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## New questions for the old setting

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### ABSTRACT

The site of Vinča is often regarded as a yardstick for the entire Late Neolithic period of southeast Europe. Neolithic farmers, cattle-breeders, fishers, hunters, craftsmen, tradesmen and artists lived here for more than a millennium between 5600 and 4500 B.C. The site contains more than 9 m of cultural deposits, and its exceptional position at the crossroads of natural routes, at the bank of the River Danube, between the vast Pannonian plain and hilly inland made it ideal for scientific research. The site of Vinča-Belo Brdo became known among archaeologists and general public soon after its discovery in 1908. Since then, there three generations of archaeologists have been excavating here. Miloje M. Vasić will be remembered as the first one to bring to light artefacts and dwelling objects of what later became known as the Vinča culture. He had excavated the entire cultural deposit in ten campaigns between 1908 and 1934 at the central part of the site and discovered at least ten dwelling horizons, all yielding rich and abundant archaeological material. The excavations of 1978–1987, led by N. Tasić, D. Srejović and G. Marjanović-Vujović, have ascertained the existence of post Neolithic dwelling horizons dated in the Copper Age, late Bronze Age and Medieval periods. Archaeological material from the site that has been excavated in the course of 105 years has been thoroughly studied, analysed, and published. It seems that it has given all the answers regarding internal division, style and function of pottery, procurement of raw materials, and relationship with other contemporaneous populations, but there are questions which cannot be answered by traditional archaeological means. The ongoing research at Belo Brdo in Vinča which started in 1998 and directed by the author of this text focuses not only on archaeological research but also on attracting and involving experts from different scientific disciplines. Archaeo-botany, archaeo-zoology, geology, geophysics, chemistry, IT, soil sciences, and geography will be used in our attempt to reconstruct some aspects of the palaeoenvironment of the site of Vinča. These new results of applied sciences, combined with archaeological knowledge, will help us answer much more complex questions concerning the relationship of human populations and their environment; explain some of the choices these people made; and perhaps give us an answer as to why they had left the site by the end of the Neolithic.

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### 1. Introduction

Although in the minds of ordinary folk the Neolithic period is still associated with bygone times shrouded in a veil of mist, when groups of people dressed in animal hides, emanating incomprehensible sounds, and roaming over desolate expanses, the reality of the past, which is being unearthed every day by teams of archaeologists, appears to be in disagreement to this conviction. Based on the data collected from numerous archaeological sites stretching from Anatolia and the Near East to Central Europe, it now seems plausible that the Neolithic period was characterised by a cultural boom and crucial development of communities which meant not

only settled societies but also the first food production in human history. The Neolithic period can also be regarded as an age of the first mass art production; as an age of hard work and as a time when peace and serenity reigned among the people.

Since its establishment in the 19th century, archaeology has changed its focus, objectives and methods quite significantly. Once, there were traditional archaeological questions, primarily those which were seeking for the answers as to 'when', 'where' and 'how old'. For example, the Neolithic period and swift social developments mirrored in material culture throughout the world have posed a tremendous problem for those who wanted to know when it emerged in Europe and where it came from. The main concepts were soon established but it finally became apparent that the missing elements for formulating valid answers to more and more complex questions raised by archaeologists and also the

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general public were not those which archaeology could provide on its own, but those which can be offered exclusively by applied sciences. Having realized that, archaeologists and archaeology evolved towards interdisciplinary research which became '*conditio sine qua non*' of every respectable archaeological enterprise.

By the year 7000 B.C. when massive glaciers had already withdrawn from their Ice Age frontiers in Europe and coniferous forests had retreated northwards, and when the "climatic optimum" was reached, the Balkan Peninsula started to look the way it would look until the end of the Middle Neolithic (Gronenborn 2009). The climate was slightly warmer and more humid, so that forests of beech, hazel, oaks and other deciduous trees covered most of the Balkans, making it almost impenetrable. On the other hand, such an environment provided an ideal habitat for numerous plants and animal species which become vital components for survival of the Neolithic people in the centuries to come. The environment in which Neolithic communities developed dictated and directed many social activities. Composition of different features of the local environment is largely accountable for adaptation of human communities which can be observed in the choice of favourable positions and adequate disposition for settlements; establishment of communication lines; and the subsistence practices of societies and individuals. Studying the environment and material culture of past civilizations in an integrative way, we can hope to answer the 'how' questions, such as: how did natural or social factors shaped the communities, how did the people of the past choose which routes to use in order to communicate and which ones to avoid; how and where to procure raw materials for tools, and so on. Only the study of all of these factors can help us identify the dynamism within and among social and cultural phenomena and establish directions of exchange of material goods, population and experience in given region, so we can get an idea about the origins of differences among neighbouring populations developing at the same time.

