

In Quest of a Missing Era in Eastern Thrace – Dilemma of the 4th Millennium

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Abstract: Our knowledge of the prehistory of northwestern Turkey has considerably increased over the last two decades. Today it is possible to define a more or less reliable cultural sequence running from the late 7th to the mid-5th millennia BC. Following a peculiar hiatus lasting from 4700/4500 to 3400/3200 BC, developments of the 3rd millennium BC are evidenced at a number of sites. However, despite extensive survey activities in eastern Thrace little data has emerged concerning this hiatus. Evidently the reasons for such a long and widespread hiatus have to be sought on a macro sphere. To the east, in Syro-Mesopotamia – including southeastern Turkey – an uninterrupted progression in the archaeological record spanning from the 5th to the 3rd millennia BC occurs. In particular, the 4th millennium stands out as dynamic and innovative era during which social and technological changes, the development of towns and the formation of states take place. In the eastern Balkans on the other hand, by mid-5th millennium BC, a significant core conventionally known as the Gumelnița-Cucuteni group emerged with modalities notably distinct from that of the east. Extensive mound sites of this culture, revealing a rich variety of status objects of high-level technology are present, nearly all over the northeastern parts of the Balkans. It is also evident from the sites of Karanovo (VI period) that the sphere of this culture extended to the southern parts of the Balkan Mountains, becoming considerably inconspicuous in eastern Thrace. Although one could surmise that the region around the Sea of Marmara remained a dormant buffer zone insulated from core areas, this scenario is not without problems; certain parallelisms such as technologies based on arsenic copper, certain figurine and amulet types, graphite decoration on pottery, the presence of ‘fruit-stands’ had been noted between Gumelnița-Varna-İkiztepe-Arslantepe assemblages, possibly having some contact through the Black Sea coast bypassing Thrace. If there had not been the difference of over a thousand years among the absolute dates from either side of this vast territory, the above-mentioned equalisation would have been good a working hypothesis. The paper presents an overview on the above-mentioned issues, however, without proposing a solution.

Keywords: Thrace, northwestern Turkey, Sea of Marmara region, 4th millennium gap, chronology, Helvacı Şaban Ware, Kocatepe Ware

Defining the Problem

On a supra-regional level, the 4th millennium BC – the time period of concern here – stands as one of the most critical turning points in the cultural history of a vast area extending from the Near East to Anatolia and to the Balkans. It is within this period that social and technological changes leading to the development of towns and to the formation of states transpire. Although overarching trends characterise the 4th millennium, the developments in the eastern, western and northern parts of this macro region considerably vary from each other. In the eastern part, Syro-Mesopotamia – including southeastern Turkey – the 4th millennium stands as dynamic and innovative era during which the introduction of incipient markers of the ‘urban revolution’ begin taking shape. Consequently, these social and economic processes are as significant as the incipient stages of neolithisation. In this respect, it is worth restating that Syro-Mesopotamia is the only region within this vast area with an uninterrupted progression in the archaeological record that spans from the 5th to the 3rd millennia BC. This is in strong contrast with the other areas where cultural succession from the Neolithic period to the Bronze Age is interrupted in the mid-5th millennium or later. More

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Fig. 1 Sites mentioned in the text.

specifically, only in the Syro-Mesopotamian region a cultural accumulation that has its roots in Neolithic forms constitutes the ancestral backdrop of the Bronze Age cultures.

In other regions, particularly in the Balkans and the Aegean and to a lesser degree in western Anatolia, cultural succession of the Neolithic substratum comes to an end seemingly giving way to an indefinable hiatus. Notably, through the 4th millennium the socio-economic and possibly also political system of Syro-Mesopotamia, evidenced by recent excavations at Güvercinkayası and Yumuktepe, was expanding its sphere of influence towards the west. The rather sudden appearance of relatively substantial Early Bronze Age urban centres, such as Hacılar Büyüktepe² and Seyitömer,³ on the southern parts of the central Anatolian plateau, indicate the presence of a much more complex 4th millennium substratum than previously envisaged.⁴ Evidently, lack of archaeological research in the southern parts of central Anatolia, the Konya Plain and its surroundings, stands as the major obstacle in correlating the east with the west. The Konya Plain and its environs, a most critical area for correlating the east to the west, provide relatively abundant data concerning the time period from the Early Neolithic to the end of the Early Chalcolithic.⁵ By the Middle Chalcolithic the region becomes rather indistinct, and then fades away almost completely by the late stages of the Early Bronze Age. It is only during the very end of the Early Bronze Age that subtle archaeological evidence from the region can be detected again.

