

Methodological issues in the exploration of prehistoric settlement sites and houses

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Abstract. The reconstruction of the prehistoric past requires methodologically correct field research that provides opportunities for systemic interpretations. Three methodological issues are raised here. The first one addresses the 'building horizon' - as it is labelled in the specialized literature - as a stratigraphic unit. This is the concept of the simultaneous creation, destruction, and reconstruction at the same place of each settlement in the late prehistory. A new model is proposed, according to which the 'regeneration' of the settlement occurred gradually and continuously, and not in discontinuous stages. The second issue is related to the character and provability of archaeological field observations done during the excavation of a prehistoric house that allow the excavator to define it as a two-storey structure. The third issue concerns a paradigm change in the archaeological concepts of the way in which the life of a Neolithic house came to an end. I propose a model of deliberate 'cremation' of the house and the 'burial' of its remains in a ritual pit.

Keywords: prehistory, 'building horizon', two-storey houses, *domithanasia*

Research of the late prehistory in present-day Bulgaria has been particularly intensive in the past fifteen years. This is valid above all of field research (mostly rescue excavations), and to a much lesser extent of armchair theorizing: theoretical studies or ones that result in publications of newly-excavated sites. Prehistoric sites of a new type have been identified, their excavations being still in progress or have been completed, but the methodological discussions needed in this connection are rare: they are usually oral, 'flare up' at excavation reports, and quickly fade out. Methodological discussions on dissertations or conference papers are even less frequent. At any rate, it is necessary at least to articulate the issues, or some of them, which have been or should be discussed with a view to maintaining the good practices in prehistoric archaeology. The reasons are clear: the reconstruction of prehistoric past requires methodologically correct field research that offers opportunities for systemic interpretations. The grow-

ing volume of archaeological excavation projects, without taking into account past observations necessitating a change in some aspects of the methodology of field research, leads to distortion of the source basis and hence to incorrect interpretations and arbitrary picture of the past. Gaining an insight into the preliterate past is extremely complicated as it is, being possible only through the prism of the systemic links whose correctness depends on the maximum possible methodological perfection of our field work and on the resulting interpretations. Field research and interpretation of archaeological sources are closely interrelated, and I will thus not treat them separately in the following consideration of some of their possible aspects or of points of discussion connected with them.

Over a decade ago, I raised the issue of the reality of one of the basic classification units in the excavation of the remains of a prehistoric settlement site, namely the so-called 'building horizon'. In field research and armchair theorizing, this term corresponds to the concept of the approximately simultaneous creation, destruction and subsequent reconstruction of each prehistoric settlement at roughly the same place. That model of settlement development had been a serious step forward at the time of its emergence many decades ago, but it became gradually clear that it is mostly theoretical one, the paradigm of that development launched in it is too simplified and hence difficult to achieve in practice. On the basis of my experience, I proposed a new model that would allow to re-think field methodology and hence the historical interpretation of prehistoric settlements remains (Nikolov 2007; Nikolov 2008a). This model can be summarized as follows: after the collapse or deliberate destruction (burning) of a single structure, it was reconstructed at the same or approximately the same place, without that being part of an overall reconstruction of the settlement; the 'regeneration' of the settlement occurred gradually and continuously, and not in discontinuous stages. This means that the stratigraphic unit of 'building horizon' identified during the excavation of the cultural layer of a prehistoric settlement is an artificial construct that seem to include mostly asynchronous features, though some of the settlement structures could have existed simultaneously.

As I follow up excavation reports of ongoing field projects, and read new analytical or synthetic publications (albeit rare), as well as PhD theses, I am left with the impression that not all of the Bulgarian prehistoric archaeologists are aware of the methodological issue thus outlined; this is why they demonstrate no interest in discussing it accordingly. During this more recent time, many field observations have been accumulated that confirm the methodological incorrectness of further structuring a stratified cultural layer into 'building horizons' identified by preserved prehistoric features that seem to be more or less coplanar: usually house floors, oven bases or other installations. Therefore, I would like to draw attention again to the need of changes in the theoretical paradigm, and thus of changes in the methodology of field research.

