

## **Late Neolithic pit sanctuaries as a structural element of community life**

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**Abstract.** Pits with deposits are negative features, usually round, irregular or oval-shaped and not very large-sized, cut into the ground, and intentionally filled up. It is the purpose of the depositional act that has been a subject of discussion. I support the view that at least because of the specific mentality of early humans in the later prehistory, the role of pits was necessarily linked with the sacred, i.e., that these are ritual features.

The appearance of ritual pit fields (pit sanctuaries) in the Late Neolithic (i.e., after mid-6th millennium BC) was both the result and the motor of a heterogeneous increase of social and economic complexity. The operation of these sanctuaries without doubt changed the pattern in which humans conceptualized the need of a more close-knit community in the area they occupied and within the activities they carried out there, including ritualized activities taking place away from the houses. The emergence of pit fields portended and accompanied the acceleration of social and economic transformations which occurred in the last phases of the Late Neolithic and during the transition to the Copper Age. They proceeded hand in hand and were interrelated.

The cosmos of early farmers expanded, included new topoi and was restructured. Seen from this perspective, pit sanctuaries grew into religious centres of newly emerging proto-political alliances.

**Keywords:** ritual, ritual pit, deposit, pit sanctuary, anthropomorphic pottery, proto-political alliances

### **Pits with deposits and their role in prehistory**

These are negative features, usually round, irregular or oval-shaped and not very large-sized, cut into the ground, and intentionally filled up. It is the purpose of the depositional act that has sometimes been a subject of discussion. I support the view that at least because of the specific mentality of early humans in the later prehistory, the role of pits was necessarily linked - directly or indirectly - with the sacred, i.e., that these are ritual features.

In fact, rituals for the early farmers were activities as necessary as land cultivation or house building. All these activities were an inseparable whole in the world of prehistoric people who kept the memory of the past, lived in a way that inexorably repeated the routines of ancestors and provided for the continuity of the archetype as a model to follow in the future. The fulfillment of the desired was not the result of either the ritual alone or the specific 'practical' routine. All human activities were conceptualized as an inseparable whole, because the cosmos of early humans was also undivided and consisted of only animate (from our point of view) elements (people, animals, plants); existing things (earth, rocks); and manmade things (settlements, crop fields, etc). In this sense rituals were human activities aimed to sustain the system in which people participated themselves by keeping appropriate relations with all its other elements, and especially with the souls of the ancestors, with a view to preserving the traditional eternal order and to coping with cataclysms which sometimes occurred. Humans apparently felt they were among the system's weak elements, and were looking for the benevolence of the strong ones, some of which might destroy the grain crops - such as drought, while others could safeguard the cereal plants - such as rain. In this vein of thought, dwellings (houses-homes) created by people were inseparable parts of people themselves. As to the fertility of the land which researchers often place at the centre of early farmers' attention, it was necessarily bound (inexplicably how) with water; in a broader sense, however, it was linked to the benevolence of the most dynamic forces in the cosmos: sun, winds, and storms. That said, it seems that the early farmers' rituals were 'specialized'. Ritual activities related to pits were most likely bound to the subsystem of people themselves, which had to include family, house and everything found in it, domestic animals, ancestors, etc. Rituals certainly had other space topoi as well, probably with other purposes; however, I focus here only on its purpose related to off-settlement cut features.

The interpretation of Bronze Age or Iron Age cut features as ritual facilities has long ceased to generate discussions in Bulgarian archaeology. The same applies also to certain indisputable ritual pits in Neolithic houses. However, there is a problem that remains unresolved as yet: how to interpret the rest of the pits that have been found in a prehistoric settlement context - between houses and on the periphery of the occupied area - that have usually been excavated without special attention due to the presumption they are of 'rubbish pits'. Is there any evidence of the latter and what does 'rubbish pit' stand for? Was there a concept of 'rubbish' in the later prehistory at all? Apart from the way settlement pits have been treated, this persistent 'rubbish syndrome' can also be found to a certain extent in the interpretation of the newly found, over the past 15 years or so, Late Neolithic off-settlement sites consisting of cut features (Nikolov 2011). The main point of skeptics is that the fill of cut features contains the same material culture as the one found in pits which have *a priori* been interpreted as 'rubbish pits'. This however is perfectly normal bearing in mind that unlike the present-day, in the later prehistory, the 'profane' and the 'sacred' were inseparably blended; all activities which today we would define as purely production-related, practical in nature, had a sacred aspect in the later prehistory, i.e., had religio-mythological meaning. This point should be finally recognized. And because