## 2. Starčevo culture

At the dawn of the Neolithic period, the Central Balkans was a sparsely inhabited area. The Mesolithic (pre-Neolithic) settlements in the Danube Gorges were probably the only oasis of settled or, rather, semi-settled life in the period between 9000 BC and 6200 BC. This was the time when the culture of Lepenski Vir flourished, leaving behind masterpieces of architecture and sculptural art (Srejović 1972; Radovanović, 2000; Borić, 2002, 2003). The Early and Middle Neolithic (6200–5200 BC) can be best understood as periods of the colonization of the region that, though unfamiliar to the newcomers, was attractive because of the highly favorable environmental conditions. The region was, at the time, blossoming in the post-glacial climatic optimum. This was the time when small groups of colonists from the south were discovering the 'secrets' of the Balkans and eventually established the cornerstones of civilization that largely determined the future directions of development of human society. In the course of their expeditions, these

pioneers made use of large territories, settling them sometimes permanently, sometimes seasonally.

Just before the emergence of the Vinča culture, the people who created the culture of the Early and Middle Neolithic periods, named after the locality of Starčevo, lived in the central Balkans, parts of the Pannonian Plain, Transylvania, Eastern Bosnia and Northern FYR Macedonia. The Starčevo culture was long-lived, lasting from 6200 B.C. to 5200 B.C. Having different regional variants, it is known in archaeology as the Starčevo–Körös–Criş cultural complex (Fig. 1). For a long time, archaeologists disagreed over its origins. Whereas some believed that the local roots of the Starčevo culture were in the Mesolithic period of the Iron Gorges (Srejović, 1979), others were of the opinion that the origins of this early Neolithic period should be looked for in the Near East and Anatolia (Garašanin, 1979). Today, there is more and more evidence in support of the latter hypothesis (Tasić, 2009). More important than the issue of the origins of this cultural complex is, however, the fact that food production, one of the major inventions in human history, dates from this period. Up to that point, pre-Neolithic communities gathered food in seasonal campaigns, following the rhythm of nature. They lived in small groups, most frequently with their biological families, which travelled great distances searching for food. Over a period of several generations, the Neolithic people gradually adapted to life in one place. Such settlements existed also during the Starčevo culture but were mainly short-lived, probably seasonal in nature, and had to do with summer grazing. Larger settlements were built in the valleys of large rivers, offering shelter in wintertime. The material culture of the Starčevo culture is also relevant for studies of the Vinča culture, since the knowledge acquired in those times was important to the following period as well. The Starčevo population represents the first farming communities of south-east Europe. The explored permanent settlements of this period yielded outstanding archaeological material that showcases the perception and skill of their founders. Although their dwellings were rather crude and of seasonal character, the pottery they produced is delicate and appealing, and is typologically and functionally well differentiated. The painted decoration on their pottery is of elaborate geometrical character, involving complicated relationship of squares, triangles and diagonal lines painted or incised on pottery which demonstrates their expertise and perhaps also the importance of geometry in their cognition.

It is still not quite clear whether Starčevo communities of the Early and Middle Neolithic were direct ancestors of the Late Neolithic Vinča population. One hypothesis holds that the Vinča people came in a separate migratory 'wave' from the eastern parts of the Balkans (Garašanin, 1979). Whatever the truth might be, the fact remains that some of the ceramic forms and decorative patterns of the Starčevo culture continued to be used during the Vinča period. Furthermore, at numerous excavated sites the archaeologists ascertained a combination of Starčevo and Vinča pottery in the same living horizon, which implies temporal and spatial contacts of the two cultures (Čović, 1961; Leković, 1990).



Fig. 1. Painted pottery of the Starčevo culture.

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