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FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PATRIMONY  
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY AND VALORIFICATION  
OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN PATRIMONY IN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

# ACTA TERRAE SEPTEMCASTRENSIS

VII

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FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PATRIMONY  
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY AND VALORIFICATION OF THE  
TRANSYLVANIAN PATRIMONY IN EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

# **ACTA TERRAE**

## **SEPTEMCASTRENSIS**

### **VII**

**Proceedings of the  
International Colloquium:**

**The Carpathian Basin and its Role  
in the Neolithisation of the Balkan Peninsula**

Editor: Sabin Adrian LUCA

**Sibiu, 2008**

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SETTLING DISCOVERY CIRCUMSTANCES, DATING AND  
UTILIZATION OF THE TĂRTĂRIA TABLETS<sup>1</sup>

Marco Merlini<sup>2</sup>

Gheorghe Lazarovici<sup>3</sup>

**Key words:** Neolithic, symbols, "Danube script", Tărtăria, Romania.

**Abstract:** In conclusion on this point, the social life of the inscribed tablets and the other cultic artifacts has two phases: before and after the death of Milady Tărtăria. With regards to the first phase, in the present article we advanced some hypothesis regarding the cultic inventory with correlate liturgies and sovereign mysteries among them we pointed out the presence of speaking or singing figurines. We also observed that only the tablets are entire and interred as complete items, while all the other cultic objects have been submitted to an intentional and methodical breaking procedure and deposited as incomplete items. In a process that transforms matter into being, it is possible that some figurines were manufactured at the time of Milady Tărtăria's death and were used in rituals to represent the newly dead and then broken and sacrificed tying the living into the power of the neo-ancestor and by doing so asserting a claim of continuity and belongings. Besides some artifacts might have been surrounded by taboos and other might have been employed in rituals that nowadays are considered of "black magic". These occurrences pose new questions about the identity of the buried person and about the possible connections with the tablets and their signs.

**1. Tărtăria finds evidence a possible European Neolithic writing**

The three inscribed<sup>4</sup> tablets discovered in 1961 at the settlement of Tărtăria (near Turdaș, in Romania, Alba county; viz. Moga 1995) are the icon of the *Danube Script* and the *Danube Civilization*. Evidence of same and similar signs had been known and investigated since the archaeological excavations carried out in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century at the important prehistoric sites of Turdaș (Romania, Alba County), Vinča (Republic of Serbia), and others. However, it was the recovery of the three Transylvanian finds to kindle a wave of controversy regarding both the

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<sup>1</sup> This article displays some results of the "Tartaria Project" promoted by the *Prehistory Knowledge Project* at EURO INNOVNET and carried on by the authors.

<sup>2</sup> Director of the Institute of Archaeomythology (Sebastopol, USA); General Director of the *Prehistory Knowledge Project* (Roma, Italy).

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<sup>4</sup> Signs are incised, not impressed as claimed by some authors (viz for instance Tringham 1971: 114).

spatial incubators and temporal sequence of Southeastern European prehistoric civilization. They also made real the *possibility* that Neolithic and Eneolithic cultures of Southeastern Europe might have expressed an early form of writing predating the Near East regions by 1000-2000 years. Therefore, the centre of the ideas about writing or the signs used for it might not have been Mesopotamia and this invention could have been developed much earlier than about 3300 BC.



**Image 1.** Tărtăria tablets.

We use "Danube signs" / "Danube script" as general terms for the rudimentary system of writing related to the Neo-Eneolithic civilization which flourished along the great Danube basin (the Danube civilization); "Vinča signs" / "Vinča script" as strictly limited to the Vinča culture which developed in the central area of the Danube civilization. This terminology is

coherent with the challenge to demonstrate that "early civilization" status can no longer be limited to the regions which have long attracted scholarly attention (i.e. Egypt-Nile, Mesopotamia-Tigris and Euphrates, the ancient Indus valley), but it must be expanded to embrace the Neo-Eneolithic civilization of the Danube basin. The script is only a mark – although important – of the high status of this civilization. The Danube script originally appeared in the central Balkan area and had an indigenous development. It quickly spread to the Danube valley, southern Hungary, Macedonia, Transylvania, and northern Greece. It had a cousin script in Cucuteni-Tripolje area (Merlini 2004c). The Danube script flourished up to about 3500 BC when a social upheaval took place: according to some, there was an invasion of new populations, whilst others have hypothesized the emergence of new elite. At that time, the script eclipsed (Merlini 2003, 2004a: 51-63).

One cannot understand the virulence and centrality of the discussion on the Tărtăria tablets if one does not consider that the ante was strategic: the effectiveness in dating of the C14 analysis and on its basis the "reconstruction of the archaeological chronology in general" (Neustupný 1968b: 32). With regards to this issue, it is worth to remember that at the time of the Tărtăria discoveries the

beginning of the Starčevo-Criș culture was estimated about three millennia after the present findings i.e. 3400 BC (*Grbić 1955: 25, 27; Benac 1958: 41, and others*) and the C14 dating method was still rather imprecise. The radiocarbon method, developed by Willard F. Libby of the University of Chicago and widely used in the fifties, for example ignored the influence of the changes of Earth's magnetic field upon the production of radiocarbon.

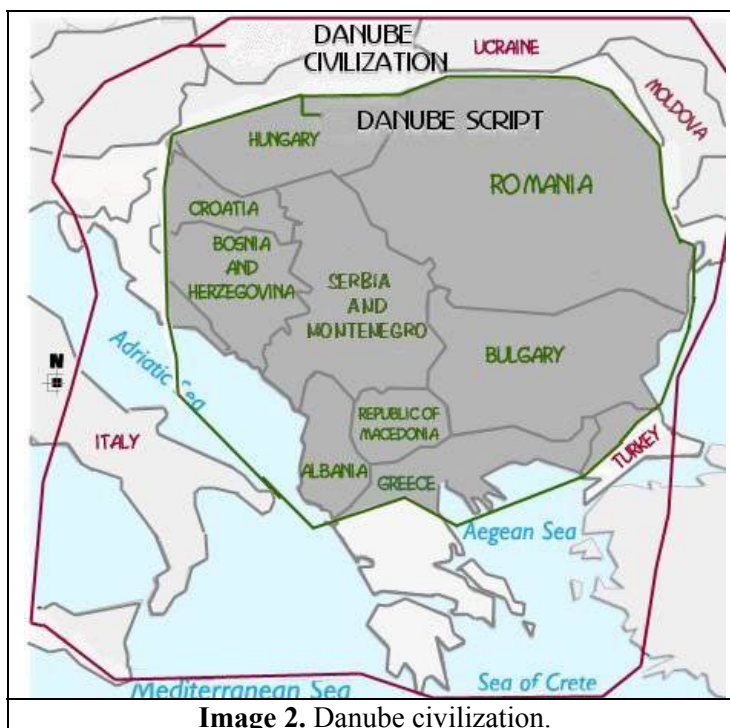


Image 2. Danube civilization.

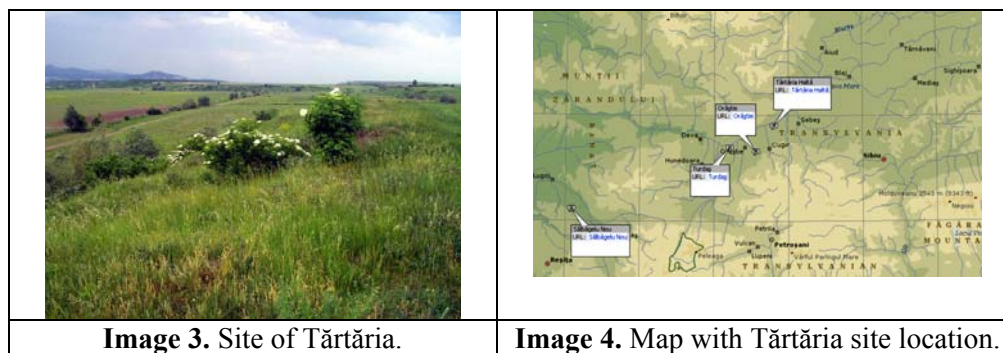
In such a fluid and unsettled situation the Tărtăria tablets played the role of a unique occasion in which some scholars tried to introduce C14 dating as a standard method while others sought to discard it as useless and misleading. Still in 1965 Vl. Milojević and in 1967 Sinclair Hood, discussing the Transylvanian finds as a glutinous occasion for rejecting the C14 date for the Vinča culture, observed

that C14 dates for cultural stages in historical Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Aegean were often accused of being too late (contrary to the Vinča date), because they did not consider their correction on the basis of the influence of Earth's changing magnetic field on the production of radiocarbon (*Milojević 1965; Hood 1967*).