rituals were aimed, among other things, to ‘support’ production activity, the ritual accessories used were part of the ‘profane’ material culture. The failure to grasp the principle of inseparability of ‘profane’ and ‘sacred’ in the thinking and concepts of the early farmers has over the last several decades prompted a mistaken interpretation of larger prehistoric cut features as ‘pit-huts’ (cf. Nikolov 2011) or even of whole ritual sites as settlements (Nikolov 2015a), which is yet another persistent syndrome in Bulgarian prehistoric archaeology.

Here I am not going to discuss in detail the criteria for defining prehistoric ritual cut features; however, I shall point to a few possible directions of analysis and research which can become the basis of further discussion, and shall put questions which should necessarily be addressed. Five decades ago, Berta Stjernquist suggested three criteria for the definition of a sacrificial feature and termed them *qualifizierter Fundumstände*, literally *qualified find circumstances* (Stjernquist 1970, 79). Recently they were supplemented and developed by Ines Beilke-Voigt in her habilitation thesis (Beilke-Voigt 2007, 30-34). With reference to the off-settlement features and complexes which appeared in the Late Neolithic, these criteria can be elaborated and further specified.

*Location of off-settlement pit sites and the ‘rubbish’ interpretation of cut features.* Precisely due to the specifics of their location, even following many decades of active prehistoric research, this type of archaeological sites remained unrecorded or unidentified as such. As far as it is possible to summarize, they are found in lower places, on terrains with a slight slant towards a river or stream, usually near an abundant spring, close to or right on arable land, relatively far from settlement(s). Even their mere locations render the profane (‘rubbish’) interpretation illogical in the least: why would early farmers use remote places with a good natural view as dumping grounds? Such places were obviously more suitable for farming. And if this was really the case, why apart from the transportation of large amounts of ‘rubbish’ at long distances and all this before the appearance of the wheel and cart, it had to be dumped in an endless labyrinth of small pits whose digging required hard work, instead of directly dumping it on the ground? And why are these ‘rubbish’ pits usually small in size, cylinder-shaped and often plastered with lighter-coloured clay on the inside? Why were pit sites sometimes formed of intersecting cuts spaced several dozen metres apart with no pits between them - or maybe families used to arrange their own places to dump ‘rubbish’? Weren’t too many efforts, time and attention invested in the deposition of ‘rubbish’? If this was the case, how did the deposits of prehistoric settlements originate, especially of tell sites, given that ‘rubbish’ was taken away from their bounds? These are all rhetorical questions which themselves testify to the groundlessness of the ‘rubbish’ interpretation of off-settlement pit sites.

*Period of desirable preservation of deposits in cut features.* If the purpose of those engaged in the act of deposition was to take the deposit back, i.e., for some reason it was left for temporary storage, its role cannot be defined as ritual, but only as profane. However, in the case of the Late Neolithic off-settlement pit sites excavated over the past 15 years or so in Bulgaria, the deposits were obviously aimed to remain in the place of their original deposition. Stratigraphic and other excavation evidence demonstrate no removal of the deposit or intentional removal of objects from it, although the sites themselves usually appeared as the

result of a long sequence of pit digging, often truncating deposits in earlier and completely filled up pits.

