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ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA ON THE GREAT AEGEAN MIGRATIONS

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Abstract: *Transitional periods, in historical and cultural terms, have always been the most interesting and provocative times for study, as they invariably bring significant changes and shape the future cultural and historical development. These times witness processes that dismantle, abandon, or alter old values, interrupting the ongoing cultural development. On the other hand, new values without local traditions are introduced, forming the foundations for a new cultural development.*

Key words: Great Aegean Migrations, Bronze age, Iron age, Aegean basin

Transitional periods, in historical and cultural terms, have always been the most interesting and provocative times for study, as they invariably bring significant changes and shape the future cultural and historical development. These times witness processes that dismantle, abandon, or alter old values, interrupting the ongoing cultural development. On the other hand, new values without local traditions are introduced, forming the foundations for a new cultural development. However, these processes often mark times of uncertainty, social and military unrest, all accompanied by economic and cultural degradation, until the stabilization of the new values and the new culture. This was the case with the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the Aegean Basin, and especially in Macedonia, centuries of serious decline in cultural and civilizational values, filled with destructive events, military campaigns, and ethnic movements. These events are usually seen through the prism of migrations, so in the Balkans, this period of transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age (13th - 11th century BC) is identified with the so-called Great Aegean Migrations, assuming that they were events and movements that both originated from and had the Aegean Basin as their destination.

A lot has been written about these events, yet we still do not have satisfactory answers to key questions.¹ Thus, these events are not adequately documented, and we lack adequate answers regarding their chronology, character, directions, and mechanisms of all movements, as well as the fundamental cultural manifestations associated with them. Furthermore, the consequences for the local environments affected by these events have been largely neglected. The reason for this is undoubtedly the weak archaeological exploration, especially in the territories immediately north of the Aegean world, which were most exposed to these events. In this context, the wider Macedonian region has played a significant role. In the past 30 years, numerous new archaeological findings related to that period, from the 13th to the 11th century BC, have emerged, significantly enriching the understanding of the events within the framework of the so-called Great Aegean Migrations.²

In earlier literature, there is an emphasis on several different waves of migrations (most commonly 3) that occurred from north to south, at different times and in different directions, bringing different cultural manifestations.³

The first wave is usually dated to the final decades of the 13th century up to the very beginning of the 12th century BC and is associated with well-known events from written sources, many of which have been archaeologically confirmed. These events include the collapse of the Mycenaean centers, the attacks of the so-called northern seafaring peoples on Egypt, the Philistine migration, the fall of the Hittite Empire, and similar events. In any case, it is certain that this wave was marked by ethnic movements across a vast territory, mainly taking place via maritime routes, from the south-eastern Alpine region, along the eastern Adriatic coast to the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the question of the nature of these events is still open, specifically whether they can be treated as genuine migrations or simply as military incursions triggered by social unrest. In connection with that, there are several points that can already be considered scientific facts.

Outside of the maritime routes and coastal regions, there is no evidence of events from the first wave of migrations, neither through ruined settlements, new burial rituals, nor the introduction of foreign forms into local material culture. On the contrary, in Macedonia and the interior of the Balkans during that time, a peaceful local development is very clearly documented. Numerous Late Bronze Age sites, mostly necropolises, surround well-defined cultural groups. Thus, the entire period from the 14th to the beginning of the 12th century is presented as a time of peaceful and prosperous development within stable Late Bronze Age cultural groups (Figure 1). Moreover, the northern groups associated with the rivers of the Danube basin were culturally oriented towards

¹ Milošević V., 1949; Garasanin M., 1962; Desborough A. V. R., 1972; Snodgrass Z. M., 1971; Bouzek J., 1974; Snodgrass A., 2000; Sanders N. K., 1978; Stefanović M., 1973; Diamond S., 1988; Dickinson O., 2007; Whitley J., 2003; Drows R., 1993; Mitrevski D., 2022.

² Mitrevski D., 2022, 115.

³ Milošević V., 1949; Garasanin M., 1962.

the Danube region and the northern Balkans, while the southern groups, along the Aegean drainage basin, were oriented towards the Aegean world (Figure 2). The highest achievements were made precisely by the communities along the major communication lines, such as the Vardar Valley and Haliacmon in Macedonia, Devol in Albania, and the valleys of the Lower Struma and Maritsa in Bulgaria and Northeastern Greece.⁴

The most vivid example is the situation in the Vardar Valley, where from the 14th to the 12th century BC, the local Late Bronze Age Dorjan or Povardarie culture flourished. It is known for findings from several settlements such as Kastanas, Vardarofca, Kilindir, Mrdaja, Vardarski Rid, Stolot - Ulançi, Manastir-Chashka, Kale Skopje, and others, as well as numerous necropolises of the Ulançi type (Figure 3).⁵ All these archaeological sites manifest unique and stable cultural values, maintaining close and still undisturbed relationships with the south, with the Aegean world of the Late Bronze Age. In this sense, the cultural position of the other neighbouring regions along the mentioned communication lines is absolutely the same.

