# ARRC – Acculturation, Romanisation, Roman Culture: Processes of Integration Across the Roman Empire

Edited by László Borhy, Kata Dévai, Linda Dobosi, and Csilla Sáró

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# ARRC – Acculturation, Romanisation, Roman Culture: Processes of Integration Across the Roman Empire

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Edited by
László Borhy – Kata Dévai – Linda Dobosi – Csilla Sáró

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# Sacrificial places in funerary contexts of Roman Thrace

## Character and meaning of ritual places in grave contexts of Roman Thrace—evidence from the Yambol region

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**Abstract**: This article explores the phenomenon of offering sites within funerary practices in the Roman province of Thrace, specifically in the Yambol region of southeastern Bulgaria. The ritual practice also known as *trizna*, or sacrificial offering, dates back to Thracian times and continues to the Roman period. It was commonly performed near graves, both within barrow burials and flat necropolises. Offerings typically consisted of specific types of ceramic vessel(s) and sometimes other associated artefacts, such as small metal objects, animal bones, and charcoal, suggesting a connection to ritual offerings, feasting or food preparation. This work offers the first systematic study of sacrificial places in funerary contexts of Roman Thrace based on an analysis of 60 offering places from 21 archaeological sites dated to the 1st–4th centuries AD. The study investigates these patterns by comparing the material from different sites, analysing the traces left on the artefacts, and considering their depositional contexts. On this basis, a typology is proposed distinguishing: 1) deposits of complete ceramic vessels; 2) assemblages of deliberately broken vessels; 3) combined deposits of intact and fragmentary ceramics; and 4) rarer deposits with metal vessels. Associated animal sacrifices (horses, horse-and-cart, dogs) and other ritual structures are also considered. The results indicate a persisting local tradition rooted in Thracian practices yet adapted and further developed during the Roman period.

**Keywords**: Thrace, burial rituals, pottery deposits, offerings, Roman period

## Introduction

Rituals and customs represent a fundamental category of human behaviour that reflects deeply rooted cultural traditions. They may be defined as repetitive actions or ceremonies imbued with symbolic meaning, typically performed during key moments of life—birth, marriage, death, initiation into adulthood—or as part of religious practice. Their manifestation can be individual, yet they are often a collective expression of an entire community. Despite their diversity and social significance, archaeology can only capture a fraction of such practices—those that leave material traces.

Within archaeology, ritual behaviour is most readily observable in the sphere of funerary practices. Funerary customs can be defined as a set of rituals and traditions performed by a community to reinforce the boundary between the living and the dead. These ritual sequences usually follow a stable repertoire of actions that culminate in the creation of a specific burial context. Some of these actions are transformed into material expressions, thus becoming archaeologically visible. The tangible components of funerary practice include, above all, the graves themselves, the accompanying grave goods, and sacrificial or offering places situated in their immediate vicinity. Together, these

✉ Corresponding author

elements formed a complex image of the funerary ceremony, reflecting the ideology, social organization, and religious beliefs of the given community.

## Aims of the study

This study focuses on one of the phenomena that constitute part of the funerary ritual—the so-called sacrificial places located near graves. Sacrificial places represent manifestations of ritual activities that took place outside the burial pit and are therefore sometimes overlooked in archaeological interpretations. The aim of the research was to collect and analyse available data on sacrificial places in the funerary contexts of Roman Thrace, with a particular focus on the Yambol region in southeastern Bulgaria.

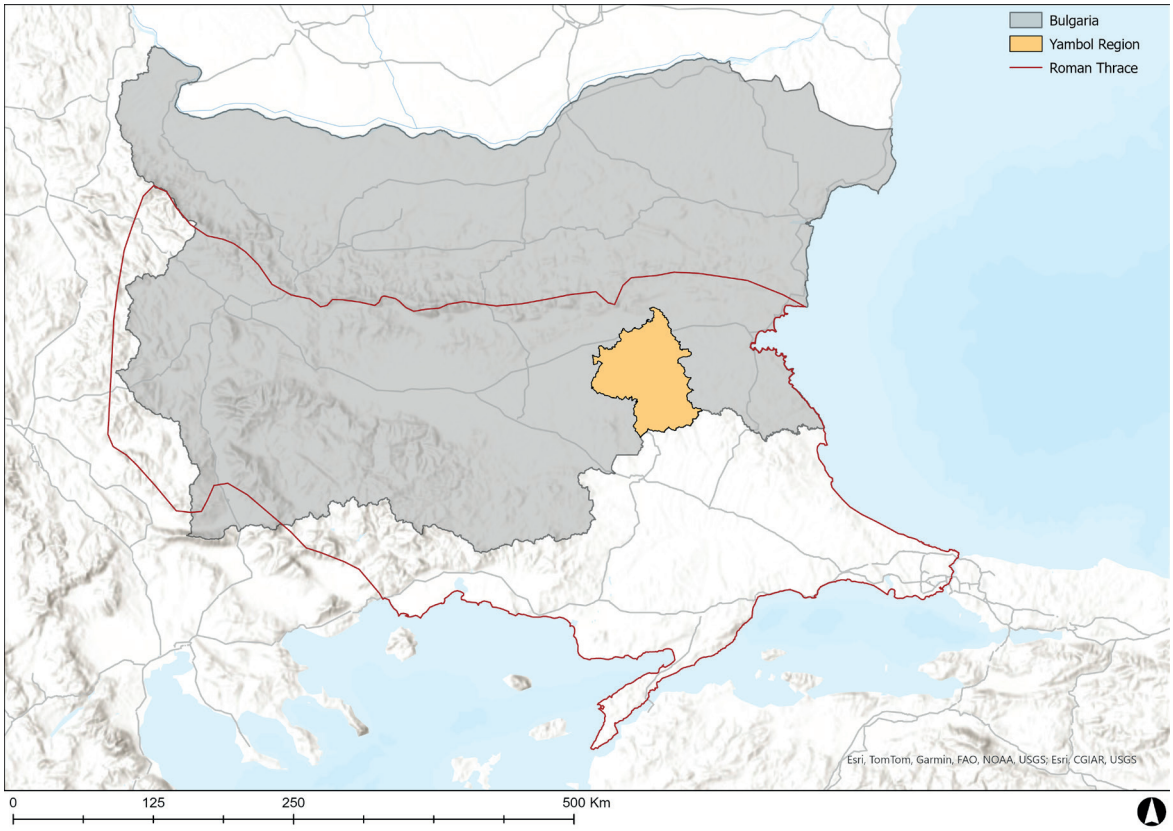



**Fig. 1.** Map of the southeastern Balkan Peninsula showing the Yambol region and the territorial extent of Ancient Thrace (map by P. Tušlová).

The article concentrates primarily on sacrificial places containing ceramic vessels, which represent the most numerous category within the studied area. All accessible data were gathered and systematically evaluated with respect to these sites. In addition, attention was given to animal sacrifices, carts, and other ritual structures, which in several cases occurred in association with the ceramic assemblages. These associated features, in which ceramic vessels did not constitute the main component, are represented here only by a selected sample; therefore, this study does not present a catalogue of all such contexts.

One of the principal objectives was to establish a typology of sacrificial places with an emphasis on those containing ceramic vessels, and to compile a comprehensive catalogue, the first of its kind for both the studied region and the phenomenon itself. The article thus represents the first systematic analysis of sacrificial places in the context of Roman-period burials in Thrace with specific focus on the Yambol region.

## Geographical and historical context

Given the wide geographical distribution and long tradition of the ritual practices under consideration, this study focuses on a specific area—the Yambol region in southeastern Bulgaria—and on burial contexts dated between the 1st and 4th centuries AD.

Ancient Thrace was situated on the northern periphery of the Greek world and occupied the southeastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Its core territory was bounded by the Aegean and Marmara Seas to the south, the Black Sea to the east, the Danube River and the Stara Planina Mountains to the north, and the Morava and Struma River valleys to the west (Fig. 1).[1] Although the borders of Thrace fluctuated over time, its main territorial nucleus remained within the boundaries of present-day Bulgaria, including the Yambol region under study.[2] The region covers an area of approximately 3,360 km² and comprises five administrative districts: Bolyarovo, Elhovo, Yambol, Straldzha, and Tundzha (Figs 1–2).

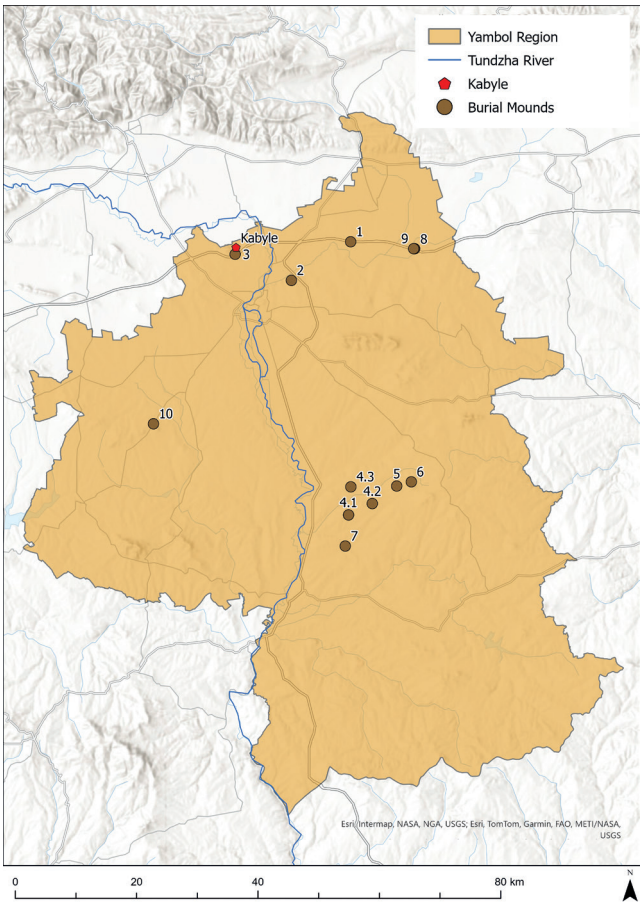



**Fig. 2.** The Yambol region with archaeological sites included in the study. 1 – Straldzha necropolis, 2 – Golemia Kayryak necropolis, 3 – South necropolis of Kabyle, 4 – Elhovo area: 4.1 – Raykova mogila, 4.2 – Koz Bunar mogila, 4.3 – Kral Mesar mogila, 5 – West necropolis of Borisovo, 6 – East necropolis of Borisovo, 7 – Kirilovo necropolis, 8 – Palauzovo necropolis, 9 – Palauzovo necropolis 2, 10 – Mogila no. 10000907 (after AIS AKB database; map by P. Tušlová).

Chronologically, the study is limited to the period of Roman administration in Thrace, spanning the 1st to 4th centuries AD. This timeframe corresponds to the establishment of the Roman province of Thrace in AD 45/46 and ends with the Battle of Adrianople (modern Edirne) in AD 378, in which the Romans suffered a defeat by the Goths.[3]

## Sacrificial Places

The studied features are generally referred to as sacrificial places, further categorized according to the nature of the artifacts recovered. Such a place may contain ceramic or metal vessels, animal sacrifices, carts, altars, fireplaces, or even empty burial mounds. The specific designation of an individual place derives from its content—for instance, a context containing a sacrificed horse is termed a 'sacrificial place with a horse'.

In this study, the term sacrificial place is used as an umbrella term encompassing all contexts associated with ritual activity in connection with graves. The term 'object' refers to a discrete assemblage

1 Bouzek – Graninger 2015, 13.

2 For more historical background: Mazarov 2005; Haynes 2011; Iliev 2015; Theodossiev 2015; Zahrnt 2015.

3 Lozanov 2015, 87–88.

of artifacts—of any character—originating from a sacrificial context. If the assemblage includes ceramic vessels, it is referred to as a 'sacrificial place with ceramics' or 'ceramic assemblage'.

