LEPENSKI VIR AND VINCA
The Ancient Time in Europe

By

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Introduction

Lepenski Vir and Vinca are two different archeological settlements in the Danube area in the Balkans of southeastern Europe. Lepenski Vir is one of many settlements in the so called the Iron Gate, or Djerdap Gorge, which is 130 km long. Settlements almost belong to the Mesolithic and early Neolithic culture and existed between 9500 B.C. and 6200 B.C. Some of the settlements are older, like Cuina Turcului I (Romania) show radiometric dates\(^1\) of 12600 ± 129 B.P.\(^2\) Vinca is a Neolithic settlement from the 6\(^{th}\) millennium B.C. also in Danube valley, in a fertile area. Scientists believe that the Starcevo complex (Lepenski Vir, Padina, Cuina Turcului, etc.) developed and spread in a new cultural configuration called Vinca complex.\(^3\)

Researches made in the last few decades in southeast Europe, changed traditional views about so called hunting-gathering societies in Europe and show the earliest evidence of food production in southeast Europe about the 7\(^{th}\) millennium B.C. Lepenski Vir and Vinca are only two of many places discovered in the last few decades. Some of discovered settlements are very old and became to the Paleolithic and Terminal Pleistocene\(^4\) like Cuina Turcului I and Climente I and II (all of them are discovered in the Iron Gate, see Fig. 1 and 2). Increase of the population started cultural development and social differentiation. There is even evidence of coexistence between the two different economies in Starcevo complex during the same time period from 7500-6500 B.C. The Iron Gate had been a place of exchange between hunting-gathering populations and the intrusive food producers known as the Starcevo culture. There was evidence

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\(^1\) Radiometric dating method is radiocarbon \(^{14}\)C; uncalibrated dates are denoted as B.P., calibrated are denoted as BC.
\(^4\) Pleistocene Epoch is also known as the Great Ice Age.
of socio-cultural practice, construction of houses, food storage and food processing. Barbara A. Voytek has argued that Mesolithic society in southeast Europe has three components: sedentism, food storage, and exchange.\(^5\)

Explorers and interpreters of the Starcevo and the Vinca cultures answered many questions about old European history in a non-traditional way. By finding new evidence, scientists opened new discussion on a period about which they knew relatively little.

**Lepenski Vir**

Lepenski Vir was discovered in the 1960s, after the Romanian and Yugoslav governments began construction of a hydroelectric dam in the area of the Djerdap Gorge or the Iron Gate. It was a big surprise when a number of settlements, based on hunting, fishing and gathering were found on both sides of the Danube river. The accumulation lake was supposed to be exactly in the Djerdap Gorge and archaeologists intensified their archeological research from the 1960s to the late 1970s. In 1968 Romanian banks were already under water, and as a result the Yugoslavian side intensified their archeological work. Scientists simply decided to move the whole Lepenski Vir I settlement to higher ground and built the Museum of Lepenski Vir. After two campaigns in 1970, Padina A (radiometric date is about 9300 B.C.) was discovered and scientists began excavation on Vlasac. In 1971 archeologists discovered the Schela Cladovei on the Romanian side of the bank and many others.\(^6\)

D. Srejovic argued that the Djerdap Gorge had specific micro-climatic conditions. A stable climate preserved and developed the Starcevo culture in the Post-Pleistocene period.

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\(^6\) Radovanovic, 3-8.
Lepenski Vir (vir means whirlpool) is situated on the Danube river bank and on the steep of the Korso hills. The Djerdap region is exposed to the steppe climate from the East and continental climate from the West. It brings uniform rainfall, mild transitions between seasons, four seasons, the absence of strong wind and extreme temperature variations. The people of Lepenski Vir lived in almost ideal conditions for that time: near the river and surrounded by diverse vegetation, mixed oak forests, walnut, and hackberry, which made survival easier in that area and created a possibility for gathering and fishing. Lepenski Vir is situated in the middle of a forest and on the banks of the Danube, which are high and almost vertical. It is possible to make one’s way along the bank, but only when the water level is low. The first settlers probably did not have need to stray far. In their isolated place they developed their own culture and architecture. (Fig. 3)