As briefly noted above, the 4th millennium in the east, in Syro-Mesopotamia, is the time when components of urban and state formation, such as bureaucracy, metallurgy, mass production, new forms of labour, military installations, organised trade, procurement of exotic materials, etc. began to take form. Conversely, on the other end of this macro region, mainly in the northern parts of the Balkans, cultural sequences developed on a different trajectory; there, a cultural peak occurred during the earlier part of the 5th millennium, with the so-called Karanovo VI-Gumelnița-Cucuteni horizon. Some of the markers of this cultural horizon, such as metallurgy, large populated settle-

² Umurtak 2013; Umurtak – Duru 2013.

³ Bilgen 2011.

⁴ Özdoğan 2007.

⁵ Schoop 2005.

ments, and prestige objects, are somewhat comparable to those of the eastern group. Nevertheless, it is clear that the governing social structures of the two regions are not comparable. It was only in the later stages of the Bronze Age that elements of the Syro-Mesopotamian system become archaeologically visible in the western parts of Anatolia and the Aegean as delayed and modified reflections originating in the east.⁶ Nevertheless, this does not shed light on the problematic period preceding the 3rd millennium. Further in the northern part of the area of the flourishing Karanovo VI-Gumelnița culture, it is not clear when and how exactly this cultural stage came to an end. Moreover, its interface with the Varna stage is a highly controversial issue that cannot be dealt with here. Nevertheless, recent, but subtle evidence for the terminal date of this cultural stage places it to around 4400 BC;⁷ thus, the gap or unstable period preceding the Ezero-Bronze Age cultures – previously surmised to be only a few hundred years – can be expanded to almost one and a half millennia. With the current chronological placement of the Varna phase, synchronisation of the northern Balkans with the Aegean and Anatolian cultures – already problematic for a long time – is now even more difficult to resolve.⁸

The region around the Sea of Marmara connecting Anatolia, the Aegean and the Balkans due to its critical location seemed to be the optimal place to find answers for these problems on a supra-regional level.⁹ It is highly regretful that in spite of the accelerated research in this region the archaeological evidence continues to remain mute for this particular time range. Here, this paper attempts to draw a picture of what might be correctly named as the missing era; however, interpretations mostly rely on piecemeal evidence.

Picturing the Region around the Sea of Marmara

Knowledge of the prehistoric cultures of northwestern Turkey has considerably increased during the last two decades, making it possible to relatively define a more or less reliable cultural sequence running from the late 7th to mid-5th millennia. Likewise, developments of the 3rd millennium BC, previously solely dependent on Troy, are now attested at a number of other sites, e.g. Kanlıgeçit in eastern Thrace being the most prolific.¹⁰ Most peculiar is the lacuna in between these two periods, from 4700/4500 to 3400/3200 BC.

Settlement history of all excavated sites, located either on the Asian or the European side of the Sea of Marmara, evidently stops by the first quarter of the 5th millennium BC. Furthermore, evidence indicating that the location of settlements had shifted to another location remains absent. In eastern Thrace, there are six excavated sites that could be relevant to the time period under investigation: Hoca Çeşme, Aşağı Pınar, Alpullu, Toptepe, Yarımburgaz and Yenikapı. In all of these sites, the uppermost cultural layer is disturbed, negating the possibility to view how the settlement came to an end. However, at Aşağı Pınar, the northernmost of these sites, the latest definable archaeological material is of the Toptepe culture, a culture widespread in the southern parts of eastern Thrace during the Karanovo IV middle to late period of Bulgaria. The latest phase at Aşağı Pınar, layers 2 and 1, have yielded material of the so-called Maritsa type and can be no later than early Karanovo V (Fig. 2).

The chronological position of the Maritsa pottery type is well attested in Bulgaria and gradually developed into the more flamboyant cultural stages of Karanovo V and VI, better known as the Koca Dermeni-Gumelnița horizon. In the surface survey of eastern Thrace, this type of pottery was restricted to the northern parts of eastern Thrace, becoming notably more intensive near

⁶ Özdoğan 2007; Özdoğan 2011.

⁷ Johnson 1999; Chapman et al. 2006; Higham et al. 2007.

⁸ Özdoğan 1991; Özdoğan 2007; Özdoğan 2011.