## 2 An archaeological investigation without end

Tărtăria is a rural Transylvanian village of 5,000 inhabitants. The Neolithic settlement of Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii is located near the railway station "Tărtăria", on a small promontory 300-350 meters long and 150 wide which is 15 meters high on the Mureș river and is orientated E-W. Some time ago, a branch of the Mureș river flowed under this mound receiving fresh water from a small stream and other springs, all sourcing out from the high terrace of the settlement river which was very much eroded in time by floods. The Tărtăria mound is located inside an intensely cultivated area. Unfortunately amateurs don't have to take pains in

rummaging the soil to unearth out shards, fragments of statues, remains of altars, etc.



The prehistoric settlement mound of Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii is just 500 m. far from another Neolithic settlement, Balomir-Gura Văii Cioarei (Vlassa 1967: 404-408; 1969: 513-540; 1976: 114-118), famous for one of the first evidence of utilization of metals (Vlassa 1976: 118). It is also not very far from the copper and gold deposits of Zlatna region and some 18-20 kilometers from two important Neolithic settlements: Turdaș and Alba Iulia-Lumea Nouă.

Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii is a main Neolithic site with the cultural strata approximately from one to three meters thick with pit-houses in sector section G from N. Vlassa, reaching a depth of four meters in some places. It was investigated in five stages by various scholars.

The site was discovered on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1906 by Endre Orosz who asserted that it was contemporaneous with the Turdaș settlement and characterized by high-pedestalled bowls and painted pottery (Orosz 1908). In the 1930s Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii became well known when Marton Roska (University of Cluj) accidentally discovered some Neolithic objects similar to that of Turdaș (Roska 1942: 21 n. 77). The settlement was for the first time systematically investigated during the war years 1942-3 by Kurth Horedt although the archaeologist carried out only an informative dig, excavating a limited area in the north-western sector of the settlement<sup>5</sup> and writing a brief preliminary report exclusively for limited circulation (Horedt 1949).<sup>6</sup>

Nicolae Vlassa (archaeologist of the National History Museum of Transylvania at Cluj) did a survey excavation in 1961 accompanied by Iuliu Paul and Attila Laszló (Vlassa 1962.23-30; 1963. 485-494; 1976. 28-43). His main purpose was to study in detail the stratigraphy of the neighboring site of Turdaș using information from the culturally paralleled Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii. In fact, the enormous collection of Turdaș finds accumulated in the past by Transylvanian museums

<sup>5</sup> Areas A, B, C, D, E and F.

<sup>6</sup> Gheorghe Lazarovici has recently re-discovered Horedt's excavation journal and he is analyzing them.

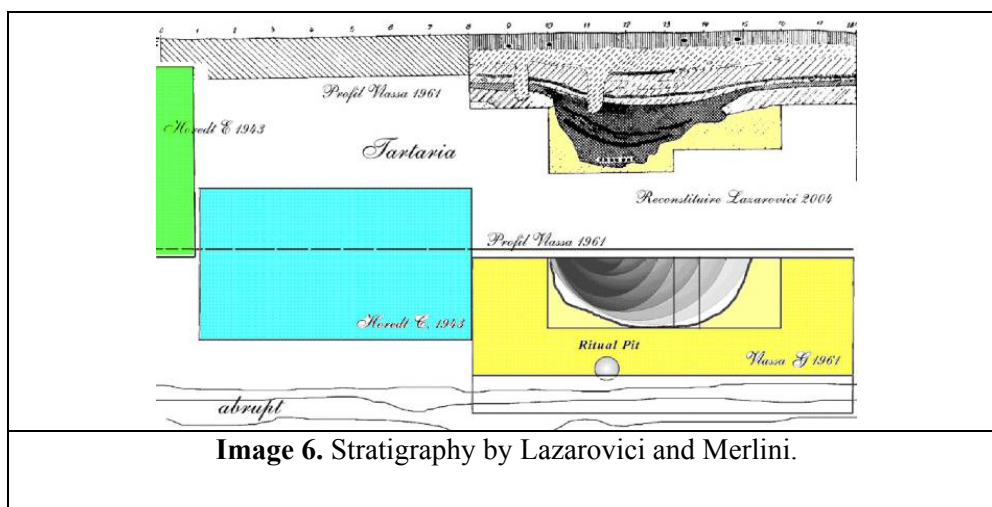
lacked any stratigraphic detail and the artifacts inventory had been made only by their typological and stylistic features. A stratigraphic analysis of the Turdaş culture was no longer possible in the eponymous settlement because it has been carried away by the Mureş River, but it was still available in Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii, which belonged to the same culture.

Finally, Iuliu Paul (University of Alba Iulia) carried out the last systematic investigation in 1989 continuing with the excavation in the north-western area of the settlement and extending the research both to the central and eastern area of it. In particular he dug 50 cm. from Vlassa's trench recovering the fire place and many pits going down from the upper levels but not the ritual pit. Unfortunately, he did not publish the report.

The excavations at Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii have uncovered four layers. According to the traditional stratigraphy, the deepest layer, thin and interrupted, has Starčevo-Criş<sup>7</sup>, Vinča A, Vinča B1, Alföld Linear pottery (*Makkay 1974/5: 14*). The third from bottom to top, 1 m. depth was a Vinča B occupation and presents surface dwellings (*Vlassa 1976: 29*). The second was considered by Vlassa belonging to the Petreşti-Turdaş culture (*Vlassa 1976: 30*). The upper stratum was ascertained to the Coţofeni culture related to the Baden and other cultures, probably Indo-European populations that replaced the Neolithic and Eneolithic inhabitants throughout Southeastern Europe (*Winn 1981: 185*).

We made a revision of plan and profile in Lazarovici and Merlini 2005-2006. We will reassume it in the paragraph 10.

### 3. The Tărtăria tablets as problematic archaeological artifacts



<sup>7</sup> Remains of this culture are pointed out by the presence of hashed chaff used as a cleanser (Luca 2003.24).

In 1961, Vlassa recovered from a pit three little, inscribed plates of baked clay together with a pile of offerings which were associated with the bones of a mature human being, estimated to be 35-40 years old (*Vlassa 1963: 492*). The excavator immediately cautioned that “the find being quite recent, we can as yet offer only some general remarks about its meaning and importance” (*Vlassa 1962: 27*). However, year after year he published the same content of the preliminary report (*Vlassa 1963, 1970, 1976, 1977*). Also after 14 years, he continued to alert the reader to the circumstances that he was offering only some general remarks because of the novelty of the discovery.

Here is in synthesis the suggestive scenario outlined by the archaeologist in charge (*Vlassa 1962; 1973; 1976, 1977*):

I. a cultic offering composed by objects and bones laid on the bottom of a ritual pit which was located in the deeper layer (*Vlassa 1963: 490*), in the sterile loess, from the first and oldest cultural level (*Vlassa 1976: fig. 3.4; 1977: 13*);

II. the bones appeared “scorched and disjointed, some of them broken” and they belonged to a mature individual about 35-40 years old;

III. the pit was evidently a *ritual pit* or “*magical-religious complex*” filled of ashy earth”; the pile of objects found at the bottom of it was a “sacrificial offering”;

IV. the discovery was “the only magical-religious complex... of this kind in the Turdaş culture areas”;

V. Regarding the human bones, N. Vlassa wrote “Near the small heap in which all these objects lay, scorched and disjointed bones, some of them broken, belonging to an individual about 35-40 years old were found” (*Vlassa 1963, p. 492*);

VI. the scorched, broken and disjointed bones were concluded to be “the remains of a sacrifice, accompanied by some kind of ritual cannibalism” (*Vlassa 1963: 492; 1976: 31*);

VII. two of the tablets are rectangular, one is round. The first tablet “has the form of an irregularly rectangular plate, measuring 5.2 x 3.5 x 1.6 cm.”<sup>8</sup> The second, similarly shaped and slightly convex in section, “bears a round hole and measures 6.2 x 3 x 0.9 cm.”<sup>9</sup> The third, “discoid and pierced by a round hole measures 6.1 x 6 x 2.1 cm.”<sup>10</sup> Signs are inscribed on the tablets only on one face. The archaeologist made note in the excavation report that one tablet “bears a (hunting?) scene, and the two others extremely curious signs placed on several rows” (*Vlassa 1963: 490*);

VIII. the signs incised on rows on the tablets “may be taken for a rudimentary writing... at least the rudiments of an ideographic notation” (*Vlassa 1963: 492*).

IX. the hoard of offerings which accompanied marked plates and human bones consisted of 26 burned-clay statuettes – or their fragments - with triangular head and

<sup>8</sup> Actually it measures 5.3 x 3.6 x 1.15 cm.

<sup>9</sup> Actually it measures 6.3 x 3.15 x 0.85 cm.

