

ANNUAL REPORT ON THE ACTIVITY OF REMI FOUNDATION

Part 2

**Research Project: Archaeological Excavations Strandzha
(BULG 820/2022 BULG 845/2023- BULG 869/2024)**

**MALOMIROVO
2022, 2023, 2024**

Project manager: Deyan Dichev – Ethnographic and Archaeological Museum, Elhovo
Scientific consultant: Daniela Agre – National Archaeological Institute with Museum at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

May 2025

1. Research objectives of the project

In 2005, the archaeological expedition “Strandzha”, led by Daniela Agre with deputy leader Deyan Dichev, discovered an exceptionally rich burial of a Thracian ruler – probably the son of the Thracian king Kerseblept – Iolaus. The comprehensive analysis of the found material was presented in the monograph: Daniela Agre. “The Tumulus of Golyamata Mogila Near the Villages of Malomirovo and Zlatnitsa”, Avalon Publishing, Sofia, 2011, published with the financial support of the STICHTING HORIZON Foundation.

However, the question where is the settlement, inhabited by the population that erected the “Golyamata Mogila” tumulus, remained open. After an analysis of the ancient written sources concerning the territory of modern Elhovo Municipality, and the fieldwork conducted by the expedition in 2021, we discovered a site located at the territory of the village of Malomirovo, in the “Marinov Dol” area near the same village, 800 m north of the tumulus, that was assumed to be the settlement we were looking for.

These studies gave us the reason to apply to the Foundation with a research project, which main objective for 2022 was:

- ***Clarification of the nature, chronology, thickness of the cultural layer and the possible boundaries of the discovered site near the village of Malomirovo, Elhovo Municipality.***

The results of the archaeological excavations conducted at the site in 2022 showed that the site, located on an area of more than 30 decares, is not a settlement, but a pit sanctuary associated with cult rituals and practices. The initial analysis of the materials found in the investigated ritual pits showed that the sanctuary was used during the Classical and Hellenistic eras and is synchronous with the burial in the “Golyamata Mogila” tumulus.

With the clarification of the nature of the site, some of the previously set goals underwent a slight change and new goals, mainly related to the cult beliefs and rituals practiced in this sanctuary by the local population were also added. The main objective of the studies in 2023 was set as follows:

- ***Based on the materials discovered in the pits - imported amphorae, amphora seals, numismatic material and imported ceramics, to develop a detailed chronology of the site and to clarify the trade contacts of the local population that built the sanctuary.***

In the same year 2022, in the eastern part of the site, quite unexpectedly for us, a section of a ditch was discovered, the material from which showed that it was built during the Early Bronze Age (EBA). Ditches from this era in this region of Bulgaria had not been studied yet, and this raised our scientific interest in investigating this structure. For this reason, the research objectives of the project for the 2023 season were expanded with the new goal:

- ***Clarification of the route and nature of the ditch discovered at the site in 2022 .***

In 2023, the investigated area of the site was enlarged, which allowed the discovery of a system of ditches. Two more ditches were discovered, located in parallel to both sides of the first ditch and about 20 m away from it - such a situation was observed for the first time in Bulgaria. The discoveries made in 2023 gave us the reason to set the following as the main objective of the studies in 2024:

- ***Clarification of the topography, nature and chronology of the ditch system discovered in 2022-2023.***

2. Activities carried out under the project

The territory of 1700 sq. m. in total was explored on the site during three archaeological seasons (2022 -2024). On this territory we investigated the system of ditches with a total length of 120 m, as well as 112 ritual pits.

The earliest structures studied at the site are the Early Bronze Age ditches. These are three structures, located in parallel to the E-W direction, about 20 m apart of each other. All three ditches have an almost V-shaped cross-section (an inverted trapezoid with a wide upper part and a very narrow lower part) and enclose or block a space located between two deep ravines limiting the site from the north and south. The ditches are of different sizes in their individual sectors. Their width is up to 2.80 m and their depth reaches 3.0 m.

The fill of all the ditches is identical - almost homogeneous grey soil in the middle and mainland white soil - at the edges. Significant soil deposits are observed in the lower part of the ditches, that caused by filling the ditches with atmospheric water during certain periods. In this part of the ditches one can see several thin, finer-structured layers of soil with light brown to dark brown-grey colour with admixtures of limestone fractions. These dark layers are from clay loams - a soil that is characteristic to that area, and the light layers are from limestone. Towards the bottom of the ditches, the layers are the lightest, with a yellow-light brown colour. In all three ditches, a uniform distribution of archaeological materials is observed - they are mostly found in the upper half of the ditches. The materials include fragments of household ceramics, fragments of anthropomorphic figurines, clay models of vessels, fragments of stone tools of labour - axes and hammers, pieces of residential plaster and animal bones. It should be mentioned that the number of discovered fragments of millstones and stone knockers is large. Analysis of animal bones has shown that the diet of ancient societies dug these ditches consisted of small and large cattle, birds and wild animals. The observations have shown that the filling of the ditches took place in a very short chronological period.