Sacrificial places from ancient Thrace can be divided into three principal types, which may appear in combination within specific depositional contexts:

- sacrificial places with vessels—ceramic or bronze;
- animal sacrifices—horses, horse-and-cart burials, and dogs;
- other ritual structures—such as altars or related building elements.

The first type of sacrificial place—those containing vessels—is the only category that has, to some extent, acquired the unknown designation *trizna* within academic discourse. The term *trizna* originates from the Slavic linguistic tradition and denotes a ritual act associated with a funerary feast. In Bulgarian archaeological literature, the term is frequently used to describe archaeological contexts situated outside graves that contain ceramic assemblages, although its original meaning is chronologically much later and unrelated to the Roman–Thracian cultural environment. In the present study, the term *trizna* is employed solely as a technical designation for sacrificial places with ceramics, corresponding through its characteristics to the most common interpretation—a funerary feast or commemorative meal (see further: 'b) Sets with Numerous Broken Vessels' – *trizna*). However, it must be emphasized that the term is understood here in a purely conventional sense, functioning as an established label for a particular category of ceramic assemblages, rather than as a direct reference to an actual funerary banquet or ritual feast.

## Sacrificial places in the context of Thracian graves

The burial practices of the Thracians in the pre-Roman era were characterized by biritualism. From the Late Bronze Age through the Iron Age, both burial rites were practised simultaneously, though with varying intensity. The methods of interring the deceased display a wide range of burial types and forms, which may differ slightly over time.[4]

Sacrificial places in their vicinity first appeared in the Bronze Age,[5] primarily as part of the newly introduced custom of constructing burial mounds,[6] and continued throughout the Iron Age.[7] However, there is currently no detailed study dealing with the development of their forms, the intensity of their creation, regional distinctions, or their spatial distribution. It is therefore not possible to determine whether this tradition was ever interrupted or carried out continuously.

Nevertheless, available data indicate that the phenomenon of sacrificial places appeared in Thrace long before the arrival of the Romans, and that during the period of Roman rule, this tradition remained a distinctly local cultural element.

After Rome established its control over the province of Thrace, the funerary rite underwent certain changes. Compared with the two centuries preceding the establishment of the province, cremation began to prevail over inhumation.[8] The newly arrived Roman population, however, maintained a smooth continuity with Thracian traditions—for instance, by continuing to construct burial mounds

4 Getov 1970, 1; Petropoulou 1988, 31; Leshtakov 2011.

5 Dimitrivova *et al.* 2024, 268, 270, 286, 274, Obr. 10.4; Tušlová *et al.* 2024, 58; Bakardzhiev – Illiev 2006, 77; Borislavov – Ivanova 2016, 185.

6 Alexandrov – Włodarczak 2024, 299.

7 Agre 2004, 130; Nehrizov 2013, 169, Obr. 2.3–4, Obr. 3; Alexandrov *et al.* 2020; Balabanov – Pantov 2020, 562; Dimitrova – Georgieva 2020, 513–515; Valchev 2023, 297.

8 Getov 1970, 1.

and by reusing those from the Late Iron Age (5th–1st centuries BC).[9] This continuity also applies to sacrificial places, which are consistently recorded in all three main forms both before and after the foundation of the province.

## Methodology

The methodological approach was based on the analysis of 60 recorded sacrificial places originating from 21 burial complexes dated to the 1st–4th centuries AD. The vast majority of these burial complexes (20 in total) consist of either individual burial mounds or small burial grounds containing up to five mounds. In one case, it remains unclear whether the site represents a flat burial ground or a ploughed mound.

All data were compiled into a catalogue containing detailed descriptions of individual sacrificial places and analyses of the associated material finds. The evaluation focused primarily on the form of deposition of ceramic vessels—whether intact, intentionally damaged, or deliberately destroyed—as well as on their quantity, traces of fire, evidence of purposeful alteration, and other indicators of ritual handling.

Particular attention was devoted to the spatial relationships of the sacrificial places, both in relation to individual graves and to the broader context of the burial mound structures. The dating of the objects was based mainly on the chronology of adjacent graves, and in some cases on numismatic evidence, which, it should be noted, was minimal.

The collected sacrificial places ultimately form a synthetic overview of traditional ritual practices performed within grave contexts in the Yambol region during the 1st–4th centuries AD. This study thus provides a comprehensive typological and contextual framework for understanding sacrificial practices from this period. The topic is particularly suitable for further research, as it has not yet been systematically explored, despite the wealth of available archaeological data.

### Sacrificial places with vessels in the Roman Period – Yambol region

Sacrificial places containing ceramic vessels represent the most widespread category of such visible ritual places and can be further divided into several subtypes described below. As discussed in relation to the so-called funerary feasts *(trizna)*, these contexts are often associated with the offering of food and drink or with communal feasting rituals. It should be emphasized, however, that although archaeobotanical data from Thrace confirm the existence of food offerings in graves, comparable evidence for sacrificial places located outside graves is currently lacking.[10]

The Thracian tradition of depositing ceramic vessels outside burials largely retained its visual appearance. With the arrival of the Roman population, the repertoire of grave and ritual artifacts changed, reflecting new vessel forms and stylistic elements characteristic of Roman material culture. In general terms, this funerary practice continued smoothly into the Roman period, although the extent to which its symbolism and function were transformed remains uncertain.

During the Roman period, sacrificial places containing vessels were particularly frequent in the Yambol region. Out of a total of 60 documented sacrificial places, 48 contained ceramic vessels, one contained metal vessels, and one featured a combination of both materials. Altogether, 238 ceramic and 9 metal vessels were recorded. These numbers are likely underestimated, since for 15 places described in the literature as assemblages of fragmentary ceramics of undetermined quantity or form, it was not possible to specify the exact number of vessels.

9 Pramatarov 2018, 5.

10 Hristova 2022, 6.

In most cases, sacrificial places with vessels were found in the vicinity of graves. There are, however, three exceptional cases—two assemblages of broken vessels and one combined assemblage—which were discovered on an empty mound, accompanied by the sacrifices of a horse and a dog, but without a human burial. This phenomenon of empty mounds with animal sacrifices is probably connected with a cult of death and Thracian tradition which started before the 2nd millennium BC.[11]

## Typology of sacrificial places with vessels

Sacrificial places containing vessels can be divided into four principal types, each comprising several subtypes:

1) Sacrificial places with complete ceramic vessels
    a) without animal bones, charcoal, or traces of fire
    b) with animal bones or charcoal in the vicinity, but without traces of fire
    c) deposited in an area affected by heat
2) Sacrificial places with deliberately destroyed ceramic vessels
    a) With a low quantity of vessels
    b) With a high quantity of vessels
        I) Assemblages of tableware – '*trizna / triznas*'
        II) Assemblages of cooking vessels
        III) Mixed assemblages
3) Sacrificial places with combined deposits of ceramic vessels
4) Sacrificial places with metal vessels

## 1) Sacrificial places with complete ceramic vessels

This type of sacrificial place includes horizontally or vertically deposited vessels that were not deliberately destroyed. Most often, these are individually placed vessels showing no traces of fire and no associated artifacts. All ceramic vessels from these places were wheel-made.

In the Yambol region, 16 sacrificial places of this type were recorded, containing a total of 30 vessels. Contexts are characterized by a low number of deposited vessels per assemblage, most commonly a single vessel (10 places). Among the assemblages with multiple vessels, the average number is 1.8 vessels per place, with the highest count being five vessels in one place.

Based on the dating of individual burial mounds, the deposition of complete ceramic vessels occurred continuously from the 1st century AD to the late 3rd or early 4th century AD. Most of the recorded examples date to the 2nd century AD, although this may partly reflect the uneven chronological representation of excavated mounds from different periods.

### *a) Sacrificial places with a single complete ceramic vessel*

A total of ten sacrificial places contained only one complete vessel. The recorded forms include jugs, bowls, mugs, a pot, and a plate (Fig. 3). In most cases, no other artifacts accompanied the vessels; in two instances, one place contained a coin, and another included beads and a fragment of a glass *balsamarium*.

According to the presence of animal bones, charcoal, and traces of exposure to fire, these places can be divided into three subtypes:

11 Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 24; Alexandrova 2013, 30.

a) without animal bones, charcoal, or traces of fire – 7×;
b) with animal bones or charcoal in the vicinity, but without traces of fire – 2×;
c) deposited in an area affected by heat – 1×.

None of the vessels, except for the one deposited directly in a burnt area, show any signs of fire exposure.

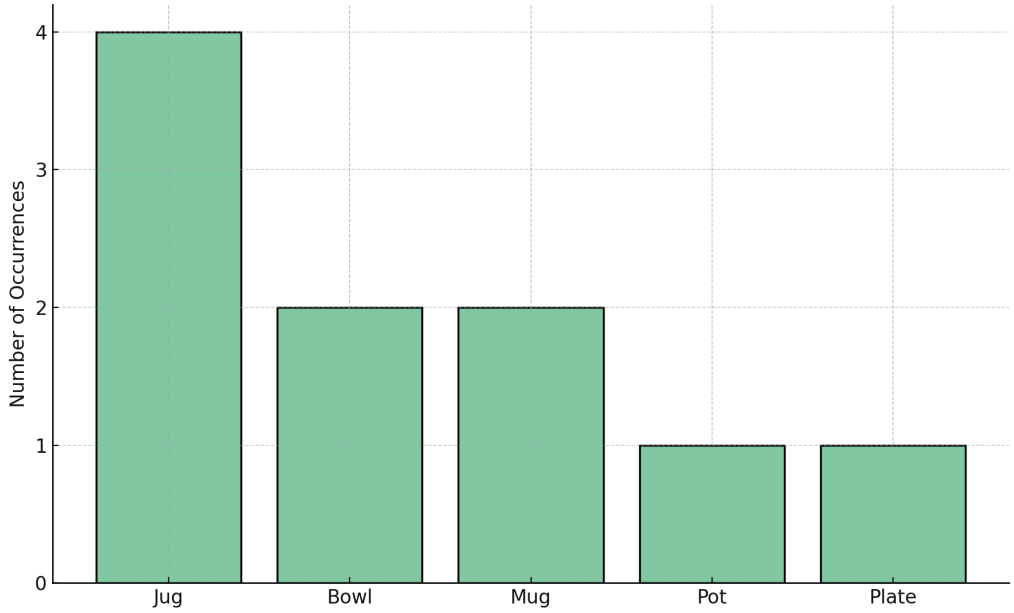



**Fig. 3.** Number of individual vessel forms in sacrificial places with a single complete ceramic vessel in Yambol region (by D. Mildová).

### *b) Sacrificial places with multiple complete ceramic vessels*

A total of six sacrificial places contained more than one complete vessel. These assemblages consisted of two to five vessels. In one case, it was not possible to determine the exact number or forms.

The following vessel types were recorded: jugs, mugs, baking dishes, bowls, table amphorae, a plate, a krater, and a transport amphora (Fig. 4). In four out of five determinable cases, at least one jug was present, while the remaining one contained a mug.

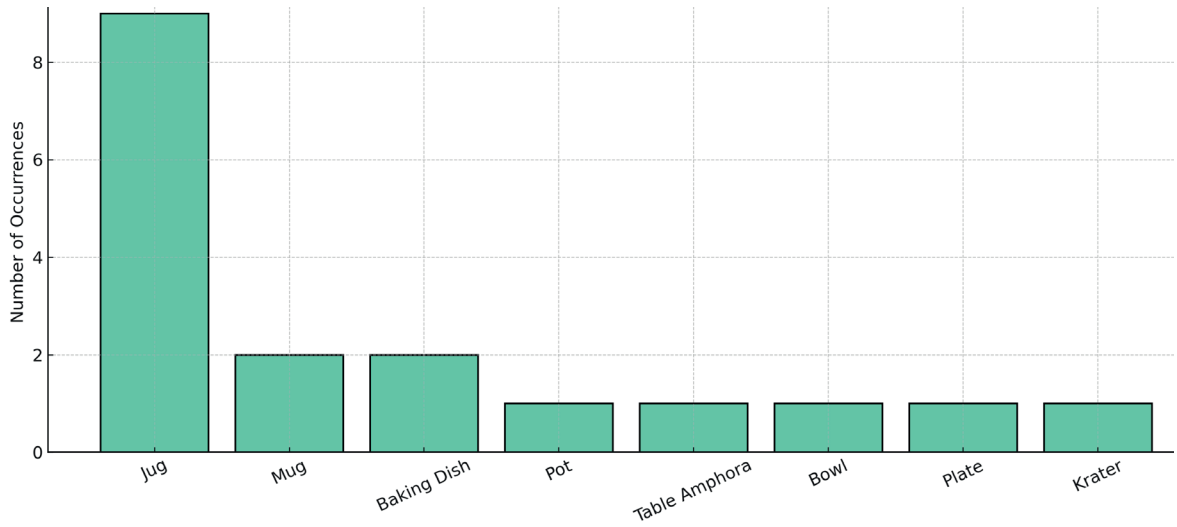



**Fig. 4.** Number of individual vessel forms in sacrificial places with more than one complete ceramic vessel in Yambol region (by D. Mildová).

