

EXCAVATIONS

VINČA - THE THIRD GRANCE (EXCAVATIONS 1998-2002)

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When in 1908 Professor Miloje Vasić initiated his first systematic excavations at the site of Belo Brdo in Vinča, he probably could not have even imagined what abundance of finds, arts, complicated architectural remains or even just data he is about to be faced up with, nor could have he imagined that his work will be continued throughout the 20th century and now stretching in the third millennium. He must have definitely realized that in a short while as hundreds of magnificent pieces of Neolithic figurines were marching across his table. What he discovered turned out to be something of a benchmark for cultural change in more than thousand years long history of this place in the Neolithic world of Southeastern Europe. Pioneers, first farmers, first sedentary population, or even first Europeans, as they were sometimes labeled, have left ten meters thick cultural deposit at an area of more than 6 hectares. They have settled at a piece of land on a river terrace which looks at the Danube river on a spot where it makes a curve coming from the North, slows down and then goes towards the East.

The continuity of occupation of this place can be traced without significant caesuras, from the Middle Neolithic, 5600 BC cal until the present days. It was first inhabited, as Vasić's excavations and his monograph suggest (Vasić, M.M. 1934), at the time of the Starčevo culture, with a type-site of the culture being only few kilometers away on the other side of the river. Some analysis of the material position this material at the Middle Neolithic i.e. Starčevo IIb after M. Garašanin (1972 and 1979) or Middle Neolithic of Central Balkans II, after the author of this communication (1997 and 1998) (further in text cited as MNCB). But the phenomenon that made Vinča famous in Neolithic archaeology occurred sometime around year 5200 cal BCE, when the Late Neolithic culture named after this site emerged. It contrasted the previous period in many ways. Perhaps the sharpest contrast is an assumption that, unlike semi-sedentary Starčevo people, inhabitants of Vinča have led a sedentary way of life, with all its benefits and constrains. Differences among them were also the technology of pottery making, type of dwellings, presence of early metallurgy in the Vinča culture, probably different types of social organization, beliefs, ritual practices and gender identity. On the other hand, both populations shared a preference towards similar landscape, similar ornamental motifs and certain pot forms. Although there is some evidence that they have overlapped in spatial and chronological terms (e.g. Gornja Tuzla, Cović 1961), the exact origin of the Vinča people is not a firmly established fact. Whether they came in the Central Balkans with yet another wave from the Southeast or perhaps represent the local adaptation of generations of the first wave of Neolithization. Or, did just their material culture changed in its appearance? That is yet to be discovered in future work of fellow archaeologists studying the Neolithic of Southeast Europe.

For the benefit of those who are not familiar with Vinča and its

culture, I will sketch briefly the history of excavations in Vinča. The first researcher at the site of Vinča - Belo Brdo was M.M. Vasić who started his excavations in 1911 and carried on his campaigns, with intermissions for the World War I and latter lack of finance, until 1934. Last campaigns and the monograph were financed by Sir Charles Hyde - a man that has helped Vasić not only financially but also in presenting his discoveries abroad. Those campaigns have been conducted according to rather high standards of the time. Rich field documentation and four volumes of "Prehistoric Vinča" by M.M. Vasić were for a long time the source for our understanding of the culture and a reliable relative chronological standard for the Balkans. However modern they were for the beginning of 20th century (Fig. 1), those excavations have lacked many aspects indispensable for a present-day archaeological research. For example, Vasić has excavated in so-called mechanical excavation layers which were leaving very little room for noticing the exact context of features and finds. Another source of errors and possible misinterpretations of the chronological sequence was the fact that all the altitudes in the early excavations have been recorded relative to "ground zero", which represented the highest point of the site, and was excavated during the first campaign. During winter and spring 2002 entire collection of Vasić's field documentation, involving field journals, plans, sketch book, glass-plate negatives, was unified, systematized and digitalized as a part of systematic approach towards creating comprehensive digital data bank for the site of Vinča.

