

New archaeological data referring to Tărtăria tablets

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ABSTRACT – We analyze and present new points of view regarding the 'Danube' script based on recent investigations of the old Tărtăria discoveries: archaeological context, anthropological expertise, absolute dating and the meaning of the renowned tablets.

IZVLEČEK – Analizirava in predstavljava nove poglede na 'Donavsko' pisavo, ki temeljijo na sodobnih raziskavah starih odkritij iz Tărtărije: arheološki kontekst, antropološko strokovno mnenje, absolutne datacije in pomen slovečih plošč.

KEY WORDS – Tărtăria tablets; 'Danube script'; signs; symbols; priestess; ethno-religion

DATA ABOUT THE SITE

When the Tărtăria tablets were discovered many discussions and questions arose concerning their absolute chronology. At that time, the beginning of the Starčevo-Criș culture was dated to around 3400 BC (Grbić 195.25, 27; Benac 1958. 41). Tărtăria-Groapa luncii is located near the CFR station Tărtăria, on a small promontory. Some time ago, below this pro-

montory a branch of the Mureș River flowed; this branch received water from a small stream and other springs from the high terraces of the Mureș River (15 m high), which was greatly very much eroded flooding. Because of this we can now see a very abrupt and eroded bank in the area of trenches made by Kurt Horedt, Nicolae Vlăsa or Iuliu Paul (1995),



Fig. 1. Vinča settlement at Tărtăria.



Fig. 2. Tărtăria: location of the excavations.

which cover an area of about 200 m (Figs. 2 and 3).

Nicolae Vlassa believed that the tablets were related to proto-Sumerian writing, and that they offer the chance of making a cultural and chronological synchronisation of Europe and the Near East (Vlassa 1962; 1964; 1965). His opinion on this subject has been confirmed by Milošević (1965) and Sumer expert Adam Falkenstein (1965). This opinion was also sustained by Makkay (1969; 1990), Hood (1967; 1968) and others.

Most other archaeologists, champions of the long chronology, have not agreed with this opinion, looking for different kind of 'vices', 'errors' or 'myths'. They adopt other hypotheses (see Merlini 2004; 2004a).

Some new projects looking to reveal the truth about Tărtăria are supported by Marco Merlini with his "Focus on Tărtăria" from the *Prehistory Knowledge Project*, or the Institute of Archaeo-mythology, which with the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts has initiated a very interesting debate focused on the Danube Script.

Such a subject raises great in some other countries, among them Germany (Schier 2002; Sinn 2002), Bulgaria (Karlovo 2002 online), Austria (Der Turmbau zu Babel 2003) and Serbia (Symposium Novi Sad 2004). Therefore, in our opinion, the Ljubljana symposium is a new stage in the definition and results obtained by recent research.



Fig. 4. Map with tablet distribution in SE Europe.

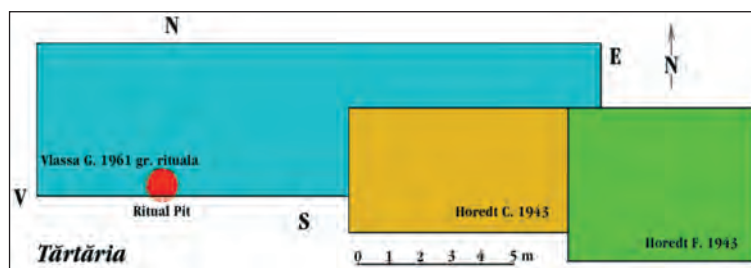


Fig. 3. Topographic plan of the Tărtăria site, after Vlassa.

We now know that there are many tablets with signs in Europe (Fig. 4). There are also new data, information and even interpretations of such kind of discoveries (Gradeșnica: Nikolov, Georgiev 1970; Nikolov 1986; Winn 1981; Winn 2003). Such pieces are known from the Early Neolithic in Romania and neighbouring regions (Perieni, Glăvănești), the Developed Neolithic (Tărtăria, Parța), Late Neolithic (Turdaș, Orăștie, Sălbăgel, Tangâru, Gradeșnica, Rast, Suplevac) or Early Eneolithic (Isaia, maybe Poduri too) (Fig. 4). The Tărtăria tablets are special because of their context.