The excavations carried out in 2024 revealed a new element in the construction of the ditch system. Initially, it consisted of three parallel ditches that functioned for no more than 30 years. Judging by the material found in them, they functioned in the last phase of the Early Bronze Age II - the Mihalich

culture stage (2900-2500/2400 BC). After a certain period of time, but no later than 100 years, three new ditches were built on the site, which almost completely repeat the routes of the previous ditches, and in places they diverge or overlap. Stratigraphic observations of the ditch profiles clearly showed that in the areas where the ditches overlap, the later ditch destroyed the materials from the earlier era. These new ditches existed for about 20 - 30 years and judging by the materials found in them, their dating should be attributed to the end of the RBE - St. Kirilovo stage (2400-2100 BC), from which an extremely small number of sites are known so far.

At this stage of the research, it could be assumed that the system of ditches, discovered at the site near the village of Malomirovo, served as an additional fortification - enclosing a ruler's complex (house) from the Early Bronze Age, which has not been found yet. We hope that this issue will be resolved this year after the implementation of a project led by Dean Dichev, who won funding from the Ministry of Culture on a competitive basis for the study of the site with the help of geophysics and LiDAR. We hope, that this study will outline the exact dimensions of the site and will show the presence of possible structures not discovered during the excavations.

A total of 112 ritual pits were studied at the site during the three seasons. The pits are outlined on the terrain at a depth of 0.20 m - up to 0.50 m. Some of them are united in groups, some intersecting. Their openings in the horizontal plan are round with dimensions from 1.0 m to 2.20 m, reaching a depth of 2.80 m. In the vertical plan, the pits have a truncated-conical shape. Their bottoms are flat. Ash and charcoal are present in the filling of all pits. In the lower half of the pits, the layers are of grey soil (here the amount of ash is the greatest) and a loose structure, which are saturated with archaeological material. In some of the pits, as a "final" ritual, big fragments or whole ceramic vessels, pieces of decayed plaster and animal bones were placed in their upper part, in others - archaeological material is missing.

The pits are predominantly filled with fragments of ceramic vessels - household and table ceramics made by hand and wheel, amphora containers, spindle whorls and loom weights. The entire ceramic forms of the vessels made by wheel are represented by jugs, bowls and table amphorae. The hand-made vessels are represented by cups with one handle, pots and jugs with one handle, pots with plastic decoration. In the filling of some of the pits, cult ceramic objects, animal bones, fragments of bronze and silver adornments and weapons were found. Fragments of millstones were found in almost all the pits.

The most representative objects among the finds from the pits are fragments of richly decorated cult portable hearths, ceramic checkers and dice, fragments of bronze bracelets decorated with snake heads, bronze rings, iron and bronze arrows as well as silver coins of Thracian Chersonese (minted during the reign of the Thracian king Kersebleptus - 359-341 BC). Among the most important materials for the chronology of the pit sanctuary are imported amphorae with seals, black-varnish ceramics, as well as local ceramics. The seals found on the handles and necks of amphorae are from such ancient centers as Thasos, Heraclea, Enos, Rhodes and Acanthus as the seals from Heraclea are the most numerous.

3. Project results and their scientific value

- **Clarification of the nature and detailed chronology of the site.**

The excavations showed that the site was inhabited during following three periods:

1. Initially, three parallel ditches were built, which, judging by the material found in them, functioned in the last phase of the Early Bronze Age II - Mihalich culture (2900-2500/2400 BC) for about 20 years. The Mihalich culture, which is characterized by ornamented ceramics with cord-

like decoration and inlay of white paste and red ochre, developed along the lower reaches of the Tundzha and Maritza rivers - between the Sakar and East Strandzha mountains, and so far only three settlement sites assigned to that culture have been discovered in Bulgaria. ***This stage of the Early Bronze Age is very poorly studied and every object containing its elements is of huge scientific importance for clarifying the role of this culture in the overall development of the Bronze Age in SE Europe.***

After a certain period of time, but not later than 100 years, three new ditches were built on the site. They almost completely repeat the routes of the previous ditches, however in some places they diverge or overlap. These new ditches existed for about 20 - 30 years and, judging by the materials, their dating should be attributed to the end of the RBE - St. Kirilovo stage (2400-2100 BC), from which an extremely small number of objects are known so far. The decoration on the vessels from the St. Kirilovo stage is simple in terms of ornamental compositions. It mainly consists of combinations of horizontal lines with bundles of hanging lines or triangles, a multi-row zigzag, in combination with stripes or hanging corners, as well as broken lines in the form of the letter "M". These decorative schemes are presented mainly on vessels for liquids - jugs, cups and some of the amphora-shaped vessels, and the main techniques for applying the decoration are incising, notching, stamping, impressions of twisted cord, relief and inlay. ***The culture of the St. Kirilovo stage developed in the Upper Thracian Lowland and materials belonging to this culture were discovered for the first time in the territory of Southeastern Bulgaria .***

The system of ditches discovered at the site is an extremely important monument for the archaeological science, since up to now these are the only non-circular ditches registered on the territory of Bulgaria. In terms of the method of construction, the ditches at the site near the village of Malomirovo belong to the type known in the scientific literature with the term "multiple ditches enclosures". Similar monuments are extremely rarely discovered outside the territory of Bulgaria as well.

