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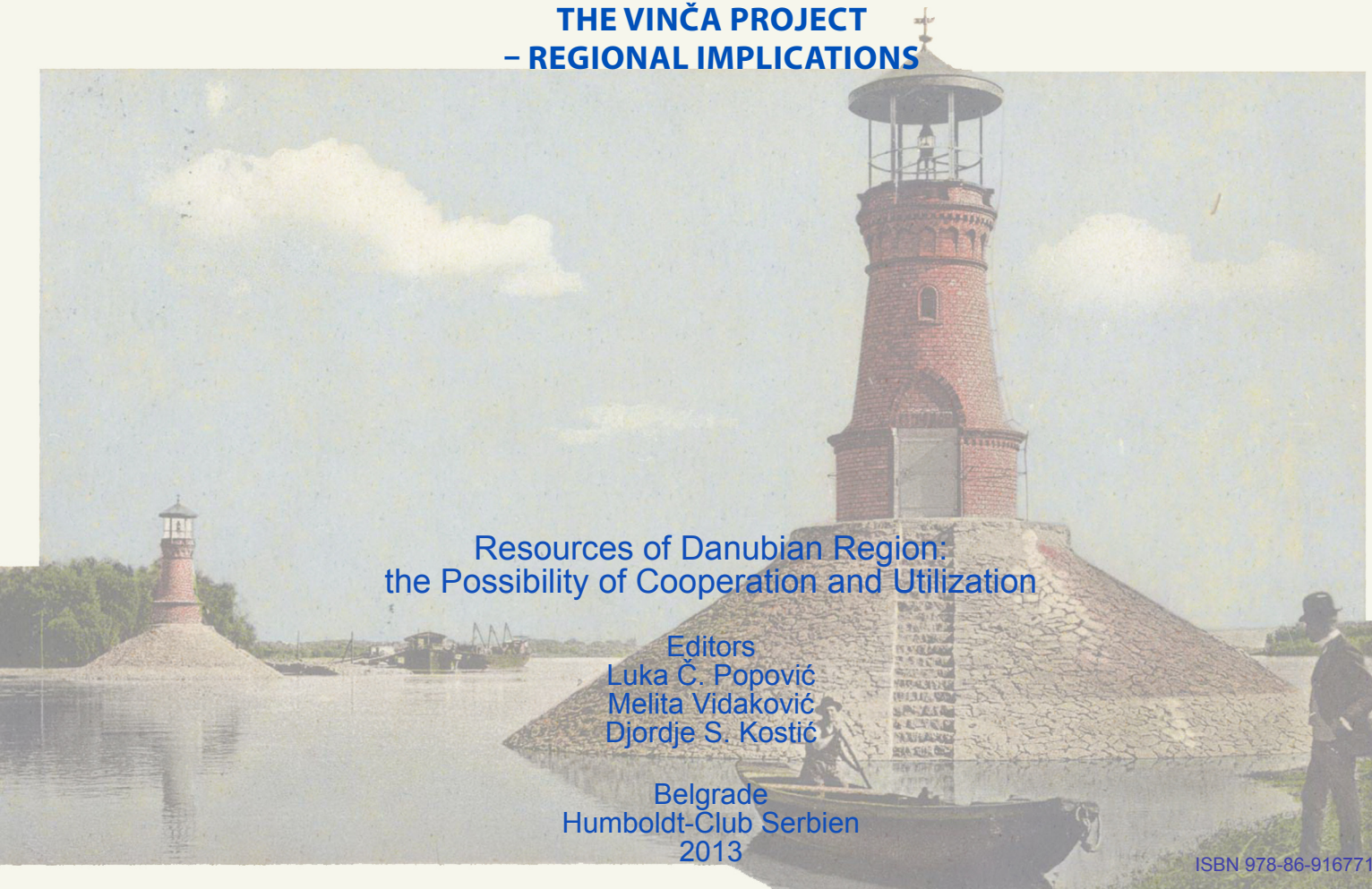
THE VINČA PROJECT – REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS



Resources of Danubian Region:
the Possibility of Cooperation and Utilization

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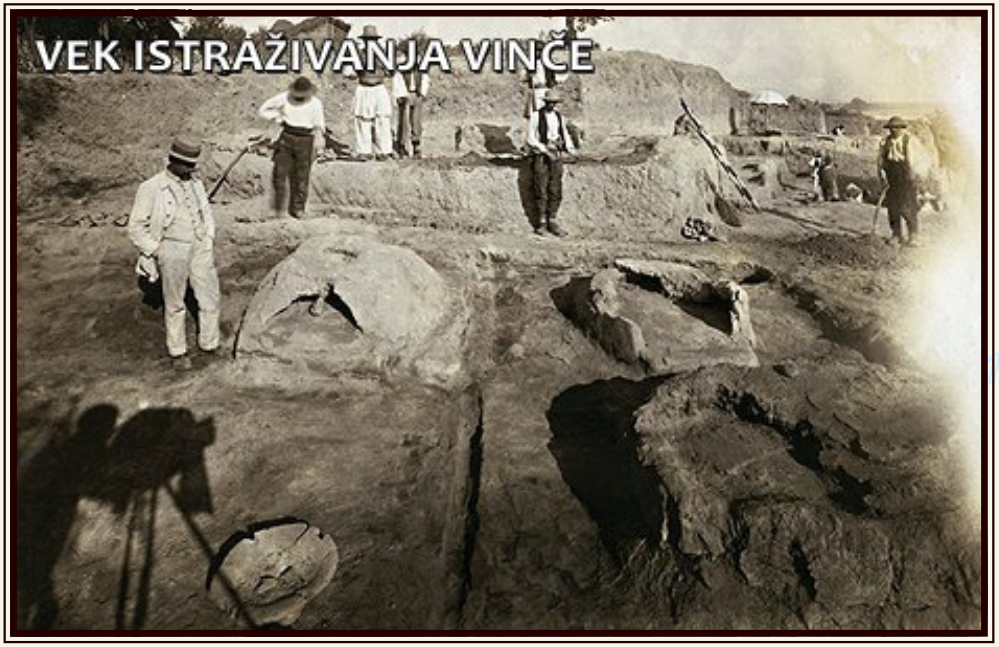

Abstract. The author has presented a brief history of research at the site of Vinča and gave an update on new excavations and multidisciplinary research. This important archaeological site, discovered in 1908 represents a focal point of the Late Neolithic period of southeast European prehistory. More than a century of research and application of most advanced techniques and procedures guarantee that Vinča will remain a yardstick for the studies of first settled communities of the 6th millennium b.C.E in Europe. Some current projects which tackle environment and absolute dating, which are presently, will enhance the quality of the picture even more.
Key words: Neolithic, Vinča, prehistory, archaeology, environment, dating, multidisciplinary research

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One of the most exceptional episodes of European prehistory was written some ten miles downstream from Belgrade, Serbia at a place where the river Danube makes a horse-shoe shaped arch and floats away Eastbound. On its way to Vinča, this agile and untameable lowland giant passes through the vast Pannonian plain where it absorbs the rivers Someş, Tisza, Drava, Sava, Timiş and other smaller streams.

The site of Belo Brdo in Vinča was first inhabited around 7600 years ago when the Starčevo people of the Early Neolithic, a population that lived in this region for a thousand years before the appearance of the Vinča people, established a small settlement on the right bank of the Danube. It appears that the inhabitants of Vinča communicated actively with those from Starčevo, the type site for the Neolithic culture lasting between 6200 and 5200 b.C.E, which is located some 6 miles across on the left bank. The Starčevo population represented the first permanent inhabitants of Southeast Europe. They introduced the Neolithic way of life to the region with animal and plant domestication and sedentary way of life. Before the time of the Starčevo culture the Central Balkans was sparsely inhabited. The Mesolithic (or pre-Neolithic) settlements in the Iron Gorges are probably the only oasis of settled, or rather semi-settled life between 9000 B.C. and 6200 B.C. This was the time when the culture of Lepenski Vir flourished, leaving behind masterpieces of architecture and sculptural art.

The Vinča people appear on the stage around the year 5200 b.C.E., bringing a decisive transformation for the future of European civilizations – the settled way of life. The implications of this change were manifold and far reaching. Agriculture, cattle-breeding, and consequently the unparalleled population boom are direct consequences of the sedentary way of life. In addition, population boom and pioneering mentality have led to further colonization even deeper into the European continent. The first settling