STRATIGRAPHICAL DATA AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

These tablets were discovered in what Vlassa called a ritual pit (Vlassa 1962; 1964). He connected this pit with a pit house found nearby (Figs. 8 and 11). We must remember here that some pit houses have related areas nearby for household activities (Figs. 8–11). It is the same situation with the pit house and the ritual pit at the Tărtăria site. Both belong to the same level (h11) of excavation (Fig. 11).

The distance between the ritual pit and the pit house was 70 to 90 cm, and they belong to the same archaeological complex. We have checked this, comparing the radiocarbon data obtained from the ritual pit and the pit house.

As we mentioned before, Vlassa (1962; 1964) and Sinclair Hood (1967; 1968), considered that these complexes contemporary. J. Makkay (1990, Fig. 1) put together on a larger plan Vlassa's sections and those made by K. Horedt to suggest their correlation and (Figs. 3 and 10).

Some archaeologists broke the ritual pit from its archaeological context and made free interpretations, as D. G. Zanotti did

(Zanotti 1983, and our response, Lazarovici-Maxim 1991), in trying to solve the problem of chronology or typological association, as the anchors generally considered as belonging to the Coțofeni level and so on (see stratigraphy position Fig. 11).

Makkay wrongly located the ritual pit near the south profile of the trench. The correct position is in the northern border of this G trench's profile (Fig. 11). In the photo (Fig. 9) we can see the pit profile projection. We underline once more that the ritual pit was located in the northern profile of the cassette (Fig. 8).



Fig. 5. Transylvanian sites with tablets.

Other scientists have furnished new, precise data (Masson 1984; Milisauskas 2002.236–237), while others have minimized the information and pictures published by Vlassa (Berciu 1967; Comșa 1982. 82–85). Therefore, we have to underline once more that is necessary to accept the fact that the pit house and the ritual pit belong to the same archaeological complex, they are contemporary, as the radio-carbon data prove. We do not intend to analyze here different speculations that have been made, because Merlini has done this already. The aim of this paper is to present new data and to reanalyse the objects and their conditions of discovery, to offer new arguments for their stratigraphy.

THE SKELETON – ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

The ritual pit contains various archaeological remains, as well as some parts of a human skeleton.



Fig. 6. Location of excavations by Horedt, Vlassa and Paul.

The shape and the extent of the ritual pit did not permit the deposition of an inhumation, and in fact the human bones were placed there after the flesh had been removed or an exhumation process.

Vlassa believed that the bones had been burnt. The bones had a charred appearance and traces of sponge or foam. Some parts of the skeleton, the skull and smaller bones, are missing. Only one of the bones among those recovered was burnt. Because at that time it was not possible to make an anthropological analysis, Vlassa did not wash the bones. We washed them and requested anthropological expertise. We believe that in fact the bones were bleached in the sun and therefore they have a whitish colour; a similar situation and rituals are known from the end of the Coțofeni culture until the Early Bronze Age (Lazarovici, Kalmar, Maxim 1987–1988; Lazarovici 1998; for defleshing/excarnation see Merlini 2004).



Fig. 7. Old River channel.

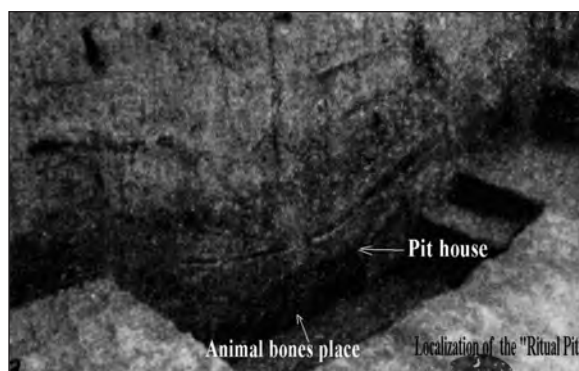


Fig. 8. The pit house; southern profile of G cassette made by Vlassa (photo N. Vlassa).