2. Two thousand years later after the construction of the ditches, a pit sanctuary was constructed at the site. The choice of the location was not accidental - during the Late Iron Age the remains of earlier habitation were probably visible on the terrain, which undoubtedly made an impression on the people of that time. The archaeological excavations have shown that such places with traces of earlier habitation were chosen for the construction of ritual pit complexes by the Thracian population. The role of the old settlements in the cult of the dead among the Thracians was very strong. In addition to digging pits and filling mounds erecting at the territory of such old settlements, the cultural layer from the old settlements was, in some cases, used as filler of the ritual pits or mounds.

Based on the amphora material found in the pits, a basic chronological scale of the sanctuary was built. It functioned during the period of the strongest development of the Odrysian state - from the 2nd quarter of the 4th century BC - until the conquest of this region of Thrace by Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great (3rd quarter of the 4th century BC). The results of the study of the pit sanctuary have shown that the role of the sanctuary in the settlement system of this region of ancient Thrace, when these lands were in the center of the Odrysian state, was extremely important. The sanctuary was located at an important crossroad of two roads connecting the Northern Mediterranean with Northern Thrace and the Western Mediterranean with Western Thrace. The sanctuary was visited not only by the local population, but also by travellers passing along these two main routes. A thorough and comprehensive analysis of the results obtained from the study of the sanctuary is yet to be completed.

As it has been already mentioned, near the pit sanctuary there is the "Golyamata Mogila" tumulus containing the royal grave, in which we assume that one of the sons of the Thracian

king Kerseblept – Iolau was buried. The connection between the pit sanctuary and the tumulus is indisputable. Both sites belong to the same cultural environment and to the same population that built and used them. The traces of rituals discovered in the tumulus have proved that the respect for the dead was enormous. Commemorative rituals dedicated to the heroized (deified) ruler, who was considered as a transmitter and intercessor of the requests of the local population to the underground deities, were performed for many years in the two ditches built around the tumulus. These rituals are almost identical to the rituals performed in the pits of the sanctuary, which in the ancients' imagination were considered as a symbol of the transition between the two worlds - the world of the living and the world of the dead. Ritual pits were an important element through which communication between the living and the dead took place. They serve as a kind of entrance to the underworld, where the underground gods and the souls of the ancestors were located, some of whom are revered as heroes. Based on the stratigraphy of some of the pits, it can be concluded that at certain times they were filled with liquid, probably water, but it is not excluded that the traces in them are of wine, milk or other liquids used in libations for the chthonic deities.

The scholars associate the large number of so called "pit fields" discovered in recent years on the territory of Thrace with one of the most important aspects of Thracian belief and rituals - the enormous role that the dead ancestors (from ordinary dead to anthropodemons and heroes) played in the world of the living. And if to this day no sanctuaries dedicated to deities (as in their Greek version) have been discovered in Thrace, this may, to some extent, be due to this broad, ubiquitous veneration of the dead and their fundamental role as a link between the supreme deities (as the Great Mother Goddess) and the living.

3. A small number of materials from the Late Antiquity Era (LAE) - 4th century AD was also discovered at the site. These materials are insignificant - mainly coins of the emperors Constantine and Constans II - 337-361 AD. Their presence is probably due to the fact that a LAE settlement was located in the immediate vicinity of the site, which led to the occurrence of these materials on the territory of the studied site.

- **Clarification of the trade relations of the population that built the pit sanctuary and the "Golyamata Mogila" tumulus**

The study of the ritual pits and the interpretation of the materials found in them have allowed us to understand the economic, trade and cultural relations of the local population. ***The imported amphorae showed the presence of intensive trade relations with Continental and Insular Greece and Asia Minor, as well as with the Greek cities on the Western Black Sea coast - Thassos, Heraclea, Aenos, Rhodes and Acanthus.*** Wine, olive oil and olives, as well as fish sauces were transported in the amphorae from these centers.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that all the research objectives of the project have been fully achieved. The investigated site near the village of Malomirovo has provided the opportunity to take a comprehensive look at the worldview and religious ideas of the population that erected the "Golyamata Mogila" tumulus, allowing us to analyze not only their funerary monuments, but also other objects related to the cult practices carried out by this population.

The investigation of the Early Bronze Age ditches is a significant scientific contribution to the study of this era in SE Bulgaria, where data on similar facilities were lacking up to now.

4. Presentation of the discovered materials and dissemination of the project results

Absolutely all materials – movable cultural monuments, discovered at the site near the village Malomirovo, have been handed over to the Ethnographical and Archaeological Museum of the town of Elhovo. They are registered in its inventory book and some of them (the entire objects and vessels) are part of the museum's permanent exhibition. After the restoration of the fragmented vessels, they will be also included in the exhibition.