The World War II ended the archaeological campaigns in Vinča and they were resumed 47 years later in 1978 when the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts established the Committee for the Archaeological Research at Vinča. This committee plans the strategy and objectives of archaeological campaigns in Vinča. The main goal of the archaeological research in Vinča 1978-1983 was to check on Vasić's data and open new surface in Sector II and expose a larger part of the center of the site.² During those excavations a part of the site was stripped, new profile was obtained and updated stratigraphy was established (Fig. 2, 3). Interesting discoveries unrelated to the Neolithic period of the site were made. Medieval necropolis, dated from 9th to 12th century A.D., with more than 800 individuals was discovered on the topmost stratum of the site (Marjanović-Vujović, 1984). The discovery of Bodrogkeresztur graves, made in 1982 and 1983 has shown that not only strong influence from this northern culture can be registered in Vinča but also the physical presence of its people. The analysis of the grave goods has shown this material can be dated in the late phase of the Bodrogkeresztur culture, i.e. its Puzstaitvanhaza horizon. (Tasić N. 1988).

At the time when this author was asked to conduct excavations at the site of Belo Brdo in Vinča, sometime early summer of 1998, Serbian prehistoric archaeology was not in a very bright position. It

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²Turning the focus of archaeological community back to Vinča - Belo Brdo was probably another important objective.

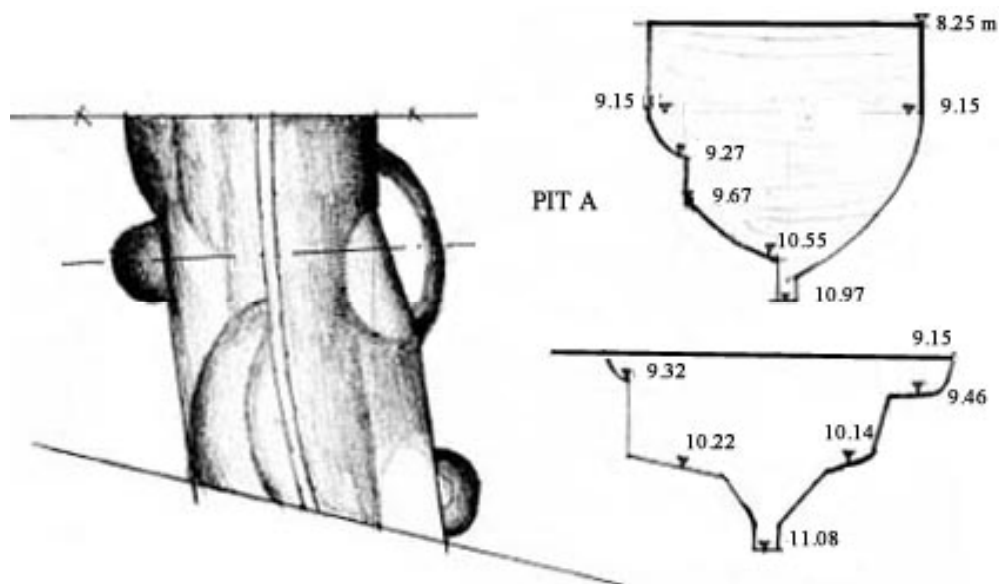


Figure 1. Pit A. Vinča Tell.

was restricted to a very few rescue excavations the impoverished society could afford. It was the time of wars among newly formed Balkan states and a time of maximal stringency for the people in Serbia. For that reason the proposal seemed rather unrealistic at the time. But, that was also the time when Serbian anti-Milošević opposition won local elections and the municipal government in Belgrade has just been elected. With no actual power in their hands, almost the only means for demonstrating their presence was investing in culture. So, the decision to finance excavations in Vinča appears to have been largely political. The time for forming the team was too short, the means too meager, but it was definitely an offer one could not refuse. We started to act very fast and made some long-reaching decisions. The first was that entire field documentation shall be in digital form and the second one was that the organization of the work must be interdisciplinary. Luckily enough the experts for pottery, polished stone, archaeo-zoology, chipped stone industry and the fieldwork readily accepted the challenge and joined the team. The field campaign Vinča 1998 started on October 6th in Sector II, in the latest Vinča culture horizons, between the houses 1 and 7 and underneath house 3 discovered in previous campaigns. The grid we use is a reconstruction of a grid laid during the 1980s excavations with division of 10 by 10 meter blocks with four squares within. The novelty in the grid was a division of each square into 25 loci. This appears to have been a right decision since we were in the position to locate the material, especially flint, malachite and other smaller finds from the sieving and flotation processes into one square meter space.

In the beginning the field team had considerable difficulties related to the quality of the soil and its color. We were excavating in shades of yellow-gray soil without traces of house rubble and burnt floors and walls. The only clues were kilns and postholes and small patches of burnt floors above yellowish truncation horizon. Rows of postholes different in diameter and sunken to a different depth suggested that we were dealing with more than one object. Unfortunately it was impossible to distinguish one object from another from the start, so the archaeological material collected from these could not be as closely attributed. From that time the strategy was clear: to widen the excavated area so that objects can be observed in horizontal plane.