Our hypothesis was sustained by the forensic study made by Georgeta Miu, at the Center for Biological Research, of the Romanian Academy. Only one bone belonging to an animal, showed signs of burning, and this was mixed with the human ones, which had no traces of burning (Lazarovici, Miu 2004). The animal bone may have been put together with the human upon interment, perhaps in relation to mortuary or funerary rituals. Georgeta Miu has also observed that the skull and many small bones (such as those from the palms or feet) are missing. This might be the result of a natural process, such as when scavengers take these parts (see Lazarovici 2000). We cannot explain the absence of the skull bones. In almost cases of defleshing process, skull bones as well as teeth are preserved even the small bones of the face are disappearing. Therefore, we hypothesise that the absence of the skull might be related to a skull cult (our opinion and bibliography, Lazarovici-Maxim 1995). But we have also to check the materials once again from the earlier excavations by Horedt and Vlassa to be sure that they were not mixed with other materials or overlooked when the profile was cleared (Fig. 11). This last hypothesis is supported by Vlassa's photos, which shows that the pit was partially cut (Fig. 9).

The radiocarbon date for the human skeleton from the ritual pit is level h11, Rome – 1631, 6310 ± 65

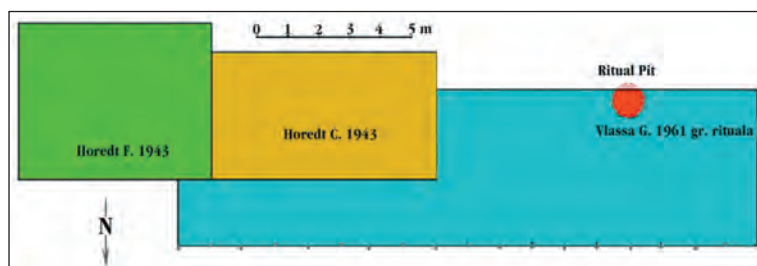


Fig. 10. The site of the ritual pit after Makkay and others is wrongly located on the southern profile.



Fig. 9. Ritual pit, the northern profile of G cassette, projected in a photo profile by Vlassa.

yr BP (1σ, 5370–5140 Cal BC); the radiocarbon date for the animal bones found at the bottom of the pit house is level h16+h17, Rome – 1655, 6210 ± 65 yr BP (1σ, 5280–5060 Cal BC), and mixed cultural level, Rome – 1630, 6200 ± 65 BP. These results show that they were partly contemporaneous. We believe that in this case Tringham's observations (Tringham 1971), or Zanotti (1983) have no real basis.

THE SKELETON – ANTHROPOLOGICAL DATA

The whitish colour of the human bones might be related to long exposure during a defleshing/excarnation process. The forensic results were stated by Merlini (Merlini 2004a): “The skull and pelvis are missing (from the latter there are only some fragments); the sex and age determination of the subject has some limitations. Dr. Georgeta Miu, based on metric and morphological features of the long bones (entire or fragmentary) and others anthropological features, considers that the bones belong to a female of 50–55 years old. The age was estimated based on: reabsorption of spongy tissue, the appearance of the pubic area, and some particular pathological degenerative processes in some bones. The height is 147 cm, indicative of a small woman. It was calculated on the basis of classic known methods (radius, cubitus and tibia length).