⁹ Özdoğan 1991; Özdoğan 2004; Özdoğan 2007.

¹⁰ Özdoğan – Parzinger 2012; Özdoğan et al. 2013.



Fig. 2 Maritsa type of vessels, Aşağı Pınar phase 2.

the present-day Bulgarian border, but totally absent in areas near the Sea of Marmara. As noted above, neither excavated sites nor surface surveys yielded material that could be the immediate successor of Toptepe group, strongly suggesting that the abandonment of sites took place earlier in the southern parts of eastern Thrace than its northern extensions. The evidence from the sites on the Anatolian side, such as Ilipinar and Aktopraklık, indicates that the cultural breakdown took place even a few centuries earlier. Thus, it is possible to surmise that whatever phenomenon led to the abandonment of settlements, it had its origins in the south and gradually moved into the northern areas. It is also evident that the Istranca Mountains, the present day boundary between Turkey and Bulgaria, limited this event. In the Bulgarian part of Thrace, north of the Istranca range, besides having no break in cultural sequence, Karanovo V and VI horizons represent a cultural climax with a marked increase in the number of settlements and sophistication of the socio-cultural organisation. The Karanovo VI period – the north of the Istranca range – is the time of ‘mound-building’ in the eastern Balkans; settlement mounds of that time period are characterised by several meters of accumulation. The Karanovo VI period not only exhibits an increase in population, but it also stands as one of the most innovative periods in the Balkans, exemplified by the achievements attained in metallurgy. It is of interest to note that this remarkable period is not traceable in eastern Thrace. Nevertheless, much can be missed in surface surveys, and future research may reveal some flat sites overlooked in our surveys; however, if mound sites similar in height to those documented in the Bulgarian part of Thrace were present, they would have been easy to detect in a flat terrain such as Thrace.

In light of the present state of knowledge, there seems to be a 1500 year ‘blank’ period of time in eastern Thrace that is rather difficult to conceive. This gap commences from the mid-5th millennium up to the beginning of the 3rd. There are two distinct pottery assemblages, Helvacı Şaban and Kocatepe, securely attributable to this long and austere period. These ware groups are named after their site types. The pottery sherds of both ware groups were easily distinguishable in the survey due to their characteristic features, Helvacı Şaban with its distinct shapes, decoration and paste, and Kocatepe with a fine quality surface treatment. Surface surveys covering most of Eastern Thrace revealed numerous sites with Helvacı Şaban pottery, however, those with Kocatepe were less common. As will be noted below in some detail, chronologically these wares clearly belong to an uncertain time period between the end of Aşağı Pınar and the beginning of Early Bronze Age, Helvacı Şaban preceding Kocatepe. A more precise date is not possible though we surmise that they must be contemporary with the early stages of Karanovo VI period.

The Helvacı Şaban Ware¹¹

During the surface survey, the presence of a previously undefined group became evident; sherds of this group, characterised by its paste, surface treatment, shape and decoration, were easily distinguishable at a number of sites, particularly on the northern parts of eastern Thrace. This ware was predominate at Helvacı Şaban and subsequently named after the site. It was the most prolific site yielding this type of pottery, but also a single component site lacking other pottery types, facilitating its definition. The site of Helvacı Şaban, coded as Site No. B 5/28 during the survey, located on the terrace, at the left bank of the Tekederesi stream, ca. 15km southwest of the town of Kırklareli and 2km north of Dokuzhöyük village. Helvacı Şaban, as all other sites yielding this pottery type, is a flat site with no detectable artificial rise, and a surface scatter of about 150x100m. The pottery occurs clustered in patches, ca. 5 to 10m apart, as if resurfacing from eroded pits or pit-dwellings. Besides Helvacı Şaban and Kocatepe, Dulya Mevkii and Batak Değirmen, two other sites documented during the last years, east of Kırklareli, have also revealed

¹¹ In earlier reports this ware was noted as Kocatepe ware after the site of its discovery, located further west along the Süloğlu Stream in Edirne province (Özdoğan 1991; Özdoğan 2004); however, due to the predominant presence of the latter ware group at Kocatepe, it is addressed as Helvacı Şaban ware, to save further confusion.

a rich assemblage of this ware group. At present Vize plain constitutes the eastern limit of this ware group.