The situation, obtained from series of orthogonal photographs stitched in a composite photograph, presented on figure 4, shows that we are dealing with at least four objects (houses) in three phases of occupation. All objects have yielded material of latest phase of the Vinča culture, i.e. Vinča-Pločnik II (after M. Garašanin). Two smaller objects with postholes of similar dimensions and distribution (house 9 and house 1/2002), in western part of the trench are contemporaneous. The largest object shown here is the House 3 excavated in 1986 by M. Stefanović. Its burnt floor was laying some 0,3 meters above this horizon. It seems that all the houses contained two kilns positioned along the walls. It is worth mentioning that none of the objects has been destroyed in fire. The only assumption we are in the position to confirm, since we have excavated a mere fragment of the last horizon of the Neolithic settlement, is very intense building activity which suggests a fierce competition for the place within the village. In view of the fact that the place has been fortified from time to time some common threat might be also assumed.

Another important feature was certainly a pit discovered in 1998. It is located in southeastern part of the excavated area and was labeled Jama 98. The pit has been sunken into the Vinča culture house and contained eight pots attributed to the classical phase of the Kostolac culture of the Copper Age (Fig. 5 and 6). Six pots have been laid in a crescent along the wall of the pit and turned upside-down. Two more bowls were discovered in the center of the pit. Another pot identical in diameter of the rim was discovered underneath the largest pot. One interpretation suggests a ritual assemblage connected with the cult of the dead, and links this pit with the pit from Sremski Karlovci and with the burial practices in the Kostolac culture in Bosnia and Padana in the Iron Gorges (Tasić, N. 2001).

Like we expected from the start, excavated horizons yielded tens of thousands of pottery shreds. During four campaigns more than 20 thousands of distinctive pottery sherds have been entered in the database and processed. Since the statistical analysis could not be linked with specific features for the time being, we will give the general trends in pottery shapes and types of decoration for the entire surface excavated.

The most common pottery type is a bowl (74 %). The radius of



Figure 2. Vinča excavation.

the rim measures from 48 to 370 millimeters and the height from 33 to 85 millimeters (usually twice the size then the height of the pot). The rim is round and unpronounced. The make of this class of the pottery is fine, and the color is usually black or grey. Carinated and conical bowls are equally represented. When the shoulder is present it is frequently rounded. Other pottery shapes represented are amphorae of all types, strainers, pithoi and baking pots. There is a variety of decorating techniques and motifs applied on the pottery (Plate I). Most frequent decorative techniques are channeling (46,67%) incisions (26,66%) and fluting (20%). Ornaments have been applied both on the outside surface and in the interior of a pot. The most frequent motifs are triangles pointed from the rim towards the base of the pot. These motifs were usually burnished (Plate I/18). Channeling and fluting is usually applied in complex motifs, sometimes in quite unexpected combinations (Plate I/9,10,12). Another important contribution for the study of the Late Neolithic of Central Balkans is the red painted pottery found in substantial quantity during excavations 1998-2002 (Plate II/1-4). The pigment used for this type of decoration was, according to the chemical analysis we made, iron and mercury oxide. However, the procedure of applying this pigment to the surface of the pot after the firing remains a mystery. It is important to stress that the paint has been sometimes applied on the burnished surface of the pot! Sometimes it has been applied even over a delicate channeled or burnished ornament (Plate II/2, 3), which suggests that this decoration technique may have been done well after initial production of the pot. The similar class of the pottery has been found during Vasić's excavations and in the 1980es in the Late Vinča horizons. The fragment with red and black triangles (Plate II/1) demonstrates that different motifs have been used for traditional Vinča decorative techniques and for painted pottery. Analogies for the red paint on dark surface of the pot can be found in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula, e.g. Kaloyanovets in south Bulgaria and Makrygialos, south of Thessaloniki in Greece. Both examples are dated in the final phase of the Neolithic period, which fits well with the chronological position of our finds.

