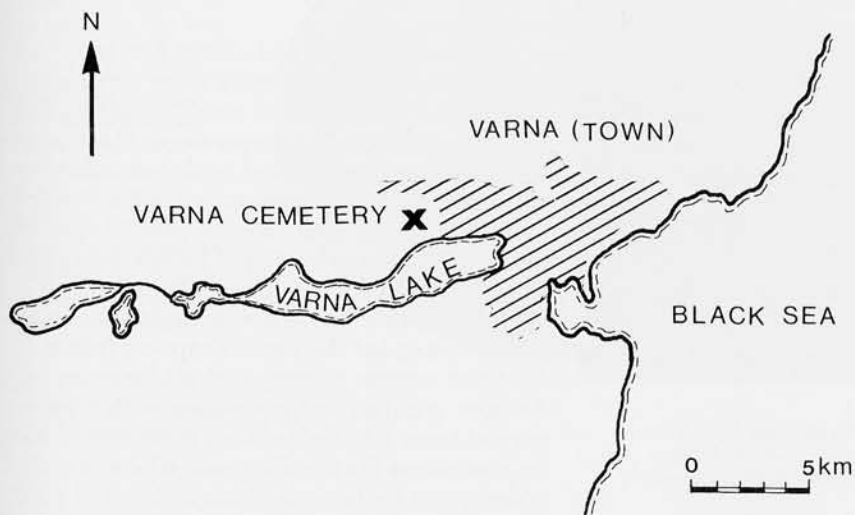


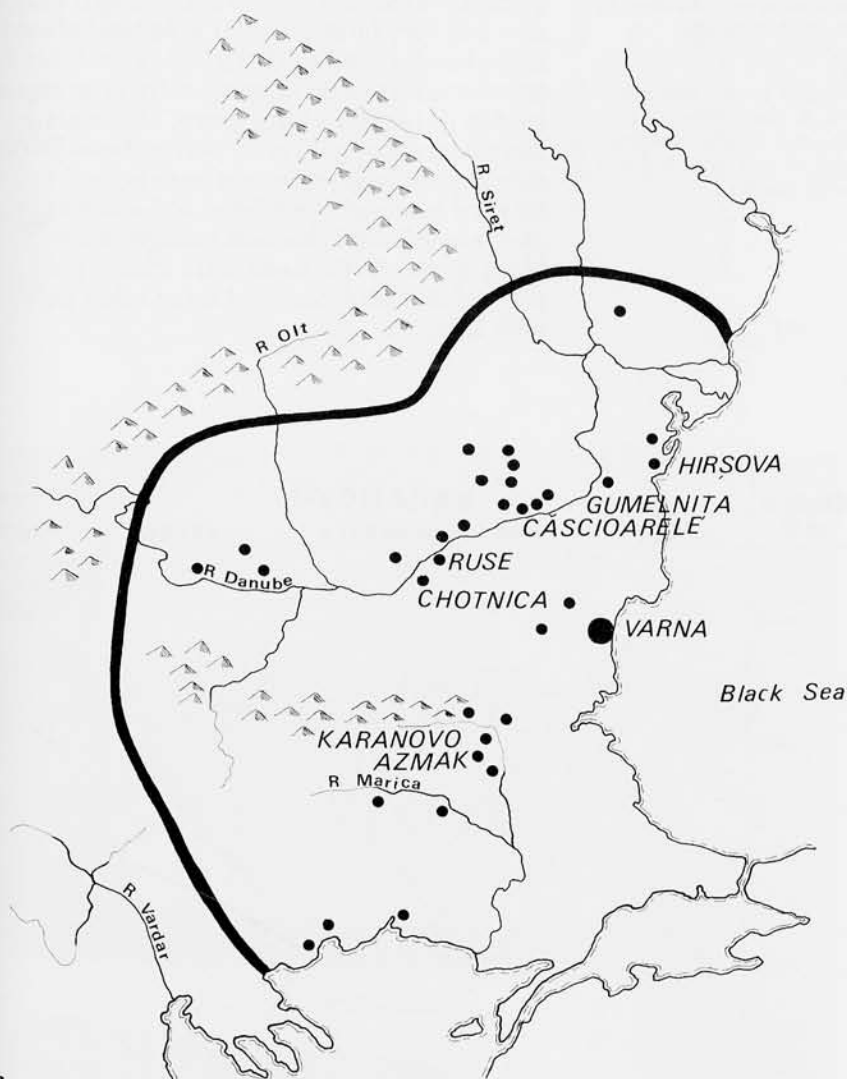
## VARNA: A SENSATIONALLY RICH CEMETERY OF THE KARANOVO CIVILIZATION, ABOUT 4500 B.C.

MARIJA GIMBUTAS



1  
The cemetery of Varna situated on the bank of Lake Varna, once a gulf of the Black Sea.

2  
Major sites of the Karanovo VI period in the Lower Danube and Marica plains yielding materials related to those from the cemetery of Varna.



The cemetery of Varna on the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria, excavated in 1973-76, is a prime addition to our knowledge of the Karanovo civilization. The eighty-one graves thus far uncovered, presumed to constitute about a half of the total number in the cemetery, are sensational for the extraordinary richness in gold, copper, marble, obsidian, flint, various semi-precious stones and Aegean shells, as well as in their technological achievements—including graphite and gold-painted ceramics. This cemetery is also remarkable for the unique “mask-graves,” the burial of the mask of the goddess which has been showered with gifts.