The Helvacı Şaban pottery type is characterised by its fine sandy, micaceous paste; the fabric is exclusively hard, compact and well fired. Light to dark greyish surfaces are common, but occasionally they take on a blackish or buff colour. Most, surfaces are well smoothed, but unburnished, however, some vessels are either buffed or slightly burnished. Additionally, their sandy paste gives a sandpaper effect. Vessel forms, decoration, techniques and designs are extremely characteristic (Fig. 3–5). A tall cylindrical pot stand, with an upper part that is flattened by inverted sides, forming a small opening at the top, is the most common shape. All such vessels are highly decorated; decorative techniques include excision, incision, impression, grooving and stamping. The designs are also extremely varied: spirals, mixed arrangements of parallel lines, cross-hatchings. In addition to these pot-stands, there are also deep bowls with inverted rims, usually with small knob-like pierced lugs.

This pottery type is not known either from northwestern Turkey, Greece or Bulgaria, therefore, assigning a date to this group was not possible. The closest parallels, in terms of shape and decoration, have been documented within the so called Pre-Cucuteni or Aldeni group from much further north in the Danube basin, relatively contemporary with Karanovo V–VI.¹² In this respect, the recovery of Helvacı Şaban type of pottery in a number of pits at Kanlıgeçit, made it possible to tentatively date this group to a period earlier than Kocatepe.¹³ For example, in sounding 35N a huge Helvacı Şaban pit, cut by a later pit of Kocatepe type, made it possible to attain a relative date for this culture.

In all the explored sites, there is a marked abundance of decorated cylindrical pot stands, highly suggesting that these might actually be cult centres and not settlement sites. Then of course, where the settlements are located, or whether these sites belonged to mobile pastoral communities continues to remain a question unanswered. It is also of interest to note that while several sites in the northern part of eastern Thrace have revealed Helvacı Şaban pottery type until recently no such pottery had ever been recorded in Bulgaria. It is only after a preliminary publication of such vessels, that Derviş Ocak a site near the Turkish border in the Maritsa valley revealed identical material.¹⁴ Among the decorated sherds from Bereketska in western Thrace, Maritsa type of Karanovo V material were predominate, but some sherds that may represent a transitional type between Maritsa and Helvacı Şaban were present.¹⁵ Thus, further suggesting that Helvacı Şaban group may be contemporary with late Karanovo V.

The Kocatepe Ware

The Kocatepe, designated as Site No. B 4/40 in the surface survey, is located approximately 28km east of Edirne on the right bank of Süloğlu stream. This site, like all other sites of this horizon is flat with no detectable elevation, covering an area of about 50x100m. Sites yielding Kocatepe type pottery are less common than those of Helvacı Şaban, and partially overlapping in spatial distribution. In the northern parts of eastern Thrace, mainly along the southern foothills of the Istranca Mountains, both Kocatepe and Helvacı Şaban pottery, occur in the same sites, while there are some sites that exclusively contain Helvacı Şaban material. However, further to the south, past the Ergene valley no sites yielding Helvacı Şaban pottery have been recovered, while, at Toptepe on the coastal strip of the Sea of Marmara, sites of Kocatepe culture are present but extremely random. Among the sites of Kocatepe horizon, Batak Değirmen nearby Kaynarca, is worth mentioning as it is the only site which seems to have a detectable mound formation; nevertheless, the

¹² Marinescu-Bilcu 1974, figs. 41–42, 69.

¹³ Özdoğan – Parzinger 2012, 46–48.

¹⁴ Leshtakov 1997.

¹⁵ Kalchev 2004.



Fig. 3 Helvacı Şaban type of pottery from various sites in eastern Thrace.



Fig. 4 Helvacı Şaban type of pottery from various sites in eastern Thrace.