Settlements and architecture of Lepenski Vir I covered a limited area of about two thousand square meters and had about eighty-five houses. The inhabitants built their villages on river terraces. All houses were built from stone and one can see that houses were renewed, rebuilt, or extended from time to time. The villagers constructed floors on firm ground showing that every house was inhabited for a long time, and were used for generations. The form of architecture and method of building was original and shows something completely new. D. Srejovic described the foundations like stone-built houses of a trapezoid form, or a “form of sector of circle with a subtended angle of $60^\circ$. This shape is clearly defended and completely closed but is not geometrically rigid. It appears to have been variable, and houses were winded or narrowed within the design of great circle, like a fan.” (See Fig. 4)

Culture, art and religion of Lepenski Vir belong to the Starcevo Culture of the Central Balkans, and the lower Danube basin. The Lepenski vir artists made ornamented sculpture and

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8 Srejovic, 50.
figural sculpture in fish shapes. Material used for this was special stones from that area (Fig. 6). Some authors like Marija Gimbutas thought that sculptures were religiously significant for the inhabitants. Gravestones and shrines were triangular and skeletons were found on triangular red lime plaster (Fig. 5). Skeletons and many fragments were found in the area, within the shrines were found bones of large fish, dog, deer, etc. It shows that people of Lepenski Vir served funerary rituals, and Marija Gimbutas thought that the site itself was a sacred burial place, because 170 skeletons and many fragments were found in the area.

The economy of Lepenski Vir was based on fishing and gathering, but they did exchange goods with neighboring cultures. They traded with neighboring cultures in Bosnia, the Dalmatian coast, Sardinia via the Adriatic Sea, and Tisza (Hungary). The main items of trade continued to be Aegean shells used for the manufacture of bracelets, beads, and rings.

The function of the sanctuary at Lepenski Vir is question for many scientists. What was the Lepenski Vir? Was it really a sanctuary, or did the people simply bury their dead under their own living place? Many scientists believe that it was a sanctuary that served other purposes, but also believe that an egalitarian collective had already begun to disappear among the individual households. The Starcevo culture spread and developed other cultures, such as Vinca. Before Lepenski Vir and settlements in the Iron Gate were found, scientists believed that Vinca was one of the oldest places of southeast Europe, but settlements of the Iron Gate changed this opinion dramatically.

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10 Ibid.
Vinca

Vinca, settlement in the Central Balkans very close to Belgrade (15 km), shows the continuity of the Starcevo culture, from the 6th millennium B.C. Vinca was discovered and excavated by Miloje Vasic between 1908-1934.13 (Fig. 7) Vasic was firm in the belief that Vinca was occupied from the beginning of the Aegean Middle Bronze Age until the area was conquered by the Romans, so according to him Vinca was a Greek colony. Archeological evidence today and the possibility of doing radiometric data, shows otherwise. The Vinca culture was indigenous, formed in the 6th millennium B.C. as a result of gradual socio-economic change, and continued to exist for more than a thousand years.14 The size of settlements doubled over the millennium. Vinca was settled in very fertile Danube Basin. It was a Neolithic culture and part of many other neighboring settlements in Bosnia, Hungary, and Romania.

Architecture was planed and the terrain was leveled before building. “Early Vinca houses consisted of one large room with an attachment or of two rooms about 8 m long and 3-4 m wide. House size increased greatly during the mid-Vinca period. Houses of three, four, or even five rooms were unearthed along with two-room houses in a number of settlements. The largest houses were up to 20 m long. The space between houses ranged from 26 m to 60 m and their courts were bordered with stones.”15 The inhabitants in Vinca and neighboring cultures built their villages on river terraces or on sloping land. The area of settled territory covered up to ten acres, spreading 1 km along the river.

13 Ibid, 63.
14 Ibid, 64.
15 Ibid.
The economy grew fast and Vinca culture traded and mined copper. Because Vinca was in a fertile area, the soil was conducive to agriculture. Archeological research shows the spread of agriculture from Tisza (Hungary today), across central Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, to Macedonia and Thessaly. During this time the area was mostly covered with oak forests. It was abundant with wild animals, but also wild grapes, berries, and cherries. It was “easy” to start agriculture in that environment, and their principle crop was emmer wheat, acorn wheat, peas, barley, and lentils. People of the Vinca culture domesticated animals; they were the same type used in Greece of that time: sheep, goats, cattle and pigs. Copper mining started later than 5000 B.C. and was one of their greatest achievements.