The cemetery belongs to the Karanovo VI period with good parallels from well-known stratified tells such as Azmak and Karanovo in central Bulgaria, and Gumelnița and Căscioarele in the lower Danube basin of Romania, all dated by radiocarbon dates and recalibrated to their true age (Table I). Close analogies of finds are known from northern Bulgarian settlements and cemeteries, Chotnica, Ruse, Devnja, and Goljamo Delchevo (Angelov 1959; Angelov and Georgiev 1957, 1959; Todorova *et al.* 1975). Calibrated radiocarbon dates place the Karanovo VI period between 4800 and 4000 B.C. (Kohl and Quitta 1966; Todorova *et al.* 1975). Typological studies of gold and copper show that Varna is roughly contemporary with Chotnica, Ruse and Gabarevo in Bulgaria (Angelov and Georgiev), with Gumelnița A2 and Vidra in Romania, and the colossal hoard of Karbuna (with 852 objects stored in a large pear-shaped vase of Cucuteni A type) in the



3 Excavator Ivan Ivanov scans opened grave pits at the Varna cemetery.

Moldavian SSR (Sergeev 1962; Klejn 1968). This is "Copper Age A" in Bognár-Kutzián's classification (Bognár-Kutzián 1976). In absolute chronology, the Varna cemetery very likely belongs to the middle of the fifth millennium B.C.

The discovery of the Varna treasure began in November 1972 when workmen digging a terrace at Lake Varna chanced to open a grave pit containing a total of 222 gold objects. Soon after, the Varna Archaeological Museum investigated the objects and excavations were immediately started under the supervision of Mikhail Lazarov, museum director, Ivan Ivanov, Chalcolithic specialist, and Georgi I. Georgiev, consultant from Sophia.

There are no sepulchral structures above or within the graves which are actually deep pits (1.50 to 2 m.) with rounded corners. Unfortunately, no wood or plant remains were preserved; but impressions of textiles on grave walls and floors and on copper axes were observed. Copper tools wrapped in fine textiles may have been put in the graves. The dead are buried with their heads oriented toward the sea and, with very few exceptions, are accompanied by jewelry, tools, figurines, stone and ceramic wares. Nearly one-third of the grave pits lack human bones, but contain funeral gifts arranged as if a skeleton were present.

The equipment found in the graves is testimony to a prosperous society. From 81 graves only five were without grave goods; three male graves were extraordinarily rich (Nos. 1, 4 and 43); at least three female graves were very rich (Nos. 26, 36, 41); sixteen were "mask-graves"; the remainder included copper tools, flint blades, gold beads or earrings,

a mass of *dentalium* and *Spondylus* shell or stone beads, and one or more lidded vases. Gold jewelry and copper, stone and flint tools appeared in both male and female graves. From what has been uncovered already a certain degree of egalitarianism can be observed. The interpretation of the social structure at Varna must await the completion of excavation.

Male skeletons were found in an extended position, females were contracted. There were no graves of small children, for the youngest are 12-14 years old. Most of the skeletons were sprinkled with red ocher.

Among the richest graves is a cenotaph (grave No. 4). A stone axe of beautiful workmanship with a tubular gold shaft was placed as if at the right shoulder of the missing skeleton. Other grave goods included: a copper pick-axe (of the same shape as found in Aibunar copper mines); a shaft-hole axe; a flat axe; a chisel and awls (one with a preserved bone handle); a dark green stone axe; an enormous flint blade (over 40 cm. long); oblong and rectangular breastplates of gold, having two small perforations in each corner; a circular convex gold disc 7 cm. across, lying at the shoulder next to the golden shaft of the axe; one very large globular gold bead placed at the head; round gold earrings; a necklace of annular gold beads; three massive armrings of gold in the center of the grave; 41 circular convex discs of gold with perforations at the side, probably garment ornaments; and a mass of beads of *Spondylus* and *dentalium* shell and of semi-precious orange, red and black stone. At the head were a large gold painted dish and vase and three other pots with lids.

