

Neolithic Jewel

Like most big capital cities, Skopje has a boring motorway entrance with industrial zones slowly giving way to suburban settlements, which become denser and more interesting as one approaches the centre. Yet, untypically, among those grey areas, there lies the unique Neolithic settlement of Tumba Madzari located in the remote suburb of Madzari. It was discovered in 1961 during the construction of the motorway. As the area had been densely built up, the site was not excavated by the Museum of Macedonia until 1978. Because of the existing construction, much of the area still has not been properly explored, but the initial findings were sufficient proof of the significance of the site. Three distinct levels corresponding to three different periods have been excavated. The excavations revealed that the settlement flourished around the year 5200 BC. In 1981 seven structures raised in traditional techniques with piles dug in the ground



and flanked with stones were discovered. The houses were built close to one another and separated by narrow alleys and small yards. The layout of the inner space of the house varied serving individual needs and desires. The mortar showed traces of big chopped beams built into the walls. On the outside, the walls were decorated with fingertips with spirals terminating in primitive volutes. The typical house has a square floor plan with the area of about 8 square metres. The thatched roof mounted on a wooden structure rests on two thick piles in the front and on the western side of the house. The house interior is divided by a thin, irregular parapet that separates two furnaces.

The site has yielded a few genuine gems. It revealed the oldest ever discovered painted amphora. Its shape, texture and decoration with stylized floral ornaments betray the hand of a very experienced

master. Forty five fully preserved vessels and numerous fragments were discovered in the house which archaeologists believe to have served as a sanctuary. They include pythoses, large frutaria, plates, cups etc. The terracotta figure of the big mother is the hallmark of the settlement. It has an impressive height of 39 cm. The figure of a female calmly watching over the village is classically composed. Another find is a ceramic representation of the head of a ram that most likely once decorated the facade of a house. It indicates that there was a cult of this animal. Goat and centaur with a receptacle on his back are among other interesting zoomorphic representations. As far as tools are concerned, weights for a vertical loom, fishing nets, bi-conic weights (reels), many bone spatulas of standard shapes, awls and needles have been discovered. There was a developed flint stone industry in the settlement, as is indicated by various flint stone knives, cutters, stone mortars and mills. All this material is on display in the permanent archaeological collection in the Museum of Macedonia.

Researchers claim that it was not by accident that a large successful settlement developed in this location. It emerged on the very fertile land in the centre of Skopje Valley, where the nearby hill offered

protection in case of war and an escape route in case of flooding of the nearby Katlanovo Lake. The people of Tumba Madzari had everything within close reach: woods, pastures, water, game, and fish. Yet, the analysis of the animal and bird bones in and around the settlement indicates that these people obtained their meat almost exclusively from livestock breeding and only rarely supplement it by hunting and fishing.

Excavations of the previous decade led to new discoveries: in 2002 a clay bath tub, a well, and finely smoothed walls and floor with salt crystals were unearthed; in 2007 and 2008 several groups of stationary square and circular objects connected with trade within the settlement were found.

In 2010 a tourist and educational facility called "Neolithic Village" was setup on the prehistoric site under the auspices of the Museum of Macedonia. A wide range of excavated objects were replicated to create a four-house exhibit attempting to reconstruct the way of life of the Neolithic man. The huts and the stockyard offer the visitors a unique opportunity to step into the everyday life of our remote ancestors. A souvenir shop to complete the visitors' experience has also been built on the site, which is now an obligatory stop in the itinerary of any tourist visiting the country.