<sup>10</sup> Actually it measures 6.1 (height) x 6 (large) x 2.1 cm.

cylindrical-or-prism-shaped body, two Cycladic-like alabaster idols and a spondylus shell bracelet; the pile of offerings accounted in total 32 objects, tablets included.

At the time of the discovery, the excavator evidently did not consider the pit important enough. Although *Antiquity* maintained that the Tărtăria finds have been “carefully published” by him<sup>11</sup>, there are certain inadequacies in his report and the tablets are not certainly dated archaeological artifacts from four points of view:

- I. the rumors on their find circumstances;
- II. the gossip about their radiocarbon-dating;
- III. their unsure stratigraphy inside the pit;
- IV. the uncertain location of the pit inside the stratigraphy of Vlassa’s dig.

*I. The rumors on the find circumstances of the tablets*

As any evocative icon with uncertain origin, legends proliferate on the find circumstances of the tablets implying quite polarized point of view on temperament and professionalism of the excavator. As stated by some scholars, Vlassa was not present at the time of the historical discovery, which happened just some hours before the closing down of the excavation. The workers packed the last unearthed finds and he recovered the important and unexpected pile of ritual objects only in the laboratory of the museum. Many years ago, N. Vlassa talks about this circumstance with Gh. Lazarovici.

According to other scholars, Vlassa was too professional to depart from his excavation on the last day and they propose another version. In August 1961, Vlassa and Paul were together excavating at Tărtăria-Gura Luncii. During the digging Vlassa claimed to have urgent tasks at home, then disappeared for a long time. Paul decided do not go on alone at digging Tărtăria and moved to an excavation at Pianul de Jos. Subsequently Vlassa came back to Tărtăria opening a new trench in another area of the settlement. After a month, he presented the tablets inserted inside the stratigraphic sequence already sorted out for the archaeological site of Răhău.

Attila Laszló who excavated at Tărtăria with Vlassa as student, does not remember when, where and how Vlassa recovered the tablets. However, Vlassa told to Gh. Lazarovici about his discovery and Vlassa and László have drawn the profile in section H. Therefore, a third wave of scholars maintains that Vlassa ran across the tablets re-organizing the collection of artifacts found by Baroness Zsófia Torma in Near East and kept at Cluj museum. Test of the assertion should be into a claimed missing page in Torma’s Notebook: the folios with the drawings of the mythical tablets.

According to a fourth wave of scholars, the tablets could be a modern fake underwent or made by Vlassa. In the latter case, it was the way to success for a

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<sup>11</sup> In the introductory note to Hood’ article (*Antiquity*, XLI, 1967: 99).

young archaeologist who was in a corner because of impediments in university career.

The only certain points behind the flourishing of several legends are the high amount of poison circulating in Romanian archaeology and the fact that Vlassa ever declined the discussion on the essential issue of the find circumstances of the tablets as well as their stratigraphic location. He also refused to carry on new excavations at Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii. However, our judgment should not be hasty. His serial deny to clarify the discovery frame might not be evidence of the worst legends. The archaeological thriller might have another plotter, which challenges more Vlassa's professionalism than ethic, as one can verify below.

## II. *The gossip about radiocarbon dating*

Regarding the legends about the supposing dating of the tablets with the radiocarbon, a directly analysis can notice that some little fragments have been taken away from their back. In fact, even up to now the legend of a Russian analysis made in the early 1960s is still circulating. Most of the scholars are very cautious about the Russian rumors and never mention a direct C14 analysis on the tablets. For example Marija Gimbutas states in *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* that "By *analogy* (italics are our) with calibrated radiocarbon dates for early Vinča layers *at other sites* (italics are our), the date of the lowest occupation level cannot be later than the early fifth millennium" (*Gimbutas 1982: 87*). Other researchers (*Bărbulescu 2001; Halloran 2002*) are less prudent claiming the results of a direct radioactive carbon dating of the tablets. Some novelists have even less caution and on the basis of the dreamed up C14 analysis they claim that the tablets mention Enki and Ur of the Annunaki gods but at least 1,000 years earlier than the correspondent Sumerian cuneiform texts (*Gardner 2000*).

The fact is that the tablets have never been analyzed by radiocarbon and they cannot be submitted to this analysis any more. After the discovery, the tablets were soft and appeared covered with calcareous deposits due to the humidity in the pit. A well-meaning but hasty restorer (Josif Korody) confused a matter mixed with calcium, as in fact the tablets are (pulverized live calcium mixed with water in order to bind clay, sand, and different minerals), with a calcium crust due to the moisture of the pit. Therefore, he put them under hydrochloric acid treatment that removed not only the surface calcium as a slip but also destroyed their internal structure. In a late article, Vlassa wrote to have noticed the emblematic signs only after the cleaning of the tablets. In order to harden them, he impregnated them in a vacuum autoclave with extractable organic material thereby submitting them to a baking process (*Vlassa 1972: 371*). Nobody knows at what temperature and how long they had been baked even if is not possible it was more than 150<sup>0</sup>, because nitro/chemical liquid used for impregnation blow up. We will look at these data in a deeper way in the paragraph questioning if the tablets could be a modern fake. For the moment, we will limit the analysis to the fact that after the heat treatment the

pieces of Tărtăria will *never* be able to pass the carbon 14 test: the thermic stress has compromised the clay's basic quality indispensable for carbon analysis (*Masson 1984: 115*).

There are not any photos of the tablets before the chemical and thermic treatment and Vlassa did not explain the circumstances of the mishap neither in the preliminary excavation report nor in the subsequent articles. He refused to discuss this issue ever with his close colleagues and friends. In his publications, he only noted that the tablets were "poorly burnt" (*Vlassa 1963: 492*). In fact, the reddish color characterizing them could have been due to the accidental burning in the museum. Some scholars review the tablets as unbaked (*Tringham 1971: 114; Whittle 1996: 101*) and others as baked (*Renfrew 1973: 67*), but we do not understand on which documental basis they formulate these opposite statements on an unknowable point.

The unfortunate accident and the reticence to discuss it hurt not only Vlassa's reputation, but also that of the tablets and of the *Danube Script*. Indeed, some scholars started to claim that the inscribed objects were out of any chronology and context: they might have been found by Vlassa in the museum while putting in order the Zsófia Torma's collection or might be simply a modern fake.

### III. *The unclear stratigraphic position of the tablets inside the pit*

Even if the general stratigraphy of the excavation at Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii has been reported with precision by Vlassa, the stratigraphy of the tablets inside the pit is *unsure*. The only little information one has is from the preliminary excavation report (*Vlassa 1962*) and its English version published one year later on the magazine *Dacia* (*Vlassa 1963*). As some scholars have already observed, Vlassa's publications did not include any sectional drawing of the pit reproducing *in situ* either the remarkable hoard of bones and artifacts or how they appeared at the time of their discovery at the bottom of the pit (*Whipp 1973: 148*). Neither did they contain data about the dimensions of the pit or other important information on it, nor the circumstances of the dig, nor the exact location of the findings (*Masson 1984: 114*). The only existing evidence is a dark and low quality, but unambiguous, photo in which an arrow points "to the 'ritual pit', dug in the yellow loess, where the idols and the clay tablets were found" (*Vlassa 1963: 487 fig. 3, n. 4*). In this photo, one can also discern another important problematic element not mentioned by Vlassa: i.e. the funnel-shaped pit is not entire but guillotined by the excavators.

At that time (1961), in Romania the cross section excavation was not used in any archaeological investigation. Viz. for example the monograph on Hăbășești (*Vl. Dumitrescu et alii 1954: pl. V*, or for the other next 83 pits: *11-169*), or that one on Trușești (where there are drawings neither for the monumental altar, nor for the sanctuary made by the excavator of the complexes; the later reconstructions have been made by *Lazarovici M. 2002; 2004: 47-64, fig. 1, 3, 27*).



**Image 7.** Photo position of the pit.

If at the moment of the discovery Vlassa did not consider the pit containing the tablets important enough to make an illustration of a cross section of it accompanied by a complete photographic record, after having recognized that the tablets were inscribed by signs of writing he spent more consideration on the hypothesized Mesopotamian influences in Transylvania than on the description of the excavation and its findings.