down marks the starting point for the formation of ten meters thick cultural deposit in Vinča that has held the remains of the settlement's material culture from the Middle Neolithic to the present day. Hence, Vinča is one of the few places in the world that have witnessed more than 7500 years of continuous history. The reason for such longevity can be found in the outstanding visual range of the river afforded by the site. The advantages in being able to spot a friend or an enemy soon enough as they could prepare a welcoming ceremony or a defence are apparent. Furthermore, the site of Vinča has a central position in the Balkan Peninsula, making it a focal point for trade and communication. The site also has a hinterland rich in wood, mineral ores, and wild game, as well as fertile soil in the valley of the river Bolečica which empties into the Danube nearby (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Site catchment analysis has shown that within two days walking distance there are confluences of numerous rivers of regional importance, making the site of Vinča a focal point of the entire region. This advantageous position within the communication network must have been of vital importance for the Vinča people, for it enabled them to take a central role in trade. This is confirmed by numerous finds, such as sea shell and dentalium bracelets, obsidian implements, and axes made of minerals that came from the sea coast or other distant parts of the continent. The central position of the site of Vinča in relation to the distribution of Neolithic cultures in the region, could explain the wealth accumulated within its layers. The Neolithic culture named after Vinča spread through the river valleys between Transylvania and Bosnia and between the Great Hungarian plain and Anzabegovo in FYR Macedonia. Striking similarity of archaeological material and almost identical sensibility in artistic expression is what differentiates this culture from other contemporaneous cultures.

Archaeological research at the site of Belo Brdo in Vinča has lasted throughout the better part of the 20th century. The first one to start excavations here was Miloje M. Vasić – Curator of the National Museum and Professor of archaeology at the Belgrade University. In order to obtain the means for his excavations, in the years before the World War II Vasić started fundraising campaigns and worked to popularize his discoveries and the cultural heritage of Serbia. Thanks to this man and to the unsurpassed beauty of its sculptoral art, Vinča has become one of the greatest cultural phenomena of European prehi-story, to the degree that the entire Late Neolithic of Southeast Europe can be characterized by the Vinča culture (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Archaeological excavations and research have continued with minor intermissions up to the present day. Digs have been renewed whenever the financial situation allowed it. During the 1970s and 1980s the most prominent Serbian archaeologists, such as D. Srejović, N. Tasić, J. Todorović, M. Garašanin, and G. Marijanović-Vujović, have excavated here bringing to the surface new archaeological material of different periods and offering new interpretations. Regional impact of the Project Vinča has been ensured as soon as the first Vasić's results were published in international journals. At the very dawn of the research of Neolithic of the Balkans, Vasić has shown an occupational sequence which lasted through the better part of the Neolithic era. Latter research established that the Vinča culture with its settlements and recognizable material culture covered most of the Balkan Peninsula. So the cultural deposit discovered at Vinča became something of a yardstick for chronological and cultural determination of Neolithic cultures that inhabited this region since the dawn of the first food-producing civilization. This regional importance and universal interest for the archaeological material from Vinča has not ceased ever since.

Between 1986 and 2007 the home for the Project Vinča had been Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and the presidents of the Board for Archaeological Research in Vinča have been such figures of Serbian prehistoric archaeology as D. Srejović, M. Garašanin and N. Tasić. At the beginning of 2007 the interdepartmental, state governed Board for Vinča was established that has been established as a place for managing this cultural heritage monument. Presently the Project Vinča is affiliated with following institutions: City Museum of Belgrade, which is legally responsible for the site; Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts which governs strategy of field research; Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade – scientific research management;

The new campaigns, which commenced in 1998 and led by Prof. Nenad Tasić, are marked by innovations in archaeological methodology and introduction of new technologies that aim to preserve the archaeological context and its contents meticulously. The key words of this research are interdisciplinary approach, protection, and presentation, as befits this cornerstone of European prehistoric archaeology (Figure 3).

Being aware that traditional archaeological research, meaning excavation and study of artefacts and objects is far from enough in the age of forensics, we have gathered a team of experts comprising of archaeologists, geologists, biologists, physicists, botanists, chemists, but also of designers, IT experts, architects, applied artists and others. The aim has been to enlighten the site of Vinča from as many angles as possible and to apply thorough analysis to the retrieved material. During initial campaigns 1998/2003 zoo-archaeologists, paleo-ethnobotanists, chipped and polished stone tools experts, geophysicist, IT experts and archaeologists were present. The excavations have not differed much in technique from those of 1978/1986. The main procedures have been identical to those in the past, only much larger amount of data had been gathered. Since 2003 technological revolution, made possible by introducing computers, digital cameras and total station, has occurred and even more and diverse data was being retrieved and consequently additional disciplines included.

