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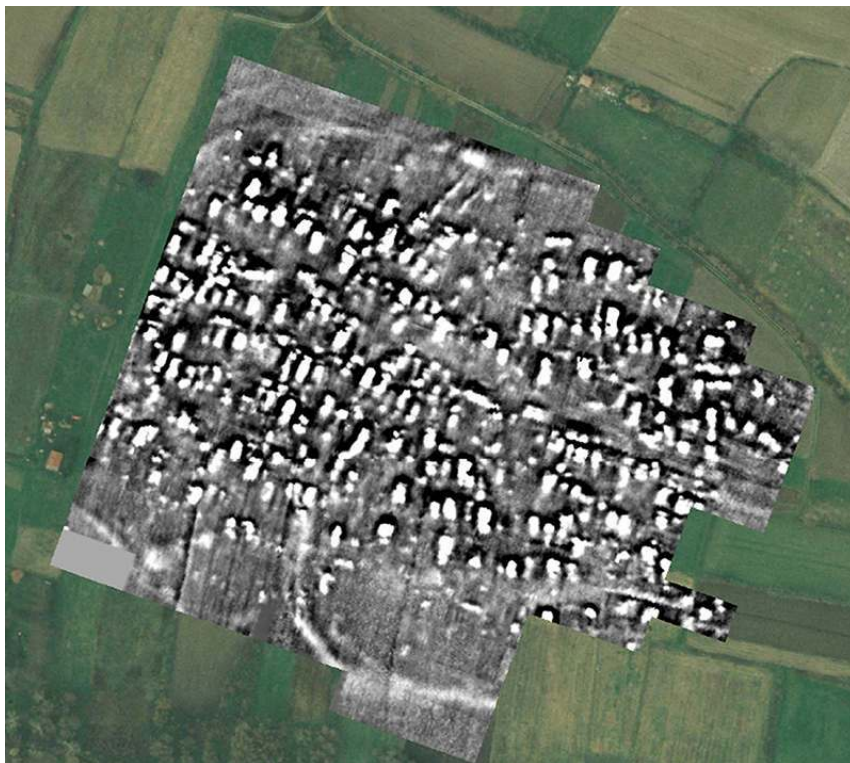
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A Group Find of Neolithic Figurines of the Vinča Culture from Stubline, Serbia

Miloš Spasić

- 1 Stubline is a Late Neolithic Vinča-culture settlement built around 4700 BCE on an elevated slope near Serbian's capital Belgrade. Excavations there revealed an exceptionally well-preserved settlement, with more than 200 above-ground houses arranged in rows, with linear communications, open spaces, and circular ditches surrounding the settlement¹. As in many other Neolithic villages in the central Balkans, a ground plan of the settlement at Stubline clearly illustrates settlement growth dynamics. We do not know which was the first house built in Stubline and who were its first inhabitants, but, over time the settlement was extended, and two ditches were dug at the far western part, either as a symbolic division of space, or to protect the inhabitants and their possessions. As time passed, the community became larger and larger, and, as a result, the two ditches were filled in order to provide the additional space needed for the new construction of houses. The houses were again erected in rows, in the same orientation as the earlier ones. This layout of new buildings enabled the persistence of former communications. New Stubline shows continuity with earlier organizational ideas, which, on a broader scale, reflects the settlement narrative as an enduring, long-term process, rather than an event, or a point in history, a true case of *longue durée*.

Fig. 1 –Magnetometric plan of the site of Stubline



After Crnobrnja 2011.

Fig. 2 –Ideal reconstruction of the Stubline settlement



After Spasić 2012.