It is evident that the first wave primarily unfolded through maritime routes, and as a result, it had limited impact in the interior regions, where it did not leave significant recognizable traces.

The events of the so-called second wave of the Aegean migrations were far more significant and dramatic. Archaeological data date these events to the 12th and 11th centuries BC, illustrating this time as a period of unrest filled with migrations and destruction, which had significant consequences for the subsequent development of central Balkan communities, particularly in Macedonia.

According to the distribution and the conditions of discovery of archaeological findings related to these events, it is clear that the migrants moved along the major Balkan communication routes in a north-south direction. Specifically, they moved from the broader region of the Northern Balkans and the Carpathian-Danube region towards the Aegean Basin and the already-destroyed Mycenaean or Anatolian centers (Figure 4). Their presence in the southern regions is easily detected through a series of innovations in the local material and spiritual culture. Firstly, through the appearance of their cremation burial ritual in urns, as opposed to the dominant inhumation in a flexed position among the Late Bronze Age communities south of the Shar Mountain-Stara Planina line. Equally indicative are the deposits of massive bronze objects and molds for casting, as well as concealed offerings in ceramic vessels with food,

⁴ Mitrevski D., 2003, 23; Mitrevski D., 2022, 64; Karamitrou-Mentessidi G., 2008, 12; Andrea Z., 1976; Prendi F., 1982, 220; Stefanovic M.-Bankoff H. A., 1998; Aleksandrov S.-Petkov V.-Ivanov G., 2007; Valla. M., 2007, 368; Popov H., Jokenhovel 2011, 193.

⁵ Mitrevski D., 2003, 46; Mitrevski D., 2013, 183; Papazovska A., 2019, 49; Videski Z., 2022; Mitrevski D., 2022, 64.

and, of course, the characteristic, conditionally called Central European or Danubian forms of weapons (swords, spears, axes - celts, sickles, etc.).⁶

All of these phenomena are encountered for the first time in Macedonia and neighboring regions in the 12th century, although even before that, towards the end of the Late Bronze Age in this area, some new ceramic forms, previously known only in the north, in the Carpathian-Danube region, speak of long-established north-south relations. The most beautiful examples of this are the so-called globular kantharoi with incrustation and the hearth vessels known as *Puranoi* (Figure 5). They testify to certain influences from north to south even during the Late Bronze Age, just as they illustrate mutual contacts between northern and central Balkan communities.

For the globular vessels with a short neck and incised decoration, it is believed that their inspiration came from the Late Bronze Age ceramic traditions in the Danube region, particularly from the territory of the culture of incised pottery. From there, the influences spread southward through the Morava and Struma river valleys to Lower Povardarie, where they gained special popularity (Figure 5:1-3).⁷

Furthermore, indicative are the findings of the specific cooking vessels that also functioned as portable hearths, known as *Puranoi* (Figure 5:4-8). Their origin is also sought in the north, where the idea, towards the end of the Late Bronze Age, spread to the south, covering the entire area from Albania to the Black Sea.⁸ Moreover, these vessels, became particularly popular in the territory of Macedonia, and they continued to evolve continuously throughout the entire Iron Age and into the Classical period. Their popularity is linked to changes in dietary habits and food preparation methods, which were gradually adopted and fully embraced in Macedonia.

These two forms of evidence best suggest the forthcoming turbulent events and trace the path of mass migrations from the north to the south, toward the Aegean Basin. The ultimate destination of these migrations was Continental Greece and Asia Minor, where, amidst the already-destroyed Mycenaean centers and in the Sub-Mycenaean and early Protogeometric necropolises, as well as in Troy (Troy B2), typical North Balkan and Danubian products are encountered.⁹

Decades ago, assumptions about the southward and south-eastward penetration of Balkan elements were already relevant. However, today, we can discuss all aspects of these events related to the so-called second wave of the Great Aegean Migrations with a much more documented understanding. Let's briefly examine the main archaeological manifestations that illustrate these events.

⁶ Lestakov L., 2018, 383; Черних Е., 1978, 195; Jochenhovel J., 2018, 172; Бонев А., 1988, 54; Hansel B., 1976, 77.

