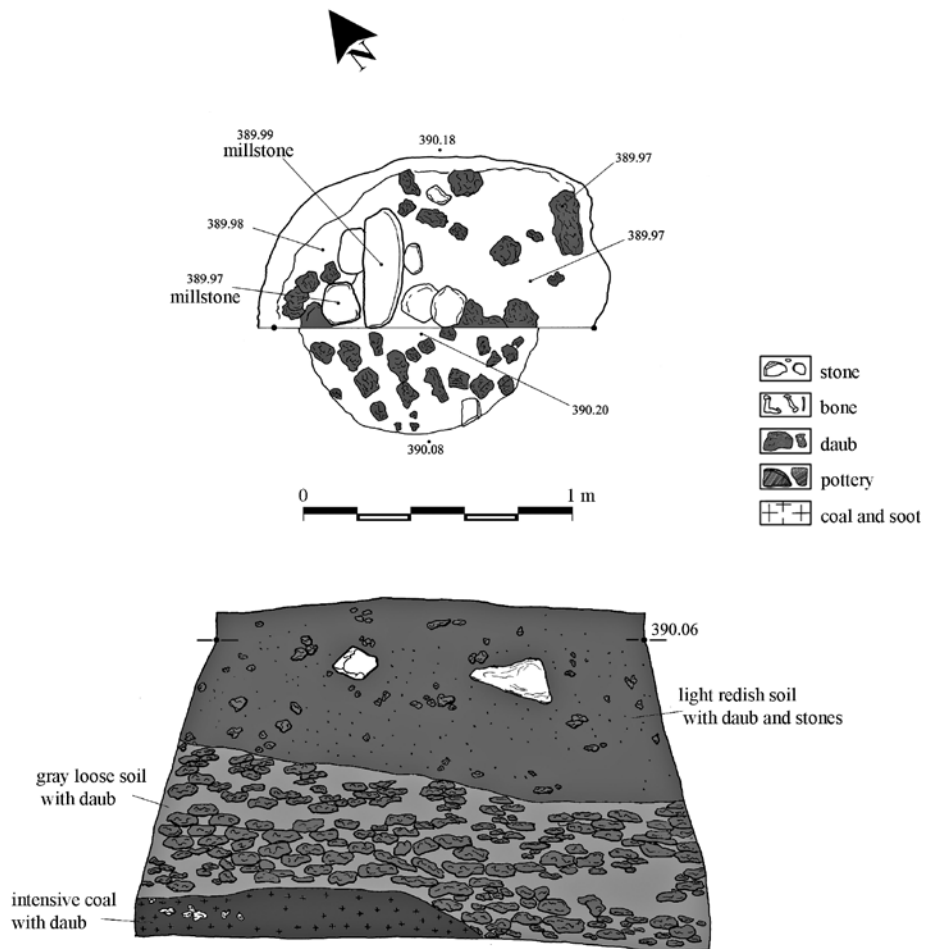
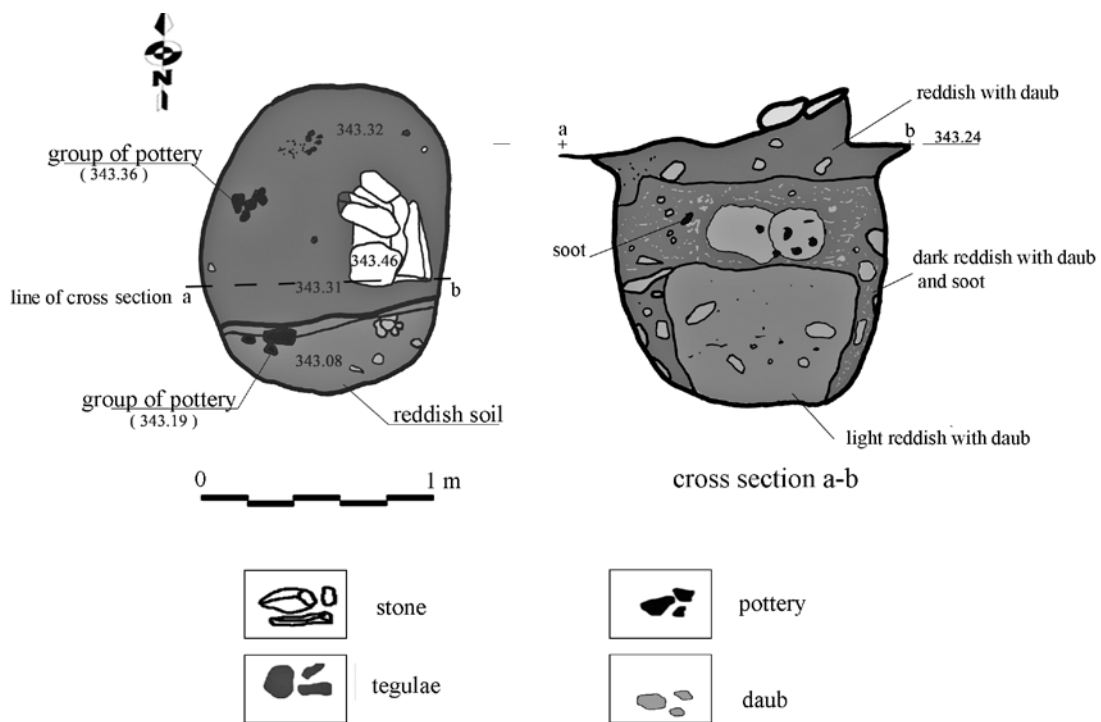