- 2 Two above-ground houses were discovered during the 2008 and 2010 excavations at the Vinča-culture settlement of Stubline². The excavated houses were rectangular in shape and have an exceptionally well preserved house inventory that offers unique insights into Neolithic housing. The house from the 2008 field season is rectangular in form without a discernible subdivision of rooms. The household inventory consists of two ovens, one quern, one clay structure for cereal storage, dozens of ceramic vessels, 43 anthropomorphic figurines, and 11 miniature tool models. Among other finds, one portable clay bucranium was found in the central part of the house. The second house was also rectangular, again without any discernible subdivision of the interior space. The house had a massive clay floor and numerous well-preserved structures and finds (two ovens, one clay structure for cereal storage, a clay table, one quern, a large number of storage vessels, etc.). Two bucrania were associated with the large oven in the north-eastern part of the house and were found facing the floor. A third bucranium is entirely made of clay and was found in the mass of collapsed wall fragments in the heavily damaged southern part of the house. Besides the confirmation that numerous activities took place inside Vinča-culture houses, as well as clear evidence that the houses were both sacred and profane places, the houses in question revealed the way in which their inhabitants conceived their natural environment, community, and foreigners. To a certain degree, their houses reflected themselves.
- 3 The set of 43 figurines and 11 miniature weapon models stand out as a unique find within the Late Neolithic Vinča culture. These figurines were found placed on a clay platform near the oven. So far only several sets of figurines are reported to have come from the central Balkans. A group of seven realistically modeled anthropomorphic figurines was found at the site of Divostin and Selevac in Serbia. On the other hand, large figurine sets are more common in the sphere of Cucuteni-Tripolye cultures, especially sets from the sites of Poduri and Isaia in Romania.

Fig. 3—Figurines from Stubline *in situ*



After CRNOBRNJA 2011

- 4 And what do the Neolithic houses from Stubline reveal about the conception of community? Reviewing the function of the extraordinary group find of 43 anthropomorphic figurines from the 2008 house, A. Crnobrnja rightfully drew conclusions regarding their function in the sphere of religion³. Focusing on contextual data, interpretations were freed from the heavy burden with which figurine-oriented studies are usually loaded. Real advances are to be made through the appraisal of the representational aspects of the 43 figurines. With the exception of one, more elaborately modelled, figurine, the 42 remaining figurines are of summary cylindrical form with only a nose/beak and hole for inserting tool handles being represented. The figurines do not have any direct analogy, at least concerning morphology and the number of figurines found in a single group. On the other hand, when it comes to the appearance of miniature clay tool models, they represent realistic representations of existing copper and stone tools. This kind of representational strategy (set of similar figurines with small differences in representational strategy) were given a broad range of explanations. The interpretations usually range from those who see the group of figurines as representations of household members to those which connect them to an abbreviated image of a community with an elaborate vertical stratification of prehistoric society⁴.
- 5 Let us turn to the function of the figurines. Although the function and the usage of the group of figurines are probably not ascertainable, a certain interpretational benefit could be obtained through the comparison of representational and possible functional issues. Whether the group of figurines functioned as pieces for a game-board, a representation of a warrior procession, an instrument of cult, an image of a household or a larger group of people, an implemented representational strategy created an image of a group of identical images devoid of detail (face, dress, ornaments, or gender) but carrying various type of objects, such as tools or possibly weapons. These miniature objects resemble generic forms of copper and stone tools which were widely used across the late Neolithic of south-eastern Europe. As for the appearance of the figurines, perhaps there is more to think about in what is not represented, then what actually is. Here I point to the fact that a very large number of Vinča-culture figurines show representations of various types of clothing, jewellery, and hairstyles. Even when the figurines are totally schematized, without any details represented, their morphology and physical appearance clearly point to their cultural origin. On the other hand, figurines from Stubline have a totally abstract, schematic appearance which has no significant analogy in Vinča-culture figurine production. Could it be therefore that the figurines from Stubline represent foreigners? Foreigners, perhaps, that the Stubline community has not yet encountered? Is it up to the imagination of the viewer to build upon the unrepresented parts of the image? Foreigners carrying tools or weapons? Enemies? In sum, when dealing with the issue of the function and/or representation of the figurines, much ambiguity remains.

Fig. 4–Figurines from Stubline



- 6 But an important aspect of these figurines⁵ is that their contemplation occurred within the house. Besides the basic activities that took place inside the house, it was both the place and subject of symbolic structuring, the place for family and kinship, as well as for neighbors, foreigners, gods, and nature. Thus the house conformed to the well-known Lévi Straussian concept of a *société à maisons*, a house society based on social group relations.

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NOTES

1. CRNOBRNJA, JANKOVIĆ, SIMIĆ 2009; SPASIĆ 2012.

2. CRNOBRNJA, JANKOVIĆ, SIMIĆ 2009; CRNOBRNJA 2012.

3. Cf. DRAȘOVEAN, POPOVICI 2008, pp. 126–2129; TRIPKOVIĆ 2010; CRNOBRNJA 2011.

4. CRNOBRNJA 2011.

5. *Sensu* BAILEY 2005, pp. 80–86.

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