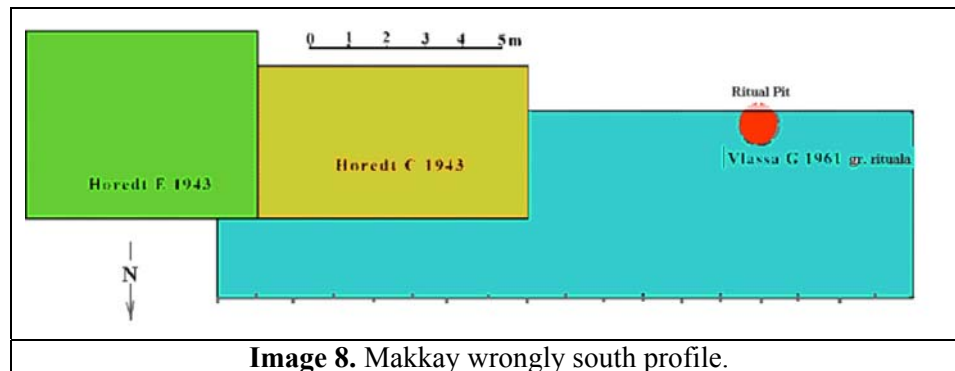
#### *IV. The uncertain location of the pit inside the stratigraphy of Vlassa's dig*

If the stratigraphic position of the tablet within the pit is not sure, neither is the stratigraphic position of the pit itself. According to the archaeologist in charge, it was found in the yellowish clay of the first layer under the level Turdaş-Petreşti (after Vlassa it is Vinča A3/B1).<sup>12</sup> However, the difficulties with regards to the stratigraphic data are evidenced by J. Makkay's mistake when, putting together on a larger plan Vlassa's sections and those made by K. Horedt (1949: fig. 3), has wrongly located the ritual pit near the south profile of the trench (Makkay 1990 fig. 1).

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<sup>12</sup> See the stratigraphy of the showcase in Cluj museum: image 8.

Contrariwise, the correct position of the ritual pit was reconstructed by Lazarovici in the northern border of this G trench profile (*Lazarovici and Merlini 2004, fig. 3*), as evidenced in the above-mentioned image 6.



In conclusion, four weak points of Vlassa framework make the Tărtăria tablets dubiously dated archaeological artifacts: the rumors on the circumstances of their discovery and sign recognition; the gossip on their presumed radiocarbon dating; their unsure stratigraphy inside the pit; and the uncertain stratigraphic location of the pit itself. Vlassa's inadequacies have induced many scholars to be skeptic about the information communicated by him regarding the layer where the pit was located, the position of the tablets inside it and even their belonging to the Tărtăria settlement (See, for example, *Berciu 1967; Dumitrescu 1969a: 92; Neustupný 1968a; 1968b: 35; Tringham 1971: 114; Whipp 1973: 148; Hood 1973: 148; Milisauskas 1978: 129-130; Comşa 1982: 82-85; 1987; Zanotti 1983*).

#### 4. The controversy on the chronology of European prehistory found a hub in the Transylvanian tablets

##### *4.A In search for a "deus ex machina" to resolve the crucial issue of the chronology of European prehistory and its synchronization with other civilizations*

From the time of their recovery, the inscribed Tărtăria tablets became the focal point in a fierce debate over: a) origin and chronology of writing; b) the chronology of the European prehistory and its synchronization with the other civilizations; c) the diffusionist paradigm according to which *Ex Oriente Lux*; d) the location of the cradle regions of civilization in Europe.

In fact, since their discovery the Transylvanian finds have occupied a unique and often contentious position in European prehistory, because of the dispute over: a) the assertion that their symbols could express a form of writing; b) the dating of the European script and the inconsistency between the absolute and relative chronology because, according to the carbon 14 method, the Danube script predated

the earliest Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics for at least one millennium; c) the evidence of a local evolution of Neo-Eneolithic cultures which reduces the importance of migration processes and diffusions from Near East; d) the possibility that the Neo-Eneolithic civilization of the Danube Valley has to be placed in a leading position in European cultural affairs (*Merlini 2003*).<sup>13</sup>

Concerning the dating of the tablets, paradoxically the Tărtăria evidence cracked the skepticism of some scholars over the spectacular claim that the Neo-Eneolithic Danube Civilization used an early form of writing and at the same time reinforced that of others. Vlassa explained that the tablets at Tărtăria came from the loess. However to which cultural horizon does it belong? Due to the uncertain setting of the tablets inside the ritual pit and the not certain location of the pit inside the stratigraphy of the excavated trench, scholars dated them on the basis of their similarity in typological features with other artifacts, the resemblance of their signs with the signs of the already known ancient literacy, and the correspondences between the objects recovered in the ritual pit with other known objects. The result was quite surreal because scholarship assigned to the layer where tablets have been found a very large range of options, sailing from the Middle Neolithic to the Late Neolithic to the Eneolithic up to the Bronze Age. Listing them from the earliest to the latest cultural horizon:

- the early Vinča (*Garašanin and Nestor 1969: 22*);
- Vinča A (*Vlassa 1976: 33*);
- the high developed Vinča A (*Milojčić 1965: 264, 268*);
- Vinča A or Vinča B (*Bognár-Kutzián 1971: 140*);
- Vinča A3, A/B1 (*Lazarovici Gh. 1977: 19-44; 1979: 123; 1989: 81, tab. 1*)
- phase A of Vinča-Turdaş culture (*Masson 1984*);
- Vinča A or Vinča B1 (*Hood 1967: 110*);
- the late period of Vinča-Turdaş B1-2 (*Berciu 1967: 162 note 55*);
- first half of Vinča B1 (*Makkay 1968: 276*);
- Vinča-Turdaş B1-2 (*Makkay 1974/5: 27*);
- Vinča B2 (*Dimitrijević 1969: 94*)
- Turdaş-Petreşti (*Tringham 1971: 114*)
- Baden-Coţofeni (*Neustupný 1968b: 32; Dumitrescu 1969: 99-100 and 588-599; Zanotti 1983*).

If the discordance in assigning a culture to the tablets and the ritual pit was quite extensive, not less wide was the disagreement in giving a date to the related culture. For example, the objects found together with the tablets have been easily associated with the early Vinča by numbers of experts and Miločić stated that the

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<sup>13</sup> For a survey see *Merlini 2004a: 51-63*.

slit eyes of the clay figurines<sup>14</sup> supported a date for the tablets in the Vinča A (*Milojčić 1965: 264, 268*). If radiocarbon dating evidence for the Vinča period had been accepted, then the tablets and their inscriptions should have been dated c. 4200-3900 BC (*Tringham 1971: 114*), or about 5000 BC (*Neustupný 1968b: 32*), or considered “genuine early Vinča artifacts of the fifth millennium BC” (*Gimbutas 1982: 88* with a dating of 5300-5000 BC), or of the latter half of the sixth millennium BC (*Haarmann 1990: 76*): one or two millennia before the dawn of the Sumerian civilization. However, it was an unacceptable conclusion for many scholars who went in search of a much more traditionally comfortable dating. Applying the archaeological connections known at that time (Uruk IV-Jemdet Nasr), they settled the tablets from about 2900-2700 BC (*Vlassa 1976: 33*) to 2500 BC (*Hood 1967: 110*).

Consequently, the Transylvanian tablets have brought into sharper focus the discrepancy between dates based upon radiocarbon method and those based upon archaeological correlations (upgraded to “historical evidence”<sup>15</sup>): the chronological gap was too large and the two options totally irreconcilable. If the radiocarbon dating was truthful, the Tărtăria tablets could not be squared with the Jemdet Nasr period even if one accepted a very early date for it, being much earlier than it. If the Vinča culture was correlated with the Jemdet Nasr period, radiocarbon dating was not only useless but also misleading (*Milojčić 1965: 268*).

We have to frame this crossroads within a period when the proponents of the new radiocarbon chronology moved to attack and the defenders of the traditional, conventional chronology were in defense. Indeed, the latter were open to direct criticism from radiocarbon regarding concerning not only the Balkans and the supposed links with the Aegean early Bronze Age on which Milojčić grounded his chronology, but also other European areas. These difficulties “suggested that the traditional chronology might be seriously in error in the Balkans” (*Renfrew 1973: 68*) regarding the estimated dates, the durations of cultures, the idea that the historical process is based on sequential series of archaeological cultures, the diffusionist paradigm according to which the first farmers spread agriculture across the globe sowing seeds also for most of today's languages and system of writing.

The pivotal role of the Tărtăria tablets in the controversy about radiocarbon dating evidence transformed them in a sort of *deus ex machina* able to solve the crucial issue of the chronology of European prehistory and its synchronization with the other ancient civilizations. Vlassa believed that the tablets offered him the possibility to establish cultural and chronological synchronization between Europe and the Near East (*Vlassa 1962; 1964; 1965 etc.*). His opinion on this subject has been confirmed by distinguished scholars such as Milojčić, who constantly have claimed the invalidity of carbon 14 dates (*Milojčić 1965*), and Falkenstein

<sup>14</sup> Illustrated by Vlassa 1963, 489, fig. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Viz for example *Neustupný 1968: 34*.