So far we have discovered ten figurines and they are all typical for the end of the Vinča culture. They are usually anthropomorphic, sometimes with bird-shaped faces but always without too much attention paid to the details. One of them (Fig. 7) has a robe, which was represented with incisions and punctures carrying traces of red pigment. This particular figurine, together with examples of similar decoration and representation of garments known from earlier excava-

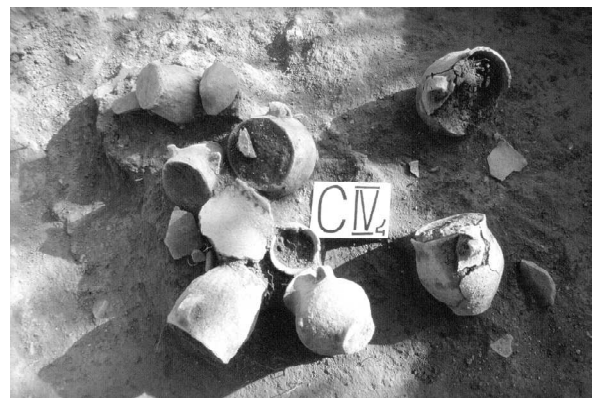
tions in Vinča and elsewhere, suggests that red ochre, found at the site abundantly, was also used for coloring the textile. Another figurine (Plate II/7) has strong influences from eastern fringes of the Vinča complex. Zoomorphic figurines, typical for late Vinča culture (Plate II/16, 22) are also present.

Except the pottery numerous tools and gadgets of baked clay have been collected during 1998-2002 campaigns and include: clay beads, amulets, spindle whorls, drainers and numerous pot handles secondary used as polishers. The discovery of clay balls, more than fifty of them scattered almost randomly across the site can be very significant in the interpretation of the destiny of the settlement. These objects were probably projectiles used in a set with rope or leather sling. They are usually 3-5 cm in diameter. Since they were not discovered associated with hearths and kilns the assumption can be that they were either owned by inhabitants of the site of Vinča or they could have perhaps flown in, during an attack which caused fires in some of the houses in this horizon and a possible abandonment of the site. That a site has been abandoned, at least for a while, clearly demonstrates a surface with dozens of river shells scattered at a square meter together with fragments of an amphora and a posthole nearby. This scene can be completed with a person, inhabitant of Neolithic Vinča who was getting the ingredients for the lunch ready when something unexpected ended this process abruptly. The fact that the shells were left on the ground, without recognizable pattern, in my opinion proves the caesurae, since no one in right mind would have left them to rot away within the settlement.

V. Dimitrijević in her preliminary report states that faunal remains include bones of mammals, birds, turtles, fish and remains of mollusks. The most numerous among the mammal fauna remains are those of cattle, pig, sheep, goat and dog. Wild species represented in Vinča are deer, roe deer, boar and wild cattle, while small mammals that could be used either as an additional source of meat, or as pests are beaver, rabbit, marten, ermine, badger, skunk and fox. Domestic animals were the main source for meat in this horizon at Vinča culture. Their age structure suggests a coherent strategy and rationality in exploitation. Hunting has evidently played an important role in the subsistence and in obtaining useful material for tools. The remains of birds are scarce. Alternative sources of proteins, which include shells and turtles, have also found its place in Vinča subsistence strategy.

Among tools for everyday use there is a group of objects that can be positively determined as fishing equipment. It comprises of fishing hooks, harpoons, net sinkers and bone needles for mending the net, which resemble strongly the tools used at a present moment in

Figure 3. Vinča excavation.