Basic corrections need to be introduced into the concept of the 'stratigraphic sequence' of 'building horizons' in the cultural layer of a stratified prehistoric site. It should be modified into a concept of the 'stratigraphic continuity' of prehistoric structures (usually houses). This means that with the

exception of some cases of total destruction of a settlement as a single act, the construction activities and the accumulation of the cultural layer within the 'living' settlement constituted a permanent evolution process. Therefore, every random 'horizontal' chronological section 'through the life' of a settlement identifies the settlement features that had existed at that moment and the mobile material culture connected with them, but all these elements more or less differ in age, and their foundations have different depths, both physically and chronologically. If the findings registered in this section are labelled as a 'building horizon', the latter should be interpreted as an open chronological unit that can only conditionally comply with the good practices in cultural-historical interpretations.

From a purely practical perspective, methodology of field research requires much more detailed observations of the interrelations in a cultural layer with a view to possibly identifying the relative chronology of features, and above all of residential structures. The probability of a more accurate reconstruction of the steps in the evolution of a prehistoric settlement is not high, but the challenge is there and solutions need to be sought, including through interdisciplinary research. However complicated this may be, it is the only way to come maximally close to the past reality. Otherwise we create and work with multiplying artificial constructs.

In 1999, during the excavations at Tell Karanovo near Nova Zagora, and later at Tell Kapitan Dimitriev near Peshtera, I found enough arguments to claim that the two burnt houses excavated there, from the Late Neolithic and from the Early Neolithic respectively, had two levels (Nikolov 2001; Nikolov 2004). Later the remains of many more two-storey houses were identified, including in the Late Neolithic layer of Tell Provadia-Solnitsata (Nikolov 2008b), and the well known 'Neolithic dwellings' at Tell Stara Zagora-Okrazhna bolnitsa were reinterpreted as a two-storey house (Kalchev 2013). The Early Neolithic settlement site of Mursalevo-Deveboaz near Dupnitsa is an incredibly interesting example: rescue excavations found that all houses in the settlement had two levels, and after they were deliberately burned, new two-storey houses were built in the same places (Nikolov et al. 2016).

The principal methodological issue with respect to the group of buildings examined concerns the character and the level of provability of the field observations made during the excavation of a destroyed prehistoric house, allowing to define it as having two storeys. The case is complicated and requires above all high competence of the excavator, especially if there are additional difficulties at the site, e.g., the remains of a house are partially preserved or only a part of them is situated in the trench. On the grounds of my experience so far I assume that the identification of a second storey seems possible for the time being only for the excavation of a burnt house with sufficiently recognisable architectural elements and installations. This is not the place for me to give prescriptions on the methodology of field work, and to point out criteria for identifying the existence of a second storey, but the precision in the field work and in the observations, as well as the search for explanation of each concrete situation during the excavations, are preconditions for the correct interpretation of the respective excavated building.

Insofar as there exist observations on Early Neolithic two-storey houses, both levels almost always display installations and objects of identical types (including the main installations and features), which suggests that these houses were occupied by different generations of an extended family. The construction activities and life in such a 'family cooperative' most certainly presuppose details that evade us so far. The reason can be sought in the greater loss of informative value of the remains of the upper level compared to the ground one. Observations on Late Neolithic two-storey houses are even more interesting from the point of view of the household economy and the related social innovations. In these cases, e.g., at Tell Karanovo (Nikolov 2001; Nikolov 2004) and Tell Provadia-Solnitsata (Nikolov 2008b), the upper level was used for residential purposes with the entire complexity of life, whereas the ground level probably had only household and/or production functions. And while the clarifying of the character of the non-residential (i.e., household) functions of the lower level at Karanovo is more difficult, the ground floor of the house at Provadia-Solnitsata was used predominantly for specialized domestic production: boiling brine, and to a lesser extent, storing and grinding grain. This is already a serious innovation compared to the Early Neolithic, which introduced a substantial discordance in the structuring of the inner real and sacred space, in the character of utilization of the house, and in the character and priorities of kinship relations. I would define the life of that house as an socio-economic experiment, as an innovation that ended in the next chronological period with taking the specialized production outside the settlement and with the emergence of a new social (or socio-familial) group.

