

**INTERCONNECTIVITY OF THE VARDAR AND STRUMA  
RIVER VALLEYS. SOME HINTS TO THE UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE SOUTH-EASTERN BALKANS ROLE  
IN THE 2<sup>ND</sup> MILLENNIUM BC<sup>1</sup>**

**POWIĄZANIA KULTUROWE DOLIN WARDARU I STRUMY.  
KILKA UWAG NA TEMAT ROLI  
POŁUDNIOWO-WSCHODNICH BAŁKANÓW  
W 2. TYSIĄCLECIU P.N.E.**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Vardar and Struma rivers flow through the south-eastern Balkans, creating valleys which have been inhabited by human populations for thousands of years. From an archaeological perspective, from Neolithic times these corridors have long been considered crucial for establishing cultural, trade, and social networks, developed later by the emergence of cultural complexes of Late Bronze Age. This area was incorporated into wide archaeological frameworks of interregional interaction, namely – the world-system theory and its variants. The aim of this paper is an attempt to apply these theoretical models as well as concept of “contact space” to human interactions in the Vardar and Struma rivers’ valleys in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. It analysis bases on tableware pottery evidences with data concerning presence of defensive outposts within easy to control mountainous paths, as well as chosen information deriving from funeral rites. These data may provide insights into the communication networks in south-eastern Balkans and mentioned river valleys may seem as an important area of mutual influences.

**KEYWORDS:** Mycenaean Pottery, Matt-painted, Incised and encrusted, Fortified outposts, Mountainous paths, Late Bronze Age, Archaeology, Contacts

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of a project funded by the National Science Centre of Poland (2016/21/N/HS3/00900).

The Axios/ Vardar and Strimonas/ Struma (hereinafter Vardar and Struma) rivers flow through 400 kilometres of the south-eastern Balkans, cutting through mountain ranges intersected by numerous plateaus. These were not only habitation spaces, but also an arena of cultural interaction. Deep valleys link areas of different climate characteristics, Mediterranean and continental (Peel, Finlayson, McMahon, 2007, p. 1641–1642), in which distinct cultural zones emerged and developed their own specific ways of life. Even today these valleys constitute the main communication routes connecting the Aegean region with southern, central Europe and beyond, providing circulation of goods, ideas and people. The presence of valleys stimulated human communities to attain foreign contacts to enhance not only their material culture but also beliefs and cultural-social behaviors.

The evidence of those interactions, which created a peculiar mosaic of local and foreign features, are still visible in the archaeological record. Despite different approaches in the contemporary countries research in the area – Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia, it is still possible to make certain comparisons and draw some basic conclusions. The increase of data within more than one hundred years of research allows us to challenge established hypotheses and test new ones about the interregional role of this area in the prehistory.

The aim of this paper is to present specific archaeological phenomena of the Vardar and Struma valleys during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, based on the artificially chosen aspects of material culture – mainly the pottery, focusing especially on the fine tableware classes of Mycenaean, matt-painted and incised and encrusted ceramics (hereinafter referred to as incised/ encrusted). In addition, as a supplemented data, I will use information regarding basic landscape issues, presumably defensive settlements pattern and some data deriving from funeral rites. All of them will be connected within the proposed methodological frameworks of cultural interactions.

Nevertheless, beside the evidences of contacts, one should be aware of the initial state of the research on the application of the concepts in the abovementioned river valleys that is proposed here. The research concepts should be stronger tied with the landscape analysis of this mountainous part of the Balkans, where almost the entire area is covered with difficult to pass mountain ranges. Very interesting insights into the role of the landscape in the prehistoric communication networks delivered sparse ethnographic and ethnohistorical studies (Grębska-Kulova, 2013). They show that until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the road network in one of the discussed valleys – the Struma river valley, differed significantly from the current state of road infrastructure and only possible ways to transport commodities were simple and basic (with limited use of mechanization, e.g. chariots, mainly with use of caravans with pack animals or by foot) due to specific geographic conditions (Kolev, 1980). Moreover, that kind of transport was practically possible only during the summer and early autumn, because the rest of the year traffic was almost suspended due to the weather and climate conditions (Grębska-Kulova, 2013; Kančov, 1970, p. 119–120). Even today, after the construction of the main “E79” road, full of tunnels and bridges crossing the Struma river, this path should be considered as dangerous, with a number of perils,

like erosion or falling rocks. It seems that the road along the Struma posed serious problems to pass through during the Bronze Age (Grębska-Kulova, 2013, p. 143). Similar situation seemed to occur in the “western path” – in the Vardar river valley. As a main communication route served today road “E75”, carved into the rocks of mountainous landscape of Northern Greece and southern Republic of North Macedonia. Availability of the communication infrastructure and accessible terrain should be also taken into consideration during the analysis of artifacts circulation and their numbers, being obstacles and providing limitations which influenced the state of archaeological recognition.

## THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The area of study, being both part of the Aegean region and the southern Balkans, was discussed within the frames of methodological concepts of interregional interaction, namely – the world-system theory and its variants (Stein, 2002, p. 905). It was not a monolithic idea, but a collection of different approaches, sharing fundamental aspects of the early versions, applicable to various archaeological researches (Hall, Kardulias, Chase-Dunn, 2010, p. 235–238). Within these methodological frames, one can find a basic tenet – past communities did not exist in the isolation and any kind of contacts affected groups involved in large networks (Hall et al., 2010, p. 240).

In Sheratt’s “Core, Periphery and Margin” – based model (1993) the area of Vardar and Struma valleys have been considered as a periphery and margin in contrast to the Aegean core, but his approach was often criticized because of its neo-evolutionist basis that concentrates on institutions and neglecting role of individual human beings, their activities within social practices and diminishing role of them as an active agents of change (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018, p. 97). The kinds of models also underestimate the reciprocal processes of translation and appropriation that underlie any kind of cultural transformation (see Knapett, 2011; Stein, 2002; Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018). It also argues that more technologically developed products and technology tend to move in one direction, from more “advanced” regions to “developing” ones, stressing hierarchical aspects of the system. Moreover, Sheratt urged for application of interactions’ models on a continent-wide scale, whereas cultural interpenetration may be often visible within the narrower areas only (Gimatizidis, Pieniążek, 2018, p. 16; Hall et al., 2010, p. 240).

Nevertheless, one should remember that the archetype of abovementioned model is a Wallerstein’s (1974) approach of world-system, which was not invented to serve in any contexts that archaeologists typically investigate. Moreover, today system-type approaches gain favour and are reproduced in numerous variants, but should be kept in mind that by its very nature may constitute and handle some overall generalizations, dealing with the past societies – objects and events they were not intended for at the very beginning and not being universal in every contexts (Hall et al., 2010, p. 245–246).

Based on Wallerstein's approach (1974) other models emerged. The concept of "negotiated peripherality" supplemented original ideas by emphasizing the exploitive relationship between dominating and active cores and passive peripheries (Hall, 1986). Due to its characteristics seems to be appropriate for the explanation and description of human interactions within studied valleys. It has been named "negotiated", because people on the periphery can effectively negotiate with inhabitants of the core, due to the fact that they control access to a key resources, and as seems to be more important from the point of view of this paper – key communication paths (Hall et al., 2010, p. 241).

Development of the term "peripherality" is also visible in the concept of "contested periphery" (Allen, 1997). Those "contested peripheries" refer to a region with certain key resources for the core or located in a strategic location, what may be applied within the frames of Vardar and Struma valleys, as an alleged important communication paths. Those valleys would be strategic thoroughfares which may constitute valuable area for the people wanting to have a control over them and compete for them (e.g. military or/ and economically). The area of study may be valuable also for the communities living in those peripheries, who may use their location to make a profit of it. It underlines the importance of the role played by people living outside the core, what has been used in the concepts describing the area of northern Aegean and Central Macedonia, which consider it to be an active agent in such models. Horejs in her article depicted this region as a "buffer" zone, affected by ideas, influences and contacts with "core" areas (Horejs, 2007).

As an example of "compromised" approach a model of Schortman and Urban (1992) has been created, who considered world-system terminology as limited and prefer to discuss at the level of interregional interaction, using at the same moment concept of "core-periphery" (Hall et al., 2010). In the center of their model they put society, which is connected by the flow of information with other communities. They stressed the role of elites who used regional interaction to generate and sustain their elevated status (Schortman, Urban, 1999), what could be a case to take into consideration relations within the studied area of Vardar and Struma valleys. Therefore, numerous variants of the "world-system" approach cannot be rejected at once. Individual specific models may be helpful in the contextualization of the possessed data from archaeological researches and used during the conceptualization of zones and their mutual relations.