Every year, after the archaeological excavations of the sites near the villages of Stroyno and Malomirovo, temporary exhibitions with newly discovered materials are held in the museum in Elhovo. Some of the restored finds are displayed at the annual archaeological exhibitions at the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

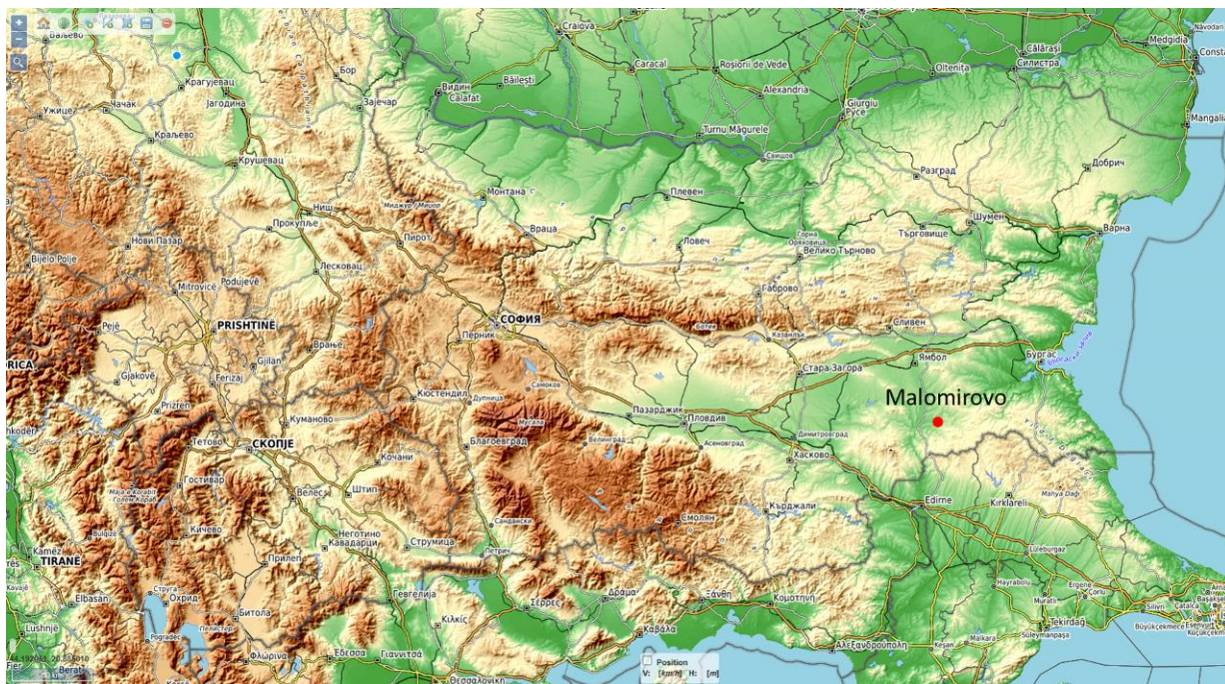
In addition, together with the leadership of the Elhovo municipality, we are looking for a way to preserve the central part of the sanctuary and, through the creation of a special eco-trail, to turn it into a cultural site for visiting by tourists.

The results of the project have been reported at the annual archaeological reporting sessions and have been published in the scientific series "Archaeological Excavations and Studies", published by the National Institute of Archaeology with a Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. A scientific publication on the system of ditches from the Early Bronze Age, discovered during the excavations of the site near the village of Malomirovo is currently being prepared.

5. Upcoming studies of the site

In 2024, Deyan Dichev won a project funded by the Ministry of Culture for non-destructive (geophysical) archaeological studies of the site using geophysics (magnetometry) and LiDAR imaging. The project will be implemented in 2025. Since a part of the site falls into a forested area, its imaging with LiDAR will help to clarify the entire area of the site occupied by the pit sanctuary, as well as to discover the complete routes the ditches as well as the possible presence of traces of the ruler's house from the Early Bronze Age. The results of these studies will be used to build a scientific strategy for the further study of this important for science site.

At the next stage we are going to conduct archaeological excavations of the most promising areas, localized through geophysics, and if it will be financially possible, to continue the study of the system of straight ditches from the Early Bronze Age, which is the only one registered so far at the territory of Bulgaria.