⁷ Mitrevski D., 2022, 124.

⁸ Gimatsidis S., 2017; Horajjs B., 2007, 148; Mitrevski D., 2022, 125.

⁹ Garasanin M., 1953; Dimitrov D.P., 1962; Stefanovic M., 1973; Bankoff-Mayer-Stefanovich, 1975; Ilieva P., 2018; Pavuk P., 2018.

The majority of the phenomena dated to the 12th to 11th century BC clearly indicate unique events associated with the incursions of Danubian elements and populations through the Morava-Vardar Valley, from the Iskar to the Struma and Mesta rivers, and through the Upper Thracian Plain into the Maritsa Valley. These movements were undoubtedly followed by conquests, destruction, and destabilization with lasting consequences, especially in the mentioned communication regions. However, the intensity, character, and consequences of these events varied in different regions.

The most exposed region, with the most dynamic and dramatic events, and therefore the most serious consequences for future development, was the Vardar Valley. A large number of findings illustrating these events in the Vardar Valley clearly indicate that the disturbances were long-lasting, caused by continuous military incursions and the movement of new populations from the north through the Morava route to the Vardar Valley. Some communities settled at specific points, while others continued to Continental Greece. In any case, these events permanently disrupted the Late Bronze Age development within the local Povardarie or Ulanzi cultural group.¹⁰ In contrast to the previous relations with the south, lasting relationships with the north were reestablished, along with cultural connections with the northern central Balkan communities. This would prove crucial in shaping the new Iron Age culture in Macedonia.

After the intensive development during the Late Bronze Age, almost simultaneously, all settlements in the Vardar Valley were forcibly destroyed and were not rebuilt. Their cemeteries also ceased to be used during the same period. Only in a few exceptions, such as the settlement of Tumba-Kastanas, which, being an island in the Vardar River, was naturally well-protected and economically stronger, life continued, albeit with lasting consequences.¹¹ During the 12th and 11th centuries, the settlement of Tumba-Kastanas was 4 times repeatedly and consecutively destroyed by fire and always rebuilt. However, with each rebuilding came dramatic changes and the appearance of numerous new elements introduced from the north through the Morava-Vardar Valley. Among other things, changes in the topography and organization of the settlement are documented, with a new internal plan and a new architectural concept. The old Late Bronze Age houses made of mud-brick were replaced with Balkan prehistoric architecture consisting of mud over a wooden skeletal structure. This was accompanied by mobile finds often of northern or central Balkan origin, such as the new so-called *grooved* pottery. Large changes in the economy are also evident with the adoption of new types of plants and livestock.

Despite the tumultuous events that Tumba-Kastanas experienced, it managed to overcome all crises and continue its existence through the following

¹⁰ Mitrevski D., 117.

¹¹ Hansel B., 1989; Hochstetter A., 1982; Hochstetter A., 1984; Kroll J., 1983.

centuries of the Iron Age. This was not the case for other Late Bronze Age settlements in the Vardar Valley.

All these settlements went through unique processes and events that occurred during the 12th and 11th centuries, clearly manifested through unique archaeological findings. It was during this period that they all concluded their Late Bronze Age development with strongly burnt layers (see Fig. 6 and 7). The archaeological evidence in these layers illustrates violent destruction through complete and enduring conflagrations of the settlements. In the burnt layers of some settlements, such as Manastir-Chashka or Tumba-Kilindir, unburied bodies were discovered.¹² As remnants of military activities, in the same burnt layers, among other things, some new, foreign types of bronze weapons (battle-axes, spears, arrows) are also discovered. Their northern origin as weapons of the invaders is unquestionable since these kinds of findings appear for the first time in these regions, precisely during that period and in that context (Skopje region, Chashka, Krivi Dol, Mrdaja-Dojran) (Fig. 8).

The situation with the destroyed Povardarie settlements is strongly reflected in their cemeteries. The last burials, following the old domestic practice with contracted inhumation, were carried out in them at the same time as the destruction of the settlements. Such is the situation with all cemeteries in the Vardar Valley, from Brvenica and Skupi in Upper Povardarie through Ulanci, Vodovrati, and Tremnik in Middle Vardar to Vardarski Rid-Gevgelija in Lower Povardarje.¹³ However, in some of them, such as Scupi and Mali Dol-Tremnik, within the same cemetery and not rarely directly above the older domestic graves with inhumation, new burials are encountered carried out according to foreign burial customs with cremation in urns (Figure 9).¹⁴ This burial ritual, common in the northern Balkan regions, is a completely new phenomenon in these areas. Along the Vardar Valley, such burials are clearly recognized as the graves of newcomers from the north and are their most distinctive feature.