Our analysis and conclusions are based on the small height of the subject and on the gracile features of the bones. We recall that the skull

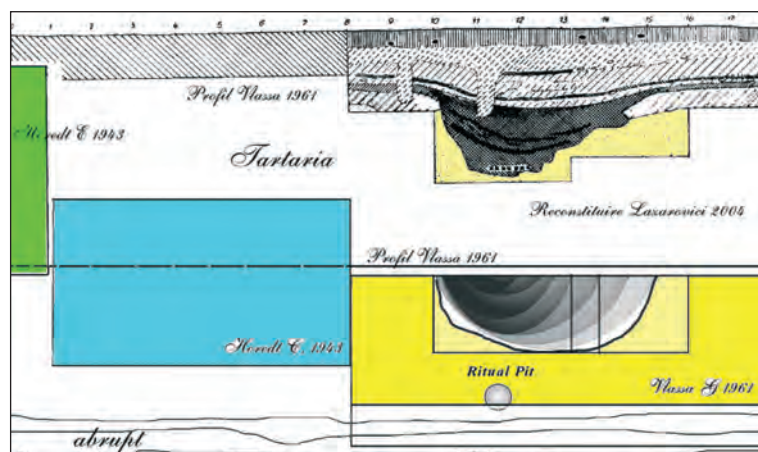


Fig. 11. Tărtăria, stratigraphy; location of the ritual pit ▲; profile of cassette G made by Vlassa, and different levels of excavation (Reconstruction, Lazarovici).

and facial bones are missing. Based on the available data we believe that all these features indicate a Mediterranean type.

The lower part of the articular surfaces of the pubis show a similar degenerative process. We do not



Fig. 12a. Distorted femur.

know the origin of these bone lesions, but they are associated with a quite high process of osteoporosis. All these degenerative processes may have produced great pain and it is probable that she experienced pain in the last 10–15 years of her life. But her death can be related to other reasons" (Lazarovici, Miu 2004; Merlini 2004a).

We would like to underline some aspects related to the first impression that the bones were burnt. This might be related to the spongy aspect of some of the bones, with holes and swellings. Miu observed these features and asked for a further opinion from Dinu Oneț a radiologist and

physician at the Neurosurgery Clinic in Cluj-Napoca, who suggested some explanation for these kinds of deformation.

Radiological expertise and clinical analogies indicate *gummatous osteoperiostitis, tuberculosis or osteomelites*. We also do not exclude an ancient strain of syphilis (Merlini 2004; Marcsik 1994; Baker and Armelagos 1988; Dennie 1962; Herskovitz et al. 1995).

OPINIONS ON THE MEANING OF THE CULT OBJECT FROM THE RITUAL PIT

The modification of some information relating to the content of the ritual pit, of anthropological or geological data, lead us to present new data, information, and opinions about the meaning of the pieces discovered in the cult pit (close to or different from those of Vlassa), about their deposition and their state of preservation.

Taking into account the fact that the human bones belong to an old, ill woman with specific disabilities in walking (Merlini 2004a) we believe that two hypotheses must be considered: a) it is a "priestess" or a person with a similar function, not well enough defined; b) or a "shaman"/"sorcerer" (as Vlassa suggested, but in this case it is a woman) who inherited



Fig. 12b. Distorted rib.



Fig. 13a. Rib with specific feature of gummatous osteoperiostitis.

the objects, together with some knowledge (in both cases this last assumption is probable). The pit contained many objects (Fig. 15), some broken, intentionally or not, others whole.

Broken objects

- Both anthropomorphic idols. In this case, the meaning is that there are not relations between this owner and divinity (Figs. 16a, 16b).
- Fragment of the “anchor”. This might have been used for weaving (Fig. 16c).



Fig. 14. Tărtăria tablets T1 and T2 up, T3 down left ▲; 4) pendant, tablet T3 cover the signs from T2, upper register.



Fig. 13b. Gummatous osteoperiostitis, form of a humerus pseudo tumor (child 14 years old).

- Intentionally broken alabaster idol (Fig. 16d).
- Bracelet, made of a very perishable material, might have been broken intentionally during the defleshing process (Fig. 17a).
- Altar, with right part broken (Fig. 17b).
- Fragmented head of an anthropomorphic idol (Fig. 17c).