*Type and composition of deposits.* The interpretation of cut features should be based on the type of the fill (e.g., presence or absence of ash) and on an assessment of its elements: human and faunal remains, artifacts and ecofacts. The ratios, respectively the combinations of the elements of the fill should be studied so as to ascertain the recurring absence of some elements which can be deemed as deliberately excluded from it; ratios should be sought within established groups of elements as well. Further analyses should relate to the state of unearthed things, i.e., possible deformities, (deliberate) fragmentation, secondary firing, use-wear, roughouts, degree of pottery firing, etc. One important point is the presence or absence of prestige goods. (On all of these aspects cf. the analyses in Bacvarov 2017, 224-233, regarding the Late Neolithic ritual pit field at Sarnevo, Stara Zagora District.)

*Structure and topography of deposits.* The structure of deposits can provide evidence about their single event or multiple event formation; in the latter case the different stages could have been separated by means of thin clay layers or in some other way. The topography of the objects and the pattern of deposition may also suggest intentionality with a definite purpose (see Chapman 2000).

The possible observations as outlined above, as well as others, would have the necessary evidentiary value predominantly based on an established recurrence. However, one should bear in mind that the deposits' characteristics - whatever their interpretation might be - reflect various personal, familial, lineal or property differences between the depositors. Besides, differences certainly also depended on the various depositional occasions, the season of deposition, etc. It could be that apart from 'feasts' held periodically and jointly by large groups of people, in other times of the year separate families or households organized their own private rituals related to their specific private occasions.

The meaning of and the reasons for the appearance of features of the discussed type have been lost forever in their full extent. However, this does not preclude the need for a comprehensive analysis of the archaeological evidence, as well as for the search for imagery and textual parallels from Southwest Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean, for ethnographic and folklore analogues from that or a wider area, to be used for interpretative purposes.

## **The rituals**

The off-settlement pit sites appeared in the developed periods of the Late Neolithic, Karanovo III-IV and Karanovo IV in Thrace, i.e., after the mid-6th millennium BC. Among them is the Late Neolithic ritual complex at Kapitan Andreevo (Fig. 1), which was intentionally located far from the 'profane' world for carrying out purposeful ritual activities outside the village(s), even though the entire life of early humans actually proceeded in a ritualized world. The round-shaped ritual area was enclosed with two parallel ditches (Nikolov 2015b, 21), which corresponds to the ideas of early humans about the world, the cosmos. Obviously, this was on the one hand, the place for communication



**Fig. 1.** Kapitan Andreevo. The central part of the Late Neolithic ritual complex (late 6th to early 5th mill. BC) after the conclusion of excavations in 2013

within the community unit whatever it might have been (people from one or more villages), and on the other hand, the place for communication with the 'invitees': the ancestors and the powerful forces which determined the order of and the normal cycle in the cosmos.

The foremost function of rituals was to create and sustain order in the cosmos, to maintain the right rhythm in it. This type of activity was vitally important for prehistoric people who inhabited an unpredictable world of forces superior to them, ones they depended on. Later prehistoric people recognized as obvious the substantial orderliness of phenomena they lived with, which determined the course of their life from birth to death: the alteration of day and night, the cycle of seasons which gave rise to the need of periodical changes in their labour routine, the periodical pattern in the functions of the human body, etc. (Dyakonov 1990, 16). This rhythmic pattern and respectively interdependence of the processes was accepted as an order expressed in the periodical repetition of natural phenomena which to a great extent or fully determined the rhythmic pattern (i.e., the order) in the life of people and their social groups. In this sense, people viewed their life not as an opportunity for an individual pursuit but rather as a path of repetition, of replication of actions already performed by ancestors. Therefore, rituals as a mode of communication with ancestors and with the forces of the cosmos were a necessary part of social life. The compliance with this paradigm was a precondition for a life without cataclysms, for successful sowing and harvesting the crops, for breeding more animals, for successful existence and procreation of the family and the home.