4 Table showing radio-carbon dates for stratified sites as recalibrated to their true age.

5 Copper tools from grave No. 4: shaft-hole axe, flat axe, chisel, needles and an awl mounted in a bone handle.



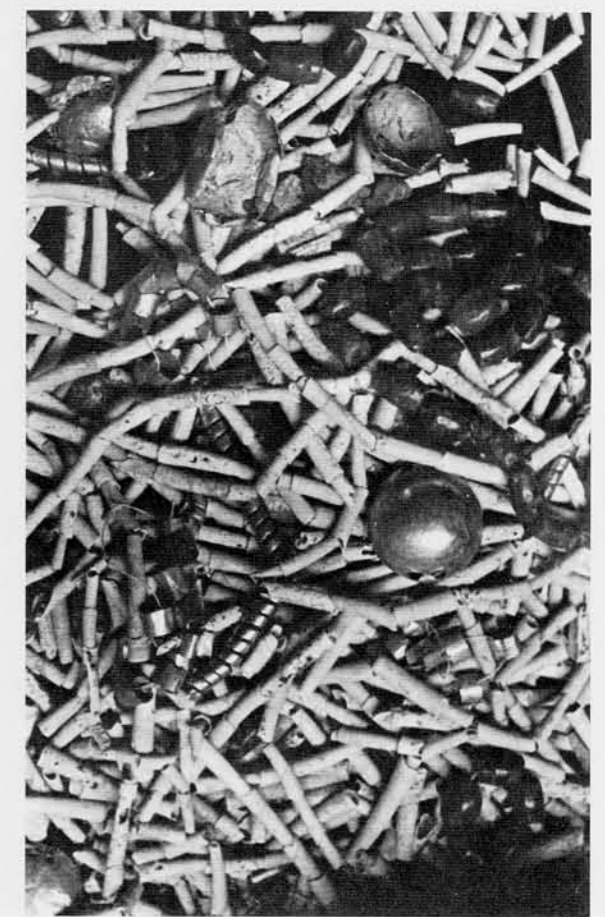
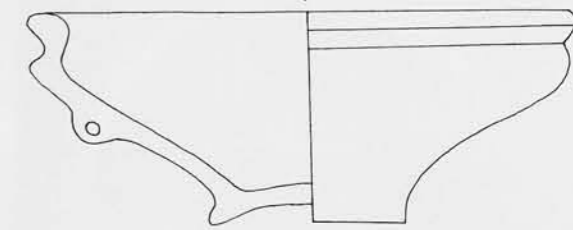
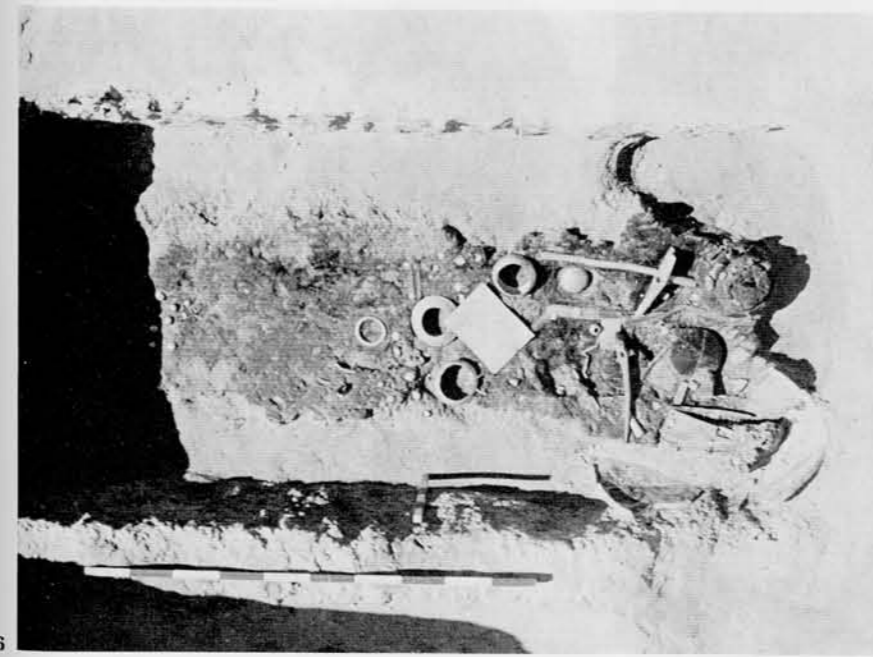
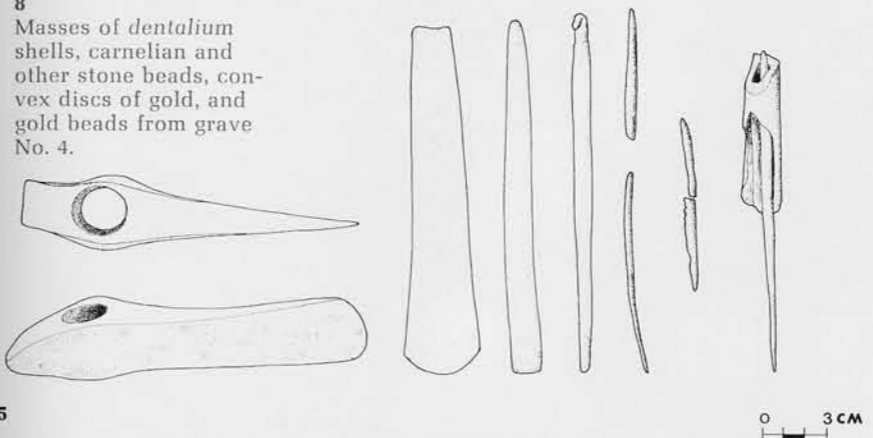
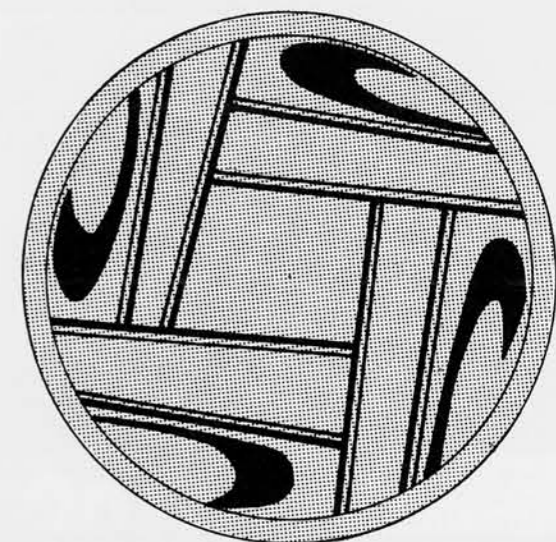
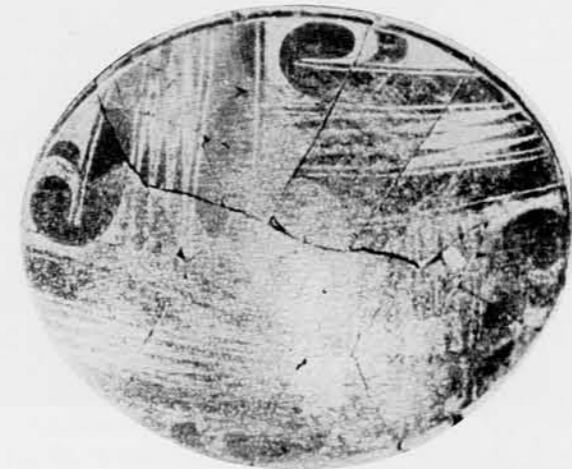
6 Cenotaph grave No. 4 with funeral gifts in situ.

1) Vases and tools mark the area designating the head and shoulders of the missing skeleton. Note the axe of pale blue-green stone with a gold tube shaft, the copper pick, the flat axe and the chisel with a long flint blade. A large rectangular gold disc, massive armrings, convex discs, rings and pendants represent the chest area of the deceased.