Another concept, which could be applied to the described area is the "contact space", developed in literary studies (as a "contact zone", Pratt, 1991, p. 33–40) and adapted into the scope of archaeology in order to look for a methodological framework for the discoveries in south-western Bulgaria (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018). It assumes the presence of a space, where "human actors meet, perceive and constitute otherness, clash, and grapple with each other" (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018, p. 105) and that the processes of transculturation, hybridization, translation, and entanglement took place. This concept may be connected to the above described idea of "contested peripheries". In this way studied valleys would not only be "con-

tact spaces” but also “innovation spaces” – key areas for economic, political, social and religious competition and exchange (Hall et al., 2010, p. 243). The application of this concept for describing processes underlying the specific types of artifacts in the valleys of the Vardar and Struma rivers may be a useful step into a more complex understanding of the area in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

In the next section of this article, three peculiar for the region and artificially chosen classes of pottery have been described, treating them as a key artifact type used to determine presence and strength of contact (according to the works on Aegean exchange network by Berg «1999»). As an additional and supplemented data served also information regarding presence of fortified outposts and some chosen aspects of funeral rituals. All of them have been collected in order to put into practice the methodological frames of some concepts described above. Undertaken initial research has an aim to more carefully focus on those peripheral/ marginal areas and try to see them as more autonomous. Nevertheless, regions outside highly developed and organized Aegean centers, not being in close intercultural relations with them, has to be always less recognized and seemed to be not-so-complex, therefore recognition of frequency and character of relationships, is still difficult to assess.

## INTERCONNECTIONS

### Pottery evidences

The study of pottery collected during researches for over a century provided an extensive dataset for the ceramics consumed by prehistoric populations living in the Vardar and Struma valleys. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC the inhabitants of these areas used several classes of tableware. These were varied from technological point of view in terms of their firing temperature, clay preparation or admixture type. Potters were using different decorative techniques (incised, painted, burnished) and various repertoires of motifs. Pottery vessels are therefore a medium of different concepts that may be derived from different cultural circles. The most important classes for this article seem to be the Mycenaean, matt-painted and incised/ encrusted.

#### 1. Mycenaean pottery

Mycenaeans forged connections between the Aegean and the Black Sea, with extensions up to Danube to the Carpathian region (Kristiansen, 1998). Therefore, Mycenaean pottery constitutes to be a useful tool in tracing interregional communication patterns due to its wide spatial distribution. Evidences of Mycenaean ware within valleys of Vardar and Struma may confirm presence of a complex and advanced network of social interactions.

This pottery, originating south of the study area, has been studied in exhaustive manner and is widely discussed in the literature (Andreou, Fotiadis, Kotsakis, 1996; Andreou, 2003, 2009, 2010; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 159–193; Cambitoglou, Papadopoulos, 1993; Horejs, 2007, Karamitrou-Mentesidi, 2003; Wardle, 1975, 1993). It differs from the local repertoires of ceramics in its elaborated painted decoration and wheel-thrown technology. Thus, it has attracted the focus of the scholars' attention since the beginning of archaeological study in this area. The greatest abundance of this kind of pottery is known from the lower parts of the Vardar and Struma valleys. Most information about the technology, repertoire of shapes, decoration, and chronology of the Mycenaean pottery in the area comes from the extensive excavation programs conducted at three archaeological sites in the Greek region of Central Macedonia: Kastanas, Assiros and Toumba Thessaloniki.

Based on the typo-chronological analysis, it has been established that Mycenaean pottery was introduced into this area in the Late Helladic III A–B (Wardle, 1988, p. 40) although some sherds were determined to be earlier – LH I and II (French, 1967), further confirmed by the presence of LH IIB fragments at Thessaloniki Toumba (Andreou, 2009, p. 18). The earliest Mycenaean sherds have been found in Macedonia on the Chalkidiki Peninsula and are dated to the LH I period (Cambitoglou, Papadopoulos, 1993, p. 292).

During the Late Bronze Age, the percentage of Mycenaean pottery in the lower Vardar area increased but never exceeded more than a few percent (5,5% at Thessaloniki Toumba, Andreou et al., 1996, p. 582). The production technology of this elaborate pottery does not differ much from that in the core of the Mycenaean civilization. It was turned on a wheel, covered with a burnished slip and fired at a high temperature (Wardle, 1993, p. 133). Some examples nonetheless reveal that locally produced vessels were diverse and not as uniform as their originals (Andreou, 2009, p. 20–21), and some examples seem to be not fired in kilns (Buxeda et al., 2003, p. 280–281). At first they appeared as single imported vessels, and was subsequently produced locally (probably in close proximity to the Aegean coast and distributed over the area (Andreou, Psaraki, 2007, p. 416; Videski, 2007, p. 212; Wardle, 1993). This spread was facilitated in Central Macedonia by easy access to the coast (Andreou, 2003) and the presence of river valleys offering a convenient platform of communication with the northern area. Researches on sherds from Assiros site revealed three different types within Mycenaean ware, what has been identified as a sign of presence of imported, provincial and locally produced pots (Wardle, 1993).

The repertoire of Mycenaean pottery shapes consisted mainly of small vessels: cups, goblets (fig. 1: 5), jugs with cut-away necks, amphoriskoi, alabastra (fig. 1: 4), kylikes, loop-handled bowls, skyphoi (fig. 1: 6, 7), stirrup and squat jars (Andreou, 2009, p. 20–21; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 163–166; Heurtley, 1939, p. 96–97; Jung, 2002; Jung, Andreou, Weninger, 2009, p. 189–191; Mitrevski, 2007, p. 445; 2013, p. 186; Stefani, 2015, Valla, 2007, p. 369; Videski, 2007, p. 212). Some larger pots have also been identified, as so-called *special use* vessels (for example bridge-spouted bowls and spouted jugs) (Wardle, 1993, p. 133). Mycenaean pots in the area were decorated



with quite modest and simple painted motifs, including bands, dots, waves, nets, meanders, herringbones (fig. 1: 5), tassels (fig. 1: 7), spirals, reversed horns, and florals (fig. 1: 6) (Andreou, 2009, p. 20–24; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 163–166; Heurtley, 1939, p. 96–97; Mitrevski, 2007, p. 445; Videski, 2007, p. 212).



Fig. 1. Examples of pottery wares mentioned in text (Foll. Videski, 2007; Stefani, 2015)

Key: 1 – Kantharos (Perivolaki/ Saratse); 2 – Amforiskos (Vardaroftsa/ Axiochori); 3 – Kantharos (Kastanas); 4 – Alabastron (Ulanci); 5 – Goblet (Toumba Thessaloniki); 6 – Skyphos (Gona); 7 – Skyphos (Toumba Thessaloniki); 8 – Juglet (Gallikos/ Salamanle); 9 – Juglet (Kalindria/ Kilindir); 10 – Basin-shaped vessel (Kalindria/ Kilindir); 11 – Basin-shaped vessel (Kalindria/ Kilindir)

This ware was recognized on almost a third of all known Late Bronze Age sites within the area (fig. 2). One of the main axes of distribution was the Vardar valley, most likely due to the conjunction of optimal settlement locations and the density of settlement in this part of the area. The highest density was on the coast and in the river valleys (Horejs, 2007). Nevertheless, distribution of this ware was not only limited to the northern fringes of Aegean. The frequency decreases as one progresses further north, however occasional finds are still recognizable. Within the Ulanci culture, located in the middle Vardar valley, a limited number of Mycenaean pots have been found, both in settlements, as well as in cemeteries (Stolot, Dimov Grob). In addition to imported Mycenaean vessels (alabastra with spherical bodies (fig. 1: 4) – “the northernmost example of an imported Mycenaean vessel”, Videski, 2007, p. 211–212), there were also handmade imitations of them (Mitrevski, 2003, p. 46–51; 2013, p. 183–188). The Vardar valley seems to be much frequented and preferred at a first glance, judging by the number of discovered sites, especially in the lower course, considering presence of the finds of Mycenaean pottery only. The Struma valley should