### **Presumed activities in ritual fields and their purpose**

The ritual activities comprised a vital part of the life of society, because its very existence was impossible without compliance with the guidelines of tradition. Everything that prehistoric communities had to perform had already been done by ancestors, so their successors were obliged to carry out their testament with a view to sustaining the existing order agreed upon with all other forces in the cosmos. The site for the performance of rituals in this case was selected in advance - a place detached from the occupied area, set up at an obviously convenient location between several villages, while the organization of the 'feast' was without doubt handled by sufficiently well-trained custodians of tradition. As suggested by the analyses of unearthed materials, the sacrificial practices included animal meat and fire, i.e., a sacrifice of an animal and thermal treatment of at least part of the meat. This, combined with the considerable amount of pottery, gives a reason to presume that a communal 'feast' was organized for the participants in the ritual in 'communion' with the 'invited' ancestors and the regenerating force of the cosmos (the Mother Goddess). The communal 'feast' aimed to stimulate interaction between the 'living' and the forces of the 'other world' for the sake of sustaining the order in the cosmos.

Feasting created a connection and interaction with real and mythological ancestors aimed at sustaining a community with the 'deceased' forebears whose

support and assistance the 'living' humans needed. At the beginning of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN), in the Levant at least some dead were buried in pits; later the skull was removed and after manipulations, was turned into a proxy of the 'deceased' in the lives of the 'living' (Kuijt 2008). Later, at the end of Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB), burials were done under floors of large buildings or houses, which seems to reflect the modified concepts of the means of communion and common activities with ancestors (see latest Karamurat 2018, 180; Karamurat, Atakuman, Erdođu 2021, 2). In the Balkans, off-settlement cut features appeared in the final stages of the Early Neolithic, and in some of them burials were carried out, most likely of 'priests' or others who had rendered great services to society, e.g., at Ohoden (Vratsa District), Miladinovtsi (Targovishte District), Zlatara and Vinča (Serbia), etc. For the time being, these 'sanctuaries' are few, but the fact of their existence is an argument in favour of the use of features in the ancestors cult. Another round feature with several skeletons (near the village of Krum, Haskovo District) dates back to a somewhat later time (the beginning of the Late Neolithic); it suggests the perpetuation of a tradition that, during the advanced stage of the Late Neolithic in the Balkans, very quickly transformed itself into the appearance of numerous smaller or larger ritual fields with pits of a different type (pit sanctuaries). Rituals grew more elaborate; 'dead' relatives were invited to communal 'feasts' with the 'living', but now in a dedicated area outside the village(s). There were probably reasons why those events did not take place in the house. Perhaps this 'feast' was conducted at the point of time when the old and already abandoned house had to be put to fire, and after the 'feast' near the pit it would be sealed with still hot house debris? Sealing may have been an act of conception: of building a new house? In fact, it could be that this whole ritual referred to the conception of the new (annual?) cycle of life. All sacrificed vessels - usually intentionally broken up and deposited in the pit - expressed the desire for their regeneration in greater numbers, for the birth of more children and animals, for more grains of wheat, for a stronger family with a higher social standing (in a new house?). A role in this was assigned to the objects with male symbolism (grinding stones, perhaps some male zoomorphic figurines, various tools of bone, horn, stone and flint, small lids, grains; it could be that the sacrificial animal was also male) that were deposited (sacrificed) in the 'female' pit with its 'female' attributes (ceramic vessels, spindle whorls and loom weights, anthropomorphic figurines, and anthropomorphic pottery). Most likely, the 'dead' had to join this comprehensive act of creation - and this could have been a regular act of their regeneration!? Breaking up the objects of the 'living' (they could have also belonged to the 'deceased') and depositing them in the pit was a great sacrifice which suggests a definitive giving without an option of their return to the realm of the 'living'. This kind of definitive sacrifice implies a strong demand for restoration in a greater quantity. This was a sacrifice of the highest value for the fulfillment of the demand placed on the world of the 'dead' relatives.