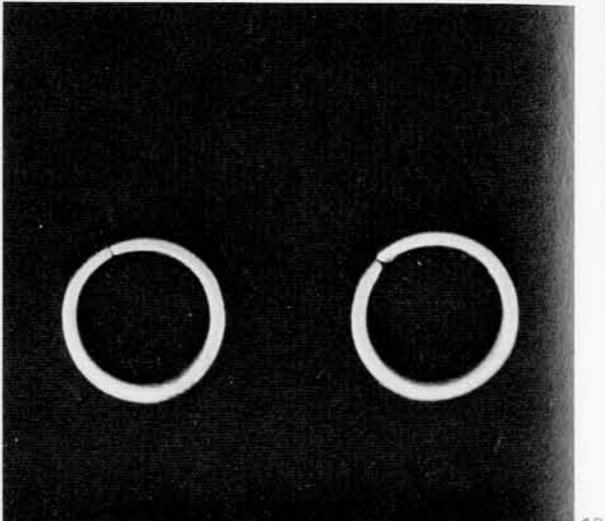
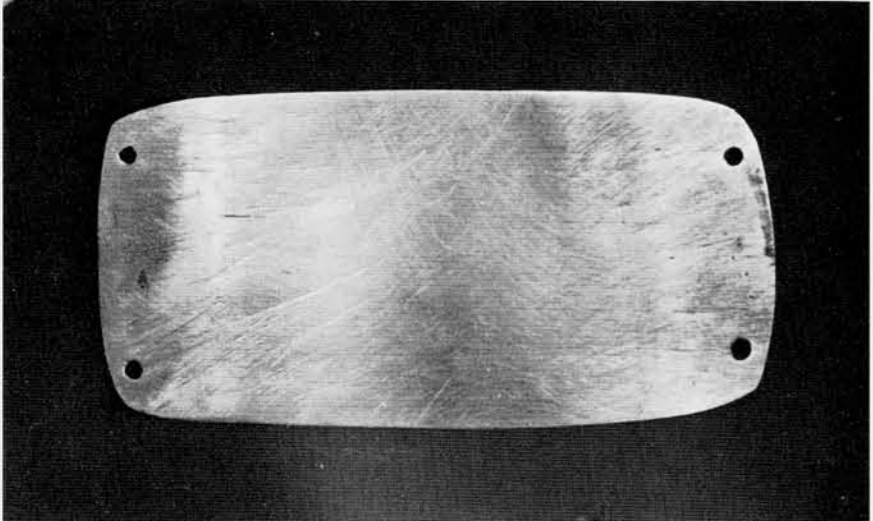
2) Detail of gold shafted axe, butt end of copper pick, gold discs, long flint blade and vases.

7 A dish painted in gold, the earliest known example of gold painting in Europe.

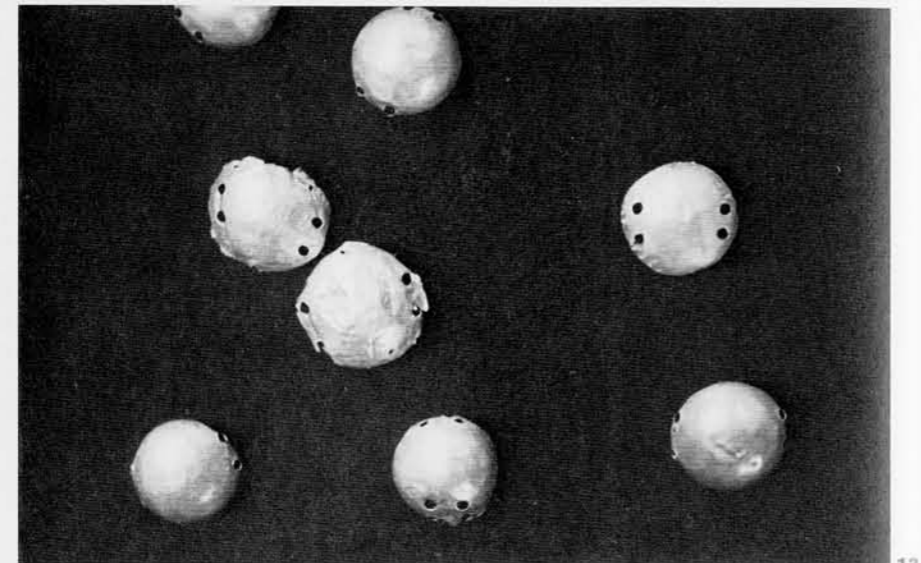
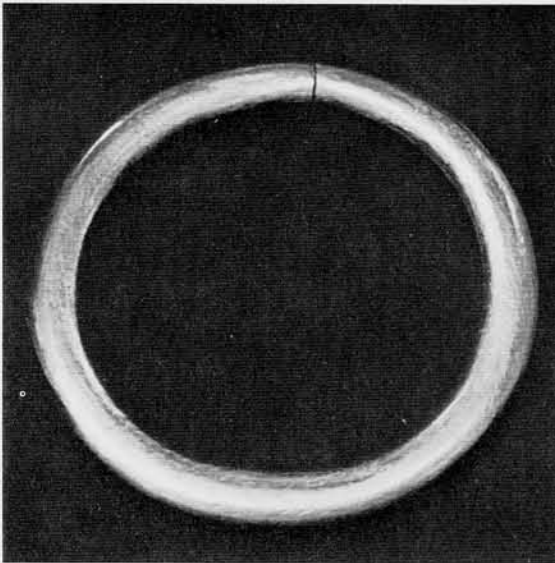
8 Masses of *dentalium* shells, carnelian and other stone beads, convex discs of gold, and gold beads from grave No. 4.