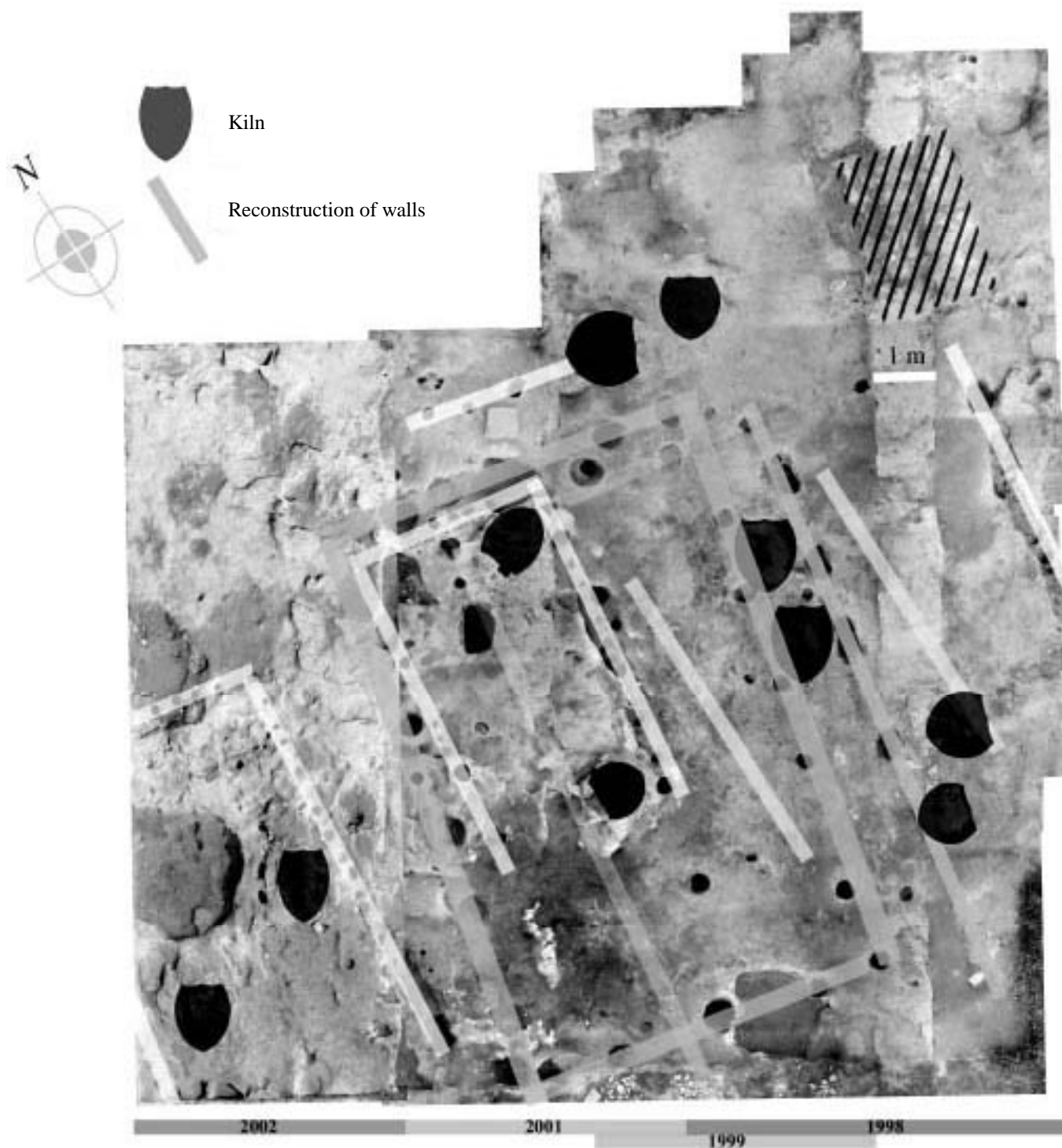


Figure 4. Composite orthogonal photograph of excavated area in Vinča 1998-2002.

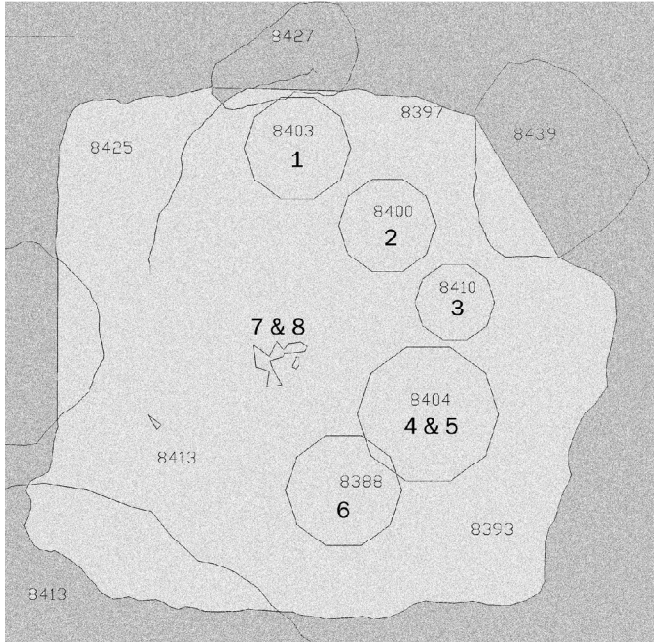


Figure 5. Kostolac Culture Pit.

the vicinity of the site (Plate II/17-23, 26). Fishing equipment and fish remains, from the archaeo-zoological collection, point to the conclusion that inhabitants of Vinča were fishing for large specimens.