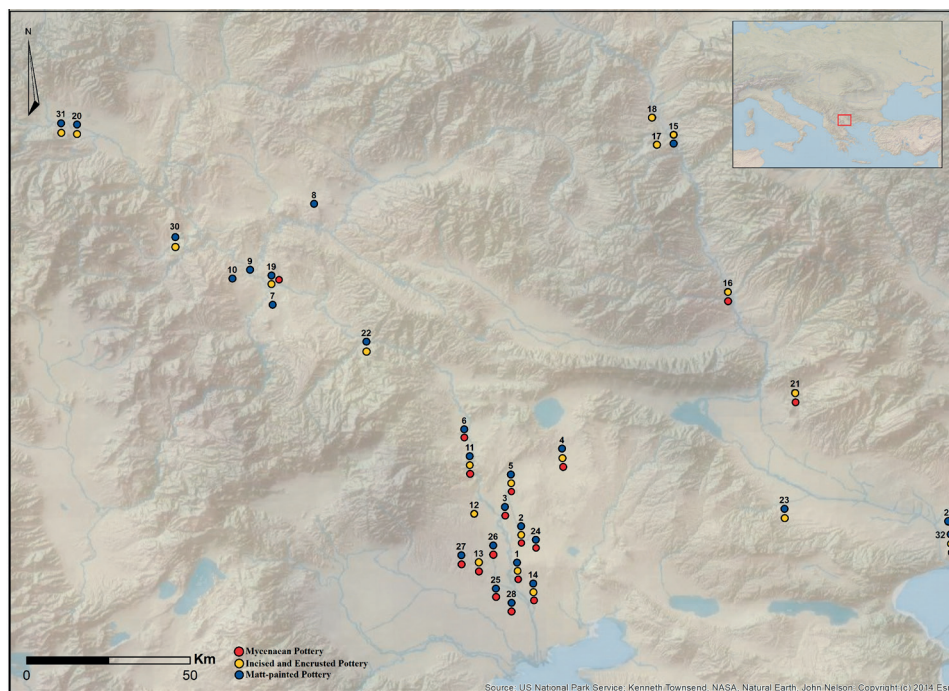


Fig. 2. Archaeological sites with finds of Mycenaean, matt-painted and incised/ encrusted pottery in the Struma and Vardar river valleys (Foll. Schmidt, 1905; Wace, 1914; Rey, 1917; Heurtley, 1939; French, 1967; Grammenos et al., 1997; Horejs, 2007; 2007b; Aslaksen, 2013; Soukantos, Malamidou, 2019) Key: 1 – Kastanas; 2 – Vardaroftsa/ Axiochori; 3 – Limnotopos; 4 – Kalindria/ Kilindir; 5 – Tsautsitzza/ Chauchitsa; 6 – Vardarski Rid; 7 – Stobi; 8 – Krivi Dol; 9 – Ulanci; 10 – Vodovrati; 11 – Kofilak; 12 – Toumba Paionias; 13 – Toumba Livadhi; 14 – Dourmousli; 15 – Kamenska Cuka; 16 – Sandanski; 17 – Krsto Pokrovnik; 18 – Bălgarčevo; 19 – Dimov Grob; 20 – Klučka-Hippodrom; 21 – Faia Petra; 22 – Demir Kapija; 23 – Vergyi; 24 – Anthophytos A and B; 25 – Toumba Kouphalia; 26 – Kouphalia; 27 – Toumba Rakhona; 28 – Valtokhori; 29 – Stathmos Angistas; 30 – Manastir; 31 – Skopje Kale; 32 – Toumba Ofrynio

be taken into consideration as well, despite the smaller number of Mycenaean sherds identified there (necropolises of Sandanski and Faia Petra; Alexandrov, Petkov, Ivanov, 2007, Valla, 2007). Indeed, although a little beyond the scope of this paper, there is evidence of Mycenaean pottery at the archaeological site of Koprivlen, in the Mesta valley in south-western Bulgaria. Here, six wheel-thrown sherds were found that stand out from the local ceramic repertoire. Those fragments were of better quality, and were made using a technology and ornamentation previously unknown in the area (Alexandrov, 2002, p. 74–75). Moreover, some resemble the products of Southern and Central Greece, that were also popular in Thessaly, Central and Eastern Macedonia. Exact parallels of the Mycenaean vessels from Koprivlen were also found in Kastanas (layer 14b), Assiros A (phases 9 and 7) and on the Thessaloniki Toumba (phase 4) and nearly all the recognized vessels are assumed to be locally produced in Macedonia (Jung et al., 2017, p. 269–302). Another piece of evidence from south-western Bul-



garia is a Mycenaean alabastron from the fortified settlement of Bresto in the Razlog valley, an almost perfect parallel to the example from Ulanci necropolis (fig. 1: 4) in the Vardar valley (Athanasov, Kulov, Stockhammer, 2018, p. 423). Additionally, at the site of Dragojna, located in the northern part of the Rhodope Range, further Mycenaean examples were found. Fragments of cups and closed pots were identified as imports from Thessaly based on NAA (close correspondence to the Dimini (Thessaly) examples, Bozhinova, Jung, Mommsen, 2010, p. 45–97). The small number of sites within the Struma valley with Mycenaean sherds may be the result of the state of research, as the fact that invasive investigations focused mainly on “atypical” (non-settlement) sites (Kamenska Cuka and Krsto Pokrovnik, mentioned later). Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind, that discrepancies between both lower and middle courses of the studied valley may result also from the notable differences in the terrain shape.

## 2. Matt-painted pottery

This handmade class is one of two types identified in the Vardar and Struma valleys, which have painted decoration, and comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC deposits. This kind of pottery appeared in the area of the northern Aegean at around the same time or slightly earlier than Mycenaean pottery – about in the 17<sup>th</sup> century BC and remained in use till the end of 12<sup>th</sup> century BC and beginnings of Early Iron Age (Aslaksen, 2013, p. 160; Horejs, 2007a, p. 346).

There are several explanations for the origins and meaning of these ceramics within the archaeological context of the studied area. On the one hand it was interpreted as a local imitation of Mycenaean prototypes (Hänsel, 1979; Jovčevska, 2008; Mitrevski, 2007, p. 445; Videski, 2007, p. 212) and on the other as originating from the Middle Helladic ceramic tradition (Vokotopoulou, 1986, p. 255; Wardle, 1993, p. 124). This handmade painted ware may be also the result of a long existing interaction with inhabitants of central and southern Greece (Horejs, 2007a, p. 282).

There is not much information concerning the overall percentage of matt-painted pottery into the repertoires of individual archaeological sites. Available data are characterized by significant variability, for example in settlement sites of the northern Aegean region, such as Agios Mamas (Chalkidiki Peninsula) and Angelochori (western Macedonia) it comprises from 8 to 40 percent of the whole assemblage (Horejs, 2003, tab. II; Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 357).

In the lower Vardar and Struma valleys there is no surviving evidence for the production processes of matt-painted pottery (Horejs, 2003, p. 345), but as in the case of Mycenaean pottery, it seems that it has been initially imported and over time locally imitated and adapted into a local repertoire (Horejs, 2007a, p. 282). Scientific analysis indicates that local sources of clay were exploited as raw material for its manufacturing (Kiriati, Andreou, Dimitriadis, Kotsakis, 1997). Despite its long period of use, matt-painted pottery remains “conservative”, it did not change significantly with regard to ornamental composition or its execution (Horejs, 2007a, p. 350).

The repertoire of vessel shapes included kantharoi, shallow bowls with angular or sagging bodies and “thumbgrip” handles, basin-shaped vessels (fig. 1: 10, 11) small s-profile bowls with raised vertical handles, closed jars, open-mouthed mugs with raised handles, and pithoi with vertical, strap-like handles (Andreou, Psaraki, 2007, p. 408; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 159–160; Heurtley, 1939, p. 218–219, 220, 224–225; Mitrevski, 2007, p. 445; Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998, p. 274; Videski, 2005, p. 97–98, 2007, p. 212). Painted decoration comprised mainly geometric patterns (fig. 1: 9, 10, 11), triangles (fig. 1: 9, 11), both hatched, and latticed (fig. 1: 9, 11), and attached pot-hook spirals, toothed and wavy lines, bands, multiple zigzags, running spirals, and chevrons (Aslaksen, 2013, p. 159–160; Heurtley, 1939, p. 218–219, 224; Mitrevski, 2007, p. 445; Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 356; Videski, 2005, p. 97–98; 2007, p. 212).

The matt-painted pottery has been recovered from all kinds of sites in the Vardar and Struma valleys. Some hypotheses involve a movement of people, living seasonally in small groups producing this specific kind of pottery (Andreou, Psaraki, 2007, p. 411; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 160). In the middle course of the Vardar there are several places known with finds of matt-painted pottery, mainly from the funeral contexts. The repertoire of shapes is almost consistent with Mycenaean pots (data from Stobi, Krivi Dol, Ulanci, Vodovrati, Manastir and Skopje Kale; Jovčevska, 2008, tab. 22, 24; Mitrevski, 1997, p. 50, 285, 313, 316; 2016, p. 134, fig. 185). Analogous examples to these vessels are recognizable within the sites of Agios Mamas (on the Chalkidiki Peninsula, layers 7 to 4) and Kastanas in the lower Vardar valley (layers 18 to 12) (Horejs, 2007a, p. 266). In the eastern valley, this class is known from the lower and middle course of the river: at the site of Stathmos Angistas (Horejs, 2007a, p. 339) and at Kamenska Cuka (Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998). The relatively sparse distribution of data may be a result of the limited amount of archaeological investigation.

### 3. Incised/ encrusted pottery

Today, more research attention has been given to this class of ceramics, emphasizing its probable importance for the reconstruction of cultural networks in the study area (Aslaksen, 2013; Horejs, 2007; Nenova, 2018; Tsafou, 2015).

The time of appearance of incised/ encrusted ware is uncertain due to the limited archaeological investigation of artifacts of this type. There are some hints that this pottery precedes the matt-painted and Mycenaean pottery in the lower Vardar valley and that its emergence should be dated to the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (according to data from Archontiko in western Macedonia; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 129, 132). Indicators from Angelochori reveal that it was introduced contemporaneously with matt-painted examples (second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC; Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 356). An alternative suggestion arises from the excavation at the site of Thessaloniki Toumba, where incised/ encrusted pottery emerged only at the end of the Late Bronze Age (Andreou, Psaraki, 2007, p. 138). There are also opinions that

encrustation as a decorative technique appears at the sites of the southern Balkans in the second part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Jovčevska, 2008, p. 97–98).