In most cases, no additional artifacts were found; only one assemblage contained a coin and a fragment of a glass vessel. The assemblages can be classified in the same way as those with single vessels, except for the last subtype:

a) without animal bones, charcoal, or traces of fire – 4 assemblages;
b) with animal bones or charcoal present, but without traces of fire – 3 assemblages.

Overall, in both types, jugs predominated among the complete-ceramic sacrificial places, occurring in eight out of fifteen assemblages. Jugs were deposited either individually or in pairs (Fig. 5).




**Fig. 5.** Example of sacrificial place with deposition of whole vessels from southern necropolis of Kabyle (after Mikov *et al.* 2018, 316, Fig. 13).

When found together with other vessel forms, these typically included baking dishes, mugs, pots, or plates. In cases of more vessels but without jugs, the assemblage usually contained a mug or a bowl, perhaps to hold some liquid.

In three assemblages (out of 15), the vessels were deliberately damaged: one contained a jug with a pierced bottom (deposited with another jug and a mug)[12] (Fig. 6), another a mug with a drilled hole (deposited individually),[13] and the third a mug with a drilled hole placed inside a complete krater.



**Fig. 6.** Deliberately damaged jug by pierced bottom from Golemia Kayryak necropolis (Barrow 5, Feature 6; Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 15; photo by P. Tušlová).

The vessels were most often deposited at the level of the ancient surface (9×), but were also found within the mound embankment (4×) or in pits dug into the subsoil (3×). In four cases, the context could not be determined.

### *2) Sacrificial places with deliberately destroyed ceramic vessels*

Sacrificial places containing deliberately destroyed ceramic vessels comprise assemblages of fragmentary pottery that exhibit clear traces of intentional breakage. In the Yambol region, twenty-three such sets have been recorded. From this number, only eight places could be examined in this work due to incompletely published information. These assemblages were classified according to their size into:

a) small sets (up to three vessels);
b) large sets (so-called *trizna* / *triznas*).

This group is methodologically challenging. As mentioned, several assemblages are introduced in the literature only briefly, described merely as deposits of intentionally broken vessels without detailed contextual information. In many cases, the number, forms, or traces of manipulation are not specified, which prevented 15 such incomplete sets from being fully included in the evaluation. Based on available data, the dating of these sacrificial places ranges from the second half of the 1st century AD to the late 3rd century AD, with most examples—similarly to the group with complete vessels—belonging to the second half of the 2nd century AD.



**Fig. 7.** Example of sacrificial place with low quantity broken vessels from Straldzha necropolis containing two jugs and hand-made pot from Trizna 8, Mogila II (after Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 17, 181, Fig. 98).

#### *a) Sets with a small number of ceramic vessels*

This subgroup includes assemblages containing no more than three intentionally broken vessels (Fig. 7). At least five sacrificial places of this type were documented, of which three are examined. Identified vessel forms are three pots and two jugs.

12 Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 15.

13 Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 241; Tušlová 2020.

One site contained two jugs and one pot, while two others included a single pot each. It is noteworthy that all three pots were handmade. At a fourth site—where vessel forms could not be precisely determined—both handmade and wheel-thrown pottery were present. It can therefore be assumed that most of these sacrificial places (at least four out of five) contained at least one handmade vessel. This type thus shows the highest representation of handmade pottery, sharply distinguishing it from the group with complete vessels, where no handmade forms occur.

No associated artifacts were found with the vessels, except for a single flint piece, whose relationship to the pottery remains uncertain. The vessels from the three-vessel set bore traces of contact with fire, and burnt animal bones were found in association with one pot. No such traces were observed in the remaining three assemblages.

The vessels were deposited at the level of the ancient surface or within one of the mound embankment layers (1×), but never in pits or recessed structures.

### *b) Sets with numerous broken vessels – trizna*

This group of sacrificial places comprises assemblages with a large number of ceramic vessels that were deliberately broken into medium to highly fragmented pieces (Fig. 8). At least seventeen such sets have been recorded in the Yambol region, however, only six could be examined in this study. The number of vessels within individual sets ranges from 7 to 32, and the overall number of vessels from the six examined places totals 103. Nevertheless, examples containing more than 50 vessels are known from sites outside the region.[14]

The assemblages are dominated by tableware, especially vessels used for the consumption of food and drink. Bowls (60 pcs) and mugs (15 pcs) are the most frequent, while plates appear less commonly. In addition to tableware, kitchenware is also present—mainly pots (19 pcs), as well as a krater and lids. The pottery is predominantly wheel-thrown, with the exception of three handmade pots documented in only two assemblages. In contrast to other groups, no jugs were recorded in the assemblages.




**Fig. 8.** Example of sacrificial place with numerous intentionally broken vessels from Straldzha necropolis from Trizna 21, Mogila V (after Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 29–30, 215, Fig. 186).

Based on their composition, three subgroups can be distinguished:

1) 'Banquet' pottery sets—memorial feasts (*trizna / triznas*) – dominated by bowls, mugs, and plates, with only minimal representation of pots (3 sets) (Fig. 9);
2) sets with pottery for food preparation—dominated by pots, or showing a balanced ratio of both functional forms (2 sets) (Fig. 10);
3) combined sets—dominated by banquet pottery but containing a higher number of pots (1 set) (Fig. 11).

In the context of these assemblages, fragments of glass vessels (mainly cups, 3×) (Fig. 12) and metal objects (mostly unidentifiable, occasionally a knife handle) were also recorded. Beads and coins were not found. In most cases (4×), charcoal and burnt animal bones were present, and a considerable portion of the vessels exhibit traces of exposure to fire, usually in the form of localized scorching (Fig. 13).

14 Agre 2008b, 233–235.

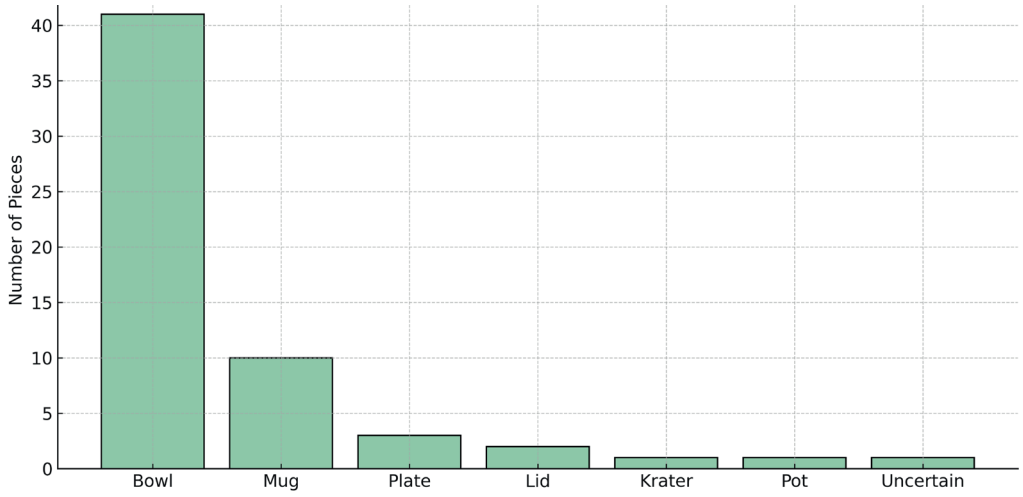



**Fig. 9.** Graph showing represented ceramic vessel forms in 'Banquet' pottery sets—upper left (by D. Mildová).

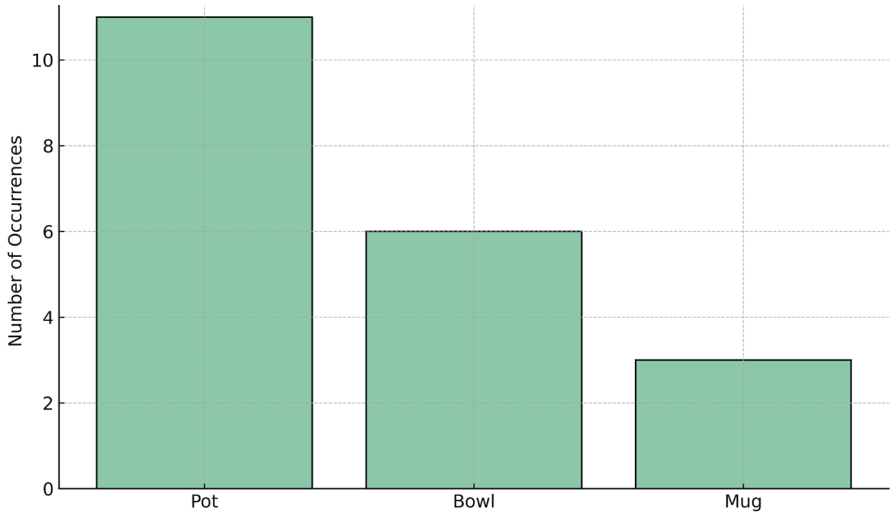



**Fig. 10.** Graph showing represented ceramic vessel forms in sets with predominate cooking pottery—upper right (by D. Mildová).

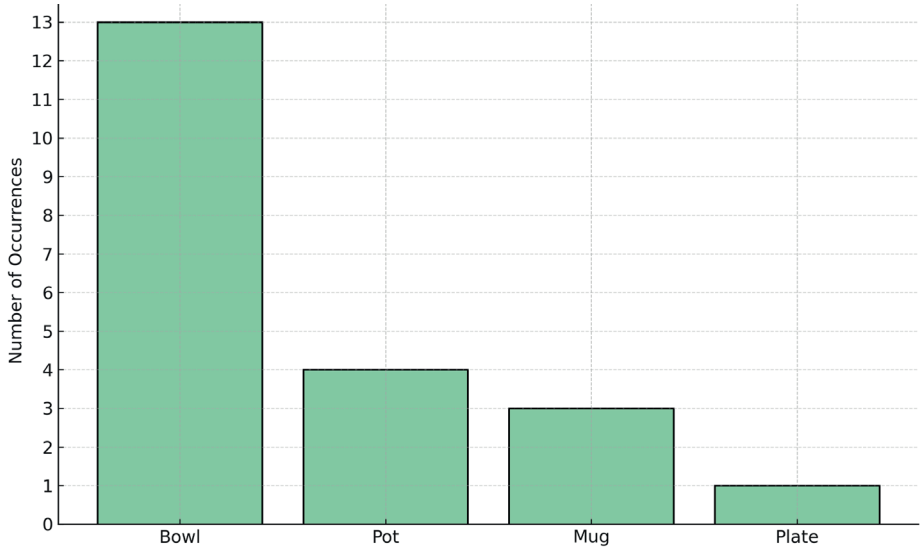



**Fig. 11.** Graph showing represented ceramic vessel forms in sets with combined forms—serving pottery with cooking pottery (by D. Mildová).