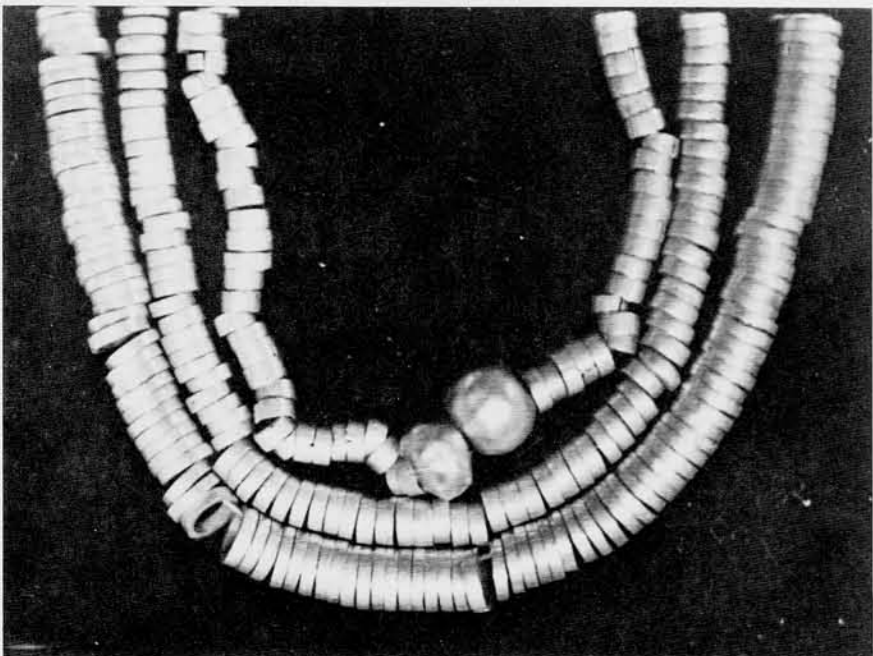




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1962 to 1963 she was Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study of Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, and from 1973 to 1974 a Fellow of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study. She is also archaeology editor of *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*. Her major publications are *The Prehistory of Eastern Europe, The Balts, The Slavs, Bronze Age Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe, The Gods and Goddess of Old Europe, Neolithic Macedonia*, as well as numerous scientific articles. Dr. Gimbutas has excavated stratified neolithic sites at Obre in Bosnia, Anza in Macedonia, Sitagroi in Greek Macedonia, and Achilleion in Thessaly.

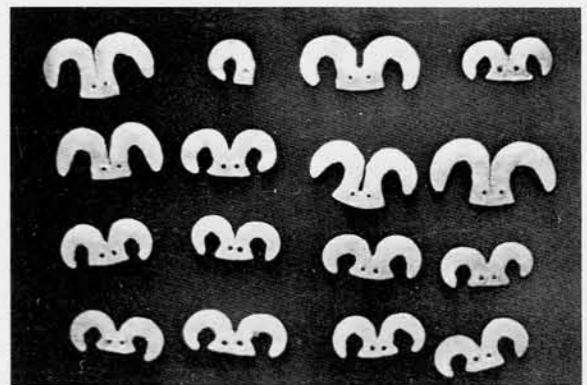
Very similar grave equipment was encountered in another rich man's grave (No. 43) including the skeleton. The man had three golden necklaces around the neck (each different); three large massive gold armrings on each arm; two golden earrings, one in each ear, made of a wire with a rectangular cross-section; six small gold hair-rings; three large golden discs with two perforations on each side; two oblong golden discs; numbers of convex golden discs apparently sewn on the garment; and a large disc of gold in the center of the grave. A necklace of electron beads and another of golden biconical beads were laid at the side, probably as gifts. A stone axe of superb workmanship with a shaft in a golden tube lay at the shoulder, and on the other side, along the body, a spear of copper, the shaft of which was also wrapped in gold. There was also a flint spearhead. The copper and stone tools in this grave were of somewhat larger proportions: a flint knife (ca 45 cm. long!), a stone celt, a copper shaft-hole axe, and awls. In addition, there were gold plate mountings and gold nails. At the head, stood a three-legged, pear-shaped vase decorated in bands of "uteri" design. This type of vase appeared in only one other grave (No. 14). A small pot, found at the side of the big vase, had a lid which was also decorated with the same symbolic "uteri" design.

Grave No. 36, again with no trace of human bones, also yielded a plethora of symbolic sacrificial gifts. These include: a solid gold axe with gold-plated shaft, a beaded gold shaft, two bull figurines and thirty bull horns of gold plate. Other gold offerings were a double-banded armring, embossed and perforated convex discs, beads, earrings, insignia in the form of a crooked staff and a "V", a sheep astragalus (of gold!), and six pendants. The grave also contained a copper shaft-hole axe, flint knife, flint saw, marble dish, copper needle, and four lidded pots.

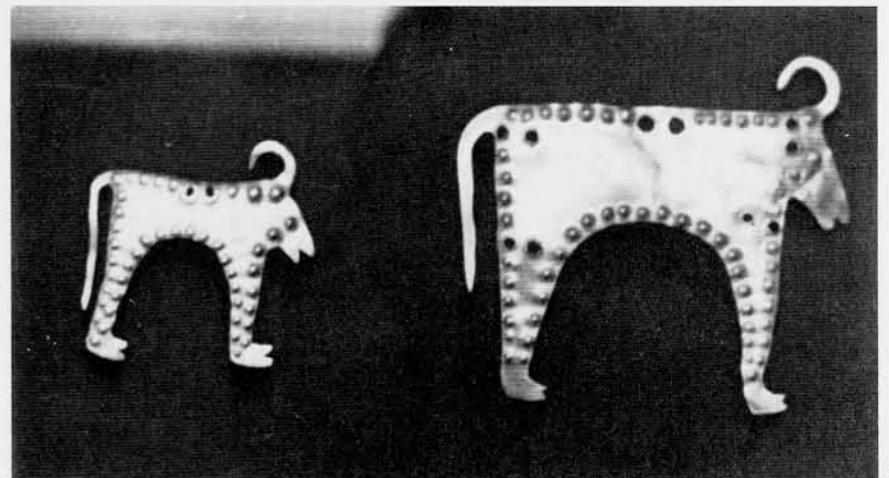
The volume of copper recovered suggests that Karanovo VI, a period in the middle of the fifth millenium B.C., is no longer "Chalcolithic" (or "Eneolithic"), but a flourishing Copper Age civilization. The classification of Old Europe should be as follows:

- Neolithic 6500-5500 B.C.
- Chalcolithic 5500-4500 B.C.
- Copper Age 4500-3500 B.C.

The end of the latter coincides with the disintegration of the Cucuteni (Tripolye) civilization and the introduction of arsenic copper. The fall of Karanovo followed the time of the Varna cemetery.



14



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16

**9-13** Objects found in grave No. 4: 9, rectangular gold plaque; 10, armring; 11, a triple necklace; 12, earrings; 13, convex discs.

**14, 15** Sacrificial offerings from a symbolic grave, grave No. 36: 14, stylized gold-plated bull horns; 15, embossed and perforated bull figurines.