There are many rituals related with intentionally broken cult pieces which are then burnt.

Whole objects

Among the whole pieces we have to mention two idols of a phallic type. Perhaps their destruction was prohibited because they were objects directly related



to fertility, fecundity, or ritual defloration. Their destruction might bring trouble to their makers.

GEOLOGICAL DATA ABOUT THE TABLETS (FIGS. 14–15, 19–21) – THE MIXTURE AND THE PASTE

Professors Lucreția Ghergari and Corina Ionescu made microscopic studies of the tablets at the Faculty of Geology, Geological Department of Cluj University and observed the following:

- All the pieces are made of the same type of material, which contains a very small quantity of clay and a large quantity of sand. This mixture is still a problem. The pieces have been treated with clorhidric acid to clean the surface. Because of the mixture of the material which contains a lot of calcium carbonates, many cracks appear during this process.
- On the surface of the pieces there seems to be a high concentration of calcium carbonate. To solve this problem it is necessary to obtain new samples; this is very difficult, since the pieces belong to the “treasure” of the national cultural heritage and there are special rules for preservation and investigation.
- Signs were made by incision, repeat pressure or impression (especially the small signs: Figs. 19 and 21.3); the long incisions have irregular traces which deform the route of the lines (Figs. 19 and 21.2).

We noted that to clean the calcareous deposit from the surface of the pieces they were placed in a clorhidric acid bath. This greatly affected the calcareous inclusions and the binding of the material the pieces were made of (based on calcar). To reanalyze these thin section analysis is needed.

There was a grass fibre (Fig. 20) on the superior part of one of the pieces. This fibre was covered with a clay stratum and a carbonate scab.



Fig. 15. Pendant, tablet T3 cover the signs from T2, upper register.

About the “faking” of the tablet

In the archaeological literature, on different notes, but also in different discussions, some archaeologists say that the tablets are fakes and that they were fired. From our discussions with Vlassa, we conclude otherwise. After the three pieces were cleaned in the clorhidric acid, many small cracks appeared, so that the pieces had to be conserved. For this a special fluid (nitro-varnish and dilutant) was used; for better, deeper penetration after the pieces were



Fig. 16a and 16b. Intentionally broken female idol.

treated with this mixture, they were placed in a drying chamber at a low temperature. Therefore it was this which caused the fragility of the pieces the cleaning with clorhidric acid affected the carbonates binding the tablets. Other pieces, made of similar material, if not washed in clorhidric acid, do not suffer such a problem. A coarse/rude material can be used to make many cultic objects. This custom is a religious condition, not related to technology or the skill of the maker.



Fig. 16c. 'Anchor'.



Fig. 16d. Intentionally broken alabaster idol.

The best examples are the Isaiia or Poduri cultic treasures of Precucuteni culture, kept in pots of rough clay, without a careful finish, in a civilization renamed for the quality of its ceramics (Ursulescu 2004.327, Fig. 4; Ursulescu et al. 1999; 2001; 2002).

Such situations have been observed too for other clay artefacts (altars, pintaderas, cult pots etc.).

Opinions regarding the meaning of the tablets

Vlassa considered that writing system related to proto-Sumerian civilization; adherents of the short chronology have seen the tablets as a chronological landmark through a connection with Uruk-Warka-Djemdet Nasr cultures (see Vlassa 1970; Milojević 1965; Falkenstein 1965; Makkay 1990; Hood 1967). Op-

posing opinions have been expressed by the long chronology camp, based on the ^{14}C data presented and analyzed by M. Merlini (2004; 2004a).

We consider that the cultic inventory belonged to a 'priestess'. We believe that this inventory was related to ritual and specific procedures, as rites of passage or other rites. Writing in this case has a cultic character; it is sacred writing expressed through ideograms, but also through signs and symbols; some might represent words or estates (Lazarovici 2002; 2004a; 2004b, 2004c).