The art of Vinca developed its own unique identity. The Vincans fashioned figurines representing the Bird Goddess, a new ceramic style of pottery, a variety of biconical vessels, and flat dishes. (Figs. 8 and 9) Pottery shows new style around 5400-5300 B.C. The dark faced pottery probably came from Anatolia, through the Karanovo culture in Bulgaria. The earliest artifacts in Vinca are radiocarbon dated between 5300 and 5000 B.C. These dark faced pieces replaced the orange pottery of the Starcevo culture. They also created biconical vessels, carinated and flat dishes, and animal shaped vases. In every Vinca settlement scientists found considerable numbers of figurines. Vinca figurines show precious details: a characteristic mask with large nose or beak with no mouth. Bird vases with human masks are true masterpieces. Realistic masterpieces and larger sculptures were present in each phase of this culture.

16 Ibid, 64.
17 Ibid, 25.
18 Ibid, 64.
19 Ibid, 66.
20 Ibid, 69.
Religion is one of main sources for the reconstruction of the social organization in prehistoric society, studying the types and function of gods or goddesses, their worship and tombs, provide abundant information about the society. Marija Gimbutas concluded that the Vinca culture worshiped Goddesses. She thought that the Paleolithic Goddess was typically a macrocosmic extension of a woman’s body. These symbols continue to exist through Mesolithic and Neolithic periods and can later be explained as a reflection or memory of a matrilineal system in which paternity was difficult to establish. This goddess represents life-giving and life destroying energy of nature. Symbols for that were the Bird and Snake Goddesses, representing incarnations of life energy for the Vinca people. These houses or temples of goddesses developed from the beginning of agricultural society.  

Abstract signs and symbols were found on many sculptures, vases and dishes, which caused more debate. For many scientists these symbols are religiously significant. For others they are trade signs or even some kind of alphabetic system.

The first archeological finds bearing these signs were excavated in 1874 at an early Vinca in Transylvania. Scientists found that the first linear signs appear around 6000 – 5300 B.C. Marija Gimbutas found that the Old European script was in common use between 5300 – 4300 B.C., and it was form of sacred writing on religious objects. It has nothing to do with the much later scripts in Mesopotamia or Mycenaean Linear B. This script developed during the Neolithic period, and some of them could have phonetic sounds. “Within this script were about thirty a core signs and more than 100 modified signs, if variations are not counted,” wrote Marija Gimbutas (Figs. 10 and 11).

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21 Ibid, 342.
22 Ibid, 320.
Vinca had the corpus of 210 signs, about one-third are symbols, universally used throughout Europe. Similar signs were found in Tisza, northwestern Bulgaria, Transylvania, and assuming that they were delivered from Sumerian script was wrong. Calibrated radiocarbon chronology shows that this script appeared in first half of the 6th millennium B.C. and was used continuously for 2000 years. Significantly, this script is several thousand years older than Sumerian, Cretan, Cypro-Minoan, and others.23

Old European script disappeared at the time of the disintegration of the Vinca culture, around 4300-4000 B.C. Scientists believe that horse-riding tribes from the southern Russian steppes came and destroyed the Vinca and Karanovo cultures. People in the Balkan area became Indo-European speakers and the older culture survived only in the Aegean area.

Lepenski Vir and Vinca are only two from many old European archeological settlements found in near history. Many archeologists think that one cannot decipher the meaning of prehistoric art, scripts and religion. However, new evidence completely changed the traditional scientific view about European Mesolithic and Neolithic people, their achievements, knowledge, religion, and life. It seems that what we call “Old Lady Europe” was truly old and many scientists believe that old Europe was a goddess country with the first phonetic script, metallurgy, and many other skills.

23 Ibid, 309.
Works Cited


Appendix: Maps and Images

Fig. 1. Neolithic complexes in the Balkan Peninsula in the seventh and sixth millennium B.C.
Fig. 2. Map of the archeological settlements at the Iron Gates (I. Radovanovic)
Fig. 3. View of Treskavac from Lepenski Vir settlement (D. Srejovic)
Fig 4. Houses in Lepenski Vir I (I. Radovanovic)
Fig. 5. Skeleton placed in triangular form at Lepenski Vir (I. Radovanovic)

Fig. 6. Typical sculpture from Lepenski Vir (D. Srejovic)
Fig. 7. Map of Balkan regional groups in the fifth millennium B.C. (M.Gimbutas)
Fig. 8. Sculpture of the Bird Goddess from Vinca (M.G.)

Fig. 9. Sculpture from Vinca (M. Gimbutas)
Fig. 10. Comparison of old European and Linear A scripts (M.Gimbutas)

Fig. 11. Core signs from Vinca sculptures and artifacts (M.Gimbutas)