



Introduction to Neo-Eneolithic Writing in Southeastern Europe

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This issue of the *Journal of Archaeomythology* presents selected papers from the international symposium, “The Danube Script: Neo-Eneolithic Writing in Southeastern Europe,” held on May 18-20, 2008 at the Museum of History, Casa Altemberger of the Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu, Romania. The symposium was co-sponsored by the Institute of Archaeomythology and is the second international symposium to be organized on the subject of the Old European/Danube script. An exhibition of large, high-definition photographs of inscribed Neolithic sculptures accompanied the symposium, creating a dynamic backdrop for the delivery of papers and roundtable discussions. A catalogue, published in 2008,¹ accompanied the exhibition which traveled afterwards to museums and universities throughout Romania. We are grateful to Professor Sabin Adrian Luca, Dr. Cosmin Suci, and the entire staff of the Brukenthal National Museum and Casa Altemberger for their generous collaboration to make this exhibition and symposium a reality.

Selected Papers

The idea that the earliest agrarian societies of Europe developed a script as early as the late sixth millennium BC challenges the typically held canon that writing began in Mesopotamia two thousand years later. In order to engage in meaningful dialogue about the development of



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writing technology in Neolithic Europe, it is essential to examine prevailing concepts about what constitutes writing.

In his article “Changing the canon: Research on ancient writing systems beyond the Mesopotamian bias,” the linguist Harald Haarmann from Finland emphasizes that modern writing research needs to revise its conventional concepts to include a larger range of issues. Insights about early experiments with writing in the Old European/Danube civilization are already being discussed by scholars in various fields in terms of the history of information technology, the philosophy of language, and theories of culture. There is a pressing need for writing research to elaborate a new paradigm beyond the Mesopotamian bias: to present a revised cultural chronology for the emergence of ancient civilizations; a revised typology of writing systems; and an updated

¹ Marler 2008.

conception of sign use in the Neolithic of Southeastern Europe.



Harald Haarmann: “Changing the canon: Research on ancient writing systems beyond the Mesopotamian bias.”

Significant research on Neolithic signs and symbols is made possible by the use of databases created and analyzed by the Romanian archaeologist Gheorghe Lazarovici and the Italian archaeosemiologist Marco Merlini. In his symposium article, “Key features of the Danube Script based on the databank *DatDas*,” Merlini discusses the inventory, fabric, pattern of features, and organizational principles of the Danube script according to the results of the *DatDas* databank (Databank for the Danube script). By 2008, this database had already documented 818 objects, 953 inscriptions, and 4,408 actual signs. As he points out, *DatDas* records general and archaeological data concerning objects bearing signs, semiotic information about the inscribed objects, as well as data about the signs and inscriptions themselves.

While some Neolithic objects are carved of stone, the majority of inscribed artifacts are made of clay—a medium more easily shaped and incised with signs and symbols. The Romanian archaeologist Cornelia-Magda Lazarovici, well-known for her excavations of Cucuteni-Tripolye culture sites, analyzes a series of inscribed clay objects in her article “Clay bread, slates or tablets with signs and

symbols.” She identifies the archaeological contexts, and suggests hypotheses concerning the use of these engraved pieces in the Cucuteni-Tripolye cultural complex.²



Cornelia-Magda Lazarovici: “Clay bread, slates or tablets with signs and symbols.”

The systematic use of linear signs and symbols is documented in the Vinča culture (epicenter in present day Serbia) from the second half of the sixth millennium BC. Script use subsequently spread throughout the early agrarian societies of Southeastern Europe. According to the Ukrainian archaeologist Mikhail Videiko, linear inscriptions are found as late as the third millennium BC in the Trypillia culture (present day Ukraine). His article, “The Legacy of the Danube Script to the east of the Carpathians during the Early Bronze Age (3400-2300 BC),” discusses script use during the florescence of the Trypillia culture and the interruption of sign use when this previously dynamic culture fell into decay. He writes that at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, “Old signs were used only in a few territories connected with the production of traditional painted pottery.”