It is clear that on their way through the Vardar Valley to the south, the invaders from the north lingered for some time at certain points, using local cemeteries, and in some cases even established their own cemeteries, as in the case of the well-known cemetery in Kluchka-Hippodrome, near Skopje (Figure 10).¹⁵ However, in any case, we are dealing with a small number of burials, with the majority of burials (11) being found in the Hippodrome cemetery.

In the material culture of the newcomers, in addition to the already mentioned northern forms of bronze weapons found in the burnt layers of the settlements, one should note the new forms of the so-called corded ware pottery, which will become a permanent part of Macedonian culture (Figure 11). Such vessels were identified by Hartly as Lusatian or Danubian pottery, and its

¹² Jovcevska T., 2008, 22; Casson S., 1926, 132; Mitrevski D., 74, 118.

¹³ Mitrevski D., 2022, 64.

¹⁴ Papazovska A. 2022, 79; Mitrevski D., 2019, 79; Jovanova L., 2015.

¹⁵ Mitrevski D., 1994.

spread to the south can be easily traced today along the entire Morava Valley and the Vardar Valley. In the local Late Bronze Age cultures of Central Balkans, such as the Paraćin or Lower Brnjichka group, this type of pottery was not known until the beginning of the 12th century. It first appears in the Morava Valley, initially in Mediana near Niš, then Hisar-Leskovac, and later in some settlements in the vicinity of Vranje.¹⁶ Its further journey south can be traced through the 12th and 11th centuries, specifically along the Vardar Valley towards Greece, where it is known as northern or barbarian pottery.¹⁷

A similar situation occurred in the valleys of the Struma and Mesta rivers, although the movements in the far east of the Balkans were somewhat different in nature and purpose. Ethnic migrations took place from the Danube region through the Upper Thracian Plain and the Maritsa Valley towards the Southeastern Aegean and Asia Minor, but they were not accompanied by as much unrest and destructive events.¹⁸ Although they interrupted the previous strong development of metallurgy in that region, as well as the existing relations with the Aegean world of the Late Bronze Age, these migrations did not leave as significant consequences as in the Vardar Valley. The numerous artifacts, primarily associated with metallurgy and food, are the main features of these movements, in which the local communities undoubtedly intended to return and make use of them again.¹⁹ Clearly, this did not happen, so it can be assumed that they reached their final destinations, mainly in Asia Minor.

The current level of research on the so-called "second wave of the Great Aegean Migrations" largely allows us to draw at least basic conclusions about these events. It appears that the processes began in the region of the Danube, where local communities, during the late Bronze Age, achieved their highest economic and cultural development. This was due primarily to their direct connection with the Carpathians and Transylvania, rich in copper and gold. Additionally, developed trade relations with the Mycenaean world contributed to their prosperity. The cultures in that region, especially in north-eastern Serbia, north-western Bulgaria, and south-western Romania, reached exceptional heights in terms of value towards the end of the late Bronze Age. These communities experienced significant demographic growth and achieved the highest economic and military power, only to then suddenly decline.²⁰

At the same time, along the lower Danube and to the south, numerous hoards with a large number of metal objects, primarily bronze weapons and tools, as well as stone molds for casting them, appear.²¹ On the other side of the Morava Valley, the first goods of northern origin appeared. All of this suggests that at the beginning of the 12th century, the communities of the

¹⁶ Stoic M., 1996; Stoic M., 2001, 19; Bulatovic A., 2010.

¹⁷ Stefanovich M., 1973.

¹⁸ Pavuk P., 2018, 265; Ilieva P., 2018.

¹⁹ Detev P., 1964; Hansel B., 1976, 77; Bonev A., 1988, 54.

²⁰ Bonev A., 1988, 58; Mitrevski D., 2022, 123.

²¹ Черних Е.Н. 1978, 195; Jochenhovel A., 2018,172; Lestakov L., 2018, 383.

Danubian region and neighboring tribes had already begun their migration to the south. They started to spread along the main Balkan communication routes, leading from central and lower Danube to the Aegean Basin and western Asia Minor. These movements involved various ethnic groups in complex and long-lasting processes, which are well-documented archaeologically, especially in the Vardar Valley.

Following this archaeological picture in relation to the so-called Second Wave of Great Aegean Migrations in the central parts of the Balkans, the only open question is how these events can be connected to the known written records of ancient authors regarding the incursions and migrations of certain Inner Balkan communities into Continental Greece and Asia Minor. It seems that there are already sufficient firm archaeological data to support such connections.