**16** Gold axe with a gold-plated shaft tube (in three pieces). Grave No. 36.



Copper objects—shaft-hole axes, pick-axes, chisels, flat axes, awls, and needles—of virtually the same shape have been discovered in about forty Karanovo VI (Gumelnița) sites in Bulgaria and Romania. The tools were cast. To this period belong miniature vessel-shaped crucibles known from a number of sites in Bulgaria—Karanovo, Bereket, Gabarevo, Poljanovgrad—(Toncheva 1961). Trace analysis of the objects shows the metal came from mines at Aibunar in central Bulgaria, 8 km. south of Stara Zagora.

The Aibunar copper mines were discovered in 1971 and partially excavated in 1972 and 1974 by E. N. Černykh of the Institute of Archaeology, Moscow. Altogether eleven shafts were uncovered, a total of 500 meters in length (!) which must have produced thousands of tons of copper ore (Report in the IXth International Congress of Pre- and Protohistoric Sciences at Nice, September 13-20, 1976). The copper from the Aibunar mines was used by Karanovo, Cucuteni and Dnieper-Donets smiths, as proved by spectro-analysis. In the mine area axes and pick-axes were found of the same type as in the Varna graves.

The 444 copper objects—a shaft-hole axe, a wedge-shaped flat axe, beads, bracelets, round discs and schematic anthropomorphic figurines—found in the Karbuna hoard of Moldavia together with 408 items of marble, shell, stone, bone and elk teeth were shown by Černykh to have been made of Aibunar copper.

Varna is the greatest treasure trove of gold of this period. Analysis of the gold by Dr. Axel Hartmann, Germany is not yet completed. The distribution of similar gold objects—pendants in the shape of an abstract image of the Goddess and bracelets—in the lower Danube region (Chotnica, Ruse and Kasla-dere in northern Bulgaria, Gumelnița and Vidra in Romania) suggests a source not far from the Danube, most likely in the Transylvanian Alps in Romania.

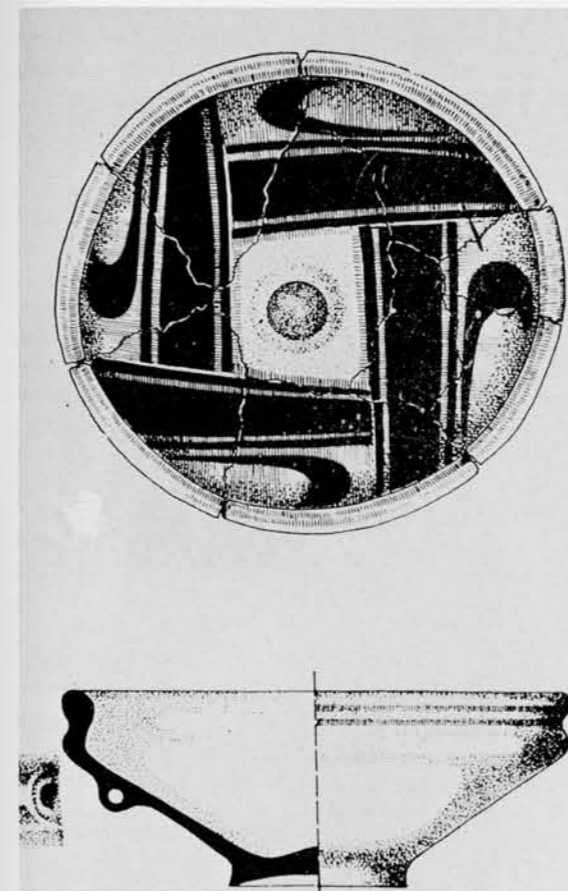
Graphite painting was widespread in the lower Danube and Marcia plains and goes back to about 5000 B.C. (Karanovo V). The Azmak and many other tells yielded graphite cones ready for drawing. Analysis of graphite-decorated wares shows a complex process of production: the graphite was applied to the dry, burnished surface of the vessel, which was then fired in a kiln at a temperature of 1000°-1100° Centigrade in a reducing atmosphere (Frierman 1970). The process of gold-painting has not yet been analyzed. The crushed and molten gold must have been applied, but how the gold was bonded to the vase surface is yet to be discovered.

A nearly transparent obsidian blade from Grave No. 41 has not been analyzed; it is very likely Carpathian (northeast Hungarian) in origin. There is also some obsidian, as yet

unanalyzed, at Kirdzhali in southeastern Bulgaria. The very long flint blades—cutting tools of unknown function—must have been prestige items: almost all graves, particularly the symbolic ones, the “mask-graves” and the richest ones, include one or several of various lengths. The source of flint may have been in the southern Bug region of Soviet Moldavia, but the answer will come when the spectro-analytical studies of 150 flint deposits in Bulgaria will be completed by Kančev of the Archaeological Institute, Sofia. Marble quarries, from which beautiful rhyta, conical dishes and symbolic shaft-hole axes were produced, are likely to be those of the Cyclades in spite of the fact that there are marble sources in southern Bulgaria. Marble could have reached Varna in the same way as the thousands of *Spondylus* and *dentalium* shells, i.e., imported from the Aegean. The sources of greenstone, blackstone and orange-red stone (carnelian or quartz) used for celts, axes and beads are not yet identified.

Varna appears to have been a harbor where exotic materials, such as *Spondylus* and *dentalium* shells and perhaps marble arrived by the sea from the south, obsidian and flint from the north and were exchanged for gold and copper. The latter were domestic, i.e. Karanovian. There is no doubt that lively trade activities existed between the Black Sea coast, central Europe, Moldavia, the western Ukraine, and the Cyclades. The area involved in trade extended south-north and west-east for more than 1000 km. From Varna or Aibunar the copper traveled north for about 600 km.