Similar problems concern the percentage of this category within whole assemblages. Due to the fact that it has been incorporated into the tableware category of ceramics (Horejs, 2007, p. 50) we can suggest only a small proportion of the settlement assemblage was in this ceramic class (the only available data in the vicinity of the study area indicate a percentage of around 2 percent, based on data from Agios Mamas: Horejs, 2003; 2007a, p. 344–345). Data from necropolises, however, offered a completely different picture than in settlements: in Faia Petra archaeologists discovered 28 fully preserved pots, of which 22 were manufactured in the manner of incised/ encrusted ware (Valla, 2007, p. 369). Unfortunately, funeral data from Central Macedonia still do not allow for wider conclusions. Information from the necropolis within the middle of Vardar valley, in Manastir site, shows that within decorated wares of pottery used during funeral rites, incised/ encrusted pottery constituted an overwhelming percentage (Jovčevska, 2008, p. 34). This notable difference may suggest various patterns of consumption of incised/ encrusted pottery between settlement and funeral sites, therefore further quantitative analysis are more than advisable.

This specific pottery category is characterized by completely different kinds of ornamentation. In contrast to other two classes of ceramics, this handmade pottery was decorated with tools, removing clay from the surface leaving narrow incisions (for example with the usage of a bone or wood stylus, sharp flints, thin metal sheets or some sort of comb (Becker, Kroll, 2008, p. 162; Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 354–355). In this way, narrow incisions were filled often by a potter using white, yellowish-white, pink, or (rarely) red paste, based on calcareous minerals or sandstones (Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 355; Valla, 2007, p. 366). The surface colors are not standardized, with shades of dark red, black-maroon and even mottling identifiable, due to the uneven firing in reductive conditions and unstable temperatures in the kiln.

The most common shapes produced and used in this class were also mainly small containers, such as kantharoi (fig. 1: 1, 3; most often globular), cups, cut-away neck jugs, juglets (fig. 1: 8), four-handled amphoras, amphoriskoi (fig. 1: 2), and wish-bone-handled bowls (Alexandrov et al., 2007, p. 377; Aslaksen, 2013, p. 132; Horejs, 2007; Jovčevska, 2008; Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998, p. 274; Stefanovich, Kulov, 2007, p. 393; Valla, 2007, p. 366–369; Videski, 2005, p. 95; 2007). So-called “special” pot, characterized by unusual shape, has also been identified – tripod stand (Pilali-Papasteriou, Papaefthymiou-Papanthimou, 2002, fig. 7; Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 355). The incisions formed mainly rectilinear and geometric motifs, triangles (fig. 1: 1, 8), as well as parallel, oblique, and irregular lines, meanders (fig. 1: 2), spirals (fig. 1: 3) and circles, sometimes forming frame-like designs (fig. 1: 2) (Andreou, Psaraki, 2007, p. 408, 412; Aslaksen, 2013; Jovčevska, 2008; Stefani, Meroussis, 1997, p. 356; Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998, p. 274; Stefanovich, Kulov, 2007, p. 393; Tsafou, 2015; Valla, 2007, p. 366–369).

Incised/ encrusted ware has been regarded as a “northern” idea in the local repertoire of ceramics. Since the moment it was first observed in the area in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millen-

nium contexts, researchers have emphasized that this class is a determinant of Balkan, central European or Danubian influences within the fringes of the northern Aegean area (Casson, 1968, p. 132; Hochstetter, 1982, p. 114; Schmidt, 1905). Based on funerary evidence from Thasos and close analogies to the products of the Tei, Verbicioara, Zimnicea-Plovdic, Coslogeni, Wittenberg, Cerkovna, and Girdla Mare-Dubovac Zuto Brdo cultures, it was described as part of a “Balkan koine” (Hochstetter, 1982, p. 108; Koukoulis-Chrysanthaki, 1992, p. 492). Some shapes resemble vessels used within the late Monteoru culture in western Romania (Aslaksen, 2013, p. 129). Another statement claims that this kind of pottery is local, and the phenomenon should be explained by the indigenous processes of the south-eastern Balkans (Aslaksen, 2013, p. 154; Horejs, 2007a, p. 74–78), based on the very wide distribution between the Vardar and Struma river valleys. That thesis seems to be plausible, taking into consideration local differences within decoration and its execution on the pots, as well as archaeological contexts of their appearance. The category of incised and encrusted vessels in south-eastern Balkans started to be visible in the material culture as early as Neolithic [e.g. archaeological site of Olynthus (Stefani, 2015, p. 135, 314), Skopje Kale (Mitrevski, 2016, p. 82, fig. 111), Ilindentsi (Grębska-Kulova, Zidarov, 2020), Chalcolithic (Carevi Kuli (Rujak, 2020, p. 65–69), through Early (Kritsana (Heurtley, 1939, p. 170) and Middle Bronze Age (Kalindria/ Kilindir (Stefani, 2015, p. 153–154), Carevi Kuli (Rujak, 2020, p. 127–134), reaching so-called “transitional period” and Early Iron Age (tumulus in Kunovo Cuki (Mitrevski, 1990, p. 59–77), site of Babyak (Tonkova, Gotsev, 2008), Manastir (Jovčevska, 2008)]. Nevertheless, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC incised and encrusted pots created a recognizable set of specified morphologically vessels, decorated with the usage of similar motifs, executed in a congenial way, visible from upper to lower courses of Vardar and Struma river valleys. Nevertheless, there are evidences of imported incised/ encrusted pots (data from Agios Mamas on the Chalkidiki Peninsula, Horejs, 2007a, p. 287). Answer to the question about origins or autochthonous/ allochthonous character of this specific kind of ceramics needs enhanced researches, strictly focus on this ware of pottery over the vast area. It is worth mentioning that only on the basis of macroscopical observations, supported by the physico-chemical analysis (e.g. XRF or NAA) any conclusions will be reliable. As with the other classes of pottery, the majority of finds are located within the river valleys and close to the coast. The wide distribution of this pottery includes a variety of contexts, settlement sites, necropolises and “atypical” sites (neither settlement nor funeral – fortified outposts, e.g. Kamenska Cuka or Krsto Pokrovnik). In the Vardar valley close similarities in the patterns of the use of incised/ encrusted pottery are visible. Finds from the best recognized necropolises of the Ulanci, Manastir and the northernmost site of Klučka-Hippodrom have close affinities to examples from the lower part of the valley, in the region of Central Macedonia (Jovčevska, 2008; Mitrevski, 2003, p. 46–51; 2013, p. 185, 193; Videski, 2005). Fragments of vessels of the same ware were identified also within the Struma valley. Kamenska Cuka and Krsto Pokrovnik, as well as the settlement site of Bălgarčevo (Pernicheva-Perets, Grębska-Kulova, Kulov, 2007, p. 206–207) revealed sherds closely related to ex-

amples from the northern Aegean (Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998; Stefanovich, Kulov, 2007). The evidence from the Sandanski and Faia Petra necropolises completed that picture, providing additional groups of pottery produced in this peculiar way (Alexandrov et al., 2007; Valla, 2007).

### **Mountainous outposts**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC Vardar and Struma river valleys, in the same way as today, may serve as corridors of networks and interaction, but they could have functioned as some kind of, even topographical, border as well (e.g. in Demir Kapija “Iron Gates” within Vardar valley or Kresna gorge in Struma valley), separating areas of different communities, that are living different ways of life, including having different customs.

Atypical sites of Kamenska Cuka and Krsto Pokrovnik may strengthen this hypothesis. These two excavated (partially) sites stand out from the typical settlement form in having massive, fortified stone walls and almost entirely lack of evidence for permanent habitation (Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998; Stefanovich, Kulov, 2007). Their upland character, relatively small area and location permits a wide view of the valley indicating that they were most likely fortresses or defensive sites, perhaps part of a fortification chain protecting the north-south communication route linking the coasts of the Aegean Sea with the northern area (Grębska-Kulova, Kulov, 2007, p. 291; Pernicheva-Perets et al., 2011, p. 19; Stefanovich, Kulov, 2007, p. 391). Location of the entrance, identified in Kamenska Cuka, additionally supports the thesis about the strongly defensive character of the site – it was placed in the southwest direction, where the approach to the building itself is the most inaccessible. Moreover, there are indicators which certify importance of this building – researchers identified two settlement horizons, first one was ended by the intensive fire, probably caused by the natural cataclysm (perhaps earthquake). The second horizon seems to be more important – it is significant that after the destruction of the first phase of the building in Kamenska Cuka, there are no visible traces of hiatus and any changes within ceramic repertoire. It has been restored immediately after the first destruction, what underlines the significant importance of it (Kulov, Stefanovich, 2005, p. 28). Intervisibility analysis<sup>2</sup> (cumulative viewshed, fig. 3) demonstrates that Kamenska Cuka and Krsto Pokrovnik probably served as outposts, closing off the Struma valley to the south. The full spectrum of visibility from these sites covers almost the whole “Basin of Blagoevgrad”. The eastern outpost (Kamenska Cuka, height of two floors – about 6 m, Stefanovich, Bankoff, 1998) and western (Krsto Pokrovnik, about 3 m height, Stefanovich, Kulov, 2007) are distant 4 km from each other, nevertheless they had clear line of sight, providing an opportunity to alert and

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to express my thanks to dr Jakub Niebieszczański from the Faculty of Archaeology of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, who took me through GIS procedures.