The tablets we refer to here are not the first. We know others from the Paleolithic period at Mitoc, Cosăuți (Borziac 1991.67, Fig. 2/3; Merlini 2004), from the Early Neolithic at Glăvănești and Perieni, the Late Neolithic at Turdaș, Orăștie, Homoșdia, Parța, Svetozarevo, and Gradeșnica etc. In all these cases, the signs have a cultic purpose. We have to mention another 3000 signs, variants and combinations



Fig. 17a. Bracelet.



Fig. 17b. 'Zoomorphic altar'.



Fig. 17c. Head from a cylindrical idol.

found on idols, pintaderas, altars or cult pots (Lazarovici 2003; 2004a; 2004b).

Absolute chronology (Figs. 22 and 23)

Radiocarbon data have been obtained using samples (animal bones) from the deepest levels of the Tărtăria pit house, and female bones from the ritual pit. We collected samples from all levels of the site, but there were funds to analyze only three samples.

Sample R 1631 was taken from one of the arms of the skeleton (very rich in bone material). The result of the sample is 6310 ± 65 BP. Calibration with 1σ indicates 5370–5140 calBC.

The second sample was obtained from animal bones from the deepest level of the pit

house investigated by Vlassa (Fig. 8). Calibration with 1σ indicates 5190–5060 calBC, with 43.1% probability (Fig. 23). The third sample was selected from the material of the first levels, which contains bones from the cleaning of the profile and those thrown away during by the excavation by Horedt.

CONCLUSIONS

- The ritual pit is contemporary with the pit house: radiocarbon data sustain this conclusion. It is also possible that its function is related to the same pit house. We suppose that this woman was living in the pit house and the ritual pit was for storing religious paraphernalia. Her bones, after exhumation were returned to the place where she was living.



Figs. 18a and 18b. The large and the small ceramic 'phalli'.



Fig. 19. The round tablet 2. Detail 1 – some calcareous areas destroyed by acid treatment.

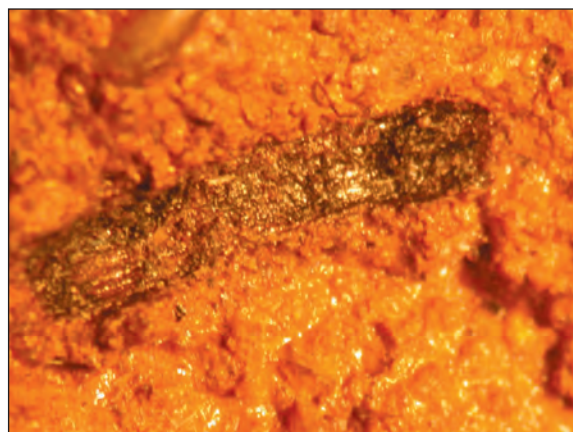


Fig. 20. Organic mixture from modeling, final stage.



Fig. 21a. 1, 3 – tablet 1; 2, 4 – tablet 2; 5, 6 – tablet 3.

Such a hypothesis is supported by two cult discoveries from Poduri and Isaiia which contained 42 pieces. We presume the existence of some special houses belonging to the ‘priestess’, ‘older’ or ‘wiser’ women, often related to the number 7.

- The tablets and other objects from the ritual pit belong to the cult inventory of a priestess. The same is true of the pit house. The objects belong to different cults relating to fertility and fecundity (the Great Goddess and her hypostasis: fertile mother, clever mother). The tablets and their signs represent another problem: they are related to an initiation process; they represent symbolic objects

with signs and have a religious meaning.

- Excarnage supposes a period of between some months to 6/7 years. It is possible that in this period the house was abandoned. To this period we can relate the first filling levels. Perhaps the cult inventory of the priestess was destroyed after her death, as a ritual, when she was not in direct relation with the divinity.