Videiko discusses the transmission of sign use in association with ritual contexts (grottos/cave sanctuaries) which, in the steppe

² In Romania, this culture system is known as “Cucuteni.” This culture extends across the border into the area of Moldavia and into Ukraine. The Ukrainians prefer to use the name “Trypillia” instead of the Russian term “Tripolye,” typically used during the Soviet period.

region, indicates the “coexistence and integration between Old European and Eastern script traditions.”



Mikhail Videiko: “*The Legacy of the Danube Script to the east of the Carpathians during the Early Bronze Age (3400-2300 BC).*”

In her article, “Danube Script: The Intersection between Language, Archaeology, and Myth,” the American linguist Miriam Robbins Dexter explores one of the most



Miriam Robbins Dexter: “*Danube Script: The intersection between language, archaeology, and myth.*”

productive core signs of the Old European/Danube script – the V– which is often modified by a variety of diacritics. Dexter relates the V sign with the female pubic triangle found on numerous Neolithic and Chalcolithic female figures throughout Southeast Europe, as well as to early historic iconography and texts.

Marija Gimbutas observed a relationship between the Old European symbols of bull and butterfly linked with regeneration.³ In “From Bull-and-Butterfly to alpha and *psi*,” the Romanian Indo-Europeanist Adrian Poruciu notes that an archaic bull-pictogram gradually

became stylized into a sign that developed into the *alpha* of the Greek alphabet. In his view, a similar process took place in the case of the Old European butterfly-pictogram, which became an Aegean ideogram that has been interpreted as the “double-axe.” Poruciu further links that ideogram with the “invention” of the Greek phonogram *psi*. “Such an assumption,” he states, “is based not only on the shape of the letter under discussion, but also on the fact that *psi* opens the written form of Greek *psyche*, a word that meant not only ‘soul’ but also ‘butterfly.’”

The symposium in Sibiu included discussions about the significance of the early



Susan Moulton: *Parsing the Past: Visual Marks as Cultural Metaphors.*”

Neolithic Transylvanian sites of Tărtăria and Turdaş. Excavations at both locations have uncovered artifacts engraved with signs and symbols, some, of which, especially the famous Tărtăria tablets, were represented in the accompanying exhibition. In “Parsing the

Past: Visual Marks as Cultural Metaphors,” the American art historian, Susan Moulton, proposes that in order to adequately investigate the symbolism of inscribed artifacts, such as those from Tărtăria or Turdaş, it is necessary to consider the human association with “place.” That is, the signs and symbols used by nature-based cultures cannot be interpreted independently from geographical contexts which often define culture and an individual’s role within it. She proposes that incised and painted marks functioned as mnemonic devices, verbal analogies, and glyphic codes derived from shared knowledge and experiences across generations. Neolithic signs and symbols functioned as cultural elements whose meaning required direct experience of place and commitment to sacred interaction within a specific ecosystem.

³ Gimbutas 1989: 270.

This issue concludes with two reviews of Adrian Poruciuc's recent volume, *Prehistoric Roots of Romanian and Southeast European Traditions*, volume 1, published by the Institute of Archaeomythology, 2010. The review by Ana R. Chelariu, a Romanian author of comparative mythology, is titled, "Colinde, Colinde. Adrian Poruciuc: Studying the Prehistoric Roots of Romanian Carols." The poet and psychiatrist Janine Canan contributes the second review, "Prehistoric Roots of Romanian and Southeast European Traditions by Adrian Poruciuc." From the back cover of Poruciuc's book, Miriam Robbins Dexter writes,

Adrian Poruciuc applies his vast knowledge of Indo-European languages, myth, folklore, linguistics, and archaeology to excavate the deep mythic, ritual and folkloric layers of Romanian folksongs, the *colinde*. His multi-disciplinary approach provides important evidence for the survival of prehistoric—indigenous—roots in Southeast European folk material. The *colinde* of the Romanians carry

rich treasures of pre-Indo-European as well as ancient Indo-European mythic and folkloric motifs.

Works Cited

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