(*Falkenstein 1965*). This view was also sustained by J. Makkay (*Makkay 1967; 1969; 1971; 1984 and 1990*), and Hood (*Hood 1967: 99-102 and 1968*) who considered the Tărtăria tablets as evidence of a short chronology drift from Orient for the Danube Neolithic. At the opposite pole, other archaeologists employed the tablets to champion the long chronology using radiocarbon dating for the Neolithic in Southeastern Europe. Under the irreconcilable controversy on dating, there was the heated debate on the entire relationship between the Balkans and the prehistoric Aegean and Near East.

The range of the published opinions about the dating of the tablets and the interpretation of the signs borne by them, as well as their origin, can be synthesized on the basis of five factors (for a detailed survey see *Merlini 2004a; 2004b*):

- i. the dating of the tablets to the Vinča-Turdaş phase or, to be correct, to the Vinča culture after new C14 dates<sup>16</sup> and archaeological evidence<sup>17</sup> according to which the appearance of Turdaş group is coeval to Vinča B2-Vinča C and its entire evolution is synchronic with Vinča C1-C2 (after Vl. Milojević's periodisation, *Luca S.A. 2001: 96, 114, 118*). Therefore the Turdaş group belongs to the Late Neolithic<sup>18</sup> (*Lazarovici Gh. 1979: 71; 1979: 123; 1989: 81, tab. 1; Luca S. A. 2001: 139-143; Lazarovici M. 2005; Lazarovici, Merlini 2004; 2005; Lazarovici M. 2005*);
- ii. the radiocarbon dates for the South-eastern Neolithic in Europe;
- iii. the idea that the Tărtăria tablets could bear signs of writing or not;
- iv. the autochthonous or foreign nature of the Tărtăria signs, e.g. the supposed existence of similarities between the Transylvanian signs and the Turdaş and Vinča marks and/or the earliest Mesopotamian pictographic signs;
- v. the native or foreign origin of the Tărtăria tablets.

In the next paragraphs, we will resume and reorganize the controversy because it is still vital.

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<sup>16</sup> According to S.A. Luca the oldest Turdaş level at Orăştie is situated between 4768-4582 CAL BC (*Luca S. A. 2001: 142*). Lazarovici M. considers this data in a quite good relation with those obtained for Vinča C1-C3, C3-D1 or D sites in Serbia and coeval with those for Vinča C2-C3 from Vinča Belo Brdo established by W. Schier between 4980/4800-4600 BC (*Schier 1996*).

<sup>17</sup> All sites belonging to this group contain Vinča C materials (Turdaş, Lumea Nouă etc.). See for example the reprint of Martin Roska's discoveries (*Lazarovici Gh., Maxim Z. 1996: 223-267*), or the publication of the archaeological materials from Turdaş or Orăştie (*Luca S. A. 1997; 2001*).

<sup>18</sup> In this case the chronological sequence is Vinča A (A1, A2, A3, or A1, A2, A/B), Vinča B (B1, B2, B2/C) and Vinča-Turdaş (I, II) and not anymore Vinča-Turdaş A, or B as used in the even recent past.

***4.B Viewpoint 1: the tablets are ascribed to the Vinča-Turdaş or Vinča period, but the radiocarbon dates for the Neolithic in the Southeastern Europe are contested***

Several archaeologists held as unambiguous the excavation context and the dating of the tablets to the Vinča-Turdaş or Vinča period on the basis of the traditional relative chronology and refuting at the same time as invalid the (corrected and uncorrected) radiocarbon dates for the Neolithic in South-eastern Europe (*Milojčić 1965: 261-8; Hirsch 1968-1969: 203; Brentjes 1971: 23-4*). According to this instance the tablets could be ascertained to the Vinča-Turdaş A period (*Milojčić 1967*) or to the Vinča-Turdaş B1 (*Makkay 1968*), i.e. to the Vinča-Turdaş I an II in current and proper way. In any case, they are considered more or less contemporary with the earliest Mesopotamian written signs and many questions raise. Do their signs have essential connections with the pictographic writing of Jemdet Nasr period? Do they bear marks of a script or not? Were they indigenous or imported?

The discoverer of the tablets suspected immediately that the signs incised on rows on the tablets “may be taken for a rudimentary writing... at least the rudiments of an ideographic notation” (*Vlassa 1963: 492*). In his unpublished PhD thesis, he specified that: “The absolute news relate with the tablets is the grouping of the signs that we have on two of the tablets that confer a rudimentary aspect of ‘writing’. It is also true that in the area of the Turdaş-Vinča culture we have hundred of isolated signs or grouped (2-3 only), especially on the bottom of the pots or on idols” (*Vlassa 1977: 13*).

Vlassa maintained that if the grouping of the signs represents a form of writing, then a Near Eastern origin of it has to be sought. Indeed, he believed that area the source of almost all cultural developments and considered the idea of prehistoric Europeans developing writing on their own and before their micro-Asiatic prototypes a too unlikely possibility to take seriously.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, he tried to catch the direct or indirect influence of Mesopotamian “high culture” on the organized and well-developed grouping of signs on the Transylvanian tablets. He thought to have found that the signs on the archaic tablets of the record deposits of Uruk IV (3500-3200 BC) and Jemdet Nasr (3200-3000 BC), where writing was thought to have been invented, had the closest analogies to that ones from the Tărtăria tablets. *Many* Transylvanian signs “are seen identical or very similar” to those of Uruk-Warka IV and *some* of them “look like those on the Jemdet Nasr tablets” (*italics is from us*). The hunting (?) scene “resembles that on an archaic cylinder at Ur”

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<sup>19</sup> “Even if we will operate with the long historical chronology of the Ancient Orient, the postponement vis a vis of the C14 data of the Vinča-Turdaş is about a millennium. It is inadmissible to imagine that the pieces from Tărtăria (and many other Middle Neolithic Transylvanian objects that have an “oriental” nuance) are older then their micro-Asiatic prototypes; in the Orient, the historical chronology is supported by very solid arguments; the absolute data of this chronology coincide with those provided by C14 (*Vlassa 1977: 14*).

(Vlassa 1963: 492). Following this line of reasoning, he suggested that since the Mesopotamian tablets dated from that period, the European counterparts would appear around 2900-2700 BC. Half millennium was considered a sufficient time lag for the Near Eastern innovation to have reached Transylvania: “the necessary time for the circulating of such pieces – or the cultural influence which gave them birth – down to the Mureş valley”. It was a date “admitted by most researchers for Vinča A” and according to Vlassa it “corresponds exactly to the date which *as a matter of fact* can put forward for the first layer at Tărtăria, even if the tablets were not extant” (Vlassa 1963: 494).

Then Vlassa, who was not a specialist in Near East history, noted that to lower “the date of Uruk-Warka IV and Jemdet Nasr... seems lately to be the general trend”. Following this mainstream tendency, he reached “for the end of the first layer at Tărtăria a date which would mark *just the beginning of the Vinča B1 phase*, as we already stated when we characterized the said layer (2600 BC)” (Vlassa 1963: 494).

It was natural that taking place an unusual discovery and with astonish novelty not explained at that time by local antecedents or parallels, Vlassa turned the mind to an external influence, filiation or imitation. Of course, he also observed that many of the over three hundred signs on the shards of Turdaş are identical to those on Tărtăria tablets. However, he did not concluded about a local origin of them and the continuity in time of similar marks occurring in Neolithic sites of Southeastern Europe, but he introduced the question of the place from which the bearers of the Turdaş culture came with an implicit answer: the Near-East (Vlassa 1963).

In the 1960s and 1970s Vlassa’s hypothesis was confirmed by distinguished scholars (Milojčić 1965, Popović 1965, Renfrew 1966, Hood 1967: 99-102 and 1968; Makkay 1969, 1971, 1984 and 1990). A number of experts on early systems of writing observed close or probable typological connections between the Tărtăria signs (and the Turdaş group of signs) and the early pre-cuneiform Mesopotamian script, in the ‘proto-literate’ period of Sumer (Gelb 1967: 488; Grumach 1969: 258; Edzard 1969: 220; Hrouda 1971: 103). They enlisted: a) parallels in the shape of a number of signs; b) their incision on tablets; c) their incision on tablets similar to the Mesopotamian ones (Makkay 1973: 1-5). They maintained to have established the best parallels have with the very end of Uruk IIIb pictographic tablets (Makkay 1968: 276).