Another important collection from campaigns in Vinča 1998-2002 is certainly some twenty pieces of spondylus shell artifacts. This type of find has been also ascertained during Vasić's excavations in 1908 when he recorded nine such artifacts. In his latter excavations and the monograph he failed to realize the importance of spondylus for the study of long distance exchange systems in the region of Southeast Europe. This collection confirms the existence of trade routes leading from the Mediterranean coast (either Aegean or Adriatic opinions on the source differ, e.g.: Renfrew, C. and Shackleton, N. 1979; Séfériadès, M. L. 1995) into the Central Balkan region and further to the North. It also implies to the wealth of the settlement and their possible role as mediators in the process of trade (Dimitrijević and Tripković, 2002)

Porcelanite³ axes, so typical for the late Neolithic and early Copper Age cultures of the Central Balkans have been found in Vinča. The source of this material is local and easily procurable. The production of axes from this material is rather fast and suitable for re-sharpening. According to some authors (Bogosavljević-Petrović V., 2001), porcelanite axes compete with copper axes at the beginning of the Copper Age. Few unfinished perforated axes and a cylinder drilled out from one of them, confirm a workplace for polished stone artifacts within the excavated area.

Another workplace has been confirmed during 1998-2002 campaigns. It was labeled as a Workplace 1 located in front of the house 9. It contained more than fifty pieces of Fiera-type micro perforators, cores, flakes and blades. The expert for chipped stone industry V. Bogosavljević-Petrović from the Vinča team suggests an eastern influence for this collection. The detailed study of the material from

³“Light white stone” as this material is called in Serbian archaeological literature.

Workplace 1 will be published elsewhere. Other products of chipped stone industry are typical for late Vinča culture and include blades, cores, scrapers etc. The material is flint, white opal, small percentage of pebbles and only two fragments of obsidian.

Red ochre was used as the pigment for the red painted pottery, but has also been frequently found amorphous all over the site. Chemical analysis showed existence of at least two pigments: iron oxide and mercury oxide. The yellow pigment found on an amphora has not yet been analyzed. One interesting object, a piece of ochre, miniature in size (less than 1 millimeter in diameter), has been discovered in a flotation process. A look through a microscope revealed a hole in the object. The dimensions of a hole definitely exclude intentional perforation and suggest a process in which a single hair or a lock has been plastered with red ochre thickly diluted in water. When the ochre had dried it must have left a hairstyle so often represented on Vinča culture figurines (Fig. 8)

The density of houses, their considerable size and also the abundance of spondylus artifacts, luxurious red painted pottery, copper ring (Plate II/21), marble pendants (Plate II/27, 28), Fiera-type implements as well as the presence of malachite and ochre in the objects discovered recently in Vinča suggest that there was a substantial wealth accumulated within a settlement. It is no wonder when at a relatively small surface excavated we have discovered at least two workshops, one for polished stone and other for micro perforators. Furthermore loom weighs and spindle whorls, together with numerous bone needles speak in favor of textile industry within the settlement. In order to finish the sketch of the economy of this affluent community we must also add the cattle breeding, agriculture (also confirmed in the macro-

Figure 6. Vinča Excavation.



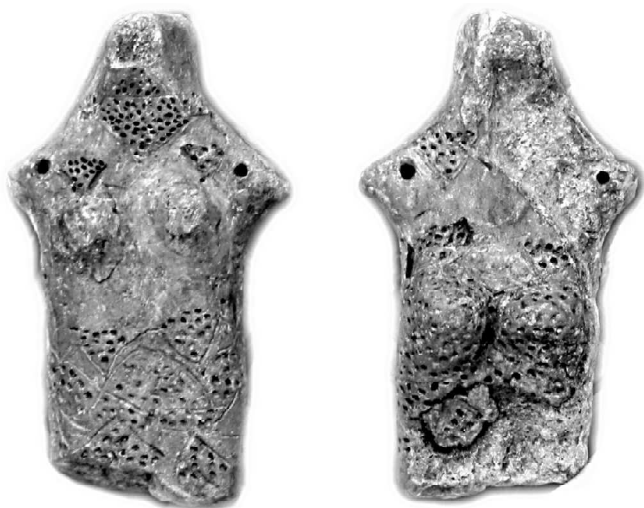


Figure 7. Standing female figurine in a robe with traces of red pigment (8 x 5 cm)

botanical remains logbook by K. Borojević and D. Milošević) and pigment industry.