A feature that connects of all assemblages is high fragmentation, which often makes complete reconstruction impossible. Diagnostic sherds only allow for estimates of the original number of vessels. This condition suggests that the pottery was intentionally broken, either outside the sacrificial place and subsequently deposited, or directly on the place, with some fragments removed or redistributed outside the funerary context. The precise reason and location of the breakage, however, remain unclear.

All evaluated sacrificial places were deposited on the contemporary ground surface. In unevaluated cases, deposition within mound embankments has also been documented.

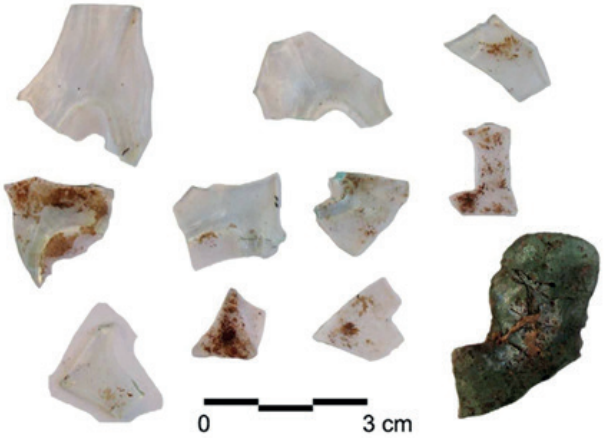



**Fig. 12.** Fragments of glass vessels from Trizna 21, Mogila V, from Straldzha necropolis (after Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 215, Fig. 187).

### *3. Sacrificial places with combined deposits of ceramic vessels*

This type of sacrificial place contains low to moderately fragmented pottery deposited together with complete vessels within a single structure (Fig. 14). Its overall character is closely related to the previous type associated with 'banquet' pottery, but unlike the 'Sets with numerous vessels containing charcoal and bones' *(trizna)* type, no assemblage of this category contains highly fragmented pottery. A total of three places of this kind were recorded, although in one case the exact number and shape of the vessels could not be determined.

In the Yambol region, the number of deposited vessels ranges from six to thirty-four pieces. The assemblages are dominated by tableware, particularly vessels intended for the consumption of food and beverages. Among them, bowls (3 sets = 33 pieces) and mugs (3 sets = 10 pieces) clearly predominate (Fig. 15).




**Fig. 13.** Example of localized scorching—traces of ash—on a surface of sherds from a set of numerous broken vessels (Golemia Kayryak necropolis, Barrow 5, Feature 5—the second half of the 2nd century – the first quarter of the 3rd century AD (photo by D. Mildová).

In addition to tableware, kitchen ceramics are also present, including pots, jugs (otherwise absent in the previous category), lids, transport amphorae, and a krater. All vessels are wheel-thrown without exception.

The vessels that were kept complete were bowls, mugs, plates, a jug, and a lekythos. The remaining vessels were deliberately broken.

Additional artifacts were found in all assemblages, including fragments of glass vessels, unidentified bronze objects, a spindle whorl, and a fragmentary iron knife. The knife was recovered from

the largest recorded assemblage, which contained 34 vessels, including seven pots. As in the previous type with deliberately broken pottery, the knife occurred only in a set combining tableware and kitchenware, forming a complete functional unit.

Within the assemblages, animal bones (1×), charcoal (1×), and a combination of both (1×) were identified. In contrast to the previous type, traces of exposure to fire were present in only one assemblage, indicating a different ritual treatment of the deposited artifacts.




**Fig. 14.** Example of sacrificial place with combined deposits of ceramic vessels (Straldzha necropolis, Mogila IV, Trizna 1; after Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 199, Fig. 142).

A distinctive feature of this type is the combination of deliberately destroyed and fragmented vessels—often impossible to reconstruct—with intact vessels deposited in the same structure. The complete vessels were either placed separately (3×) or nested inside one another (1×) (Fig. 14). The nesting of vessels may suggest that they were empty at the time of deposition, thus symbolically representing offerings rather than containing sacrificial material themselves.

The deposits were placed on the contemporary surface, within mound fills, or in shallow pits cut into the subsoil. Most assemblages were found in the vicinity of graves, but the largest one, comprising 34 vessels, was discovered in an empty mound, together with two additional sets of broken pottery and the sacrifices of a horse and a dog.[15]

Due to the small sample size, the chronological determination of this type remains uncertain, although the documented finds date broadly from the early 2nd to early 3rd century AD.

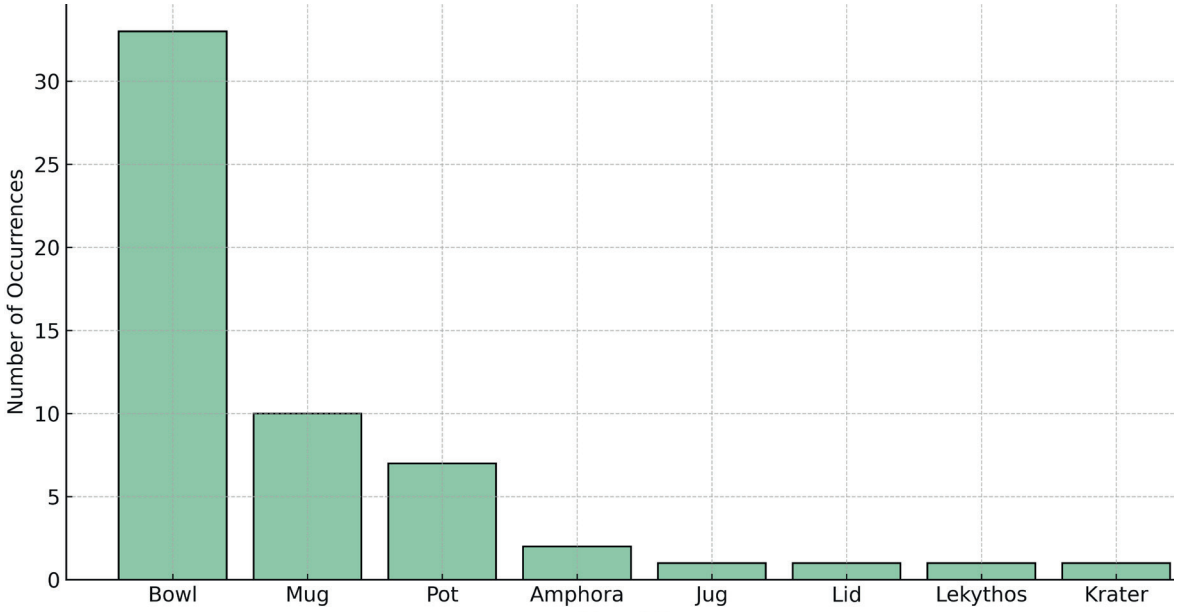



**Fig. 15.** Graph showing ceramic vessel forms occurring in offering places with combined deposits of ceramic vessels (by D. Mildová).

15 Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 23–24; Alexandrova 2013, 30.

### *4. Sacrificial Places with Metal Vessels*

Sacrificial places containing metal vessels cannot be analysed in detail due to their limited number—only two cases have been recorded in the Yambol region. In general, metal vessels appear to have been deposited either individually or as part of larger assemblages containing additional artifacts. Both examples date from the late 1st to early 2nd century AD.

The first case represents an independent assemblage of six metal vessels deposited without accompanying artifacts. The collection included two jugs, two table amphorae, one bowl, and one patera. All the vessels were intentionally deformed and pierced, indicating ritual destruction and their removal from functional circulation rather than use in libation. The assemblage was deposited within the mound fill and is associated with a female burial.[16]

The second case constitutes a complex assemblage that included a two-horse chariot filled with complete ceramic, bronze, and glass vessels (see Fig. 16 in 'Sacrificial places with horses and carts'). The bronze vessels consisted of a pan (1 pc.) and a ladle and strainer set (1 + 1 pcs), accompanied by an iron grate. The vessels were undamaged and, together with the ceramic forms (jug, bowl, pot, and mortar), formed a set of kitchen and table equipment. This complex is associated with a male burial.[17]

In neither case were traces of exposure to fire observed; charcoal was identified only in the second assemblage.

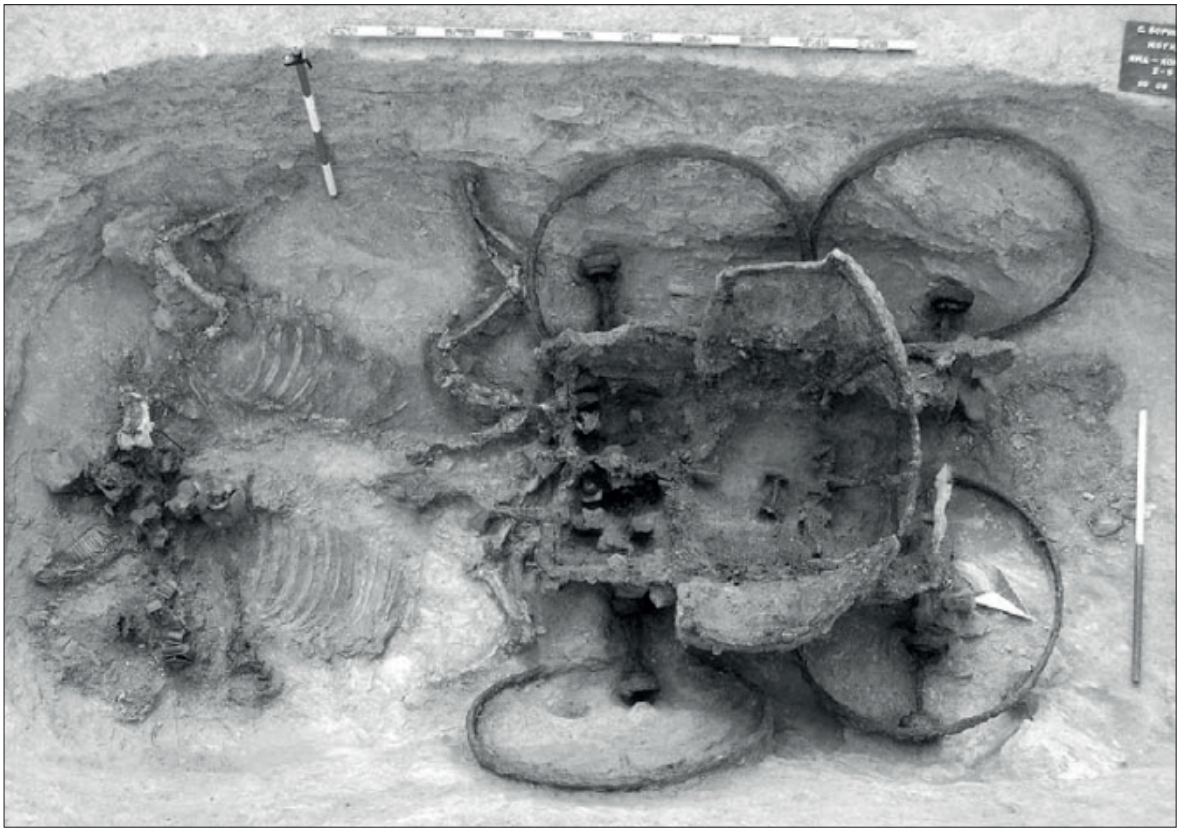


**Fig. 16.** Example of a sacrificial place with horses and two-wheeled cart, which was filled with ceramic, metal and glass vessels; dated to end of the 1st – beginning of the 2nd century AD (western necropolis of Borisovo, Mogila I) (after Agre 2009, 279–280, Fig. 1).

16 Agre 2008a, 237–239.

17 Agre 2009, 280.

## Animal Sacrifices—Horses and Dogs

Animal sacrifices in funerary contexts appear across Europe from prehistory to historical periods and are usually associated with religious or cult practices.[18] Among the culturally specific features of the Thracian environment, horse and dog sacrifices occupy a particularly significant place.[19]

Archaeological evidence of horse sacrifices in the territory of present-day Bulgaria dates back to approximately the 7th century BC.[20] In the pre-Roman period, these sacrifices reached their highest intensity during the 4th–3rd centuries BC, especially in monumental tombs, indicating their connection with the elite strata of society.[21] At the same time, they also appear in the context of simpler pit graves.[22] Thus, horse burials did not only represent expressions of social prestige but may have reflected broader ritual practices. Both riding and draught horses were sacrificed, which may have been related to different ritual functions and symbolism.