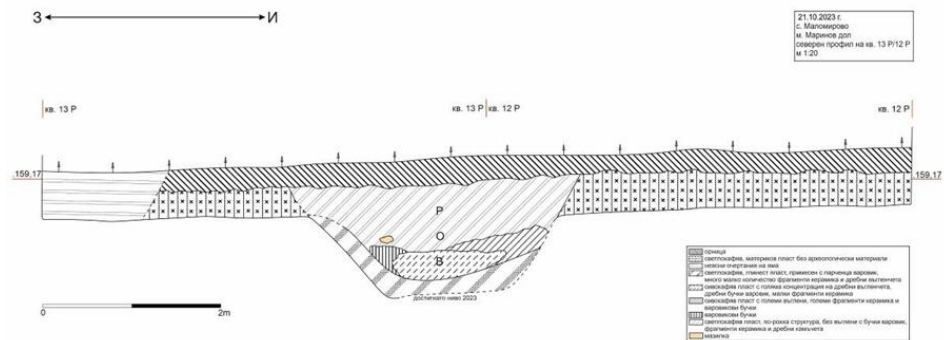
Location of the site



Stages of investigating ditch №2



East and north part of ditch №2



Profile of ditch №2 in sq.13 P



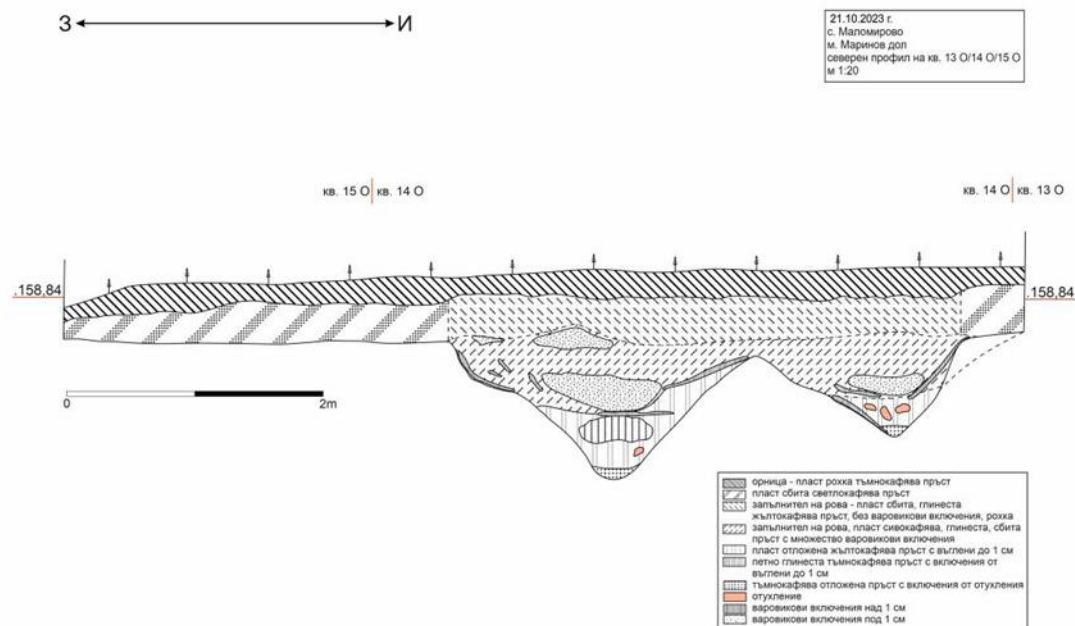
Investigating ditch №3



Division of ditch №1 on two parallel parts



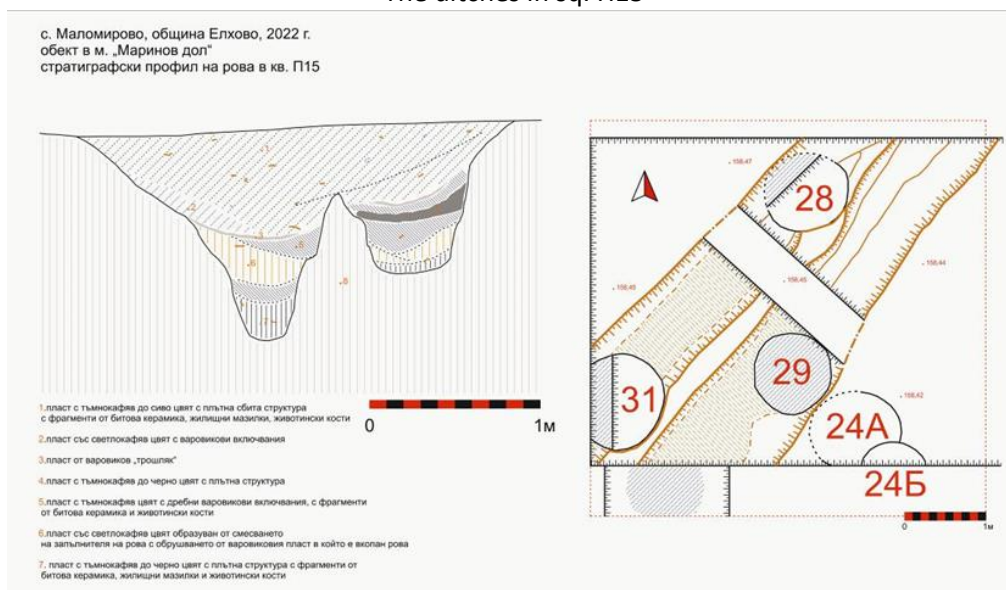
Investigating ditch № 1



North profile of ditch №3 in sq. 13 Q



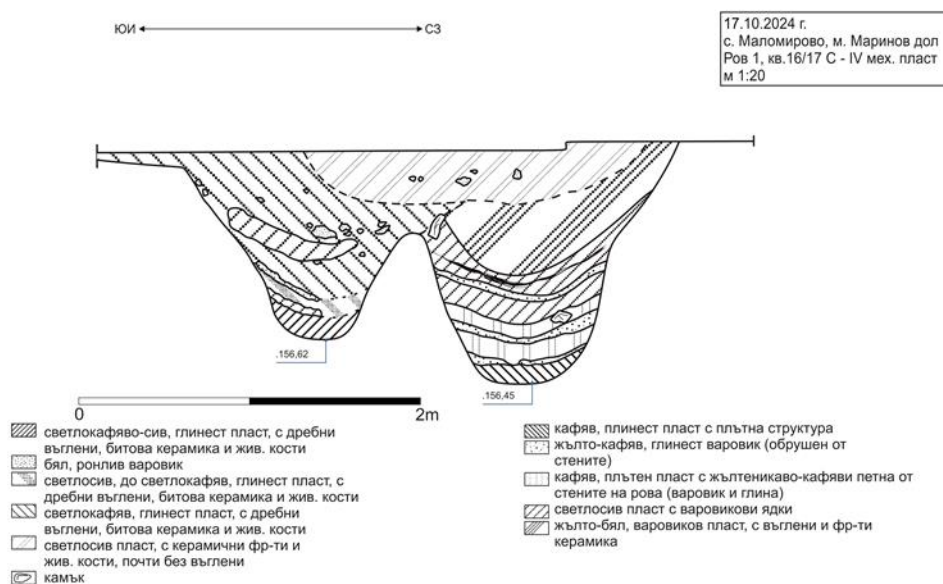
The ditches in sq. П15