These rituals had a multi-aspect purpose. On the one hand, they 'refreshed' the relations between the 'living' and the 'dead' and combined their efforts to attain prestige and higher social standing. On the other hand, they reflected the unbreakable bond with the forces of regeneration, with the image of a force that we define as the Mother Goddess that was also personified in the

anthropomorphic pottery from the sanctuary at Kapitan Andreevo, parts of which were sometimes deposited in pits. Could all families or households afford to possess such a vessel, and respectively, were they able to reinforce their request by just a sherd from such a vessel? Parts of the 'sacred icon' have been found in only 62 of 260 pits; however, the other 'female' elements used in the ritual and respectively deposited in pits after breaking, were without doubt effective enough.

Bearing in mind that the number of identified anthropomorphic vessels in the excavated area of the ritual site is not large, about three dozen in all, as well as the long time of the use of the sanctuary (about four centuries), it seems that the inclusion of anthropomorphic pottery in the ritual performances took place in a way different from the one that applied for the rest of the ritual inventory. It could be that vessels of this type representing the hypostasis of the Mother Goddess were taken to the ritual field for their use in ritual activities and were then returned to the village. In all likelihood, this occurred many times and only on certain occasions, the vessels were broken up and disposed of. Perhaps there is a link between the burning down of a house, the disposal of a symbolic part of its debris in a pit, the breakage of an anthropomorphic vessel, which had been part of that house, and the disposal of a sherd from it in the same pit?

Special attention should be given to the sealing of the pits. Most probably, it was a required part of the ritual activities. Very often, including at Kapitan Andreevo, sealing was done with still hot debris from a burnt down house. It is hard to imagine the mechanics of a synchronized succession of burning down the house in the village, ritual performance in the sanctuary around and in the pit, removal of hot structure debris from the village to the sanctuary, and finally, sealing of the pit. This entire set of activities would have required synchronized participation of many people, without doubt relatives, under someone's general guidance. Actually, ritual performance around a pit was most likely carried out in multiple cycles, which finished with the final sealing of the pit; it was done because of the end of the lifecycle of the house that was completed through its abandonment and burning down. If this was the case, then not all participants in the major 'feast' at the sanctuary (presumably an annual one) carried out the act of the final sealing. Obviously, it was done by those who were burying their house during that particular cycle. They would bury it so that it would be reincarnated in a new house/houses (cf. Nikolov 2015c).

The ritual field was the arena of the (annual?) trilateral 'feast' prepared and carried out by the 'living' who summoned (invited) the 'deceased' ancestors and the immortal great regenerating and reviving force (Mother Goddess) in a bid to solicit from them an auspicious new reproduction cycle in the community.

### **Late Neolithic pit sanctuaries: A sign of social and political change**

During the Early Neolithic in the Central and Eastern Balkans, every human community interacted at different levels, but it was exclusively within the settlements. Outside the settlement was the place to carry out activities

which, in principle, could not take place within its bounds: burials, farming, communication with neighbours at everyday and economic levels. The life of people with their everyday and ritual activities was focused within the house. Numerous auxiliary and other activities were performed outside the home, but predominantly within the boundaries of the village, including activities in ritual pits and ditches along its periphery (e.g., Slatina-Sofia and Mursalevo, Dupnitsa region). As I pointed out above, during the Early Neolithic, most probably in its second half, the earliest ritual pit sites began to appear outside the settlements. They are relatively small in area while the pits are usually large, elongated, and often contain human burials. This tradition continued at least until the beginning of the Late Neolithic. For the time being, the excavated features are few and this impedes their interpretation, however the idea of performing ritual activities outside the settlement and close to rivers already existed.

Ritual pit sites which appeared during the Late Neolithic in the Central and Eastern Balkans indisputably suggest an elaborated social dynamism, which quickly upgraded the social structure and social relations from the preceding period. A large number of off-settlement ritual (pit) places were created, for the long-term use by several generations of people who lived in several neighbouring villages. These sacred spaces grew into an essential part of the common social memory of every newly emerging inter-settlement community. Obviously, there was a change in the pattern in which society conceptualized the set of combined rituals as an indivisible part of the daily routine of its members, and 'outsourced' a synthesis of some of them, without doubt further advanced, outside the settlement, to an area common for several villages (on certain aspects of this part of the article cf. Kaya, Nikolov et al. (in review)).