Horse sacrifices can be divided into two main categories—sacrifices associated with a deceased person and sacrifices without connection to a grave. In the first case, horses were placed beside the deceased or cremated together with them on the funeral pyre.[23] A common type is also the deposition of a horse or an entire team with a cart or its symbolic parts, which may have represented the journey to the afterlife.[24] The burial of horses together with humans is often associated with Thracian Orphism, where the animal sacrifice was meant to replace a human one.[25]

Dog burials are also not an exclusively Thracian phenomenon—they appear throughout ancient Europe and Asia. The symbolism of the dog was extremely strong: it served as a companion in hunting, a guide during transitional rituals, a guardian of graves, or a psychopomp leading souls to the underworld. The significance of this animal thus transcended the practical level and had a strong ritual and mythological dimension.[26]

As with horses, dog burials can also be divided into two categories—independent sacrifices, representing a collective or communal aspect, and sacrifices, where the dog is found in direct association with a human. In Thrace, dog sacrifices appear from the 10th century BC, although the earliest documented examples in a funerary context date only to the 6th century BC.[27] They occur most frequently near graves from the turn of the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, similarly to horse sacrifices. Dogs were buried independently, together with humans, or in association with horses and carts.

Under Roman influence the sacrifice of horses and dogs continued, though with a slight decline, during the last two centuries before the arrival of the Romans.[28] After the establishment of Roman rule and the achievement of economic stability, the situation changed noticeably, showing a remarkable revival in the popularity of such sacrifices—particularly those involving horses with chariots.[29] The majority of recorded cases feature four-wheeled chariots, concentrated mainly in the Stara Planina region near relatively rich graves in eastern Bulgaria.[30]

18 Pluskowski 2012, 12.
19 Ștefan 2022, 54, Fig. 14.
20 E.g., Sofronievu tumulus, Vratsa district (Ștefan 2022, 50).
21 E.g., the Sveshtari burial complex (Nikolova 2020, 164).
22 E.g., a tumulus from the mid-4th century BC near the village of Elhovo (Georgieva 2016, 272).
23 Georgieva 2016, 272.
24 Agre 2000, 239.
25 Kouzmanov 2005, 145.
26 Ștefan 2022.
27 E.g., Toros tumulus, Lovech region (Ștefan 2022, 50).
28 Nikolova 2020; Ștefan 2022.
29 Nikolova 2020, 168, Fig. 3.
30 Nikolova 2020, 167–168.

A similar resurgence occurred in the practice of dog sacrifices. From the 3rd century BC onwards, dog offerings gradually shifted from northern to southern Thrace, where, by the 2nd century AD, they had regained almost the same level of popularity as during their peak in the 4th century BC.[31] This decline and subsequent increase in both types of animal sacrifices suggest a renewed necessity to perform such rituals in response to the socio-political and cultural transformations brought about by Roman rule.

The rise in the number of animal sacrifices can thus be linked both to the local elites—who formed small aristocratic communities—and to the expansion of the Roman army, which fostered enrichment and consequently a rise in the opulence of funerary practices.[32] The key question remains to what extent the symbolic meaning of these sacrifices was transformed under Roman influence.

## Sacrificial places with horses in Yambol region

Horse sacrifices enjoyed considerable popularity during the Roman period. In the Yambol region, such sacrifices were recorded at seven out of twenty burial mounds and one unidentified burial site. Horse sacrifices can be divided into two main types: sacrifices of horses without carts (4×) and sacrifices of horses with carts (5×)—total of fifteen horses sacrificed. These sites date from the end of the 1st to the third quarter of the 3rd century AD.

### *a) Sacrificial places with a horse/horses without a cart*

Sacrificial places containing one or more horses without carts occur mainly in the context of graves (3×) but also on burial mounds without human burials (1×). In the Yambol region, the most frequent form of sacrifice involved a single horse (3×), and only in one case were two horses sacrificed together. Zooarchaeological data indicate that the horses found without carts—both in grave contexts and in empty mounds—were most likely riding horses. Only one sacrificed individual was a pregnant mare, which nevertheless shows she was at the peak of her physical strength.[33]

Sacrificial places associated with graves contain artifacts related to horse harnesses or military attributes, such as shields.[34] In one case, an unidentified perforated bronze object and a bead were found. In the same feature or in its vicinity, horses were sometimes accompanied by dog sacrifices (2×). No additional artifacts, including ceramic vessels, were found, and in the case of the horse sacrifice in an empty mound, no harness parts were present either.

Skeletal burials predominate (3×), but there is also one case where a horse was cremated directly at the place of sacrifice. All individually sacrificed horses were laid on the ancient surface, and only the pair sacrifice was performed in a sunken pit.

Most of the sacrifices could be linked to a nearby grave. Based on this, it can be concluded that riding horses buried without carts were associated exclusively with male burials in the Yambol region.

### *b) Sacrificial places with horses and carts*

Five sacrificial places containing horses with carts have been recorded, all occurring in direct association with graves (Fig. 16). They are therefore more frequent in grave contexts than horse sacrifices without carts (3×). Each site contained two horses and one cart; in at least two cases, the

31 Ştefan 2022, 52, 55, Fig. 11a, Fig. 15.

32 Nikolova 2020, 168.

33 Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 16.

34 Agre 2009, 280.

carts were four-wheeled, which would correspond to their popularity visible in their supra-regional distribution.[35] The remaining carts could not be identified in detail. Archaeozoological analyses indicate that the sacrificed horses were predominantly draft animals.

The assemblages include decorative harness fittings and possible ornamental elements of the carts. Other artifacts—ceramic, metal, and glass vessels—were also deposited with the carts, and in one case, a dog sacrifice was found in association.

The methods of deposition are similar to the previous type, with skeletal burials predominating (4×) and only one example showing cremation of the entire assemblage. Unlike the previous group, however, these horses and carts were placed exclusively in sunken pits. In most cases, these sacrificial places can be linked to specific graves, and the evidence indicates that such sacrifices were made in honor of both men and women.

### Sacrificial places with dogs

Dog sacrifices were recorded at three of the twenty burial mounds and at one unidentified burial site. The animals were sacrificed individually, both in the context of graves (2×) and in an empty burial mound (1×). They appear either as part of horse sacrifices (2×) or independently (1×). However, dog sacrifices in the Yambol region are so specific and few in number that it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about their meaning or function.

In the first case, the dog was sacrificed together with a horse in an empty mound without any accompanying artifacts.

In the second case, the dog was sacrificed together with horses and a cart in a grave context. Here, the deposition represents a simple burial of the animal without any accompanying objects (in contrast to the richly equipped horse harnesses).

The third case concerns a cremated dog associated with a male grave. The dog's burial was furnished with a bead, two complete cups, and a pot, with one of the cups placed inside the pot. In this instance, it remains debatable whether the find represents a sacrificial deposit or a full-fledged animal burial.[36]

### Sacrificial places with additional structures

Four recorded objects can be classified as sacrificial places containing additional ritual structures. Three of them represent stone altars, and one is a pit filled with a mixed assemblage of materials.

All three altars originate from the area of Borisovo. Two of them, located together in one mound, were constructed from two parallel rows of stones on which *tegulae* were laid to form a flat surface. On these tiles, ash, charcoal, and burnt animal bones were recorded. The third altar consisted of three lines of unworked stones—two parallel and one perpendicular—forming a rectangular layout. In the centre of the structure were found fragments of ceramic vessels, bones, and iron nails. In the literature, this feature is referred to as a *heroon*; however, due to the presence of ceramics and bones, it is included here among the altar structures. These objects represent a small but distinctly ritualized group, likely connected to a local tradition in the Borisovo area.

The fourth object is a pit located in the geometric centre of a mound, filled with fragments of charred wood, charcoal, ash, animal bones, and metal artifacts. The metal finds include seven bronze circular fittings from horse harnesses and eight fragments of an iron object of unclear type. The nature

35 Nikolova 2020, 167–168, Fig. 3.

36 Agre *et al.* 2014, 199.

of the assemblage resembles a cremation pyre; however, the absence of human remains challenges this interpretation. It is possible that the deposit represents the symbolic burning of grave goods, parts of harness equipment, or another type of offering. Although the examination of these structures was not the primary focus of this study and the examples presented here do not constitute a list of all similar features in the Yambol region, their existence confirms the presence of additional forms of ritualized space.

## Sacrificial places containing ceramic vessels: Interpretation

Sacrificial places with ceramic vessels represent the most numerous category of sacrificial places from the Roman period in the Yambol region, highlighting their key role in funerary rituals. The analysis of individual types of sacrificial places in the region shows that ritual handling of ceramic and metal vessels was diverse and bore clear signs of ritual behaviour.

Despite their heterogeneity, several consistent patterns allow for the identification of distinct ritual categories and symbolic behaviours.

### Sacrificial places with complete ceramic vessels

Sacrificial places with completely deposited ceramic vessels form one of two most numerous group within the Yambol region. They are characterized primarily by the simple deposition of vessels that were neither intentionally destroyed nor directly exposed to fire and are usually not accompanied by additional artifacts. The fact that all vessels were wheelmade indicates a certain degree of standardization and formality in these ritual acts.

Most finds show no traces of heat, charcoal, or animal bones, which clearly distinguishes this type from sacrificial places associated with funerary feasts or food preparation. Instead, it is likely that these vessels were used exclusively to honor the deceased or a deity, either through liquid offerings or their symbolic representation. This interpretation is supported by their strongly standardized ceramic forms dominated by jugs and mugs.

Deliberate damage to vessels, particularly jugs and mugs, is most common within this type. The drilling of holes through the walls or the piercing of the bottom represents a specific ritual act, probably related to emptying the vessel's contents as part of the libation rite or 'killing' the vessel. Spatial variation in deposition—either on the ancient surface or within pits and mound embankments—may reflect different ritual phases, from acts performed during mound construction to later commemorative ceremonies.

Overall, sacrificial places with completely preserved ceramic vessels provide insight into a ritual tradition centred on the consumption or physical or symbolic offering of liquids and the ceremonial 'deactivation' of objects.

### Sacrificial places with small numbers of deliberately destroyed vessels

This group includes assemblages containing no more than three broken vessels. A distinctive element is the presence of hand-made pottery, rather than vessels produced on the potter's wheel. Hand-made pots appear in all recorded places, which sharply contrasts with the type of sacrificial places containing completely preserved vessels where handmade pottery is entirely absent.

Their presence highlights the continued use of traditional Thracian ceramic production during the Roman period and suggests that these objects served as carriers of cultural identity rather than merely utilitarian items. The symbolic destruction of vessels, usually limited to one to three examples, likely represented acts of ritual closure, transformation, or offering.

Although the available data do not allow a more detailed reconstruction of the rituals performed, it is likely that these practices represented an expression connected with a local identity.




**Fig. 17.** Example of deliberately drilled hole in a sherd from a set with numerous broken ceramic vessels from Golemia Kayryak necropolis, Barrow 5, Feature 5 (the second half of the 2nd century – the first quarter of the 3rd century AD; photo by D. Mildová).

## Sacrificial places with numerous deliberately destroyed vessels *(trizna)*

This type is one of the two most frequently documented offering sites. These assemblages consist of large quantities of highly fragmented pottery vessels. The pottery is mostly wheel-thrown, but handmade pots also occur, which may reflect Thracian tradition as previous group. The vessels were deposited in a highly fragmented and frequently unreconstructable state, indicating deliberate destruction before or during deposition. The composition of the assemblages, along with the presence of charcoal, animal bones, and traces of burning, suggests a link with funerary feasts (memorial meals). As already noted, although archaeobotanical data from Roman Thrace confirm food offerings within graves—especially between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD—comparable data for sacrificial places are still lacking. Nevertheless, the combination of tableware and kitchenware implies that these rituals involved both food preparation and consumption. Based on the preserved material, the sets can be divided into 'banquet' pottery, pottery for food preparation, and combined assemblages containing both types.