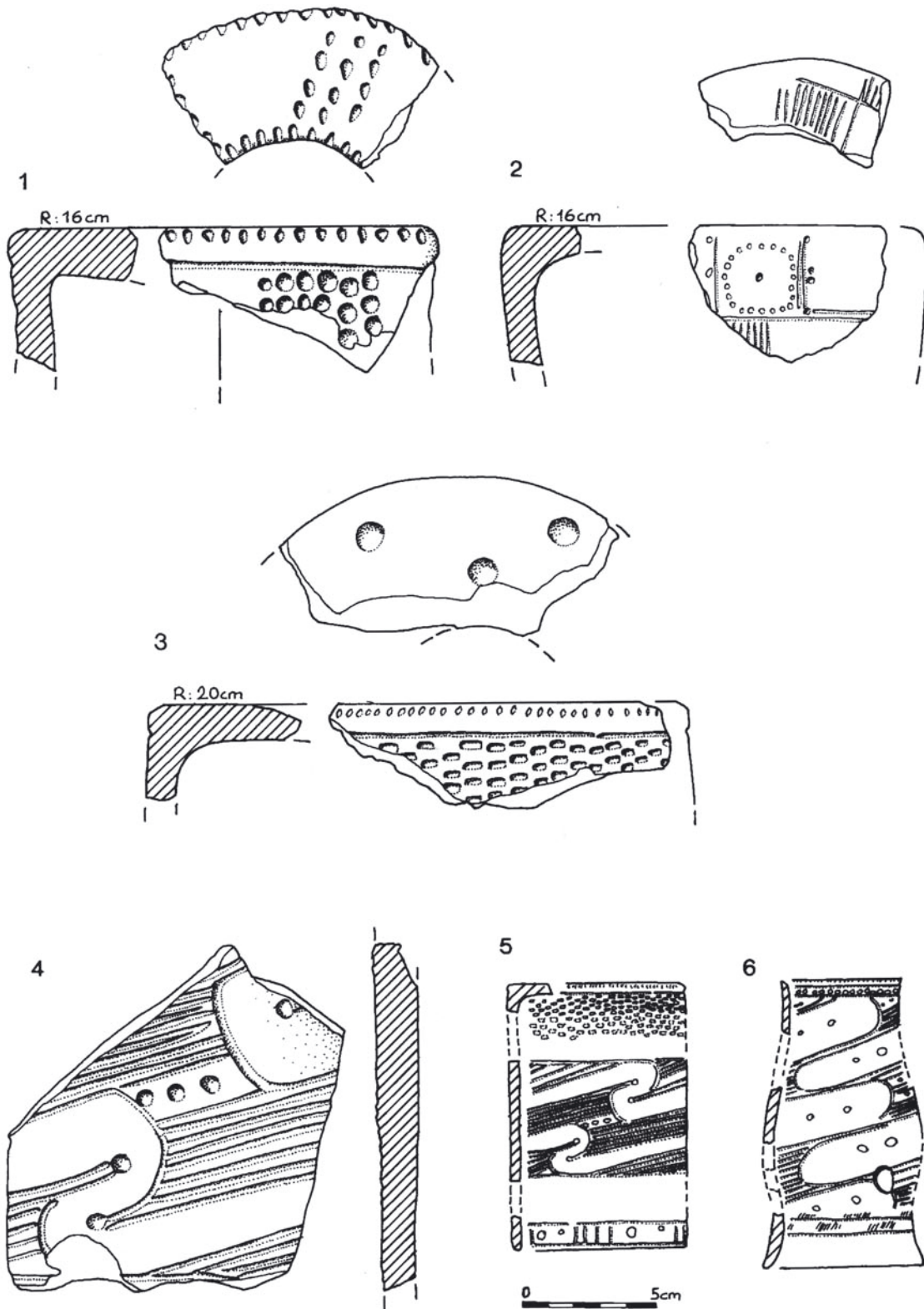


Fig. 5 Helvacı Şaban type of pot stands.

presence of sherds from other periods made it difficult to determine whether or not the mound formation belonged to the Kocatepe period.

The pottery of Kocatepe is finer than that of Helvacı Şaban; it is easily recognisable with its fine burnished surfaces, mostly with a metallic lustre. The fabric is exclusively of fine levigated paste with some mica, and compact and hard firing technique; surfaces are smoothed and highly burnished, and take on light buff to orange tones. There are a few sherds with linear graphite decoration (Fig. 6) and a single sherd has been found with bichrome black and red paint. Most characteristic vessel forms are open bowls with incurved rims (Fig. 7); they are occasionally carinated having a rather limited repertoire; nevertheless, there is an apparent resemblance to those of Karanovo VI-Gumelnița wares.

The chronological position of Kocatepe ware was first identified at Toptepe, where a pit containing exclusively Kocatepe material was found at the surface of the 1989 trench, evidently well below Early Bronze Age, cutting into Toptepe deposits.¹⁶ Subsequently, at Kanlıgeçit, other pits containing similar material were observed stratified below Early



Fig. 6 Graphite decorated Kocatepe sherd from Kanlıgeçit phase 5b.



Fig. 7 Kocatepe type of bowls from Kanlıgeçit phase 5b.

¹⁶ Özdoğan 1991.



Fig. 8 Pattern burnished sherds from Hoca Çeşme, inner surfaces.