Fig. 4 – Pavlovac near Vranje, SE Serbia, the Iron age ritual pit.



**Fig. 5** – Kržince near Vladičin Han, SE Serbia, the Late Antiquity ritual pit 5.



**Fig. 6** - Kržince near Vladičin Han, SE Serbia, the Late Antiquity ritual pit 12.

RITUAL PITS IN THE CENTRAL BALKANS – THE CONTINUITY OF A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

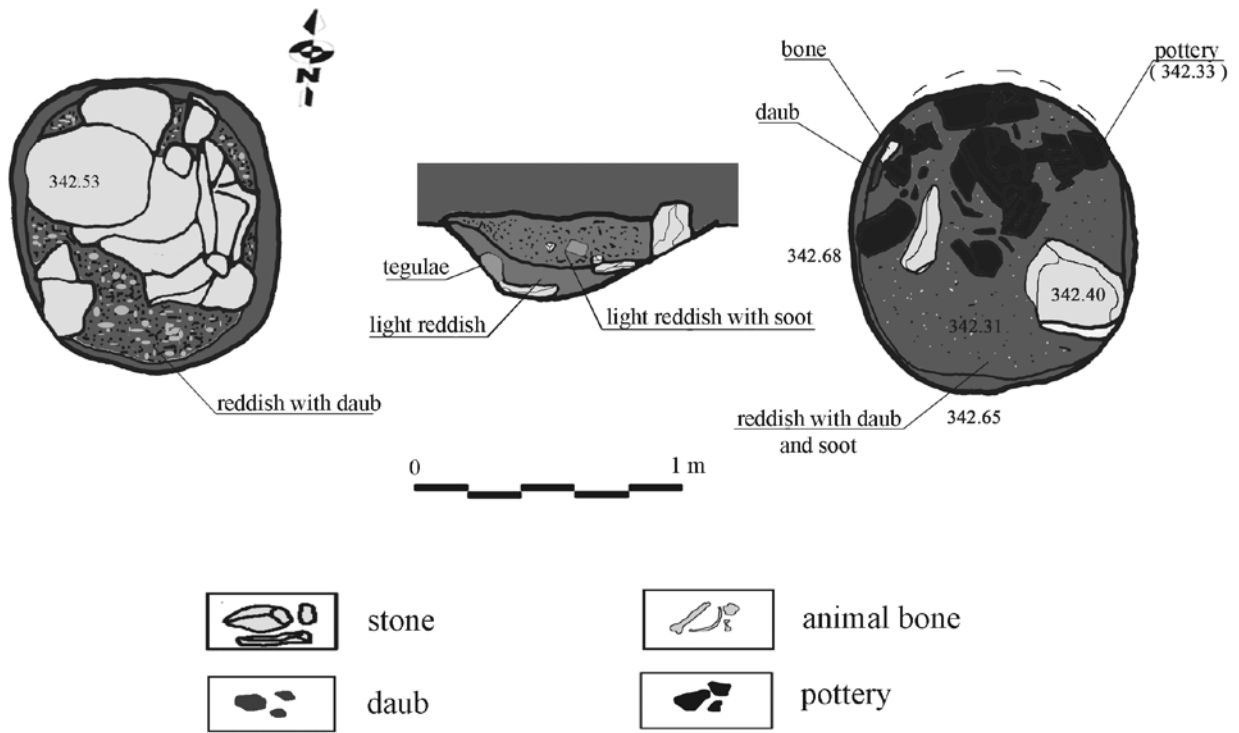


Fig. 7 - Kržince near Vladičin Han, SE Serbia, the Late Antiquity ritual pit 13.