However, it must be acknowledged that not all sacrificial places with 'banquet' pottery necessarily correspond to feasting rituals. As Veselin Ignatov has pointed out, some assemblages may relate to purification rites, during which "… after purification, the used vessels were crushed and gathered into a heap together with animal bones, similar to a pre-Roman ritual."[37] This description corresponds to assemblages with the highest degree of fragmentation (i.e. fragments 40 × 40 mm and less). It is therefore possible that the meaning and function of these sites varied, and that 'banquet' pottery sets may in some cases represent acts of purification or the symbolic conclusion of a feast, rather than a feast itself.

On the other hand, several highly fragmented assemblages include artifacts that clearly refer to feasting or libation rituals. One example comes from the Golemia Kayryak necropolis (MH07_T02), which contained vessels used for both food consumption and preparation, along with animal bones and a sherd from a mug or bowl with a deliberately drilled hole (Fig. 17). Such modifications are often interpreted as evidence of libation practices, i.e., the ritual pouring of liquids as offerings.

Both hypotheses are thus plausible, and it is likely that both ritual variants coexisted. Their precise differentiation, however, can only be confirmed—or refuted—through detailed archaeometric analyses of samples from the sacrificial places themselves, which could verify the presence of food residues or organic remains.

Similar practices are documented at other Roman-period sites beyond the Yambol region and even beyond Thrace.[38]

37 Ignatov 2018, 57.

38 Oţa 2009, 109–113.

### Sacrificial places with combined broken and intact vessels

The combination of deliberately destroyed and intact vessels suggests a complex ritual treatment of objects, in which certain vessels were intentionally rendered non-functional while others were preserved. This duality likely reflects a ritual with multiple symbolic layers, where some vessels were broken as part of the sacrificial act, while others remained intact to continue representing the offering or gift in a lasting form. The coexistence of tableware and kitchenware, accompanied by artifacts such as a knife and glass vessels, further points to feast-related rituals in which the preparation and consumption of food played an important symbolic role.

The forms and quantities of the deposited vessels closely resemble those found in the sets of deliberately broken pottery described above. All four assemblages are preserved in a low to medium state of fragmentation, which distinguishes them from pottery associated with purification rituals.[37]

Overall, these sacrificial places can be understood as an expression of a combined ritual, intertwining elements of feasting and sacrifice. The deposition of the largest assemblage in an empty burial mound is particularly interesting, suggesting that such rituals were not always directly connected to burial activities, but could represent independent acts of commemoration or devotion.

### Sacrificial places with metal vessels

The interpretation of these assemblages is complex, as they represent two distinct ritual contexts. In both cases, the predominance of vessels associated with feasting—or more precisely, with the *symposion* tradition—indicates their important symbolic and representational role within the ritual context. The deliberate deformation and piercing of the vessels in one of the cases likely carried symbolic meaning—a ritual 'killing' of the object.

Both cases demonstrate that metal vessels occurred in association with both male and female burials, indicating their general ritual importance rather than gender-specific use.

### The function and contents of the vessels

The question of the function and contents of sacrificial vessels concerns all types of assemblages. It is generally assumed that the vessels served for the consumption or containment of food and drink, based on their primary utilitarian purpose. As shown in Fig. 18, the most numerous ceramic forms are everyday food-related vessels. However, it cannot be excluded that in some cases, the vessels fulfilled a purely symbolic role and were deposited empty, or used for a different purpose. Unfortunately, this issue cannot yet be clarified, as relevant archaeometric or residue analyses are lacking.

Similarly uncertain is whether the foods and liquids placed in graves were identical to those associated with sacrificial places. In a few cases of graves where archaeobotanical analyses have been done (for example, at the necropolis of Golemia Kayryak) we have data confirming the presence of chickpeas, grapes, plums, hazelnuts, walnuts, and other remains.[39] A comparison of these results with future analyses of sacrificial contexts would be invaluable, as it could reveal distinctions between ritual and funerary consumption practices.

### Deliberately broken ceramic vessels: Where is the rest?

In the case of places with deliberately broken ceramics rises a questions concerning their nature. These assemblages represent one of the main interpretative challenges of this study. They are characterized by a high degree of fragmentation and incompleteness, raising the question of where the vessels were actually broken and where the missing parts might have gone.

39 Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 12–13.

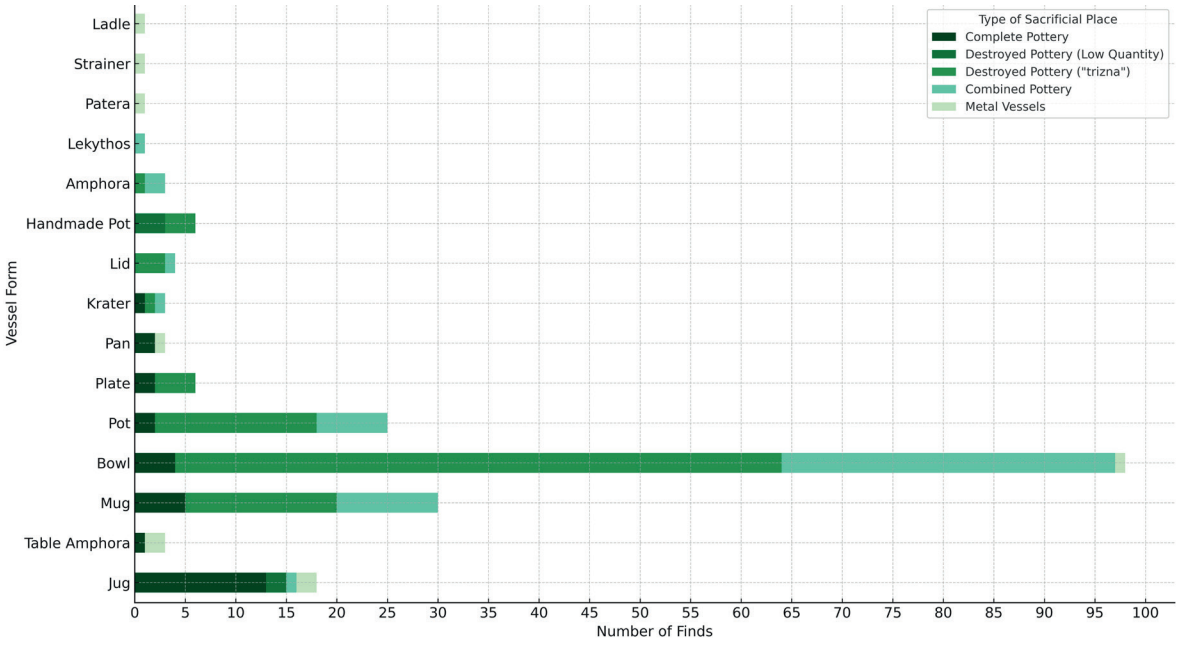



**Fig. 18.** Graph showing distribution of vessel forms through all types of sacrificial places in the Yambol region (by D. Mildová).

One possible hypothesis suggests that the vessels were broken outside the sacrificial place itself (the location of which cannot yet be determined) and that only selected fragments were brought to the site. An alternative explanation assumes that the destruction took place directly at the site, with part of the sherds later removed or redistributed elsewhere.

The high degree of fragmentation also indicates that the vessels were handled in a particular way. It is conceivable that they were smashed against hard surfaces (e.g., stones) or deliberately trampled. Given the quantity and incompleteness of the fragments, the question of selection arises—whether certain parts of the vessels (e.g., bases, rims) were intentionally chosen or whether the selection was random.

Based on a case study (in preparation), the number of diagnostic and body sherds was found to be approximately balanced. This finding contrasts with the assumption that body fragments should be far more numerous, as they typically represent about 70% of a vessel's mass. Among the diagnostic fragments, rims clearly predominated over bases. The fact that 32 vessels were identified based on rims compared to only 24 distinct bases supports this observation.

It can thus be concluded that, although the counts of diagnostic and non-diagnostic fragments were numerically similar, the generally higher likelihood of non-diagnostic sherds occurring suggests a deliberate preference for depositing diagnostic fragments. This question, however, remains open—yet its resolution could significantly contribute to understanding the symbolic meaning of ceramic destruction in funerary rituals.

## Animal sacrifices—horses and dogs: Interpretation

Animal, primary horse, sacrifices enjoyed considerable popularity during the Roman period. In the Yambol region, such practices were recorded at seven of the twenty burial mounds and at one unidentified burial site, with a total of fifteen sacrificed horses. These sacrifices can be divided into two main types: sacrifices involving one or more horses without a cart (4×), and sacrifices involving horses in combination with a cart (5×). The sacrificial places are dated from the end of the 1st century to the third quarter of the 3rd century AD.

### Sacrificial places with horse(s) without cart

Sacrificial places with horses without carts represent a distinct ritual element in the Yambol region, closely associated with male graves. The presence of riding horses, often in good physical condition and occasionally of reproductive age, reflects their high value and symbolic role within funerary ceremonies. The occurrence of horse harnesses and military artifacts such as shields indicates a symbolic link between the deceased and military or equestrian status. Differences in the treatment of horse remains—from inhumation to cremation—further demonstrate ritual variability and possible regional or temporal distinctions.

### Sacrificial places with horses and cart

This form of ritual practice appears slightly more common in funerary contexts than horse sacrifices without carts. The consistent presence of two draft horses and one cart suggests a deliberately organized ritual act. Unlike the riding horses of the previous type, these animals were not associated with the equestrian elite but with the function of traction and transport. A notable distinction from equestrian horse sacrifices is that these are associated with both male and female burials, indicating that the cart served as a broader social symbol of status and mobility across genders. This type of sacrificial place can thus be interpreted as an expression of prestige and movement without direct reference to military or equestrian identity.

### Dog sacrifices

Dog sacrifices in the Yambol region represent a rare and ritually specific phenomenon that appears only sporadically within the broader spectrum of funerary practices. In two cases, dogs were sacrificed in combination with horses—once in an empty mound without additional artifacts and once accompanying a funeral cart and a pair of horses in a grave context. In both instances, the dogs lack individual grave goods or signs of special treatment, suggesting a symbolic rather than a personal role in relation to the deceased. The third case, however, differs significantly. The cremated dog equipped with small grave goods may represent not a sacrificial act but an independent animal burial, perhaps reflecting a personal or emotional bond between the deceased and the animal

### Regional tradition of sacrificial places with vessels and animal offerings

Regional differences in sacrificial practices can be traced across the Yambol region (Fig. 19). However, the results must be interpreted with caution, as the degree of systematic archaeological investigation varies considerably between the necropolises. The best-explored sites are Straldzha and Borisovo (5 excavated mounds each), while Palauzovo (3), Boyanovo (2), Golemia Kayryak (2), Kabyle, Stroyno, Kirilovo, and Botevo (one mound each) show a much lower level of investigation. This discrepancy may have influenced the recorded frequency and diversity of sacrificial places across the region. The Straldzha necropolis stands out with the highest concentration and diversity of sacrificial places, including all main types—from single complete vessels to large feasting assemblages and combined deposits. The popularity of sacrificial places with ceramic deposits in Straldzha is further supported by the fact that the triznas yielded the largest quantity of vessels within the necropolis (40.4%).[40] At Palauzovo, deposits of complete ceramic vessels are especially frequent, often containing single piece. The most abundant vessel type within these deposits is the mug.