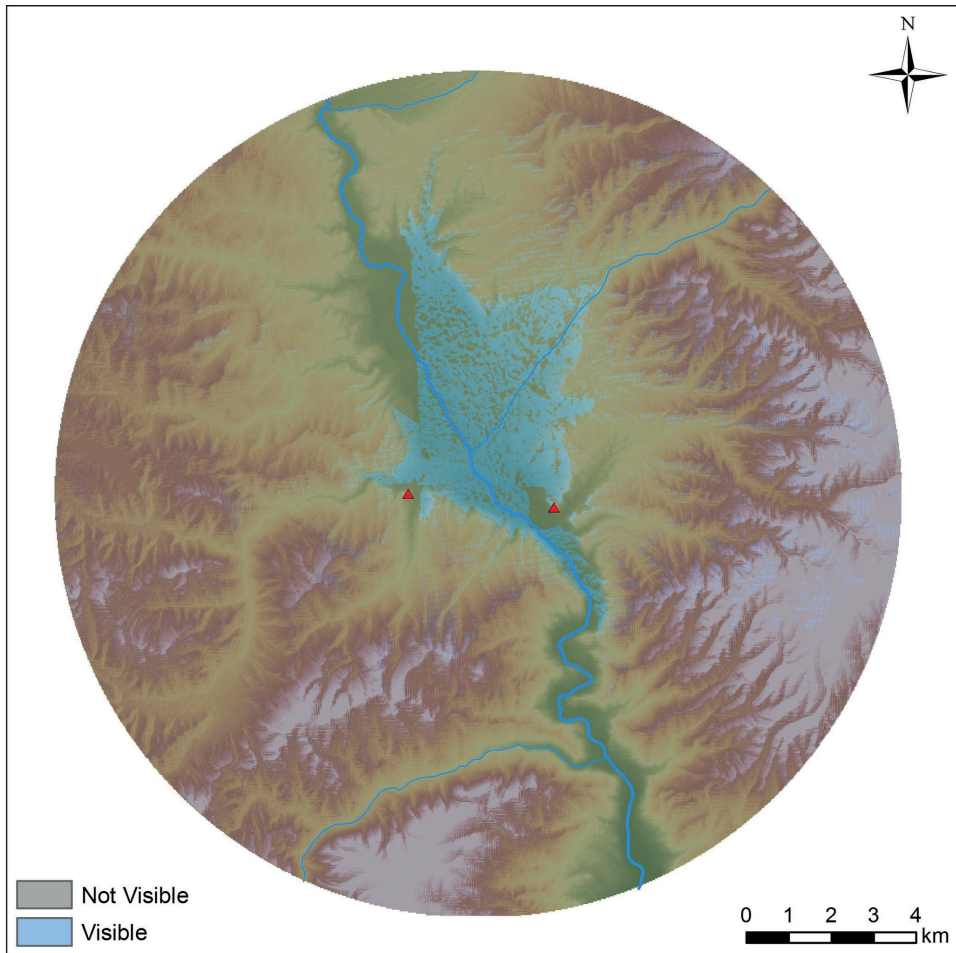


Fig. 3. Visibility towards Basin of Blagoevgrad from the sites of Kamenska Cuka and Krsto Pokrovnik

react in the moment of danger (fig. 4). Mentioned landscape analysis has been performed only for those two sites, due to their known exact geographic coordinates, what makes it possible to prepare a model of intervisibility. After the discoveries of aforementioned two sites, eight more of the same type have been identified within the region of Blagoevgrad in the middle Struma valley (Kulov, Stefanovich, 2005). All of them share similar characteristics: they are located on natural hills that rise directly above the river valleys with very good visibility over the vast area, measure small dimensions (width: 8–10 m and length: 10–12 m, height: 2–3 m), have visible medium sized stones and large fragments of fired daub on the surface, all have been destroyed by the fire and, most probably (due to the pottery analysis) were simultaneous in time (since Late Bronze Age to the very transition to the Early



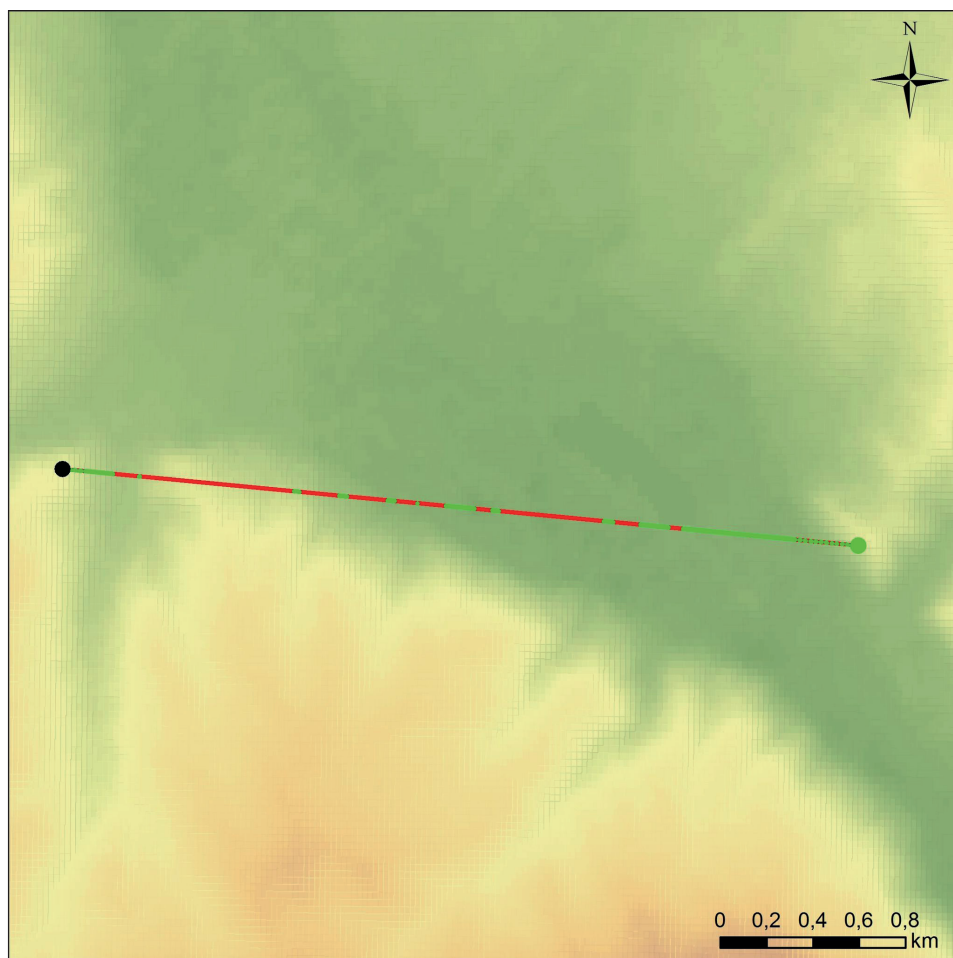


Fig. 4. Line of sight between Kamenska Cuka and Krsto Pokrovnik

Iron Age; Kulov, Stefanovich, 2005, p. 27–28). Most of the recognized sites are registered in the valleys of the Chetirka and Leshnishka rivers – in the direction that leads towards the Delchev Pass – marking and possibly protecting one of the main paths connecting two studied valleys – Struma with Vardar. During surveys a few fragments bearing incised type of decoration have been identified on the surfaces of aforementioned “a-typical” sites. These were sherds with incised triangles decoration, from the sites of Kuklite, Tsiganska Chucklitsa and Surovichcka Cuka (Kulov, Stefanovich, 2005, p. 30–32, 38), which, based on the analysis of vessels’ shapes and ornamentation, has been dated to the Late Bronze Age (13<sup>th</sup> century BC), what was confirmed also by the radiocarbon C<sup>14</sup> dates. After discovery of these highly defensive structures, which have characteristic common features, many questions

arose. Researchers wondered if they are unique for that period and region and tried to find analogies on the north and south, along the Struma valley. Since now, confirmed defensive outposts with strong fortified features, which may certify control over the path along the river in the prehistoric times, have not been discovered in the Vardar valley, in contrast to the middle Struma.