The Jemdet Nasr period (Uruk III-II) was at that time ascribed before or after 3000 BC by the relative chronology to the century (Porada 1965) and after 3000 BC by the C14 analysis (Moorey 1966). As observed above, to Vlassa and to many other scholars some centuries seemed to be a proper time-lag for the invention of writing – or at least for the captivating effect of its magic signs - to spread out from Near East to Transylvania, therefore he dated the tablets about 2900-2700 BC (Vlassa 1976: 33). Makkay considered the tablet to be coeval “with pictographic or

pottery signs”, ascribing them to the first quarter of the third millennium (*Makkay 1974/5: 27*) and more precisely between 2900 and 2800 BC (*Makkay 1973: 1*). Some scholars considered the date for the beginning of the Vinča culture after 2500 BC (*Hood 1967: 110*). According to this chronology, the Tărtăria tablets have been included within the cultural horizon of comparable tablets in Crete: possibly before 2000 BC, but more probably as late as 1750 BC, while the idea of writing on clay tablets might have been introduced into Crete from Syria at the beginning of Early Minoan II (c. 2600 BC) or before (*Hood 1967: 110*).

Many scholars agreed with the very short chronology established by Hood, but unfortunately, it has been based on a complete misunderstanding of the stratigraphy published by Vlassa. In fact, he confused: a) the pit fillings with a hut infill; and b) the find spot of the tablets with a hearth (*Whipp 1973: 148; Hood 1973: 148*). Careless of it, a number of researchers strictly maintained the conjectured existence of a correlation between the early pictographic Mesopotamian script of literacy and the Transylvanian signs. They argued that if the Sumer tablets were not much earlier than 3000 BC, the Transylvanian ones should be later, rejecting the “anomalies” of radiocarbon dating (although calibrated) from the Vinča culture based on “lurking imperfections in the method” and debating if the Tărtăria marks could be considered signs of writing or merely writing-like signs (*Vlassa 1963: 485-494; Hood 1967: 99-113; Makkay 1968: 272; Makkay 1969: 9-27; Vlassa 1972: 372; Hood 1973: 149; Young 1973: 72-79; Vlassa 1976*).

The leading position was established by A. Falkenstein, responsible for the publication of the tablets from Uruk, who pointed out a strict correlation with Uruk III B, which belonged to the same cultural horizon as those of Jemdet Nasr, and argued that the signs were definitely Sumerian. Falkenstein’s line of reasoning was based on four pilasters:

- a) the Tărtăria signs, especially those on the rounded tablet, are highly comparable with those on the early tablets from Uruk III and Jemdet Nasr as the scholar synthesized in a chart (*Falkenstein 1965: 271*); the Near East connections are particularly clear in the case of the symbolic hunting scene on the undrilled tablet, which was a more naturalistic representation and resembled the well documented Mesopotamian seals impressions;
- b) some signs appear to have been derived from Mesopotamian marks for numerals;
- c) both the Transylvanian and the early Mesopotamian tablets show no occurrences of the wedge-shaped instrument employed for cuneiform writing;
- d) the shape of the rectangular tablets (relatively flat) and the system of dividing groups of signs by means of incised lines occurred also in Mesopotamia.

Establishing these connections, Falkenstein dated the Transylvanian signs around 2900-2700 BC and tried to establish parallels between them and the signs

from the most ancient pre-cuneiform Sumerian documents found at Jemdet Nasr, Tell el-Far'ah, and Uruk. Unfortunately, he did not consider or did not care to consider as important some counterarguments about the same issues:

- a) the Tărtăria design shows striking resemblances not only to the Predynastic Mesopotamian writing, but also to other ancient script;
- b) in the case of numerals, on the Uruk tablets the whole shape of the sign is sunk in the clay with a round-ended stylus, while at Tărtăria the equivalent signs are incised in outline;
- c) in Mesopotamia only few larger rectangular tablets are relatively flat and there are also very few small circular tablets to compare with the Transylvanian one;
- d) in addition, the string-holes on two of the Tărtăria tablets have no parallels among the early tablets of Mesopotamia (*Falkenstein 1965: 269-273*).

It is significant to note that the tablets from Uruk III and Jemdet Nasr do not bear a merely primitive stage of writing, because they display signs which are not only ideographic but also contain a phonetic element. In this occurrence signs stand for words and not for objects, animals or structures which they literally represent, and signs with recognized sound values are combined together to make words (*Diringer 1962: 21*). Then the main question regarding the marks on the Tărtăria tablets became, could they represent a similarly advanced stage of writing or had they just a superficial resemblance without any writing implications to early Mesopotamian tablets? (*Hood 1967: 104*).

The group of scholars inclined to maintain a strict correlation between the Tărtăria signs and the Mesopotamian proto-writing considered the supposed graphic influence in the framework of a more general cultural strong drift from the Near East, which occurred at the point of transition from the fourth to the third millennium BC or during the third millennium BC (it depends on the author). Within Southeastern Europe, the Vinča-Turdaş culture was considered the most markedly affected (*Makkay 1973: 1*). Müller-Karpe pointed out that human representation in relief was common practice in Mesopotamia and that it occurred in Southeastern Europe only at Turdaş possibly because of Near Eastern influences (*Müller-Karpe 1968: 307*). Makkay investigated the advent of cylinder seals in Europe as result of a strong influence from the cylinder seals of the Jemdet Nasr and Predynastic periods. According to him, in the Final Neolithic the knowledge of making cylinders or cylinder seals was possibly bridged on the European continent by early settlements on the Cycladic Islands and via the export of obsidian from Melos to as far as Thessaly and Thrace. The small fragment of light-colored trachyte tuff with engraved signs found by Torma at the Transylvanian site of Nádorválya (*Torma 1882: 44, pl. IV, 7; Vlassa 1970: 21, fig 19*) was considered the

most distant example of a cylinder seal made locally under the indirect influences of the Mesopotamian ones (*Makkay 1974/5: 26*).<sup>20</sup>

This group of researchers believed that the idea of a local independent invention of a Southeastern European Neolithic system of writing was an absurd because of the lack of complex phenomena and processes indispensable to the invention of writing as listed for example by Gelb (*Gelb 1967: 488*): developed agriculture, full metallurgy, cities with large public buildings and monumental art (*Makkay 1974/5: 23*). Therefore, they emphasized a Sumerian influence not only in the sphere of writing but also in economic affairs (i.e. the presumption of the exploitation of copper and gold deposits in Transylvania by Sumerian prospectors and the know-how on metallurgy). Having taken into account the Southeastern European Neolithic phenomena in general under Anatolian and Near Eastern umbrella, they propounded the influence of the earliest Sumerian writing system maintaining also that Europe adopted latterly inventions of the other e.g. the chariot, the pottery wheel (*Makkay 1974/5: 23*).

In conclusion, the viewpoint of an eastern-west drift of culture diffusion during a period included between 3100 and 2500 BC was based on four pillars: a) the identification of typological connections between the two systems of signs; b) the existence of a general cultural influence from the east; c) the difference in level of economic, social and cultural development; d) the adoption by Europe of some inventions from the Near East at a later date.

Following this line of reasoning the questions became, when and how the inventory of signs of literacy, the system of writing, and the technique to write on clay tablets was transmitted. Was there some form of southern colonization of the Balkans during this remote period? Alternatively, was the transmission done only by indirect methods? According to Hood, "In Romania...the first spread of writing or of signs derived from it may have been in a strictly religious or magical context... It is not impossible that the missionaries of an earlier religion from the East brought a first knowledge of writing during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC" (*Hood 1967: 111*). Although most of the scholars considered unlikely that the tablets were drafted by a Sumerian hand or in the Sumerian language of early Mesopotamia, dozens of amateurs offered their outlandish translations employing Sumerian sounds (*Tonciulescu 1996: 9-15; Moisoiu on line*).

Most of the scholars who accepted the Vinča-Turdaş or Vinča horizon for Transylvanian tablets and were puzzled by the correspondences between the oldest European inscription and early Sumerian signs preferred to recognize the parallels only in shape, but not in meaning. The design on the Tărtăria finds, especially on

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<sup>20</sup> In opposition Renfrew considered the five cylinder seals found at Sitagroi as product of a local inspiration and made thousand years earlier than those of the Jemdet Nasr period (*Renfrew 1972: 215*).

the rounded one, is so similar to writing on early Mesopotamian tablets that they must have derived, even if indirectly, from it. However, the original signs might have lost their authentic functions having been merely copied and used as symbols of a religious or magical character without understanding what the Levantine signs actually meant (*Gelb 1967: 488; Hood 1967: 111; Makkay 1968: 286-287; Makkay 1969: 9-27; Makkay 1974/5: 25*).