Stratigraphic profile of ditches in sq. П15

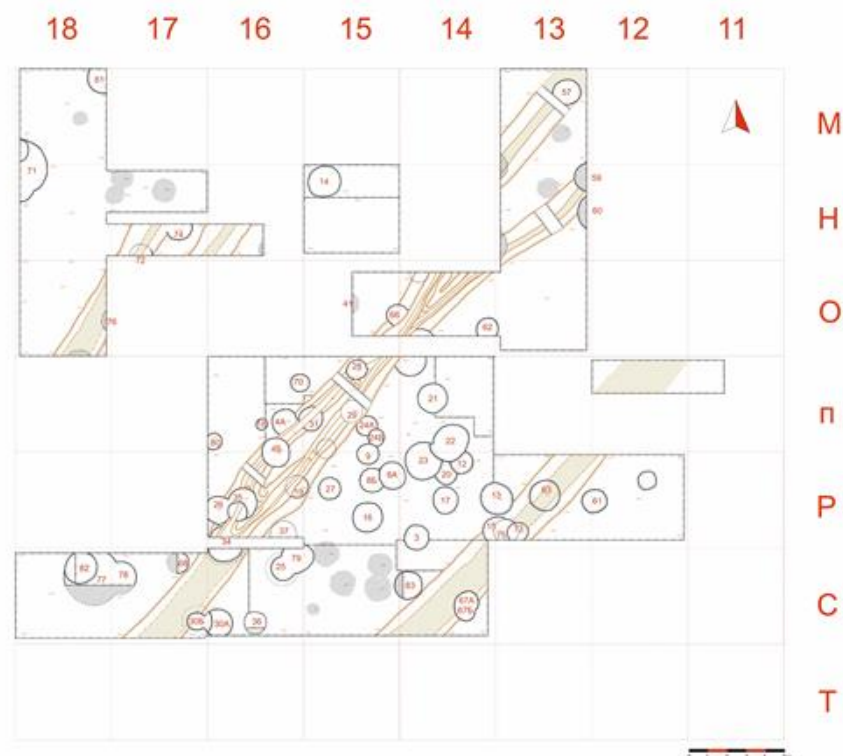


Stratigraphic profile of ditch №1



Ditch №1 and ritual pits near and in it

с. Маломирово, община Елхово, 2022 г.
обект в м. „Маринов дол“



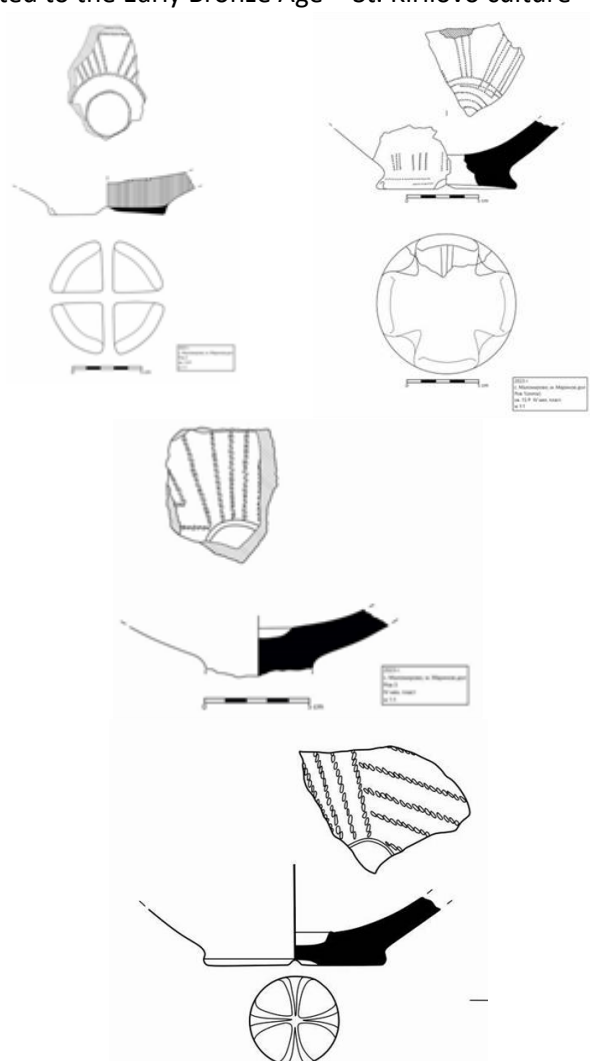
Horizontal plan of the ditches in sector East



Completely investigated parts of the ditches



Fragments of ceramic vessels with decorations dated to the Early Bronze Age - St. Kirilovo culture