And here is another aspect of these issues. The earliest two-storey houses appeared at the end of the Early Neolithic: Balgarchevo, Mursalevo-Deveboaz, Kapitan Dimitriev and Stara Zagora-Okrazhna bolnitsa. They covered relatively small areas: insofar as this information could be complete, they measured ca. 50 sq. m, and very rarely up to 70 sq. m. Single-storey houses from that later phase of the Early Neolithic had in the best of cases the same - but usually smaller - areas than the ones cited. This is in strong contrast to the area of some single-storey houses from the initial phases of the Early Neolithic. For the time being, reliable data can be cited from Slatina-Sofia. In 1985, in the lowermost layer in one part of the site, I excavated a huge - for the then knowledge - single-storey house covering an area of 117 sq. m. (Nikolov 1992). Close to its 'construction plot' and in the same layer, we recently excavated the remains of two other, even bigger single-storey houses covering areas of 147 sq. m and over 250 sq. m, respectively (Nikolov et al. 2017). A large house dated to the same period has also been reported from the site of Kovačevo near Sandanski (Lichardus-Itten 2014). It seems that during the settlement of the Central Balkans in the late seventh and the early sixth millennium BC, the Early Neolithic communities predominantly built and lived in large single-storey houses accommodating two, three or more related families (a kind of kin group). This socio-architectural model might have resulted from the fact that less labour was needed to build a house, though a big one, thus freeing labour resource for other collective activities with a view to the rapid adaptation to the challenges of the new environment. Moreover, on account of the incomplete colonization of the region at

that time, a settlement was possibly sufficiently spacious for such 'extravagant' construction. The concept of a settlement and house apparently changed during the later phases of the Early Neolithic: building only two-storey houses or both two- and one-storey structures made the occupied area more compact and more functional; after the initial 'stressful' conquering of the respective ecological niche by the first farmers, the diminishing need of living in very big families was probably another determinant of the change in the construction concept.

In fact, the social aspects of the period of early farming colonization of the Central and Eastern Balkans remain an underresearched topic, and the social structure and the social relations during those first three or four centuries of settling are directly related to the characteristics of houses and settlement. An essential issue for contemplation and research can be the structure of migrating groups or the structure of the population reclaiming a concrete ecological niche in the Balkans, and hence the structure of a newly-created settlement in the incipient Neolithic: did its creators come from a single settlement in the overseas homeland, or from different settlements or even different regions? It seems to me that an answer to these and similar questions can be given by excavating the entire or the bigger part of the area of at least several of the earliest Neolithic settlement sites in the colonized European territory. For the time being, one can speculate mostly on the basis of circumstantial evidence. As the colonization tended to be a spontaneous process, the population of an initial settlement most probably had a heterogeneous composition. That must have also influenced the construction of the first houses, being also dependent on the innovation dynamism of the different settler groups, because - in addition to everything else - they had to create or master new building materials and technologies. With a view to the appearance of two-storey houses in the later phases of the Early Neolithic, I ask myself: if with the growing number of people and accordingly of the families in a kin group that occupied a certain part of the settlement, this group had the right, opportunity, and interest to spread to other parts of the settlement? Bearing in mind the kinship structure of farming settlements in the traditional culture in the Balkans, the preservation of a certain area of the settlement was a priority for the kin group. Assuming that the model of social organization of the Early Neolithic settlements was similar, the appearance of two-storey houses might have resulted from the need to preserve, in a concrete settlement structure, the compact coexistence of relatives strongly bound to the land of their predecessors who had become the guardian ancestors of the kin group's territory.