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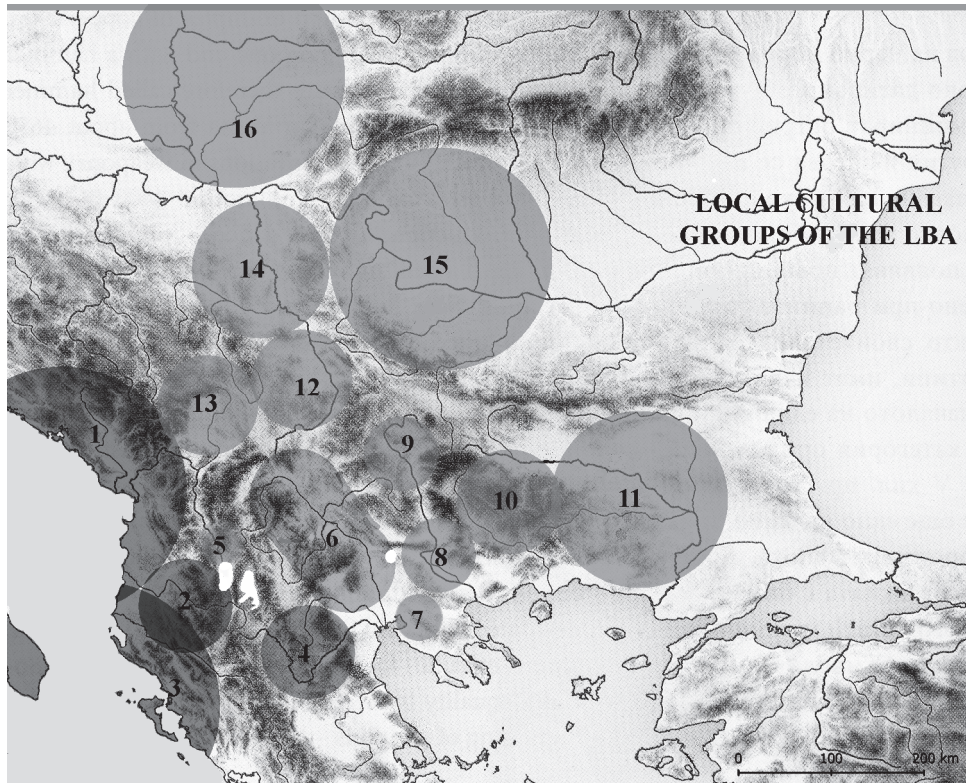


Fig. 1. Map of the distribution of cultural groups in the Central Balkans during the Late Bronze Age.

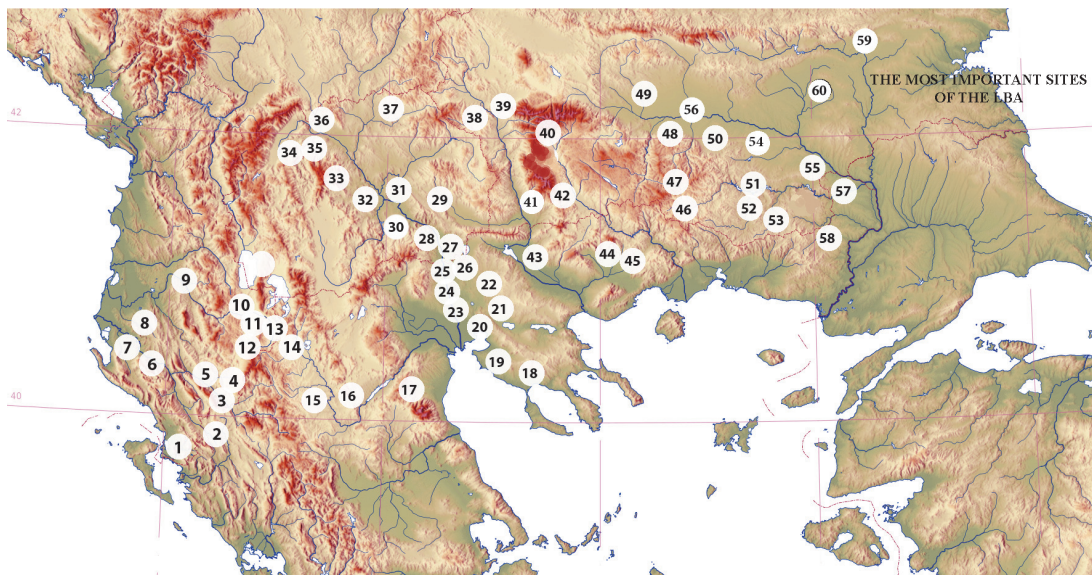


Fig. 2. Map of the distribution of Late Bronze Age sites in the Balkans.