Fragments of ceramic vessels dated to Mihalich II culture



Ritual objects found in the ditches



Stone tools found in the ditches

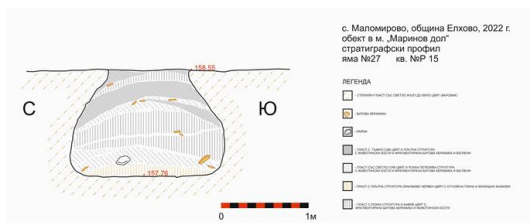
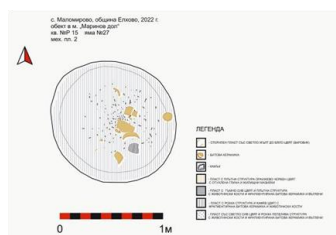
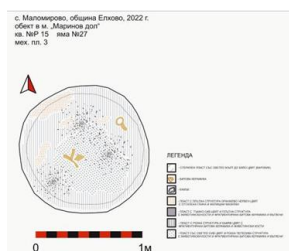




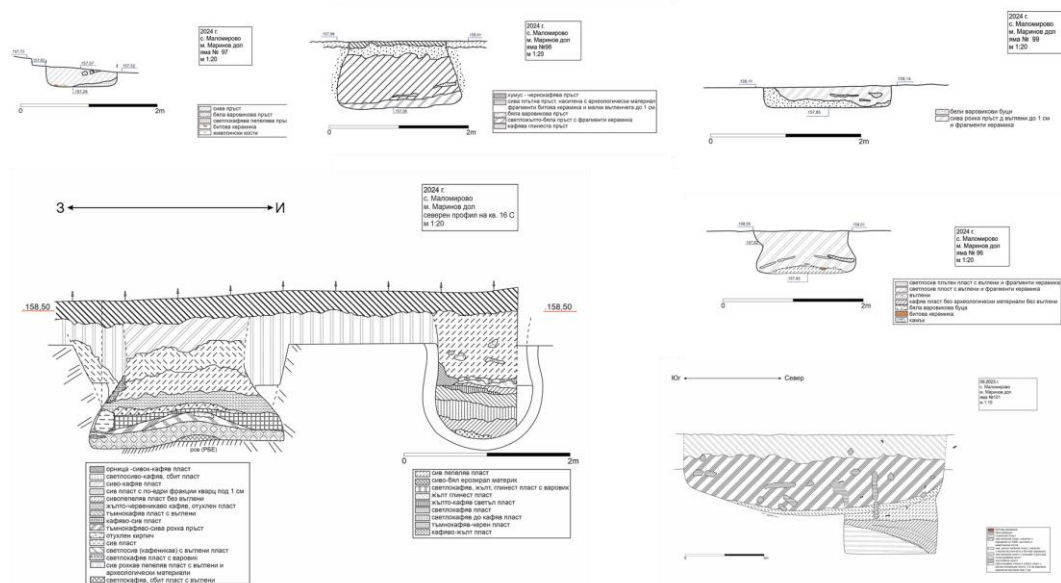
The site



Pits 4a and 4b with amphorae



Pit 27, sq. P5 sector East
Fragments of millstone and amphorae



Profiles of different pits





Investigating ritual pits



Fragments of amphorae in pit № 88



Ceramic vessel – strainer in pit №100



Stratigraphic profiles of the pits

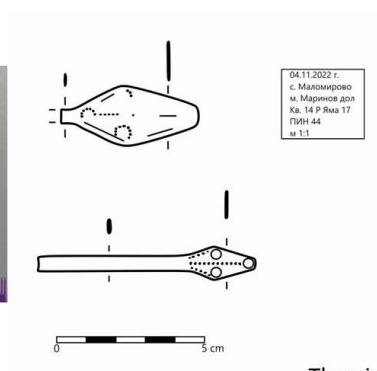




Ceramic loom weights found in the pits



Iron ring with an anthropomorphic image



Silver coin of
Thracian Chersoneses 357-323/320 BC



Some metal finds from the pits



Lead ring with the image of a woman head



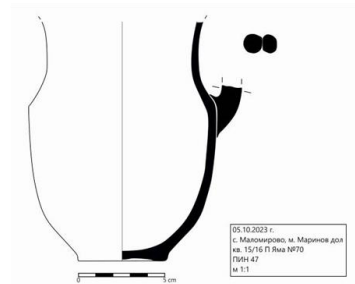
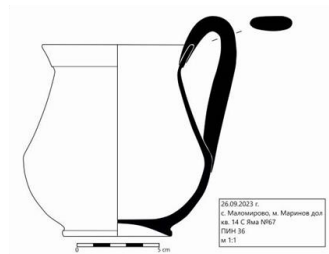
Silver and bronze adornments