In Kabyle, only sacrificial places with complete ceramic vessels are documented. In this case, a distinct local tradition can be observed, involving the deposition of jugs exclusively in pairs rather

40 Alexandrova 2013, 30.

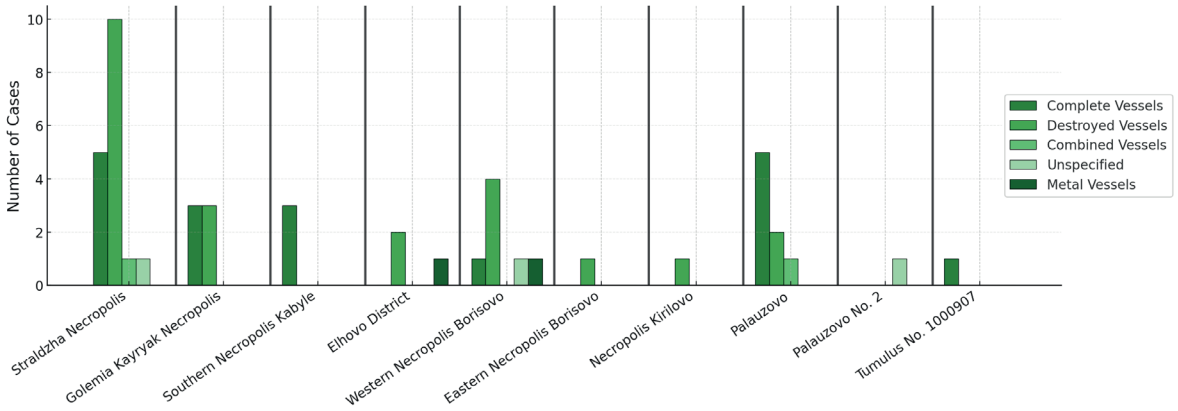



**Fig. 19.** Graph showing each site included in this work with sacrificial places with vessels found within them (by D. Mildová).

than as single pieces, as seen elsewhere. Additional vessels may occasionally accompany these deposits, but the primary characteristic—strictly paired jugs—is not documented at any other site

Golemia Kayryak necropolis also displays a unique local feature—complete single jugs surrounded by stones (Fig. 20).[41] This stone arrangement may indicate a local or generational peculiarity, as it does not occur elsewhere. It is noteworthy to mention analogous sacrificial places from the Roman period in the territory of Moesia. These places usually contain one or two vessels, most often intended for holding liquids, and are not associated with other finds. Liana Ota further notes that "… most of them were covered by tumuli or small heaps of stones, similar to the graves beside which they were discovered."[42]

In the case of offering places with destroyed pottery, such regional differentiations cannot be determined due to the small number of well-published assemblages. What can be stated, however, is that the highest concentration of these places is again found at the necropolis of Straldzha (8 cases), which may indicate a local predominance of this specific ritual practice. Conversely, compared to complete-vessel deposits, only a relatively small number of such features were documented at Palauzovo (2 cases), suggesting possible regional variation in ritual behaviour. With regard to the deposited vessel forms, no clear local preferences can be distinguished.

A total of four combined offering places were recorded across two necropolises. The tradition of depositing both complete and destroyed ceramic vessels within a single feature is most evident at the Straldzha necropolis, which contains three such assemblages; one of these represents the largest ceramic assemblage documented in this study. The fourth example comes from Palauzovo and is exceptional in its vessel composition when compared to Straldzha. Combined offering places represent a less frequent, yet significant element of ritual practice.

Regional characteristics of individual animal sacrifices are not included in this study; however, it is necessary to highlight the horse sacrifices at the necropolis near the village of Borisovo (Fig. 21). The necropolis yielded a below-average number of ceramic deposits, yet the presence of four horse-and-cart sets and one deposition of two horses indicate a regional dominance of these ritual practices.

Overall, the evidence indicates that although sacrificial practices followed a shared funerary tradition, their form, intensity, and symbolic meaning varied significantly between necropolises.

41 Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 15.

42 Oţa 2009, 113.

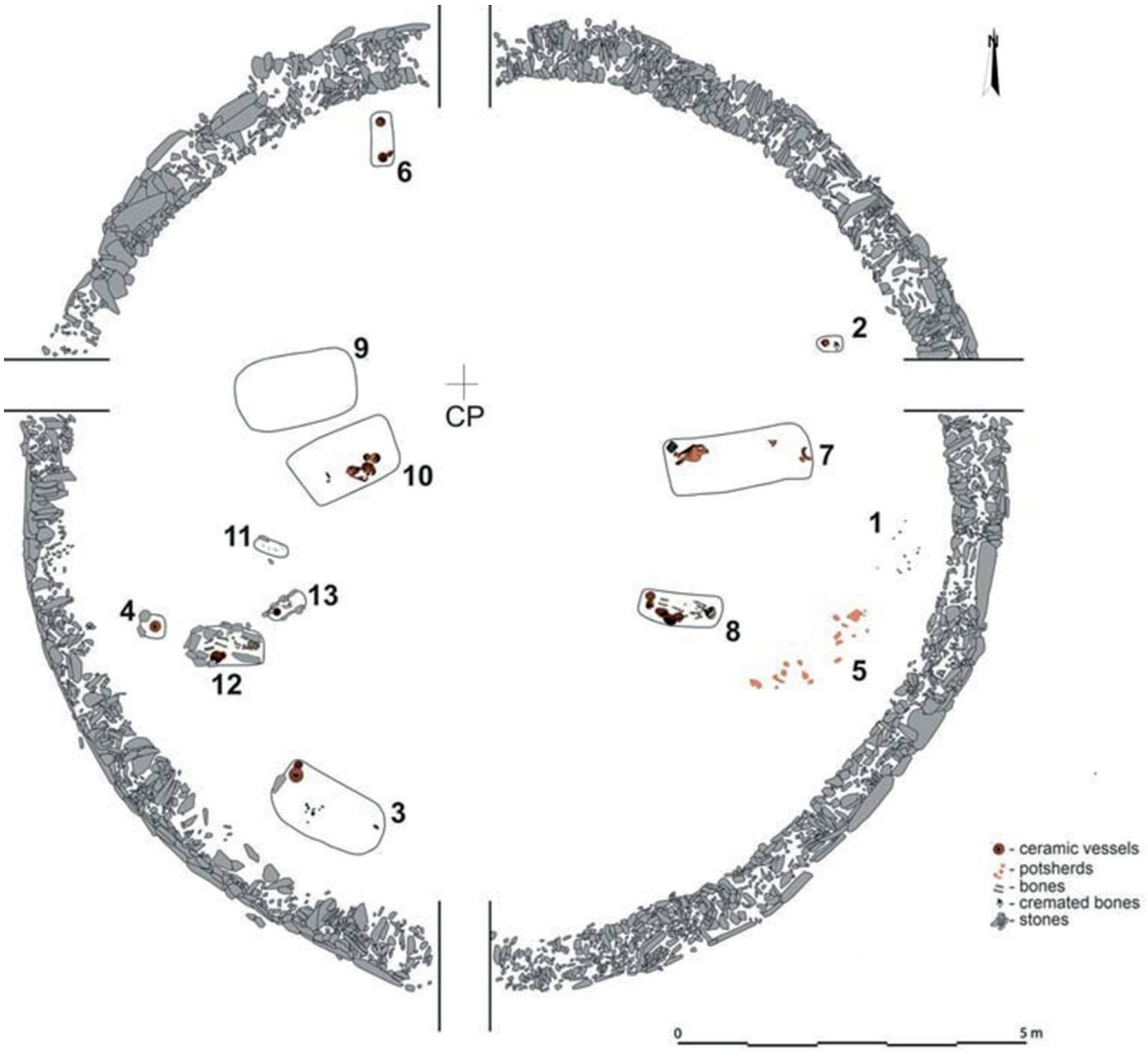



**Fig. 20.** Plan of Barrow 5 (the second half of the 2nd century – the first quarter of the 3rd century AD) from Golemia Kayryak necropolis with several offering places (nos 4–6). Feature 4 resembles the case of a single jug encircled with stones (after Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 15, Fig. 7).

## Reflections of Thracian traditions and the development of sacrificial places during the Roman Period

The partial continuity of Thracian traditions from the Iron Age into the Roman period has already been indicated in this study. However, the extent to which the character and symbolism of sacrificial places changed after the arrival of the Romans remains uncertain. In general, all recorded types of sacrificial places have their predecessors in the pre-Roman times, and the main question concerns the degree and nature of their transformation following the adoption of Roman administration and culture.

One of the most notable changes lies in the deposited vessel forms, which reflect the influence of new technological and cultural patterns. This transformation is also visible in the selection of vessel types—unlike in the Iron Age, when local production predominated, in the Roman period newly adopted forms became dominant. Whether this change was accompanied by a transformation in the meaning and function of the sacrificial places cannot be determined with certainty based on the available data.

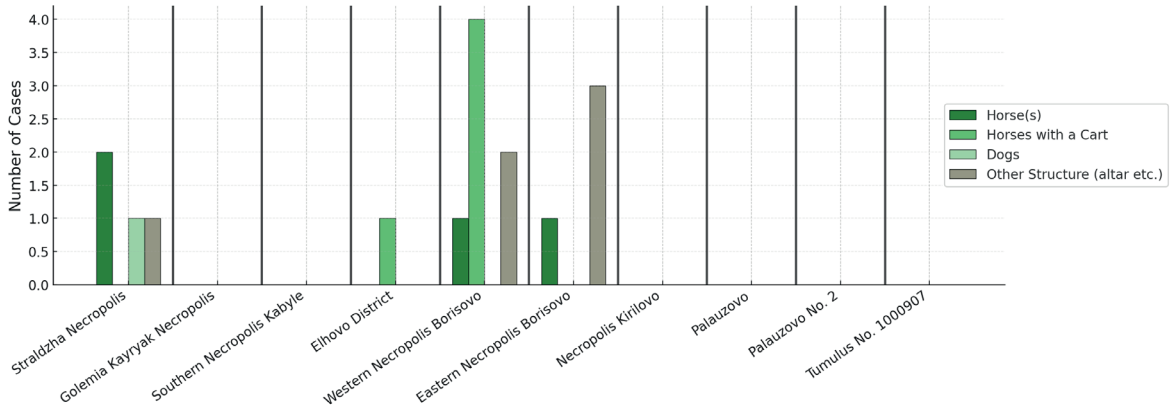



**Fig. 21.** Graph showing each site included in this work with sacrificial places with animal sacrifice and other ritual structures (by D. Mildová).

## Development of sacrificial places during the Roman Period

Tracing the development of sacrificial places during the Roman period is challenging. Their dating is often based on associated artifacts, but in many cases it relies on the chronology of nearby graves. Although many sacrificial places are not stratigraphically connected to specific burials, they generally occur at the same stratigraphic level and can therefore be dated according to adjacent graves. In some instances, however, the graves differ in date by up to a century, making it difficult to determine which of them the sacrificial place was related to. As a result, it is problematic to assess whether certain types of sacrificial places were more popular at specific times or whether preferences shifted over time. The accompanying chart (Fig. 22) illustrates the distribution of sacrificial places during the Roman period based on published datings derived both from artifacts and from surrounding graves.