Symbolic graves with no human bones containing life-size clay masks decorated with gold attachments are another sensational discovery at Varna, with no analogies elsewhere. The mask was rather well preserved in graves Nos. 2 and 3. Two gold discs represent the eyes, a horizontal gold plate with a row of seven or more gold nails below apparently signifies a mouth and teeth. A golden diadem covers the forehead region; earrings were attached to pierced clay earlobes; and ring-shaped pendants with “eyes” were on either side of the chin. The face depicted on the masks is the same found on a certain type of East Balkan figurine. The function of the pendants with “eyes,” a stereotype of an abstract human female widely distributed throughout the Danubian and Carpathian region, was unclear until they were found *in situ* attached to the chins of the Varna masks. As grave gifts, the mask-graves contained exquisite marble rhyta and conical vases, thousands of gold, stone and *dentalium* beads, delicate gold pins with quadrangular heads, bone pins with double-egg (or double globe) heads, bull figurines, spindle whorls, long flint knives, and sickles. In addition,



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Four-corner composition with floating “uteri” painted in graphite on the inner side of a dish from Mask-grave No. 2.

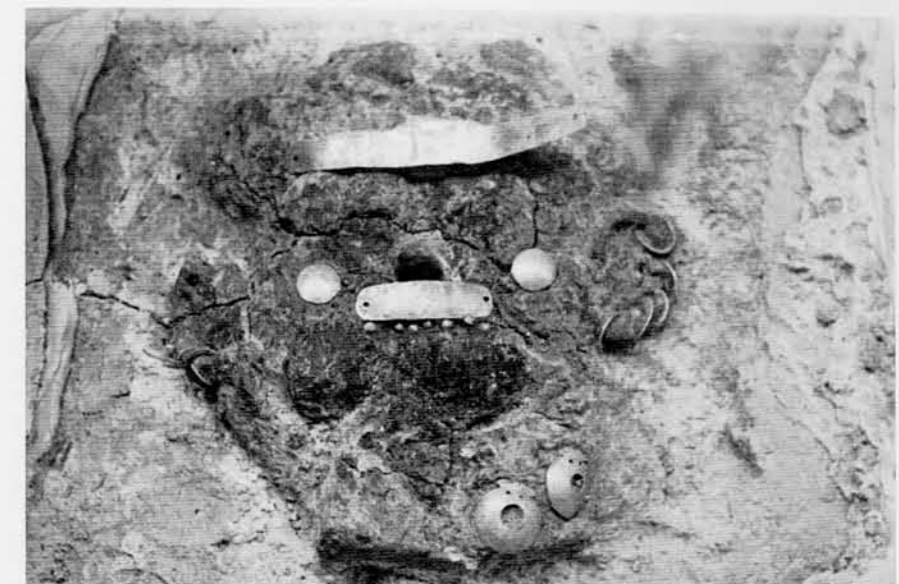
18  
Anthropomorphic gold pendants with “eye” perforations from grave No. 36.

19, 20  
Life-size clay masks with gold attributes from graves Nos. 2 and 3. The eyes are signified by gold plaques, the mouth is a gold disc studded with gold “teeth,” six gold hoops outline each ear, two gold pendants are attached to the right jaw, a gold diadem spans the forehead.

21  
Head of Karanovo VI figurine from the tell of Karanovo, bearing a striking resemblance to clay masks recovered from the Varna cemetery. Note two pendants incised beneath the mouth. The incised line on the forehead probably represents a diadem. The ears are perforated. The eyes are painted green; the lips, forehead and outer eyes, red. Height, 7.2 cm.; width, 9.5 cm. (After Raduncheva, *Doistoricheskoe iskusstvo v. Bolgarii*, 1974.)

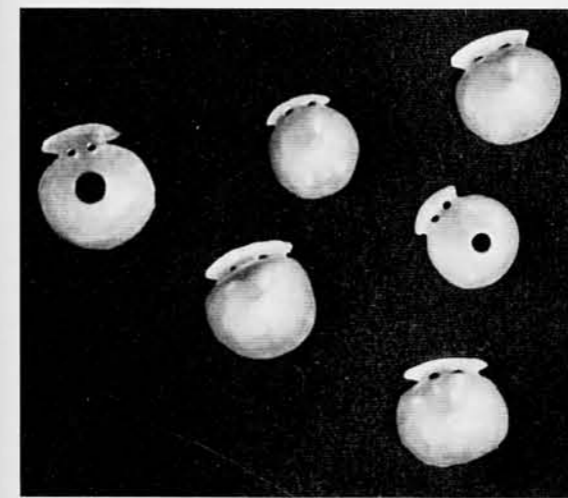
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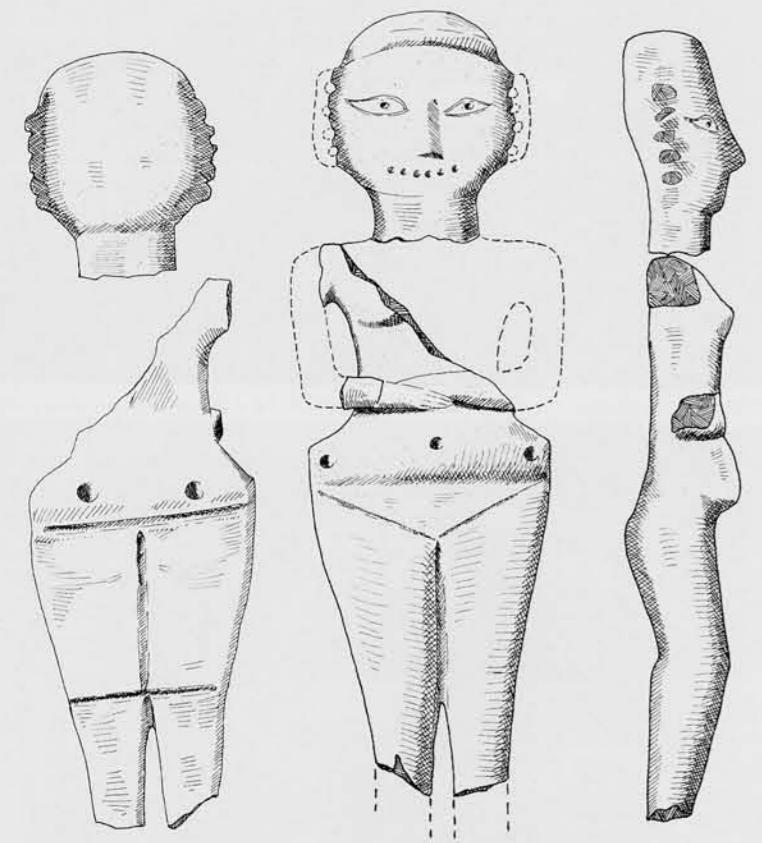
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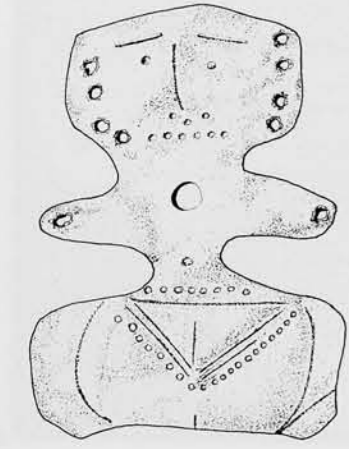