Hemidrahma of Thracian Chersonesos 357-323/320 BC



Some metal finds from the pits



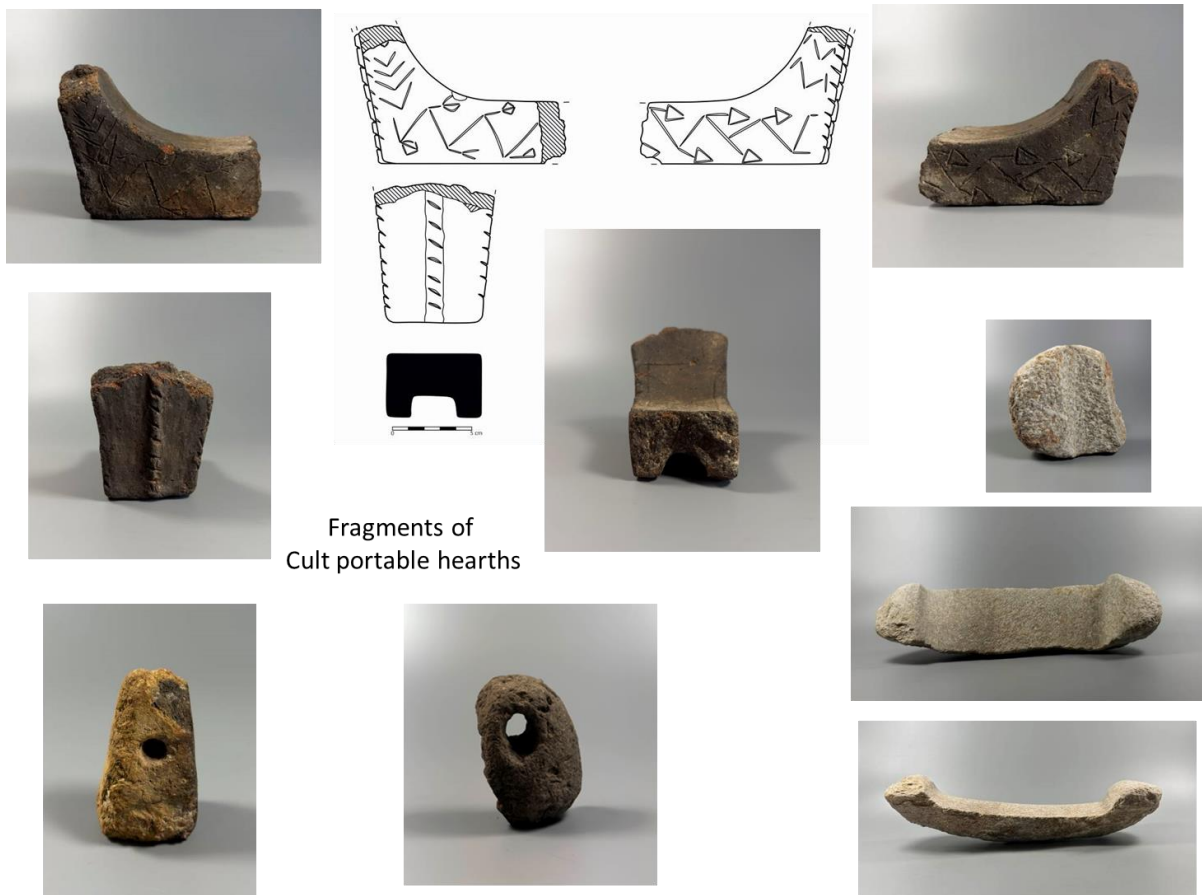
Some of ceramic vessels found in the pits



Imported ceramics found in the pits



Ceramics vessels made by hand found in the pits



Fragments of
Cult portable hearths



Enos-V-IV c.BC.

Heraclea - II ½ of IV c.BC



Heraclea -I1/2 of IV c.BC.

Enos - V-IV c.BC

Thasos-349 BC

Thasos - 360 BC

Some of amphorae seals found in the pits

Direct cost project 820/2022 Malomirovo	BGN
<u>Spend for project in cash</u>	
Allowances and lodging for the team	12 603.60
Paid net remuneration for the team & workers	36 031.70
Tools , consumables	949.91
Rent car and Fuel	5 271.2
Removal of earth mass	280.00
TOTAL	55 136.41
Paid from the Foundation's bank account	7 065.04
Paid income tax &social security&health insurance civil contracts	
TOTAL	7 065.04
SUBTOTAL SPEND	62 201.45
Funded by Horizon Foundation	62 200.00

Direct cost project 845/2023 Malomirovo	BGN
<u>Spend for project in cash</u>	
Allowances and lodging for the team	15 920.00
Paid net remuneration for the team & workers	41 066.25
Tools , consumables	796.79
Rent car and transport	7 104.29
Removal of earth mass	880.00
TOTAL	65 767.33
Paid from the Foundation's bank account	8 860.11
Paid income tax &social security&health insurance civil contracts	
TOTAL	8 860.11
SUBTOTAL SPEND	74627.44
Funded by Horizon Foundation	73782.92

Direct cost project 869/2024 Malomirovo	BGN
--	------------

<u>Spend for project in cash</u>	
Allowances and lodging for the team	17 920.00
Paid net remuneration for the team & workers	46 411.95
Tools , consumables	1 010.25
Rent car and transport	6 832.8
Removal of earth mass	960.00
TOTAL	73 135.00
Paid from the Foundation's bank account	7 464.06
Paid income tax &social security&health insuriance civil contracts	
TOTAL	7 464.06
SUBTOTAL SPEND	80 599.06
Funded by Horizon Foundation	80 660.00