Taking into consideration landscape issues, which are basic for the researches in the studied area, one can focus on possible and available to communicate mountainous paths and “gates” – places constituted strategic positions over the thoroughfares. Within the area of study we can assume the existence of two places, which should be especially focused on. First one is created by the two rivers: Tsaparevska and Bregalnitsa, which form a natural passage connecting Struma with Vardar. Since the Neolithic times one can observe the presence of the settlements in this region (site of Ilindentisi) controlling over natural pass leading east-west direction, which is a major factor in founding it (Dzhanfezova, Doherty, Grębska-Kulova, 2020; Grębska-Kulova, 2017). In the Bronze Age that role was played by the system of fortified outposts – in the type of Kamenska Cuka site, described above, protecting the “Basin of Blagoevgrad”.

The second place, having a strategic position between Vardar and Struma, is a Strumica river valley, carving in mountainous inaccessible terrain with a relatively easy to pass path. On the eastern side (“gate”) to the Strumica valley no Bronze Age sites in favorable locations have been discovered. Nevertheless, the newest discovery on the western entrance requires to pay more attention to that localization. About 450 m above the city of Strumica, located on the crossroads of trading routes, is the place traditionally called Carevi Kuli (“Tsar’s Tower”). Completely inaccessible from north-west and south-east, obviously the localization has been carefully chosen by its inhabitants by the favor of significant geostrategic position in a valley, which has often been a place of military conflicts and destruction, what certifies still visible medieval fortress rise above the river (Rujak, 2020, p. 11–16). In Carevi Kuli archaeologists discovered layers of the Middle Bronze and Early Iron Age with ceramic artifacts bearing incised and encrusted decoration (Rujak, 2020, p. 115–153). According to the analysis of pottery – they have close affinities to the Kastanas site in the lower Vardar area (layers 22a–19 – 1900–1600 BC; Hochstetter, 1984, p. 277) and one with Kalindria/ Kilindir (Heurtley, 1939, p. 206; Stefani, 2015, p. 153–154), although in the latter case example from Carevi Kuli is noticeable deeper and higher (Kalindria/ Kilindir– height – 3.9 cm; Carevi Kuli – 19 cm). Technology of production, chosen ornamental motifs and their execution persuades to incorporate this site into the “contact space” of Vardar and Struma. Moreover, its strategic location with a wide view over the vast area of strategic importance indicates that Carevi Kuli may be included also to the category of outposts, guarding communication route and possible also – reaped the rewards from its localization. Unfortunately, prehistoric strata did not provide complete results – they have been massively disturbed because of the marked erosion and by the later building intrusions on the hill and only two dwellings have been partially uncovered, built in a wooden timber-post construction (Rujak, 2020, p. 125).

Peculiar role of massive watchtowers, discovered in the middle Struma, as well as newly identified site over the Strumica valley, encourage to do the further research within the Vardar area. Closer look on the map allows the selection of potentially easy-to-protect places, which may serve in the prehistory as an outposts, securing thoroughfare and benefiting from it. Along the course of the Vardar, certainly one place meets the requirements drawn above – in the middle course of the river, directly north of modern Greek-North Macedonian border. In the close vicinity of the Vardar river the site of Vardarski Rid has been discovered, which chronologically fits to the issues presented in this article, as well as because of the features of material culture. On the opposite side of the river – 300 m away from the Vardarski Rid site, archaeologists discovered another settlement – Kofilak, located on a dominating hill and certainly holding a strategic position (Videski, 2005). Under the ground, researchers uncovered remains of a building – with the dimensions 8 m x 6 m, built in a traditional manner with wooden posts placed into the stone foundations (the same way as in Carevi Kuli). Discovered artifacts in Kofilak, among others: matt-painted and incised/ encrusted pottery, certify affinities to the material culture revealed on the almost whole length of Vardar (e.g. sites of Dimov Grob, Manastir, Kastanas) and Struma (e.g. Kamenska Cuka, Sandanski, Faia Petra) (Jovčevska, 2008; Videski, 2005). Adding to that similar characteristics of Kofilak's localization with strong geostrategic position over the Vardar valley, which could be a perfect outpost securing mountainous and only accessible path to the north – one can assume that this site may have played an important role in the interregional communication.

### **Burial rites**

Beside of the presence of fortified watchtowers which identify potentially rich human actions and interactions, regardless of their form and shape, within valleys of Vardar and Struma rivers during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, there are also another spheres revealing some level of integration this region in the “contact space”. In the study area substantial differences in the organization of sepulchral spaces, funeral rites and wealth complexity of applied burial customs have been observed. Often in a relatively close area many ways of dead farewell were used. They were sometimes extremely various, like burying inhumated deceased (Sandanski, Ulanci, Faia Petra (mostly); Alexandrov et al., 2007; Valla, 2007; Videski, 2004, 2007) or cremated (Klučka-Hippodrom, Manastir, Jovčevska, 2008; Mitrevski, 1995). The choice of funeral rite referred to completely different belief and value systems employed by the local communities. Even within one approach to the treatment of human body after death, substantial differences are visible – e.g. employment of the funeral pyre and fulfilment of the cremation on the place of definitive burial (Manastir) or usage of urn to which cremated elsewhere remains of deceased were buried (Klučka-Hippodrom). Different organization and the structure of the necropolises is visible, as well as various methods of marking the burials. Nevertheless, as it has been men-

tioned at the beginning of this paragraph – some hints certify that we can assume necropolises in the valleys of Vardar and Struma as arguments supporting the thesis about presence of “contact space”. Beside many differences, very shortly described above, there are common features. From the very beginning – preparation of the terrain chosen for a necropolis seems to be similar. It implies act of purification and fencing the chosen ground – similar or identical procedures are observable at the wider Balkan region, even outside the scope of this paper (e.g. in the sites of Manastir (Jovčevska, 2008), Gradiste near Pelince, at the sector Dve Mogili (Trajkovska, 1999), also in Belotic – Bela Crkva group (Garaszanin, 1988), necropolis I in Gorna Strazava in Donja Brnjica – Pirot (Kostih, 1992), etc. Some parts of the ritual seem to be also similar within the valleys of Vardar and Struma. There are similarities visible in the remained traces of ritual sacrificing of animals in order to prepare funeral feasts, being important event of a ceremonial where most inhabitants probably participated (Manastir, Klučka-Hippodrom, Dimov Grob, Faia Petra) or presence of fireplaces (Manastir, Faia Petra). Finally, one of the common features is certainly employment to funeral rituals similar repertoires of pottery vessels, treated in a similar way. In every cemetery one can find pots of matt-painted, incised/ encrusted and sometimes Mycenaean ware. Served as an offerings, as well as indispensable utilitarian tools during funeral rites, used as liquids containers and pots aimed at the consumption of food and drinks during the feasts. This collective event left in the archaeological strata an impressive record – piles of sherds, what can be gently considered as a certification of the presence of a wide network of rites and symbols connected to the ritual libation, including vessels’ breaking. Adding to those evidences, a large number of kantharoi-type vessels, which, according to the researchers (Jovčevska, 2008), may played a similar and significant role to the “kylikes” pots in the Mycenaean civilization zone (Cavangh, Mee, 1998, p. 112–115). We can also carefully assume the existence of elaborate, complex, advanced and multistage ritual, in the shape of events known from southern Aegean in the Late Bronze Age. In a similar way to its counterparts from the south, funeral feasts in Vardar and Struma valleys may serve as a strengthening factor of the social ties for the whole community, taking into consideration a common participation of its members in them. Apart from common characteristics, which were shared over the studied area, no one can forget that there are also visible traces within funeral data, connecting valleys of Vardar and Struma with external, neighboring regions (especially northern). There are plenty of them, nevertheless due to the limited space and complexity of this issue, I would like to mention only similarities in the treatment manner of the deceased, intentionally choice of the place for necropolis, specific adjustments of it and the common use of portable braziers (“pyraunos”) during ritual feasts and preparation of food on them, as well as some shapes of pots similar to those found north of Northern Macedonia (especially visible in the cases of Manastir, Klučka-Hippodrom and Donja Brnjica; Jovčevska, 2008, p. 63, 118; Jung, 2007; Mitrevski, 1995; Žeravica, 2010). This evidence connects the studied area with the wider horizon of Central and Western Balkans, certifying the opinion that

archaeological sites and regions cannot be understood only in isolation (Hall et al., 2010, p. 234). It is worth to remember also that in the lower course of the Vardar river, in the region with the greatest number of identified archaeological sites from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, the necropolises still have not been discovered yet, which could be associated to the multilayered tell settlements. Therefore a significant part of the knowledge is waiting to be discovered and incorporated into the models of interaction within the study area.

## DISCUSSION

This paper had an aim to discuss mainly three different categories of pottery and accompanying them archaeological data from settlements, necropolises and fortified outposts as a complementary information, without which “raw” ceramic evidences remain incomplete. I wanted to demonstrate that the Vardar and Struma river valleys were a significant arena of cultural interaction in the prehistory.

The idea of *contact space*, proposed in the theoretical chapter above, and successfully applied for other region of south-eastern Balkans, suggests three possible results of human interaction – acceptance, appropriation, and ignorance or rejection (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018, p. 106), which may be traced on the basis of selected data.