The hypothesis that the Tărtăria tablets represent only a writing-like design was based on the argument that the signs of literacy did not occur together in the same groups on them as they did on the Mesopotamian tablets. Two signs that occur separated but in adjacent groups on the Tărtăria discoid tablet, are joined together on some of the Jemdet Nasr tablets to compose the name of a god: EN-GI. Nevertheless, the presence of signs of literacy could reflect awareness that they were marks of great power, combined with ignorance of the significance of writing (*Hood 1967: 104-5; 1968*). “The tablets, in all probability, are mere imitation of original Mesopotamian ones, made with a magic purpose without any real understanding, possibly by a person who saw the usage of such tablets somewhere, between Southern Mesopotamia and South-eastern Europe, without a real knowledge, however, of the art of writing... It is well-known that the apotropaic power is specially felt among illiterate people” (*Makkay 1974/5: 24*).

A fertile imagination was put in motion, in order to make up for the incongruence rose from the variety in dating, or to establish chronological correspondences, or to justify conjectures on the relationship between the Danube region and the Mesopotamia, or to explain signs considered graphic imitations with magic purpose and their deposition in a ritual pit. Hood applied Cyrillus and Methodius mission of evangelization along the Danube to the Neolithic Southeastern Europe and Sumerian times. According to him, the Tărtăria tablets, found in a ritual context and resembling the early tablets of Crete and Mesopotamia, could harmonize with Vasić's idea that the Vinča ruling class consisted of mining prospectors-cum-witch-doctors from the south engaged in the exploitation of the mineral resources of the Middle Danube region keeping a hold over their native subjects by means of religion and magic (*Vasić 1929*). Popović made complex exegesis of the epic of Gilgamesh in order to find traces of a Sumerian colonization of Transylvania and, therefore, a rationale for the ritual deposition at Tărtăria (*Popović 1965*). Gelb attributed the tablets to Sumerian traders familiar with writing, or to a not better specified inhabitant of Transylvania who had a vague idea of Sumerian documents and aped them (*Gelb 1967: 489*). Merchant adventurers moving along the routes connecting the Middle and Lower Danube, the Cyclades, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia may have been the go-between. Makkay assumed that the gold of Transylvania made merchants from the Near East, Anatolia and Eastern Aegean establish contacts with that European area and pointed out that the ancient gold producing site of Zalatna in György valley is near Turdaş and Tărtăria. He presupposed that the mines in Anatolia could no longer satisfy the sudden increase

in the demand for gold by the Mesopotamian city-states therefore the request was channeled – possibly via the entrepreneurial merchants of the Cycladic islands – to the efficient Transylvanian mines (*Makkay 1974/5: 27*).

If most of the detractor of C14 dating method worked on comparative evidence assuming a connection between the Transylvanian signs and Mesopotamian signs, a minority supposed the former had other than vague parallels with the latter being simply a local development, independent from near-eastern stimulus (*Renfrew 1970: 51-52*).

***4.C Viewpoint 2: both Vinča-Turdaş or Vinča assumption of the tablets and radiocarbon dating for the Southeastern European Neolithic are acknowledged***

If the above-mentioned standpoints were based on the negation of any reliability of C14 for dating, at the opposite pole other scholars acknowledged to be valid both the Vinča-Turdaş and Vinča ascertainment of the tablets and the radiocarbon dating of Neo-Eneolithic cultures in Southeastern Europe. In general, they dated the inscribed tablets to c. 5300 BC, predating the early Mesopotamian pictographic written signs (*Masson 1984*). However, are the Tărtăria tablets actually bearing written signs? Are there connections between their signs and the later writing system of Jemdet Nasr period? Have the Transylvanian artifacts been locally processed?

Concerning the first question, the acceptance by some experts of the radiocarbon dating caused the waning of their interest in the possibility that Southeastern Europe might have expressed a form of writing in Neo-Eneolithic times. The invention of an *ars scribendi* was held so unthinkable that the simple *possibility* of it was ignored and its evidence given very scant attention. If the European signs are actually so ancient, they should be considered decorations, ownership / manufacturer marks, or simple scratches.

According to Renfrew, it is “very possible that the signs on the tablets are a local invention... The similarities of some of the signs with those incised on the Vinča period pottery at Tordos, Banitsa and Vinča itself would suggest that they have to do with the Vinča culture or the Balkan copper age. (However) to call these Balkan signs ‘writing’ is perhaps to imply that they had an independent significance of their own, communicable to another person without oral contact... (Contrariwise they) seem to have functioned essentially within an oral tradition, as mnemonic aids to a chant which had to be learned by other means... And the marks on plaques or ‘tablets’, which can be plausibly associated with some ritual purpose, are likely to have had at most a mnemonic value, if indeed they were anything more than invocations, carrying a meaning only at the moment they were made... So that, while...these Balkan signs have an independent origin and held a real meaning for those who made them, to talk of writing, without careful qualifications, may not be appropriate” (*Renfrew 1973: 67, 68, 176, 186*).

At the opposing pole, other scholars considered the Tărtăria tablets as the earliest attestations of an old European script. A religious tradition of literacy flourished in Southeastern Europe and covered a span of time from the late sixth to the mid-fourth millennia BC (*Todorovič 1971; Gimbutas 1972a: 113; 1972b: 47; 1973: 12; 1974; 1989, 1981; Masson 1984; Haarmann 2002*). However, there are any resemblance and connections between the European system of writing and the Near East one?

According to most of these scholars, the establishment of a new cultural chronology for Southeastern Europe (accurately determined according to the dendrochronological method) has facilitated the assessment of the relationship of *ars scribendi* between Europe and Mesopotamia in the direction of the exclusion of any influence from Sumerian culture. First, they emphasized the two thousand year time gap between the earliest European inscriptions and the oldest Sumerian writings of the late fourth millennium BC. Second, they gave attention to the fact that any resemblance between the Transylvanian finds and those from the Near East was simply incidental (*Berciu 1967: 162; Renfrew 1969: 28-29; Renfrew 1972: 7*). Any stylistic connection with the earliest Mesopotamian signs of writing was considered merely occasional or illusory and the techniques of incising differed between Europe and Mesopotamia. About the tablets from Tărtăria, Masson stated, "Leur aspect matériel ainsi que le caractère des gravures excluent la possibilité d'une importation proche orientale" (*Masson 1984: 116, note 75*). Third, they upheld the local origin of Transylvanian finds and marks. Fourth, they underlined the confirmation of an independent emergence of writing in Europe (that is, without Sumerian influences) by some orientalist (e.g. *Helck 1979: 12*).

We remind that in Europe the first tablets appeared in the last phase of Stačevo-Criș culture, coeval with Vinča A, at Perieni, Glăvănești (*Ursulescu 1998: 102-103, 27-1, 2; Lazarovici, Merlini 2004; 2005: 206, fig. 4*).

Establishing a new calibrated chronology for Southeastern Europe, many scholars considered that the origin of the tablets and their signs could not be traced back directly to the earliest Mesopotamian pictographic literacy and did not explore any significant relationship between the two cultures worried of a drift arguing that writing originated in Southeastern Europe and spread towards Near East. Other experts were puzzled by the similarities of the signs in the oldest inscriptions of Neo-Eneolithic Europe with early 'proto-literate' Sumerian signs and were inclined to associate it with a drift from the west to the east (*Haarmann 2002*). Therefore, they started to ask whether the ancient European tradition of writing might have provided impulses to the Mesopotamian tradition in its formative process (e.g. *Rice 1994: 83*).

**4.D Viewpoint 3: the tablets are reconciled with radiocarbon dates, but they might be intrusive from the upper strata**

Considering the Tărtăria tablets a significant boost to “some *fanatics* (italics is our)” according to whom “all the carbon 14 dates obtained from archaeological sites are invalid or too early”, another wave of scholars made an effort to move the polarized discussion away from accepting radiocarbon evidence or archaeological resemblances/correlations. They tried to demonstrate that the tablets had a problematic nature because they did not belong to the context with which they had been connected: the Vinča culture. The pit could have been disturbed and unsealed, therefore it might not have been dug down from the Vinča strata, or the tablets might have intruded from the upper layers which occurred in the Tărtăria site (Turdaş-Petreşti or Coţofeni).

Ruth Tringham and Sarunas Milisauskas (Milisauskas 1978: 129-130) asserted that the pit *may* have been dug near the Turdaş layer, but not from it. According to them, it is possible that the tablets are from another cultural horizon and another location of the site: from “one of the later habitation levels ... from outside the area of the Turdaş settlement”. This suggestion was sustained noting that “signs similar to those on the tablets were incised on the bases of pots which have been excavated especially at the top of the Turdaş-Petreşti level at Tărtăria, and in Yugoslavia in Vinča-Pločnic assemblage, for example at Banjica and Vinča” (Tringham 1971: 114).