After the campaign of 2009 the strategy of excavations changed. It was a result of poor state of the preservation of the site itself which was partly ruined by the landslide, erosion and illegal building activities. The excavations have been moved from the main plateau (Sector II) to the part of the site which was affected by the landslide and erosion (Sector I). One particular part of the site deserved our special

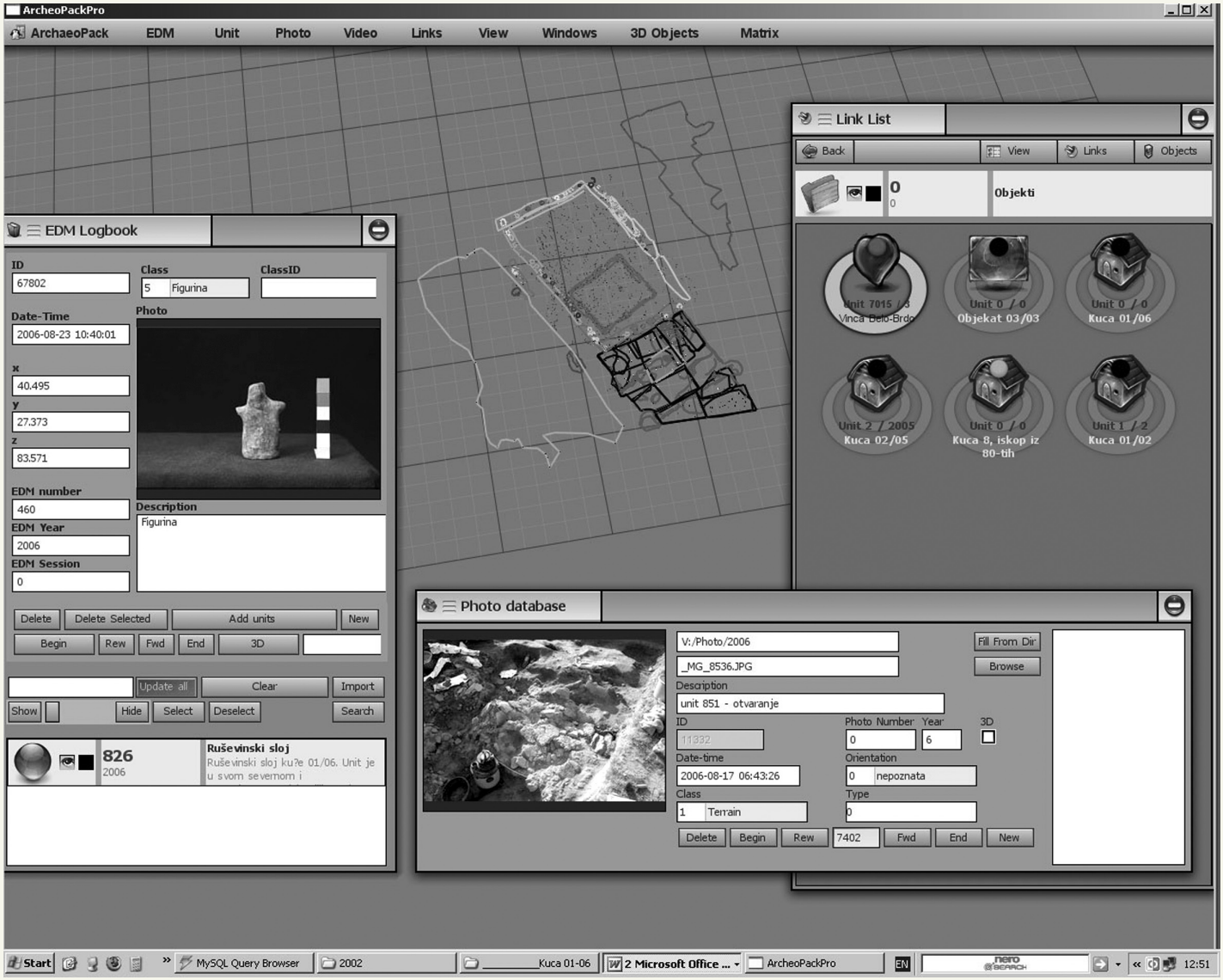

Figure 3.

attention. It was a part fully detached from the rest of the site as a consequence of sliding activities. Apart from saving the part of the site by excavating it, the team had a great opportunity to investigate a section of cultural deposit of the site from top to bottom, thus having a glimpse into more than thousand years of continuous inhabitation. Another aim of these excavations is to re-evaluate Vasić's stratigraphy

and link it to the results from the digs in the 1980-ies. These results will have significant implications on interpretation of Middle and Late Neolithic cultures of the region of Southeast and Central Europe.