The first of those results – acceptance – is visible in the distribution pattern of two tableware pottery classes discussed in this paper: Mycenaean and matt-painted. The ideas staying behind them were incorporated in the material culture of communities lived in Vardar and Struma river valleys, often without any changes and without indication of attempts to adapt them according to the local needs and desires. They emerged in settlements sites, fortified watchtowers and in necropolises, as probably luxurious and desired items, which because of their far-away origins gain additional, special and non-utilitarian meaning.

The second result of human interplay – appropriation – means the transformation of foreign ideas for local needs (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018, p. 106). This effect may also be interpreted from the evidences of studied sites. Mycenaean pottery, initially imported, began to be imitated locally. Matt-painted pottery had close affinities with Thessaly, and was presumably the result of long lasting interactions with the inhabitants of central and southern Greece. As with Mycenaean pottery – it seems that matt-painted pottery was also initially imported, subsequently locally imitated and eventually adapted into the local material culture. As it has been proposed (Jovčevska, 2008; Mitrevski, 2007, p. 445; Videski, 2007, p. 212), matt-painted pottery constituted often an equivalent of the technologically elaborate Mycenaean archetypes, replacing them in the same contexts. The examples of incised/ encrusted ware, despite its not yet fully understood origins, provides another evidence of appropriation. This specific class of pottery seems to be produced locally in workshops of Vardar and Struma valley, what is certified by the numerous ways of decoration execution as well as diversified quality of vessels production. Nevertheless, imported items within this

group are also not excluded. The main idea of staying behind the peculiar manner of decoration, being significantly different from decoration from the southern regions, seems to have originated from the Danubian area (terrains of Romania and Bulgaria). That idea of decorating vessels using incisions and then filling them with encrustation has been incorporated into the repertoire of potters' skills in the study area. Nevertheless, that concept has evolved and transformed into numerous local variations and manners of execution in order to meet the needs and requirements of Vardar and Struma inhabitants. Elaborate sets of ornaments has been executed on the limited number of vessels' shapes, what can be explained by the modern and spacious concept of fashion (Jovčevska, 2008, p. 116) and simple local preferences. Use of the encrustation technique is a different issue. Inside the incisions of many vessels remains preserved white calcareous powder, but other pots seem to be only ornamented with incisions. Explanation of that fact still waits for the answer, as well as clarification of choices for encrustation colors (white, pink or red). No patterns have been identified concerning that issue. Nevertheless, appropriation of the idea of incised/ encrusted pottery within study valleys seems to be indisputable.

Ceramic vessels are connected also to another example of appropriation, visible on the necropolises within studied valleys. Participants of the funeral rituals, probably majority of local communities, during final farewell to the deceased used specific sets of pots – they constituted a collection of tableware categories, which originals came from distant regions. Sometimes during the same event served altogether on the funeral feast and after that were buried with the deceased as offerings. That specific ritual very much resembles southern burial customs, known from the Aegean core of Mycenaean civilization. Nevertheless, this manner has been appropriated by the local communities. Often, instead of using archetypical kylikes, participants preferred kantharoi (sometimes matt-painted) with a combination of incised/ encrusted jugs. Burial ritual differs significantly, especially within northern regions of the studied area, where customs of cremation appeared in opposition to the skeletal manner prevailing on the south. Nevertheless, elaborated and rich feasts closely tied participants of the funeral events with inhabitants of the southern regions, what may serve as an emphasize of the role, position and status of the burying deceased within the local community and even outside it.

The third and the last result of human interactions – rejection – may be visible in the lower Vardar valley and manifest in the rejection of the elaborate and precisely arranged burial customs visible in the middle and upper course of this river as well as within the valley of Struma. This is strict contrary to the neighboring area, where funeral rites were very rich, and many exotic and luxury objects were deposited with the bodies, like e.g. Aiani in western Macedonia (Karamitrou-Mentesidi, 2002), Spathes on the nearby Mount Olympus range (Poulaki-Pandermali, 1987), Kastri on Thasos island (Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, 1992), Ulanci Dimov Grob in the north (Videski, 2007). In the central area of the northern Aegean there is a lack of discovered cemeteries corresponding to the biggest tell settlements (Andreou, 2010, p. 651). As it has already been mentioned, a lack of funeral sites in the Late Bronze Age in this area may



be also a result of the state of research. The process of rejection may also be perceptible directly south of the geographic scope of this paper, in the lack of incised and encrusted pottery in the archaeological record of central Greece. With the exception of a single artifacts, this pottery is absent beyond this part of the northern Aegean and was not adopted by the communities to the south in opposition to other categories of northern origins pottery (e.g. portable braziers – *pyraunos*).

Processes of hybridization and translation, linked to the presumed existence of “contact space”, may be discernible within the area such as the evidence of the local handmade production of Mycenaean pots (Videski, 2007, p. 212). Further evidence of these processes may be seen in the use of the “northern” style incised decoration on local pottery shapes (Horejs, 2007, p. 296–297). Material culture may be both the cause and the outcome of communications and interactions (Gimatizidis, Pieniążek, 2018, p. 14). One of the reasons for contacts in river valleys during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium could have been products and commodities, which were transported inside the pottery vessels. Many of the trade goods are archaeologically invisible or can only be inferred from the remains of the vessels presumably used to convoy them (Greaves, 2007, p. 9–21). Matt-painted, Mycenaean and incised/ encrusted pottery is characterized mainly by small, predominantly closed vessels, which may have served as containers for precious contents, which could have been the subject of exchange. The outcome or result of communication may have been the inclusion of these foreign categories into the local south-eastern Balkan ceramic repertoire and their adoption over time. For example, the presence of Mycenaean pottery and its local imitation became one of the main indicators of the Late Bronze Age in the region of Northern Macedonia (as shown at Ulanci; Mitrevski, 2013, p. 181).

This article suggests that pottery evidences demonstrate the existence of a “contact space” – a place, where “human actors meet, perceive and constitute otherness, clash, and grapple with each other” (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018, p. 105). This open platform for various social behaviors (communication, interaction, exchange products and ideas etc.) may form an arena for the “movements of prospectors, specialists and traders [...], «heroes» and chieftains [...]” (Aslaksen, 2015, p. 18). Presence of that kind of mobility, which can be performed through only accessible thoroughfares, namely Vardar and Struma valleys with adjacent paths, is indirectly confirmed by the remains of strongly fortified “atypical” sites, that functioned as some sort of outposts, from the middle Struma and presumably also from the Vardar valley. Gaining an advantage from their geostrategic positions, laid in the foundations of the “contested periphery” concept (Allen, 1997). Carefully chosen place on the secure position with a wide view over the surroundings in the only accessible communication paths, may benefit economically, military and result in a consolidation of the power of local authority, regardless of its character. Also in many places the discussed paths may be blocked in the favored locations, like gorges and passes (Bouzek, 1985, p. 221). Discovered outposts (also the “potential” ones, like Carevi Kuli or Kofilak) certify that those valleys would serve as strategic thoroughfares, being a valuable area, also from the point of view of wide repertoire of human interactions in the prehistory, which

may be considered within the concept of “contact space”. Those massive buildings may constitute the presence of the interests of different communities, perhaps sometimes in opposition to one another (according to the idea of “contested peripheries”). Defense of key locations may explain the indispensable and very needed existence (example of immediately restoration of Kamenska Cuka) and position of the several fortifications guarding “Blagoevgrad Basin”, possibly connection between Vardar and Struma by the Strumica valley and Vardar valley itself. Although, there is no direct evidence for a hierarchical settlement pattern in this area and presence of institutionalized authority, which would be capable to rule over it, the possibility of this should be taken into consideration. Hints, such as elaborated funeral feasts, collecting majorities of local community members or required labor inputs to the construction of inaccessible mountain fortresses with connection to the mobilization of considerable resources of the workforce are convincing enough to at least consider the existence of some sort of authority. Any other explanations of this phenomenon require further research.

Nevertheless, the Vardar and Struma rivers and their valleys constituted “veins connecting key areas” (Aslaksen, 2015, p. 16). The western path is considered to be a zone orientated towards the southern Aegean because of the vast presence of imported and locally imitated Mycenaean vessels (Nenova, 2018, p. 300). However, influences also come from the north. Beginning from the northernmost site of the Skopje Kale and Klučka-Hippodrom, moving south through Manastir, Ulanci and Vardarski Rid, Kofilak and Kastanas, a mixture of features from both Aegean and the Balkan cultural circles is observable, predominantly visible in the pottery assemblages (Videski, 2007), as well as in elaborate funeral rites (Jovčevska, 2008; Mitrevski, 1995; Videski, 2004).