The concept of a two-storey building was an exceptional innovation in the thinking of the early farmers, being a breakthrough from the initial concept of a large single-storey house to the idea of a strongly reduced horizontal space, but at the expense of a vertical extension of the occupied area, i.e., to 'raising' the residence of some of the house occupants above the 'solid' ground, above Mother Earth. In addition to being a breakthrough in the thinking and possibly in the religio-mythological system, this was an architecture breakthrough as well. Its significance should be investigated separately: while for the houses built over a large area the problem for the 'architects' consisted above all in constructing a sufficiently solid roofing, the major problem with two-storey houses was

to build a sufficiently strong wooden support structure comprising inseparably and entirely both storeys and the roof; the only technological advantage of the planning and construction of two-storey houses consists in the much smaller foundation area compared to the large houses in the beginning of the Early Neolithic.

Developed and tested, the concept of two-storey construction was used in the Late Neolithic and evolved further in the Chalcolithic. Nevertheless, an outstanding question remains: why only a relatively small number of the excavated houses in the later prehistory had two storeys? Sufficient technological knowledge and building experience was accumulated in society; however, based on the published settlement excavation reports, single-storey houses predominated significantly. Taking into account the settlement site of Mursalevo-Deveboaz that dates back to the end of the Early Neolithic and features almost exclusively two-storey houses, as well as the observations on the massiveness of the debris of burnt 'single-storey' houses dating back to the Copper Age and extensively considered in the specialized literature, I should emphasize the relativity of the present discussions on the correlations between one- and two-storey houses in the later prehistory. Still along the same lines, I would recall the considerable number of Chalcolithic enclosed settlement sites, which covered a small area; a limited number of defenders could protect more successfully a 'fort' with a shorter wall, and the wall would have been shorter only around a settlement with two-storey buildings (although no such structures have been identified in these settlements). The data accumulated on the advancing social hierarchization in that period are also in support of my theory about the construction and use of considerably more two-storey buildings in the prehistoric settlements, and a two-storey house was undoubtedly a much more significant expression of the higher social status of the family which occupied it. Prior to the identification of the first Neolithic two-storey structures less than two decades ago, large-scale excavations were conducted in the Eastern and Central Balkans with the assumption of single-storey construction of the houses. The excavation of some burnt buildings likewise did not help for the change of that paradigm (fortunately, one such building has been preserved: at Stara Zagora-Okrazhna bolnitsa, and it was recently reinterpreted; Kalchev 2013). However, it should not be forgotten that burnt houses are rare at some prehistoric settlements and hence chances of finding two-storey buildings are almost null. Still, that does not mean that two-storey houses did not exist there.

I say all that with the assumption that our field work should follow a much more sophisticated paradigm concerning both the principles of the Neolithic construction and the speed of innovations in the technological skills of the Neolithic 'architects' and builders. It should not be forgotten that it was in the Central and Eastern Balkans that the construction model of building houses with a wooden support structure and thick vertical wattle-and-daub 'panels' was born and developed quickly, spreading over a short time to other areas of the continent as well. This suggests extensive variations in the concrete building solutions during the later prehistory, and their revealing is a strong challenge to the thinking prehistorians. In this context, I would cite the Big House at Slatina which featured 'an original sophisticated version of a standing roof, so

far without parallels, in which all forces are led off directly into the ground by means of a system of posts' (Nikolov 1992, 51), the reliable demonstration of which requires conclusions resulting from precise field work. Another outstanding question is connected with the use of truss roofing in the construction of smaller houses (Pernicheva 1978, 48, 50), which will be even more difficult to prove with field observations, though it may be possible. My observations on the use of a regulated measure of length in the construction of the mentioned Big House is also in connection with the cited ideas about these roofing types (Nikolov 1991). I am indicating only isolated examples that are in themselves important arguments in support of the need of a much more precise approach in the excavation of the debris of settlement structures.