The shift to the "Sector I" has proven very effective as far as the protection of the site is concerned, and it furthermore created a possibility to collect samples for different types of archaeological and physical-chemical analyses. At the time the Vinča Team is concentrated on two important projects which have been possible due to cooperation with other institutions from European countries. Extraordinary affluence of the site which is living its 8th millennium has attracted numerous colleagues creating unique environment for multidisciplinary research with the site and material of Vinča in focus (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

The project of research of paleo-environment of Vinča involves numerous colleagues from Belgrade, Novi Sad, Heidelberg, Frankfurt, London, Boston and Oxford and aims to offer elements for reconstruction of geomorphological features, botanical and faunal assemblages which have occupied the vicinity of the site during 5th and 4th millennia b.C.E.

Pivotal figures in this project are K. Penezić who deals with the changing flow of the River Danube, pedological characteristics of the soil Vinča people used, the scope of inhabited part of the settlement and M. Marić, who is focused on wider region surrounding Vinča and investigates the core region of the Vinča culture, attempting to discover regularities and rules in settlement pattern of this period. As an input for their research they use the data from Vinča and its surroundings gathered by archaeologists and analyzed by sedimentologists, thermoluminescence dating experts, geographers, biologists, botanists, climatologists and other experts from the best European laboratories. This aspects of research fit well with one of the aims of Vinča Project which is to promote the study of past material culture and its environment offering a test field for new methods in applied sciences**.**

Full impact of scientific research at Vinča will be attained through publication of the monograph with archaeological material excavated between 1998 and 2009 which is currently being prepared and also through publishing of the results of another project "*Times of their lives*". This project was conceived by A. Whittle of the Cardiff University and A. Bayliss of English Heritage and funded by the European Research Council. The goal is to collect sufficient amount of samples for radiocarbon dating and chronologically determine the position of the most prominent cultural phenomena of Neolithic Europe and follow the changes which occurred when small-scale, mobile and egalitarian hunter-gatherer communities shifted to complex, variously hierarchical societies materially based on sedentary existence and a farming economy.

The site of Vinča is a part of this project and has been attributed two hundred samples for the entire cultural deposit. Samples were gathered from M. Vasić's excavations, N. Tasić's excavations from the 1980ies and N.N. Tasić's excavations at Sector II and Sector I.

In this way we will be in the position to re-date the Neolithic sequence of the site with great precision. This will be made possible by precise collection of samples and by application of Bayesian modelling which will set the dates in tight ten-year slots. Entire chronological scheme which is currently based on the material and strata from Vinča would finally get true historical ages associated, enabling colleagues from entire region to test their results and interpretation and put them in exact time in the past without investing in radiocarbon dating.

During last 15 years numerous activities aimed at publication of new excavations and promotion of cultural heritage, have been undertaken. Many new titles published in scientific journals and popular books and magazines have presented new archaeological material, results of research and offered some new angles for further interpretation (Figure 5).

Furthermore, the research team at Vinča addresses to various target groups: school children, elementary school teachers and general cultural audience in order to raise the awareness about the importance of preservation and further research at this extraordinarily important monument. In 2008 an exhibition marked 100 years of research at Vinča. It was seen by more than 55,000 visitors including 300 organized school visits and 85 workshops with school children. Another exhibition, produced in 2010

Figure 4.

was dedicated to methods and procedures of preservation practised at the site of Vinča. This exhibition has been on the show in different towns in Serbia, Slovenia and Slovakia for over two years now. In 2010 a group of artists, musicians, dancers, choreographers and costume designers have approached us with an idea to put a show which included a ballet act, music inspired by the Neolithic Vinča. This project was latter named "Travelling Vinča Festival" and has been presented in Timisoara, Romania, Paks, Hungary and Belgrade, Serbia where it attracted broad attention in media.

Since 2001 we have organised *Archaeological summer school* which was attended by many students and colleagues from Serbia and abroad. Some of them soon became regular members of the Vinča Team.

Our intention for the future is to continue multidisciplinary work as we could reach some of our important goals:

- Better protection of the site of Vinča
- Better scientific research of the Vinča culture;
- Faster dissemination of results;
- Less time for knowledge formation;
- More diverse financial resources;
- More efficient promotion of cultural herritage;
- Development of cultural tourism.

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