The eastern route, the Struma corridor, provides an even more peculiar picture. This river valley, even since the Early Neolithic times, is believed to have played an important role in the initial spread of early farmers’ life ways, from the Near East to the Balkans and further to Central Europe (Zidarov, Grębska-Kulova, 2013). In the middle course of this valley, unexpected archaeological sites have been identified. The strongly inaccessible buildings in the heavily mountainous area stand out from the typical form of archaeological sites in the region. These could provide the basis for an argument for the presence of a chain of fortified outposts in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, which may have secured this potential communication path linking the Aegean with southeastern and even central Balkans. As an enhancement of this thesis served ethnographic and ethnohistorical analysis, which stated that those outposts have been located in the same places as roman “Gradišta”, situated on the difficult to access places. They may be compared with later inns which, except for securing the roads, played a role of hostels and are especially good markers of ancient paths. In some of such places, a long chronological tradition is observed, with the remains from the Neolithic, Late Bronze Age and Roman periods (Grębska-Kulova, 2013, p. 142–145). In the same valley, cemeteries with offerings of pottery vessels representing both the northern and southern traditions of ceramic production have also been identified (Sandanski and Faia Petra, Alexandrov et al., 2007; Valla, 2007).

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article is to suggest that the application of the theoretical model of “contact space” (Stockhammer, Athanassov, 2018), as well as attempt to the incorporation of other models (based on the world-system theory), to the human interactions in the Vardar and Struma valleys during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, could be useful. Long-lasting mutual influences in this area resulted in the emergence of unique constructs, leading to a peculiar mosaic of various material features from different cultural circles, selectively adopted and incorporated by the local communities. Despite of being very often downplayed and underappreciated, people living on the peripheries and margins of the Aegean world might have been active participants of interregional interactions and played an important role in the communication networks, even above the local and regional scales. Certainly, presence of various wares of pottery, as well as elaborate funeral behaviors visible in some parts of study area, may be assumed as the results of integration into the interregional network of interplays.

As it has been stated in the models of “contested” and “negotiated peripheries”, the role of local communities would be easily strengthened by themselves. A few vantage features, which could be also conditions for the local communities during “negotiations” with “foreign clients” could be highlighted here. Inhabitants of Vardar and Struma valley certainly had the best access to the important communication paths. They exercised control over them, what has been proven by the discovered remains of fortified outposts. Moreover, as longtime residents of those unfavorable areas, they were skillful guides who knew how to cross all of the difficult paths and what kind of climatic conditions would be expected there, and therefore they constituted a valuable source of information. In other words – inhabitants of those margins and peripheries were a guarantee of the safe flow of objects, ideas and people during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium in south-eastern Balkans. Moreover, described advantages presumably further benefited, not only from the commercial point of view, but also non-utilitarian, for instance in the form of enhancing power of authorities. Economic benefits would be spent e.g. to the construction of other fortified outposts, needed reinforcements/restorations of existing ones, to possess luxurious items of prestige or organization of elaborate communal funeral feasts, which resulted in the consolidation of stable socio-economic local and regional conditions.

Living in the “contact space” delivered opportunities and allowed to fulfil aspiration, which outside it would be impossible to exploit and perform. In other (slightly metaphorical) words, from a perspective of the nomenclature of basic “world-systems”, due to the active exploitation of their chances, peripheries would get away and escape from the peripheries.

At the end of this paper it is worth adding, that all of the ideas proposed here are on an early stage and should be only treated as a beginning of the way. All of hypothesis drawn here should be verified on the basis of careful material culture analysis within vast area of south-eastern Balkans, bearing in mind that some characteristics of it (such as pottery ornamentation or its execution) have very wide distribution and

chronological pattern and not always will be useful in the detailed study on the issues of prehistoric human interactions. The whole subject of European Bronze Age creates an interconnected system, in which every single puzzle matters.

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POWIĄZANIA KULTUROWE DOLIN WARDARU I STRUMY.  
KILKA UWAG NA TEMAT ROLI POŁUDNIOWO-WSCHODNICH BAŁKANÓW  
W 2. TYSIĄCLECIU P.N.E.

Streszczenie

Rzeki Wardar i Struma przepływają niemal przez cały obszar południowo-wschodnich Bałkanów, wycinając w trudno dostępnym górskich terenach doliny, w których panowały warunki sprzyjające ludzkiej egzystencji od tysięcy lat. Rzeki te tworzyły nie tylko miejsca do życia, ale również wpływały w istotny sposób na interakcje między społecznościami Egei i Bałkanów, łącząc obszary znacznie różniące się pod względem klimatycznym i kulturowym. Nawet dziś stosowane są te same szlaki wzdłuż Wardaru i Strumy, dostarczając możliwość cyrkulacji dóbr, idei i ludzi.

Dowody na istnienie ludzkich interakcji sprzed ponad trzech tysięcy lat w omawianym obszarze widoczne są w archeologicznym zapisie po dziś dzień, tworząc swoistą mozaikę lokalnych i obcych cech kultury materialnej. Mimo znaczących różnic w stanie badań między poszczególnymi krajami znajdującymi się w obrębie omawianych dolin rzecznych (Grecja, Bułgaria, Macedonia) istnieją pewne możliwości wnioskowania na podstawie dostępnych informacji archeologicznych. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie teoretycznych modeli kontaktów kulturowych, możliwych do zaaplikowania w południowo-wschodnich Bałkanach, na podstawie wybranych danych pochodzących z analizy materiałów ceramicznych z 2 tysiąclecia p.n.e., aspektów funkcjonowania ufortyfikowanych posterunków i wyselekcjonowanych informacji płynących z badań funeraliów.

Podczas ponad 50-letniego funkcjonowania teorii systemu światowego ulegał on znaczącym przemianom, co doprowadziło w rezultacie do powstania wielu jego wariantów, znacznie lepiej dopasowanych do dyskursu archeologicznego. Podstawowe założenia nie ulegały jednak znaczącym zmianom – przeszłe społeczności ludzkie nie mogły funkcjonować w całkowitej izolacji, a interakcje kulturowe powodują zmiany i rozmaite rezultaty widoczne w archeologicznym zapisie.

Fakt ten jest doskonale dostrzegalny w południowo-wschodnich Bałkanach w 2 tysiącleciu p.n.e. To właśnie w dolinach rzecznych Wardaru i Strumy widoczne są wpływy dwóch odmiennych kręgów kulturowych – egejskiego i bałkańskiego. Lokalne zbiorowości ludzkie pod wpływem impulsów zewnętrznych i dążenia do dostosowywania obcych wzorców do własnych potrzeb wytworzyły specyficzny fenomen materialnej kultury, będącej swoistą hybrydą cech południowych, północnych i lokalnych. Jest ona obserwowalna w ramach pozostałości wytworów ceramicznych, szczególnie w postaci importów, adaptacji i naśladownictwa klas mykeńskiej, matowo-malowanej i nacinanej, i inkrustowanej.

Argumentem wzmacniającym tezę o istnieniu w południowo-wschodnich Bałkanach areny wzajemnych interakcji kulturowych są również pozostałości unikalnych fortyfikacji górskich, ulokowanych w niedostępnych obszarach omawianych dolin rzecznych. Budowle te, lokowane w punktach posiadających najlepsze warunki do obserwacji otaczającego je terenu, miały między sobą niezaburzoną linię kontaktu wzrokowego, co sprzyjało szybkości reakcji na wypadek zauważonego niebezpieczeństwa przez jedną ze strażnic.

Dane płynące z odkrywanych funeraliów w dolinach rzecznych Wardaru i Strumy charakteryzują się pewnymi podobieństwami w realizacji zwyczajów pogrzebowych, co może wskazywać na istnienie w tym regionie sprzyjających warunków do wymiany idei i powstania platformy kontaktu, w ramach której funkcjonowały poszczególne zbiorowości. Mimo niekiedy różniącego się obrządku, niektóre z zachowań wydają się być podobne, jak również były wykonywane przy użyciu wytworów tej samej kategorii w obrębie całej długości biegu omawianych rzek.

Ludzie żyjący na peryferiach i marginesach świata egejskiego, mimo że bardzo często bagatelizowani i niedoceniani, mogli być aktywnymi uczestnikami interakcji międzyregionalnych i odgrywać ważną rolę w sieciach komunikacji, nie tylko w skali lokalnej, ale również regionalnej i nawet ponad nią. Obecność różnorodnych wyrobów garncarskich, a także wyrafinowane zwyczaje pogrzebowe, widoczne w niektórych częściach badanego obszaru, można uznać za rezultaty integracji w międzyregionalną sieć wzajemnych oddziaływań.

Pradziejowi mieszkańcy dolin Wardaru i Strumy mieli najlepszy dostęp do ważnych szlaków komunikacyjnych i sprawowali nad nimi kontrolę, czego dowodzą odkryte pozostałości ufortyfikowanych posterunków. Co więcej, jako mieszkańcy tych niesprzyjających terenów byli najprawdopodobniej zręcznymi przewodnikami, którzy wiedzieli, jak przekraczać trudne szlaki i jakich warunków klimatycznych można się tam spodziewać, a zatem stanowili cenne źródło informacji. Innymi słowy – mieszkańcy stref marginalnych i peryferyjnych byli gwarantem bezpiecznego przepływu przedmiotów, idei i ludzi w 2 tysiącleciu p.n.e. w południowo-wschodnich Bałkanach. Życie w swoistej „strefie kontaktu” dawało im ogromne możliwości i pozwalało realizować aspiracje, których poza nią nie można by było wykorzystać.