Organizing joint 'feasts' for a smaller or bigger farming community required the preparation of ritual resources (animals, water, grain, fire-wood, objects, remains of burnt houses, all of which would have been used in the ritual and deposited). This presupposes that a certain ideological change was already completed, which already united people from different households and villages, motivated them to travel a certain distance, to bring the ritual inventory, and, organized into familial groups, to carry out the preparations on the spot and the rituals in their parts of the common ritual field. The archaeological evidence allows me to interpret separate pits as probably belonging to different families, to members of families or to a family, who came and performed activities such as preparation of sacrificial food, firing the object of sacrifice, breaking up ritual inventory, and structured deposition in pits. The spatial differentiation of the pits in the sanctuary does not indicate physical division of the rituals or patterns, which were followed. However, the structuring of the pit field was hardly accidental. Its organization was certainly at least in part prompted by the kinship between the people involved in the activities or by other social connections between them. It is important to realize that the transportation and distribution of cultural material from one or more villages to a ritual site, which was external for all participating people, substantially expanded the territory of this community not only ideologically, but physically as well. The creation and use of a ritual field shared

by people from several villages was obviously a manifestation of some kind of political unification processes most likely elicited by similar phenomena in neighbouring areas. The emergence of such a mosaic of small competing communities was most probably the basis of unions at a higher level which originated for predominantly economic reasons.

It would be too romantic to believe that during the Early Neolithic in the Central and Eastern Balkans, all people in the same social group had the same social status. Let us only imagine one aspect in the process of early farming migration from Anatolia - the need for a leadership role taken up by one or several persons in a smaller or bigger migratory group was obvious and it certainly created the basis for their hierarchal position to remain valid later, upon settlement. Nevertheless, it is hard to prove the impact of someone's higher social status in the archaeological record of the Early Neolithic settlements, although indications in this respect can be presumed. However, based on pit sanctuaries outside settlements which appeared as a certain type in the Early Neolithic but became - in a considerably modified version - a vital part of community life in the Late Neolithic, we can begin to realize how new social roles originated and worked. Pit sanctuaries were a new structure by both type and location in the cosmos of early farmers which epitomized growing trends of community building in a certain aspect, but at the same time of differences due to objective reasons, e.g., differences in the practical skills of people and respectively in their socio-economic status. The trend of a naturally occurring increase in differences of property status between households led to a counter-trend towards community building based on unifying joint activities in the context of the religio-mythological system. This was a naturally occurring process, an expression of the need to keep balanced relations which would prevent the disintegration of communal ties. This ensured the reproduction of the traditional system which we define as egalitarian by form but with already altered or altering content, and with potential energy to break up the social model. However, society in the Neolithic was most probably not yet mature enough to let the hierarchy of prestige grow into a hierarchy of status.

Conclusions in this regard derive from evidence from the excavated Late Neolithic pit sanctuaries and more particularly, from the site at Kapitan Andreevo. In terms of shape, size and structured deposit, the pits are not 'equal'. Though they are consistent with some sort of a standard, it is clear that some of them are much more complex than others, e.g., they may include different faunal remains. Plant remains in the pits are differentiated too by type and quantity. In some pits, heads of anthropomorphic ceramic vessels characteristic of this sanctuary were deposited, while in others only fragments from their bodies were found; still others contain no sherds of such vessels at all. The differences in the depositional rituals can be interpreted as subjective variations, but it is a fact that in its general principles this innovative opportunity was already made public. The social group related to a pit was certainly aware that fellow villagers around the neighbouring pit were doing somewhat different things. The situation is confounded due to the unclear function of a few larger pits, such as a shallow pit from the sanctuary at Lyubimets, which was presumably used jointly by a certain

social group. The purpose of the large flat area without pits within the temenos at Kapitan Andreevo that was fully covered with remains from ritual activity also remains undefined.