Fig. 3. Map of sites within the so-called Povardarska or Ulanči culture of the Late Bronze Age.

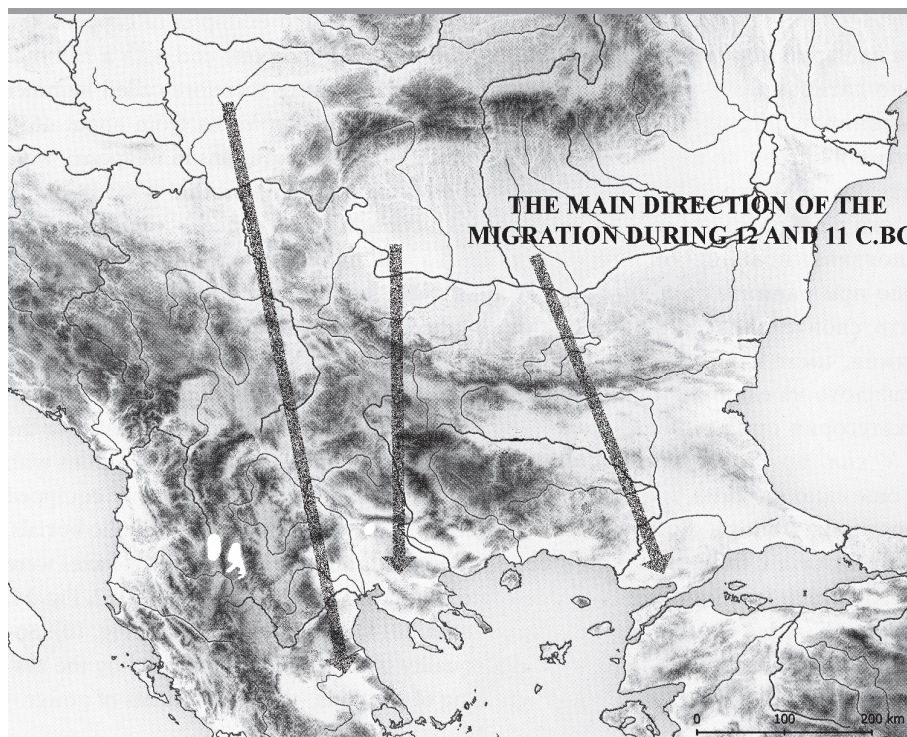


Fig. 4. Map of migration routes to Greece and Asia Minor.



Fig. 5. Examples of globular jars (1-3) and hearth pots (4-8) from the Vardar Valley: 1 Hippodrome; 2,3 Demir Kapija; 4,5 Skopje Kale 6,7,8; Manastir-Chashka.