- The Tărtăria complex, based on ^{14}C data and stratigraphy, belong to the early Vinča period, between the Starčevo-Criș IVA discoveries (contemporary with Vinča A2), and those from the Cârcea, Banat culture (Mantu 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2002; 2003) or those early Vinča from Liubcova, Orăștie, Turdaș I and Uivar (Man-

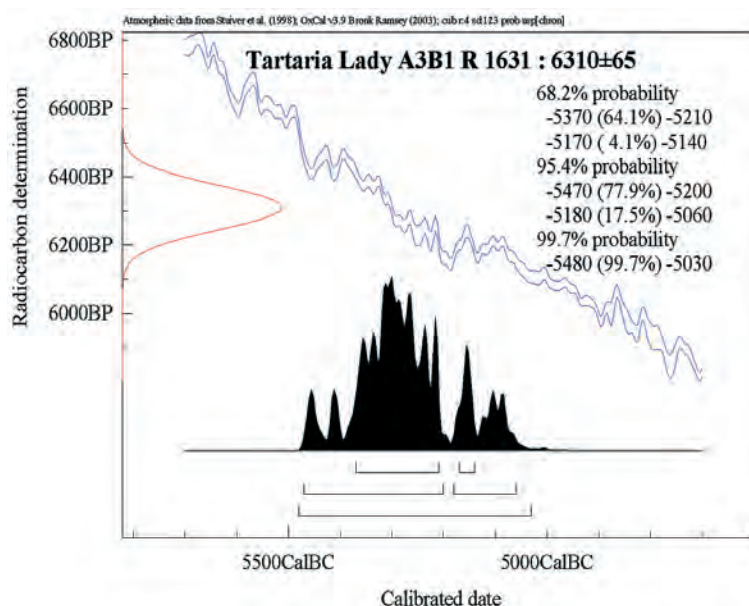


Fig. 22. Tartaria lady – absolute chronology.

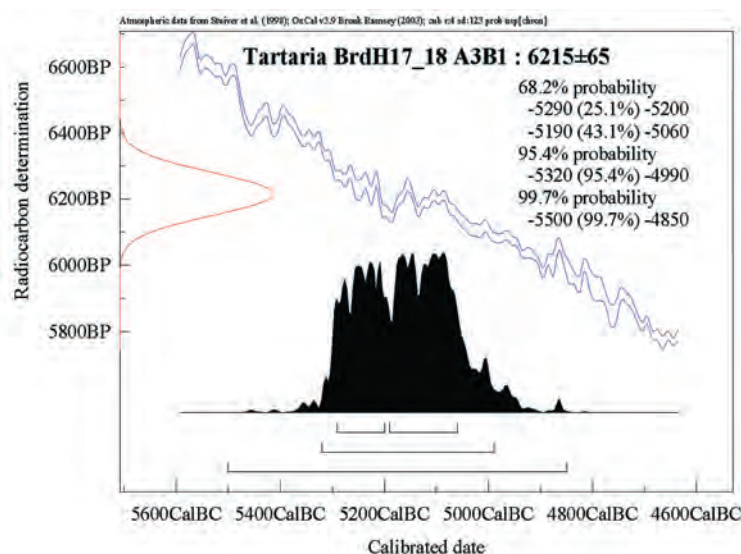


Fig. 23. Diagram of data obtain from the bones of the pit house base.

tu 1995; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; László 1997; Schier & Draşovean 2004).

● On the Tărtăria tablets we find the greatest number of sign combinations. Before and after the Tărtăria discoveries some have spoken of an ancient European script (Masson 1984), with southern or Near Eastern connections. Such ideas have been assumed and developed by Vlassa (Vlassa 1971.161–197; 1976; PhD 1977 m.s). Tablets discovered in Romania and other places have been summarized and analysed by various archaeologists, such as Winn (1981), Makkay (1990), Ursulescu (1998), Lazarovici (2001; 2002; 2003; 2004) and Merlini (2004). Today we have a larger number of such pieces, and scientists speak of a ‘Danube script’ (Haarmann 1996; 1997; 1998; 2002; 2004; 2004 on-line; Symposium Novi Sad 2004; Merlini 2004a; Lazarovici 2004a; 2004b; Winn 2004; Winn on-line). This involves the ‘Vinča script’ (Winn 1981; 2004; Starović 2004), ‘the Turdaş script’ (Makkay 1969; 1990 and bibl.), or the ‘Grădeşnica script’ (Nikolov, Georgiev 1970; Nikolov 1986). We believe that in fact this is merely the beginnings of a script, with a cultic, initiatory character; therefore we believe that many meanings were esoteric, being

revealed only partially on the occasion of specific initiations.