The chart shows the intensity of occurrence of individual types of sacrificial places with vessels throughout the Roman period. It demonstrates that the highest frequency of all types was reached during the 2nd century AD, particularly in its second half. Complete ceramic vessels were the most

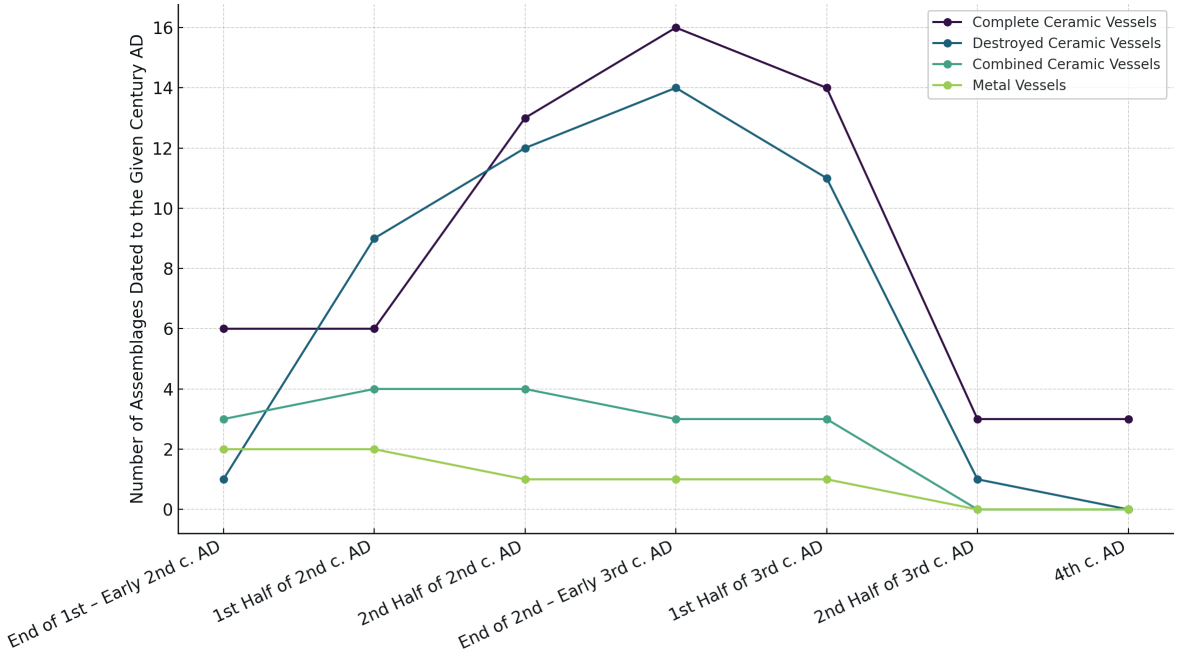



**Fig. 22.** Chronological table showing number of assemblages of sacrificial places with vessels through 1st–4th century AD (by D. Mildová).

common type across all periods, reaching their peak in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD, while deposits of broken vessels followed a similar trend but in smaller numbers. During the same period, the highest number of horse and dog sacrifices (especially those with carts) also occurred. It should be emphasized that the chart provides only a preliminary approximation of these patterns. Its interpretation is limited by the broad chronological range of many contexts: for example, if a deposit was dated to the end of the 1st – beginning of the 3rd century AD, it was counted within all corresponding time spans. Therefore, the chart should be understood as an initial analytical framework, serving as a basis for further, more detailed chronological analysis.

In addition to sacrificial places, the number of newly constructed burial mounds and the reuse of earlier Iron Age mounds also increased. The second half of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century AD thus represent the most prosperous phase of the Roman period in terms of sacrificial activity, corresponding to a time of economic stability in Thrace.[43]

After the peak at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, the graph shows a marked decline in all forms of sacrificial places, which may reflect the invasion of barbarian people from the north, transformations in religious practices, the spread of Christianity, administrative changes within the Roman Empire, or a general decline in the importance of funerary ritual.[44]

However, these observations must be viewed with caution, as chronological uncertainty and the uneven number of excavated burial mounds.

## Conclusion

This study provides the first systematic analysis of sacrificial places in funerary contexts of Roman Thrace, focusing on the Yambol region in southeastern Bulgaria. Despite their frequent occurrence, such contexts have remained largely overlooked in archaeological research.

A catalogue of 60 sacrificial places from 21 burial sites served as the basis for a new typology, distinguishing ceramic, animal, and structural types. The results reveal a persistent local tradition of ritual deposition near graves, rooted in earlier Thracian practices.

The most common forms include deposits of complete ceramic vessels and assemblages of deliberately broken pottery. Whole vessels likely functioned as libations or formal offerings, while fragmented sets—often with fire traces, animal bones, or charcoal—reflect complex rituals linked to feasting or purification. Rare metal-vessel deposits and animal sacrifices (especially of horses and dogs) further emphasize the symbolic diversity of funerary behaviour.

Regional patterns suggest localized traditions: Straldzha and Palauzovo show a prevalence of complete vessels, whereas Borisovo is dominated by horse sacrifices. Overall, these practices demonstrate both continuity and transformation of Thracian ritual traditions under Roman influence.

The study highlights the structured and symbolic nature of these rituals and provides a comparative framework for future research on funerary and religious practices in Roman provincial contexts.

Future research should expand this approach by integrating natural-science analyses, such as archaeobotanical, zooarchaeological, and ceramic studies and by exploring less visible or symbolic ritual behaviour, including those without direct material expression. Such methods would allow a deeper understanding of the social and ideological significance of sacrificial practices in Roman Thrace.

43 Lozanov 2015, 84–85.

44 Lozanov 2015, 87–88.

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## Catalogue

| Mound ID | Feature ID | Cross ref. no. | Feature | Specification | Deposition | Amount | Notes to feature | Literature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MH01 | T01 | *Trizna* № 8 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 5–14 |
| MH01 | T02 | *Trizna* № 10 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | beads and pieces of balsamarium | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 5–14 |
| MH01 | T03 | *Trizna* № 11 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 5–14 |
| MH01 | T04 | *Trizna* № 14 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 15 | broken glass vessel and iron item | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 5–14 |
| MH01 | T05 | *Trizna* № 16 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 3+ | pieces of glass vessel | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 5–14 |
| MH02 | T01 | *Trizna* № 17 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 14–18 |
| MH02 | T02 | *Trizna* № 18 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made (2) / hand-made (1) | destroyed | 3 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 14–18 |
| MH02 | T03 | *Trupopolagane na kon* | horse | — | inhumation | 1 | pregnant female horse | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 14–18 |
| MH03 | T01 | *Trizna* № 4 | ritual structure | — | destroyed | — | pit with charcoal, burned wood, animal bonec, 7 bronze aplique (horse harness) | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 18–22 |

| Mound ID | Feature ID | Cross ref. no. | Feature | Specification | Deposition | Amount | Notes to feature | Literature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MH03 | T02 | *Trizna* № 5 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 11 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 18–22 |
| MH04 | T01 | *Trizna* № 1 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | combined | 34 | iron nails, pieces of an iron knife, bronze plaque | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 22–25 |
| MH04 | T02 | *Trizna* № 2 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 9 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 22–25 |
| MH04 | T03 | *Trizna* № 6 | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 22–25 |
| MH04 | T04 | *Trupopolagane na kon i kuche* | horse and dog | — | inhumation | 1 + 1 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 22–25 |
| MH05 | T01 | *Trizna* № 19 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 8 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 25–32 |
| MH05 | T02 | *Trizna* № 20 | ceramic vessels | hand-made | ? | 1 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 25–32 |
| MH05 | T03 | *Trizna* № 21 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 7 | fragments of a glass vessel | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 25–32 |
| MH05 | T04 | *Trizna* № 22 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 14+ | fragments of a glass vessel | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 25–32 |
| MH05 | T05 | *Trizna* № 23 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | — | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 25–32 |
| MH05 | T06 | *Trizna* № 24 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | 21 | fragments of a glass vessel and iron object (prob. knife) | Cholakov *et al.* 2016, 25–32 |
| MH06 | T01 | Feature 1 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | a coin | Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 11–19 |
| MH06 | T02 | Feature 2 | ceramic vessels | hand-made | destroyed | 1 | — | Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 11–19 |
| MH06 | T03 | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | unidentified | unidentified | — | Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 11–19 |
| MH07 | T01 | Feature 4 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | — | Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 11–19 |
| MH07 | T02 | Feature 5 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made / hand-made (1) | destroyed | 32 | — | Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 11–19 |
| MH07 | T03 | Feature 6 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 3 | deliberately broken jug | Włodarczak *et al.* 2024, 11–19 |
| MH08 | T01 | Kontext 4 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 3 | — | Mikov *et al.* 2018, 295–331 |
| MH08 | T02 | Kontext 7 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 2 | — | Mikov *et al.* 2018, 295–331 |
| MH08 | T03 | Kontext 9 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 4 | — | Mikov *et al.* 2018, 295–331 |
| MH09 | T01 | — | metal vessels | bronze | comp.– del. damaged | 6 | deliberately pierced and deformed | Agre 2007, 76–77; Agre 2008a, 237–239 |
| MH09 | T02 | — | 1 cart + 2 horses | — | cremation | 1 cart + 2 horses | four-wheeled cart | Agre 2007, 76–77; Agre 2008a, 237–239 |
| MH10 | T01 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | unidentified | fragments of yellow glass vessel | Agre 2010, 251–253 |
| MH11 | T01 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made / unidentified | destroyed | — | — | Agre 2016, 300–303 |

| Mound ID | Feature ID | Cross ref. no. | Feature | Specification | Deposition | Amount | Notes to feature | Literature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MH12 | T01a | Pit 1 | cart + 2 horses | — | inhumation | 1 cart + 2 horses | four-wheeled cart + richly decorated harness | Agre 2009, 279–282 |
| MH12 | T01b | Pit 1 | met., cer. and glass vessels | bronze / wheel-made | complete | 3 metal / 4 ceramic / 5 glass vessels | one iron grate | Agre 2009, 279–282 |
| MH12 | T02 | Pit 2 | two horses | — | inhumation | 2 | harnessesc + 2 shields with massive umbos | Agre 2009, 279–282 |
| MH12 | T03 | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | — | Agre 2009, 279–282 |
| MH12 | T04 | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | — | Agre 2009, 279–282 |
| MH12 | T05 | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | — | Agre 2009, 279–282 |
| MH13 | T01 | — | 1 cart + 2 horses | — | inhumation | 1 cart + 2 horses | bronze aplique from a harness | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH13 | T02 | Altar No. 1 | Altar | From row of stones - on top of them were | — | 1 | on the tegulae - ash, charcoal and animal bones | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH13 | T03 | Altar No. 2 | Altar | Rows of stones | — | 1 | — | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH13 | T04 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | unidentified | — | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH13 | T05 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | destroyed | unidentified | — | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH14 | T01 | — | 1 cart + 2 horses | — | inhumation | 1 cart + 2 horses | iron fragments from the cart + bronze appliqué from the harness | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH14 | T02 | — | 1 cart + 2 horses | — | inhumation | 1 cart + 2 horses | iron fragments from the cart | Agre 2012, 217–219 |
| MH15 | T01 | Pit No. 1 | ceramic vessel, shells of | wheel-made | destroyed | unidentified | considered as ritual pit | Agre 2013, 164–166 |
| MH16 | T01 | — | horse | — | cremation | 1 | not crem. harness + bead | Agre 2013, 164–166 |
| MH16 | T02a | Structure No. 1 | altar | rows of stones | — | 1 | — | Agre 2013, 164–166 |
| MH16 | T02b | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | iron nails, within MH16_T02b struc. | Agre 2013, 164–166 |
| MH17 | T01 | Grave No. 3 | dog | — | cremation | 1 | 3 whole vessels and one glass bead. | Agre *et al.* 2014, 197–200 |
| MH17 | T02 | *Trizna* | ceramic vessels | wheel-made / hand-made | destroyed | unidentified | — | Agre *et al.* 2014, 197–200 |
| MH18 | T01 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | combined | 3 whole vessels + unidentified | bronze object and spindle whorl | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH18 | T02 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete – deliberately damaged | 1 | deliberately drilled hole | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH18 | T03 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | located near the cremation boundary | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH19 | T01 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 1 | — | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |

| Mound ID | Feature ID | Cross ref. no. | Feature | Specification | Deposition | Amount | Notes to feature | Literature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MH19 | T02 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete | 5 | — | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH19 | T03 | — | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | complete – deliberately damaged | 2 | mug - deliberately damaged by drilled hole and placed inside the krater | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH19 | T04 | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | area exposed to fire | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH19 | T05 | — | ceramic vessels | unidentified | destroyed | unidentified | area exposed to fire | Iliev – Bakardzhiev 2008, 239–242 |
| MH20 | T01 | Structure no. 5–6 | ceramic vessels | wheel-made | unidentified | unidentified | — | Bakardzhiev *et al.* 2018, 146–148 |
| MH21 | T01 | — | ceramic + glass vessel | wheel-made | complete | 2 ceramic vessels, 1 glass vessel | bronze coin of Caracalla | Bakardzhiev – Valchev 2014, 568–569 |

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