The fact that all the objects of wealth and prestige mentioned above have remained in situ implies that for some reason the site has been left uninhabited for a period of time until the building of the last horizon of the Vinča culture represented with the house 3. Further detailed analysis of pottery will perhaps show the subtle differences in shapes and style between assemblages of upper (house 3) and lower horizon (house 9) of the final stratum of the Vinča culture at the site.

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Figure 8. Representation of a hairstyle.

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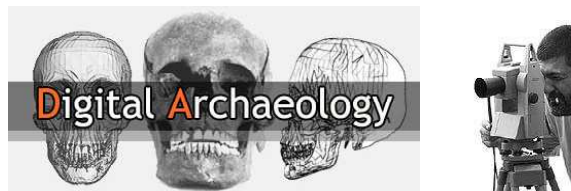
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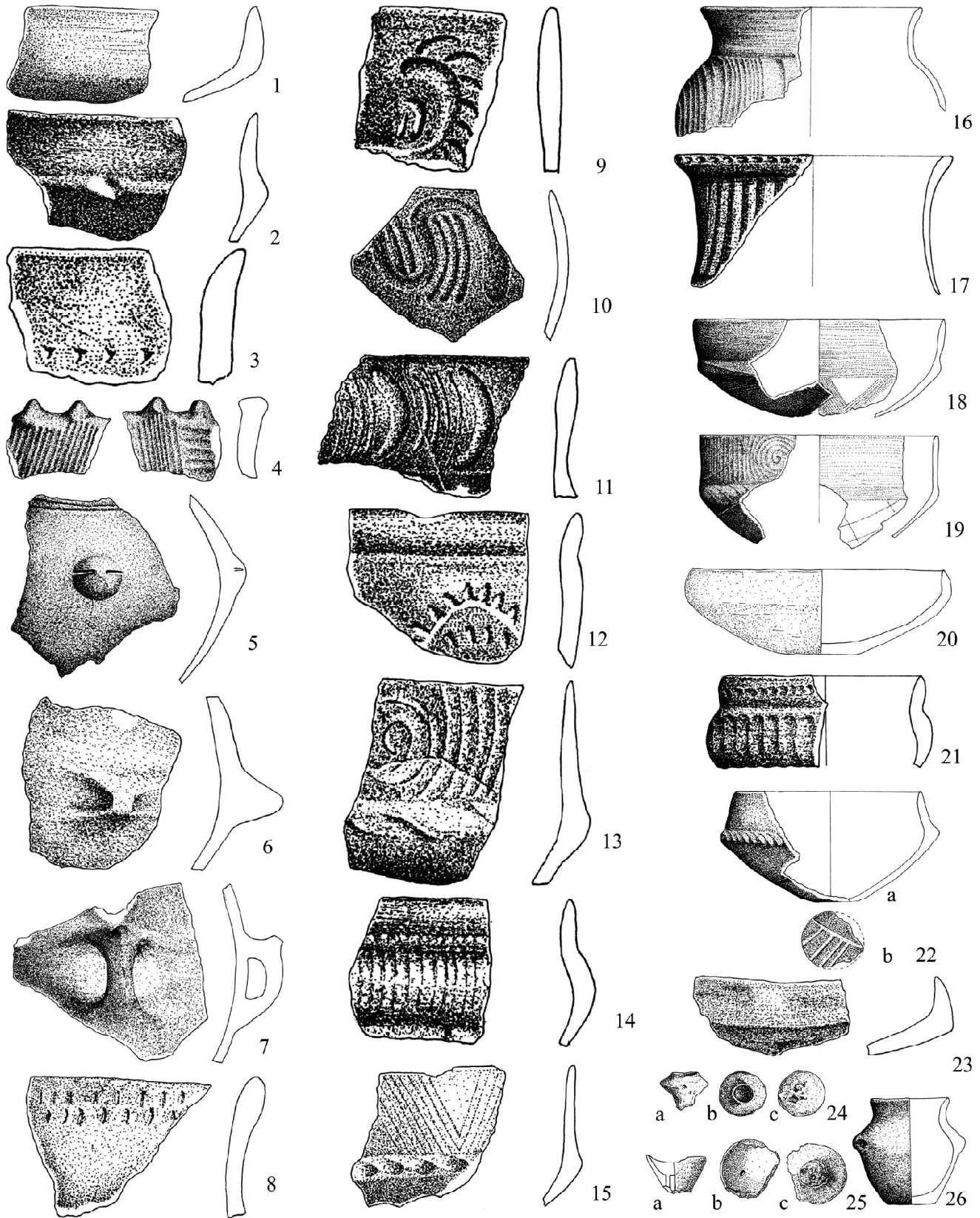


Plate 1. Typical pottery forms and decoration. Scale 1:4 Vinča culture.