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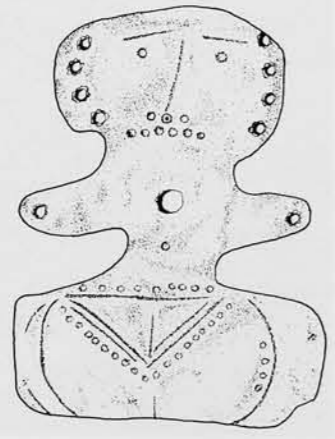
22 Marble figurine from Razgrad, central Bulgaria. Height, 33 cm. (After Georgiev 1955.)

23 Gold figurine (two sides) from Ruse on the Danube, northern Bulgaria. Scale 1/1. (After D. Rosetti, IPEK 1938.)

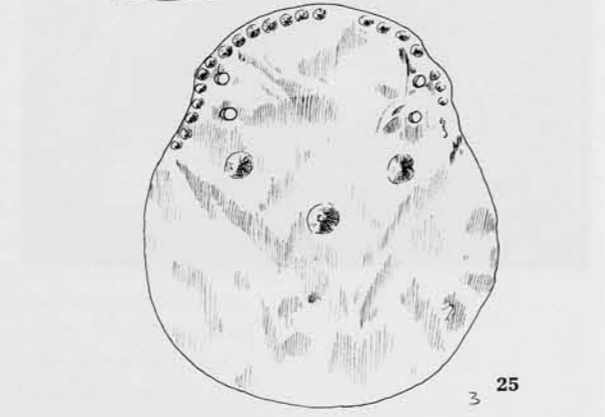
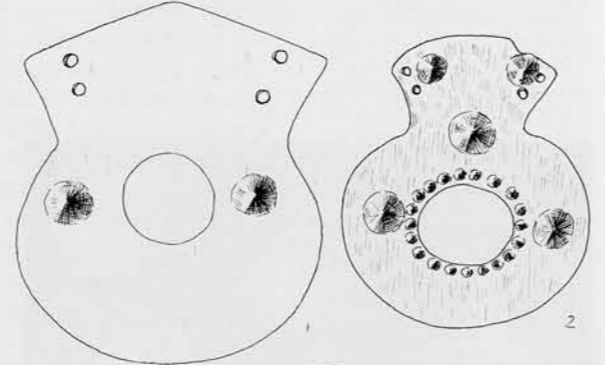


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24 Marble T-shaped anthropomorphic figurine. Gold discs cover the eyes, breasts, and pubis. Height ca 15 cm. From grave No. 3.



25 Schematized anthropomorphic effigies of gold from: 1) Tisza-Szöllos, eastern Hungary, scale 1/2; 2) Progar at Zemun northern Yugoslavia, scale 1/2; 3) Hatvan-Ujtelep, eastern Hungary, scale 1/1. (After H. Dumitrescu, *Dacia* 5, 1961.)



25



24

anthropomorphic figurines of bone and marble were found, probably abstract images of the goddess. These were of two kinds. The first has head and legs indicated and there is an accentuated pubic triangle, or "womb," usually surrounded by dots. Made of gold, marble, bone or clay, these are known in considerable numbers from Bulgaria and Romania. One of gold from Ruse and another of marble from Razgrad in Bulgaria are reproduced here. The second are "T" or "mushroom"-shaped abstractions of human form, made of bone or marble and worn as pendants. Round convex plates with perforations on the sides were attached to indicate eyes, breasts and pubis. Morphologically the latter are relatives of the gold pendants with "eye" perforations. Variants of such gold pendants as found in eastern Hungary and northern Yugoslavia, have round embossings, apparently for eyes, breasts, and pubis.

The "mask-graves" are possibly ritual tombs for the Goddess of Regeneration. Perhaps it was necessary to bury her in order to ensure the rebirth. Symbolic designs painted in graphite or gold on large dishes and lidded globular vases from this cemetery accentuate the idea of regeneration. The whirl pattern motif of helixes and "uteri" on Varna wares is a four-corner composition of symbols. This composition, as well as the "uteri" and egg motifs, is commonly associated with the Goddess of Regeneration in all parts of Old Europe and persisted in Bronze Age Crete. Vases with related design motifs have been discovered in shrines. The best analogies for Varna come from Chotnica near Trnvo in northern Bulgaria: in this Karanovo VI village, which is contemporary with Varna, a sanctuary almost quadrangular in plan (ca 4.80 m. x 5 m.), consisting of two rooms, with wall paintings in red color, was unearthed in 1957 (Angelov 1959). In its inner room, at the northern wall, on an elevation (probably a dais), was a gold treasure of forty-four objects. Five vases stood nearby, all decorated with whirl, egg and "uteri" design. Among the gold items were four anthropomorphic pendants—the abstractions of the Goddess we assume—of a type similar to those in Varna (cf. Fig. 14); the other items were bracelets and rings of various dimensions, placed singly or tied in twos or fours. The sanctuary evidently was dedicated to the Goddess of Regeneration. An earlier sanctuary from the beginning of the fifth millennium B.C., consisting of two rooms with two pillars in the inner room has been unearthed at Căscioarele, an island village in the lower Danube region (Hortensia Dumitrescu 1968). Obviously the Goddess had her own sanctuaries and she was the prime goddess of the Karanovians. Naturally, she was invoked at the crisis of death.

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