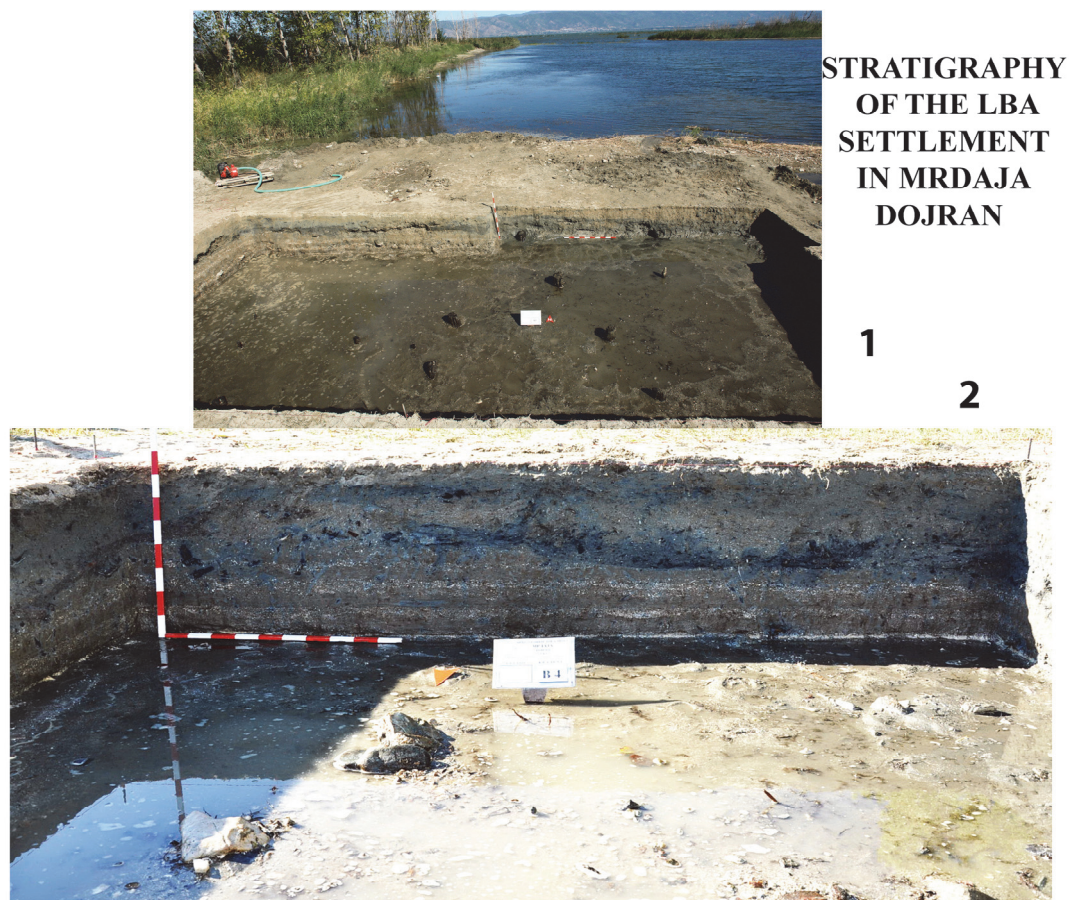
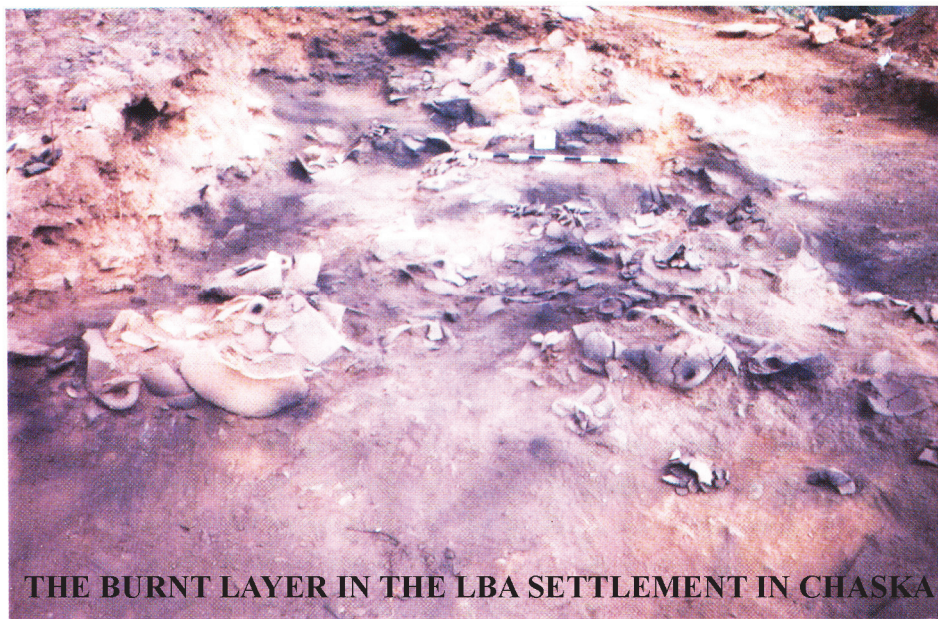


Fig. 6. Stratigraphic sections of layers from the settlement in Mrdaja-Dojran.



THE BURNT LAYER IN THE LBA SETTLEMENT IN CHASKA

Fig. 7. Burnt layer with skeletal remains from the settlement in Manastir-Chashka.



SOME BRONZE AXES-CELTS FROM THE BURNT LAYERS IN THE LBA SETTLEMENTS ALONG VARDAR VALLEY

Fig. 8. Finds of axes-celts in the Vardar Valley.



Fig. 9. Individual burials in urns from the necropolis in Mali Dol-Tremnik.



Fig. 10. Urn burials from Hippodrome-Skopje.