The life span of a Neolithic house is often the object of theorizing which is based in certain cases on field observations as well; the suggested period of occupation is usually between 30 and 50 or 60 years. One argument for this is the number of floor plasterings of some burnt houses; this is very plausible, but not indisputable evidence. It is necessary to develop the respective methodology that would be based on more criteria and in the case of suitable remains, on scientific analyses of burnt houses (cf. Kovacheva 1992).

The death of a Neolithic house occurred due to its own structural ageing and collapse, as a result of some natural or social cataclysm, or of a voluntary deliberate act of the family living in it: *domithanasia* (to use the term coined by Ruth Tringham) (Tringham 2005, 106-108). The latter case receives and should receive increasingly keen attention in the field research, complemented by scientific analyses. One of its versions is the mechanical destruction of the house, without the use of fire. The other one is its deliberate setting on fire and burning down (Stevanović 1997; Chapman 1999). The widespread assumption of accidental fire resulting in the destruction of a Neolithic house already seems rather unlikely and even quite illogical. Burning a house made of a wooden construction thickly daubed with clay is not possible without bringing substantial amount of firewood in it and its deliberate kindling. This is the only explanation of the thick layers of massive debris left from walls and especially from upper stories' floors fired at more than 1,200 °C. There might have been different reasons for the deliberate 'cremation' of a house during the Neolithic, about which we can only speculate: e.g., danger of collapse of the house, the death of the highest 'figure' in the kin hierarchy, inner problems in the family and the need of its division, simultaneous cremation of the house and of a deceased family member or some social intracommunity conflict that could be resolved only through the *domithanasia* of the entire settlement (which was probably the case with the last settlement at Mursalevo-Deveboaz).

Irrespective of the reasons, the Neolithic burnt houses are an archaeological fact. It seems reasonable to assume that the fire set free the spirit of the house, and its debris needed to be buried following the pattern of treatment of the body of a deceased member of the family that lived in it. Only then the house could be reborn, i.e., its soul could 'move' to another body, in another house, newly-built at the same place or at another (adjacent) location. The way in which the house debris was buried can also be the object of multidirectional speculations. Apparently, a smaller or greater part of the destroyed structure remained in its place.

However, the reconsidered approach to the excavation and interpretation of Neolithic pits and pit complexes gives a possible direction to thoughts about the subsequent manipulation with the burnt house debris. A considerable number of pits, considered earlier unambiguously to have been garbage pits, have been registered on the territory of the Neolithic settlements, including along their periphery. They very often contain layers with burnt daub pieces from houses (e.g., recently in Mursalevo-Deveboaz). This group comprises also the ritual pit in the floor of an Early Neolithic house at Tell Kapitan Dimitrievo, deliberately packed with burnt house debris (Nikolov 2008c, 31-32). However, much more striking is the case with the Late Neolithic off-settlement pit complexes, which were recognized as such very recently. Pit deposits, including their uppermost levels, often comprise layers of burnt house debris, or consist entirely of such material (Nikolov 2011; more observations during the excavations at the Late Neolithic pit sanctuary of Kapitan Andreevo). In both cases, particularly in the latter, the debris includes different parts of the structure and of its interior installations, in addition to ceramics and small objects. All these cases and variants seem to represent the burial of deliberately burned down houses, but following the *pars pro toto* principle (a part as representative of a whole) that was valid in prehistoric thinking.

For the time being, for the burial of unburnt houses, I would suggest a procedure without taking parts of them out of the settlement, but because of the low informativeness of these remains I have no grounds for a more concrete interpretation.

The development of the principles and of the respective approaches in the methodology of prehistoric archaeology is a dynamic two-way process triggered by the challenges of field research and by the need of their interpretation in the context of present knowledge. This is also the way to obtain new knowledge about the preliterate past.

I presented my observations and thoughts on three topical themes of settlement research connected with houses as the principal component of the settlement, but in the broad research field of human occupation it is necessary to add to them also the issues related to the settlement periphery: enclosure ditches and defensive features that could be the object of a subsequent methodological discussion.

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