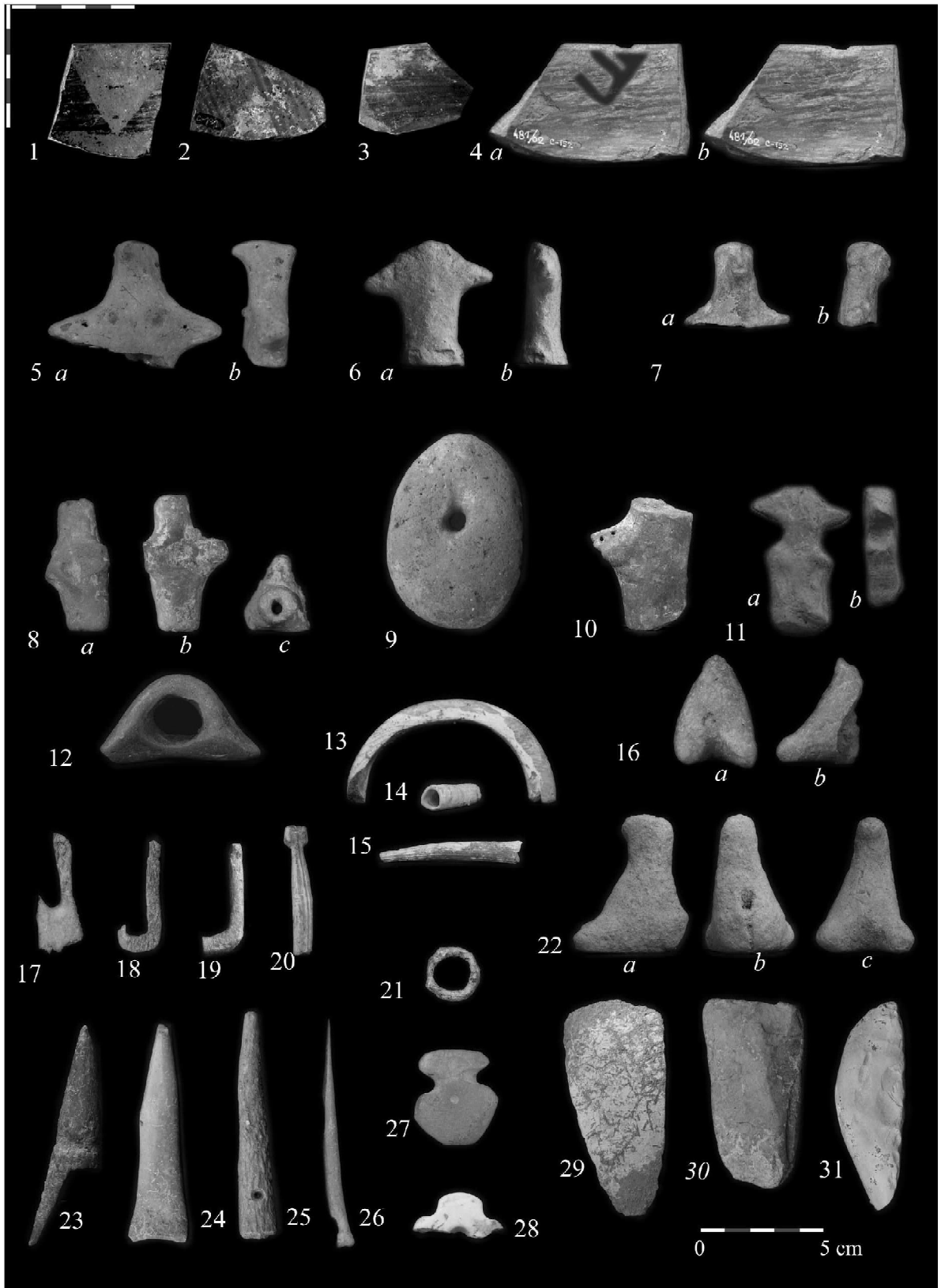


Plate 2. Vinca excavations.