HIPODROM-SKOPJE
SOME POTTERY FINDS AROUND THE URN GRAVES

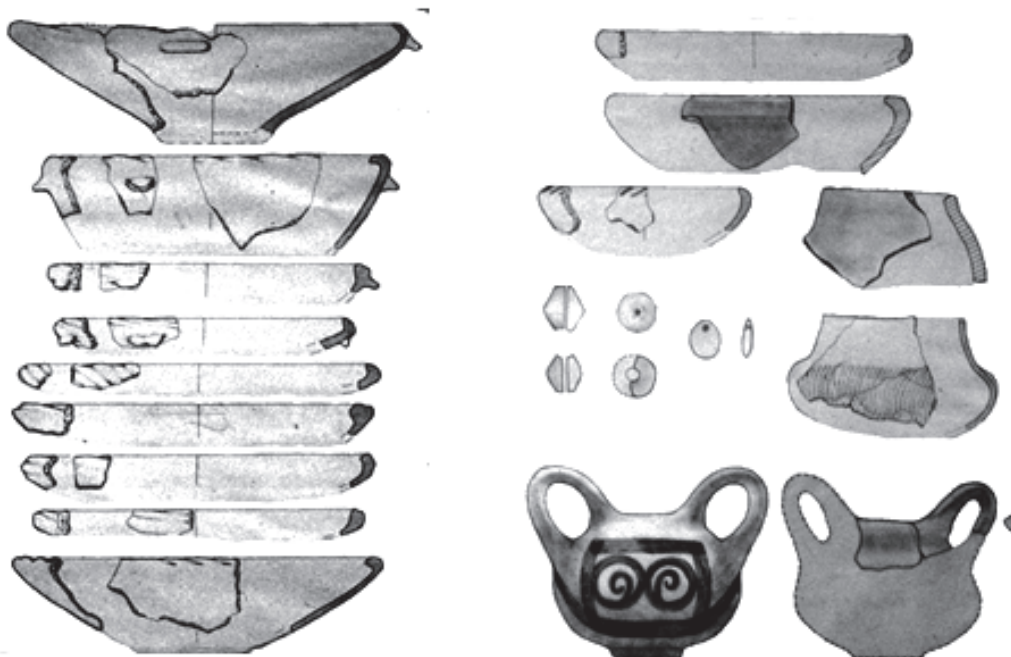


Fig. 11. Grooved pottery from the necropolis in Hippodrome-Skopje.

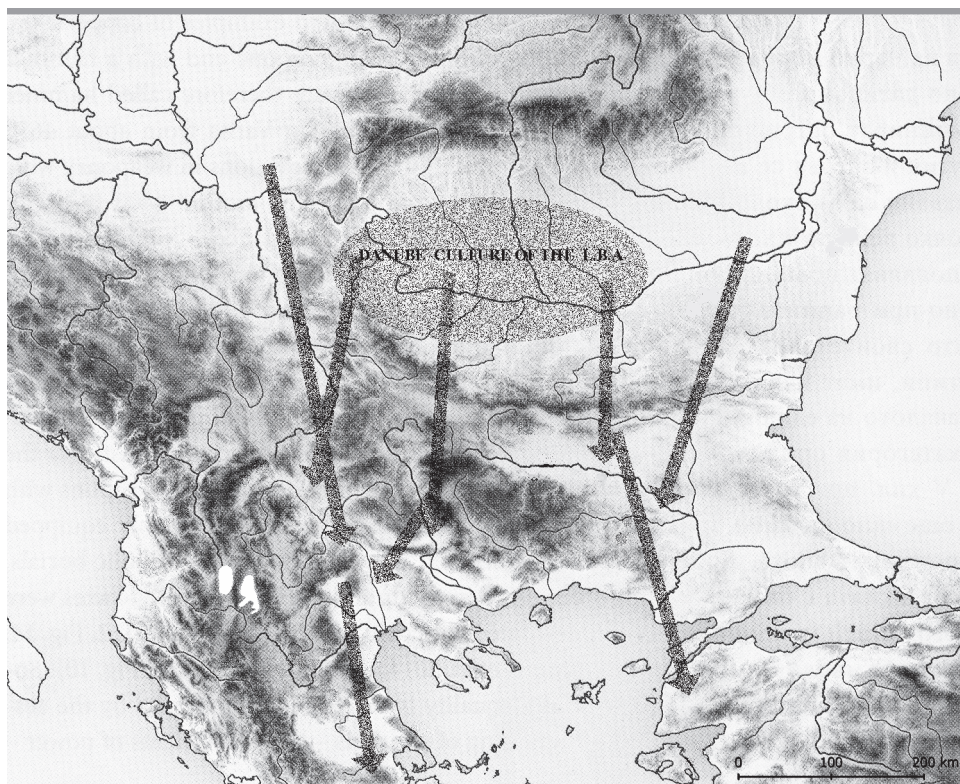


Fig. 12. Map of migrations.