Not all participants in ritual feasts were 'equal' either. If the 'feasts' of these communities were based on sharing, the ability of someone to share more types of meat than their neighbour had brought, raised the social importance or prestige of the former in the eyes of the rest. This might also entail from the awareness that some animals were hunted game while others were domestic livestock, or that some were young while others were mature. It is guesswork to posit what the preferences were, but it is obvious that not everybody contributed equally to the feasting table.

Furthermore, the appearance of a ritualized area outside settlements, which rallied together for its creation, required the formation of a group of people engaged in the organization of ritual performance in this new ritual structure. The need for the emergence of new social roles is quite clear. Rituals in this new context were hardly a simple procedure of preparing certain goods, visiting the ritual field and performance of certain activities in a pit. Organizing a joint 'feast' of several villages included a plan for the right timing in the annual cycle with a view to the objectives of the ritual, as well as the preparation and transfer of the necessary ritual inventory. The organization of the 'feast' itself, with many people taking part, was probably the greatest challenge. For sure, the sides would agree on regulations of the joint and local ritual activities in the area of the sanctuary. Most probably, the organization of communal 'feast' required also joint action of the leaders of all settlement communities involved. Let me recall here that plastic imagery bearing male portrait features appeared in the Late Neolithic that have long been presumed to reflect the emergence of a leadership social role; it has been tentatively termed 'tribal chief-priest' (Nikolov 1979).

Presumed joint ritual feasting required offering of a blood sacrifice, coordination of activities including processing of sacrificial animals and preparation of food from meat, making vegetarian food (bread, gruel), possible distribution of the ready food - a range of activities, which would wreak major havoc without good organization. The people chosen to lead these activities certainly had skills that made them eligible for the function. In themselves these skills did not generate inequality among the participants in the ritual, yet the mere fact that these skills had earned those people a social role which they performed as sacred leaders, suggests a change in the mentality of society, the onset of new social institutions and growing social complexity.

The appearance of ritual pit fields in the Late Neolithic was both the result and the motor of a heterogeneous increase of social and economic complexity. The operation of these sanctuaries without doubt changed the pattern in which humans conceptualized the need of a more close-knit community in the area they occupied and within the activities they carried out there, including ritualized activities taking place away from the houses.

The emergence of pit fields portended and accompanied the acceleration of social and economic transformations which occurred in the last phases of the Late

Neolithic and during the transition to the Copper Age. They proceeded hand in hand and were interrelated. This period saw an inevitable intensification of agriculture, a change in settlements and the creation of specialized production centres. The Late Neolithic complex of Provadia-Solnitsata is a unique example of the complexity which some of those communities achieved due to the elements of social change which characterized that period. A production centre outside the settlement appeared there for the first time, in this particular case, specialized salt production site, which triggered major changes in the socio-economic relations across the region.

My explanation for these changes in the Late Neolithic is the growing dependence on agricultural produce which structured the way people organized and used the occupied space. There is no targeted research on the changes in agriculture after the mid-6th millennium BC, but it was a time when the use of legumes declined. Lentils and vetch were still common, but cultivated fields with grain crops expanded; flax cultivation was on the rise as well. It is exactly this context in which I view the transfer of basic ritual activities to a new place, away from the house or away from the village. At that time, for the Neolithic farmers, the importance of the zones outside the house grew in both practical and ideological terms: the new ritual locations emerged where active farming activities were underway. In this sense it is not surprising that pit fields are found amid fertile land, near riverbeds. While the Early Neolithic society was concentrated in and around the house, and the community seemed mostly confined to the settlement, the Late Neolithic society was turned outside, shifting its focus both physically (including activities of taking various material elements from the life in the settlement outside it) and symbolically (by enlarging the area influenced by the innovations in the religio-mythological system).

The cosmos of the early farmers expanded; it encompassed new topoi and was restructured. Seen from this perspective, pit sanctuaries grew into religious centres of newly emerging proto-political alliances.

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