Fig. 9 Pattern burnished sherds from Hoca Çeşme, exterior surfaces.

Bronze Age deposits, one of them intersects into a pit with Helvacı Şaban material.¹⁷ Accordingly, with some justification we can consider Kocatepe to be contemporary with the early Karanovo VI period.

Concluding Remarks

Our team has been working in eastern Thrace since 1980 carrying out surface surveys and conducting excavations in various parts of the region; despite all of our research efforts it is not possible to provide more robust evidence for this critical region during the 4th millennium BC at this point. As has been summarised above, the chronologically significant material remains associated with this time span, are restricted to a few pits with pottery sherds of Helvacı Şaban and Kocatepe type, seemingly analogous to Pre-Cucuteni and Gumelnița cultures respectively. Therefore, they are not at all sufficient to fill this lengthy lacuna. As previously noted, the gap is not only restricted to the 4th millennium, but extends well into the second half of the 5th millennium, in the southern parts of the region, a considerably longer span. Consequently, it is useful to note that pattern burnished wares of the so called Beşiktepe type, were initially placed within this blank period; however, their extensive presence both at Hoca Çeşme and Aşağı Pınar together with Karanovo IV assemblage (Fig. 8–9) clearly indicated that they must be of an earlier date, the late Karanovo IV period.

It also seems clear that the reasons behind such a long and widespread hiatus cannot be explained by solely looking at the evidence from the region under investigation. This is a complex research problem that has to be explored on a macro regional scale. By mid 5th millennium BC in the eastern Balkans, a significant core, conventionally known as the Karanovo VI-Kocadermen-Gumelnița-Cucuteni group emerged with modalities notably distinct from that of the east. Extensive mound sites revealed a rich variety of status objects indicative of high level technology. Even though the core of this culture is in the northeastern parts of the Balkans, related cultural formations have been discerned from a much wider area, extending into western and northwestern Balkans. It is also evident from the presence of Karanovo VI sites in western Thrace that the Balkan Mountains did not constitute the southern border of this cultural formation. Although the Istranca Mountains seem to mark southern limits of this culture, the presence of Kocatepe material suggests that this culture extended further to the south, but considerably inconspicuous in eastern Thrace. It also seems evident that Kocatepe material represents the earlier part of Karanovo VI period with no archaeologically detectable evidence either in late Karanovo VI or subsequent periods. On the other hand, it seems possible that the Helvacı Şaban group might be the immediate predecessor of Kocatepe, though neither the exact date nor the cultural affiliation of Helvacı Şaban group has been clarified; nevertheless, it is certainly earlier than Kocatepe with some affiliations to the northern Balkans. It is thus possible to surmise that, by mid 5th millennium, mobile groups penetrated eastern Thrace filling in the vacant space after settlements were abandoned. At this point, the reasons for this abandonment can only be conjectured. However, because this break took place earlier on the Anatolian side of the Sea of Marmara than in Thrace, it is clear that these groups were not the cause, but the result of this turbulent period.

In a broader sense, the region around the Sea of Marmara is positioned between two major cultural formation zones, a very dynamic one in the east and a less stable one in the Balkans. While, the latter was interrupted by the second half of the 5th millennium, there is an unbroken continuum in the former. The region around the Sea of Marmara must have developed and persisted as a dormant buffer zone between the two. Evidently, this scenario is not without problems; certain parallelisms such as technologies based on arsenic copper, certain type of figurines and amulets, graphite decoration on pottery, the presence of ‘fruit-stands’ have been noted between Gumelnița-

¹⁷ Özdoğan – Parzinger 2012, 46–47.

Varna in the Balkans and İkiztepe-Arslantepe assemblages in Anatolia. Such similarities highly suggest that some sort of contact occurred among them. As neither of these assemblages has been recovered on either side of the Sea of Marmara, we might postulate a maritime connection between central Anatolia and the northern Balkans through the Black Sea, bypassing the Marmara region;

The difference of over a thousand years in the absolute dates from both sides of this vast territory, invalidate the above mentioned equalisation as a good working hypothesis. The problem stems from the absolute dates of similar elements on either side of this geographical sphere. For example, Varna dates to the mid 5th millennium, while Arslantepe with close ties to the Uruk culture of Syro-Mesopotamia, remains at the end of the 4th millenium. At this point, we have no answer to this critical question. Without proposing a solution, this paper tries to present an overview that is primarily based on negative evidence.

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