The problem of the signs on the tablets and their meaning is a very complex one. Merlini has observed that when we overlap the perforated tablets (T2 and T3, Fig. 14), perhaps a pendant, a part of the text from tablet 2 was covered by tablet 3, possibly an esoteric text. We have analysed some groups of signs and their meaning, but the formation of the database is still in progress; our method of interpretation is still developing, and thus far now we have analysed only some subjects as light fire, sexuality, consecrated liquid (Lazarovici 2000; 2000a).

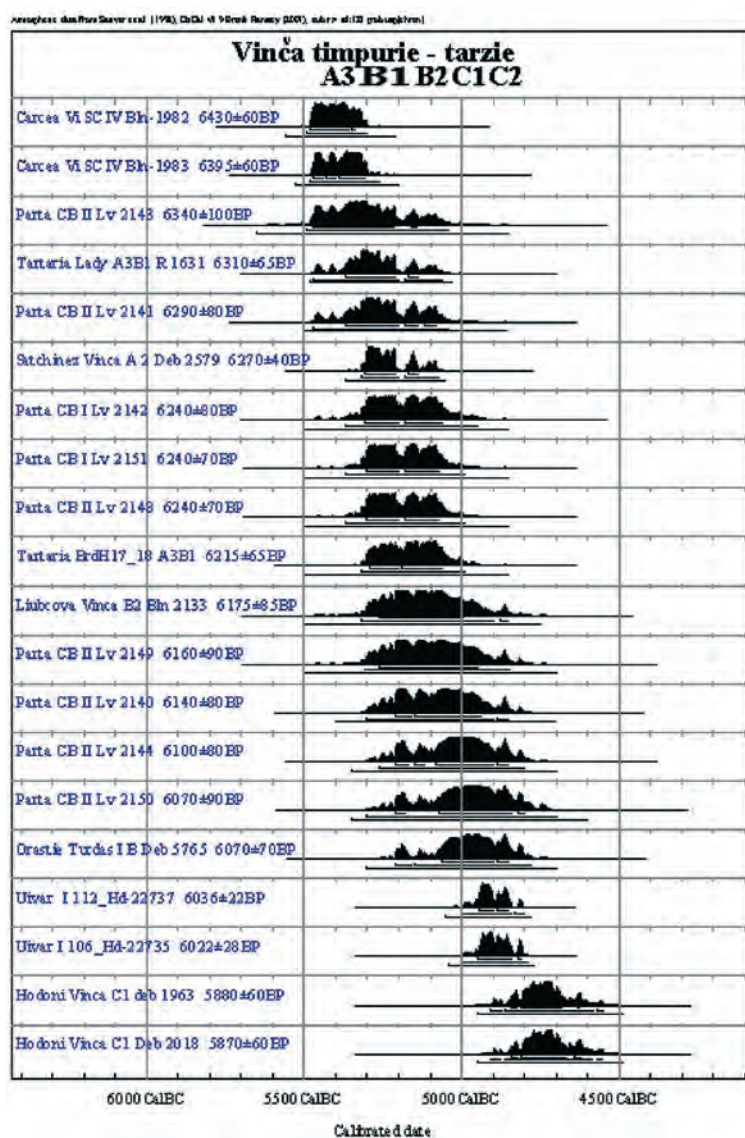


Fig. 24. Absolute chronology of Early Vinča.

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