In 1967 V. Dumitrescu was the first to express doubts on the Vinča-Turdaş dating of the sacrificial pit and its contents presupposing they belonged to much later, to the Coţofeni cultural horizon c. 2900-2500 BC as the anchor evidences (Dumitrescu 1969a: 92, 99-100, 588-589). Then he challenged the authenticity of the tablets and, if they were authentic, the “cult” complex at Tărtăria should belong to the Coţofeni culture (Dumitrescu 1972: 93 fol.). However, after some time he abandoned the thesis that tablets are not authentic placing them again into the Coţofeni culture (Dumitrescu 1973: 469 fol.). M. Garašanin in *Praistorija* judged Vlassa’s information on the discovery as “unchallengeable” (Garašanin 1973 I: 127), but he subsequently changed mind and considered the Transylvanian artifact to be more recent.

The following year after Dumitrescu, the Coţofeni-gate was re-launched by Neustupný and then by Roman (Roman 1969: 68). Neustupný asserted that all the layers contained a chronologically mixed complex and pointed out that the clay ‘idol-shaped pendant’<sup>21</sup> extracted from the layers in which the tablets were found resembled the “anchor ornament” common in the context of the Early Bronze age of the Aegean area and also in the Late Chalcolithic Coţofeni culture, more or less synchronous with Jemdet Nasr culture (Neustupný 1968a; 1968b: 35). In a note on *Antiquity*, David Whipp recovered the suggestion of a bronze age deposit pointing

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<sup>21</sup> Illustrated by Vlassa 1963: 489 fig 6, n. 5, but unexplicably considered unpublished by Neustupný.

out certain deficiencies in Vlassa's account of the discovery and suggesting, in agreement with the views of some scholars such as Neustupný (1968b: 32-35) and Berciu (1967), that the tablets came from a pit whose surface was not sealed by subsequent layers (Whipp 1973: 148-149).

Some scholars divorced the ritual pit from its archaeological context and made free interpretations trying to solve the inconsistency between absolute and relative chronology (i.e. the problem of the "anchor", generally considered as belonging to the Coțofeni level). David G. Zanotti advanced the possibility that the tablets were intrusive from the upper strata most likely connected with the Bronze Age presence on the site, in particular with the Baden-Kostolac culture. This would date the tablets to be between 5,400 and 5,000 years ago, or contemporary with the Uruk IV and Jemdet Nasr periods in Mesopotamia and would make their signs compatible with the Sumerian analogies detected by Adam Falkenstein in 1965 and Sinclair Hood in 1967 and 1968. In the Zanotti assumption, Vlassa actually found the inscribed artifacts in a pit dug from the Vinča-Turdaș level, but in fact they had been buried in a very superficial stratum on the steep north-western slope of the mound which was characterized by a mixed archaeological context. The tablets could have been intrusive from that upper stratum and could have been a product of the trade or the reflux movement of tribes returning to the Aegean (Zanotti 1983: 212). This vision was challenged by Lazarovici, Maxim (1991).

In conclusion, the belonging of the pit and its pile of object to later deposits overcome the tendency to disregard C14 method for dating and reconciled the tablet to it by disregarding Vlassa's account.

#### ***4.E Viewpoint 4: the authenticity of the tablets is questioned***

This afore mentioned group of specialists challenged the authenticity of the Tărtăria tablets claiming that they were not discovered by Vlassa at the prehistoric settlement of Tărtăria, but in the basement of Cluj museum. They might be held in one of the boxes in his custody which contained the Turdaș findings of Baroness Zsófia von Torma (Berciu 1967; Comșa 1982: 82-85; 1987, who disputed information and pictures published by Vlassa). According to other experts, they were simply a modern fake.

After some years of heated discussion, the controversy remained blocked although still fluid. Because of the lack of new information regarding the tablets and their signs, the polemic petered out. The Tărtăria finds remained locked in a caveau of the National History Museum of Transylvania at Cluj seen as a National treasure to be preserved from any further investigation. After 1961, a limited excavation took place at Tărtăria without any archaeological evidence giving new crucial information. Some Romanian scholars better assessed the available material and the stratigraphy (Lazarovici 1977b, 1981: tab. 1; Lazarovici 2003a; Lazarovici Gh.,

*Maxim 1991*), but their research, which narrowed down only in part the range of archaeological probabilities, has not been widely read. Some scholars observed that a C14 date derived from the bones in the ritual hoard would prove interesting (*Whipp 1973: 148*). Nevertheless, nobody went in search of them. The debate extinguished itself because of the dearth of information and the impossibility of reconciling or going over such incompatible opinions expressed categorically.

Unfortunately there was not, and there is not still today, an objective judgment on the tablets and their signs having they played a key role in the international archaeological debate exclusively to the extent in which they become a battlefield for another specific issue, i.e. the acceptability or not and the level of acceptability of radiocarbon chronology. Parallels drawn between Turdaş-Tărtăria and Jemdet Nasr served exclusively as chronological baseline (*Vlassa 1963; Milošević 1965; Falkenstein 1965; Makkay 1969, 1974/75, 1990; Kalicz and Makkay 1977*). For a number of scholars the dating of the tablet to a late period was instrumental to promote other Neolithic scripts designated as the oldest in Europe or even in the world (*V.I. Georgiev 1969: 32-35; B. Nikolov and V.I. Georgiev 1970: 7-9; B. Nikolov and V.I. Georgiev 1971: 289*). G.I. Georgiev and V.I. Georgiev for example argued the signs on the Karanovo seal, Gradešnica platter, and other Bulgarian artifacts to be the first written record in human history and the Tărtăria tablets as Coţofeni finds (*G.I. Georgiev and V.I. Georgiev 1969*).

We want to present new information on the Tărtăria finds articulating them in the following questions:

- Which actually are the objects belonging to the ritual complex?
- Could the tablets be a modern fake?
- Could they come from another Transylvanian site, from another region of the Danube civilization, or even from Near East?
- Could the tablets be analyzed with C14?
- Which is the actual date of the tablets? The issue of the radiocarbon dating of the human bones found with the tablets
- Might the tablets be intruders into the Vinča layer from later and higher levels, e.g. Petreşti, Baden-Kostolac or Coţofeni?
- Where is the precise localization of the cultic pit and the pit house?
- Can we reconstruct the stratigraphy of the excavation layers?
- Why both ritual objects and human bones are present inside the pit?
- Which kind of ritual happened at Tărtăria? The enigma of the charred human being, the cultic sacrifice, and the cannibalistic ritual
- Which was the identity of the buried person?
- The distinctiveness of the ritual complex as a consecrated grave of a novel ancestor, and not as a votive pit full of offerings

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- Are the Transylvanian tablets a device of a sacred script for initiates?

The basic evidence for our reconstruction, answering to these questions, will come from the remains themselves and not from a more or less plausible and coherent framework.

## 5. The objects belonging to the ritual complex

Vlassa published only 11 of the impressive finds belonging to the ritual complex, tablets included, while in the inventory of the museum he addressed 12 objects as belonging to the “groapa rituala”.

**Image 9.** Museum’s inventory.

The other objects are still now unpublished and the main regret is that most of them are not even findable. In the National History Museum of Transylvania at Cluj the showcase dedicated to the Tărtăria ritual complex displays only 10 artifacts: the copies of the three tablets, five clay figurines, one alabaster statuette and the bracelet.

Making a systematic research in the storage rooms of the museum in order to find the missing artifacts belonging to the ritual grave, we have found one more object which can be surely ascertained to the pit and one unsurely, but presumably. All the pieces are broken, intentionally and possibly ritually, and deposited in the pit as incomplete items. Only the tablets are entire and bedded as complete items.

### 5.A Ritually broken objects:

I) *A fragmented figurine (head and shoulders)*<sup>22</sup>



**Image 10.** Tartaria showcase.



**Image 11.** Fragmented figurine.

the angoba on the surface. The statuine was covert by red ochre and then with yellow one.<sup>24</sup>

The first figurine is schematically shaped and has one truncated arm. The head is rectangularoid. The mask is triangular and shows features typical of Vinča A art canons: two long strokes for eyes, prominent nose, and an elaborate coiffure at the top of the head made by parallel grooves within triangular patterns.<sup>23</sup>

The statuette is 7.2 cm high and 7.0 cm. large, arms included. It is possibly a male due to the absence of breasts and the typology of hairstyle. The matter is quite fine, with little shards embedded inside. It was fired at higher temperature than the prismatic figurine that we analyze below, but for less time and it is still gray colored inside. This figurine was heavy restored and impregnated wit lacquer, but it is still possible to glimpse the original brawn color and

<sup>22</sup> The inventory number is P420, considered merely a head. It was published in Fig. 6.1 from *Vlassa 1963*.

<sup>23</sup> The inventory number is P412. It was published in Fig. 6.2 in *Vlassa 1963*.

<sup>24</sup> It is very clear on the mask.



**Image 12.** Yellow and red.



**Image 13.** Had and hair.

The mask is 3.2 cm. high and 3.0 cm. large at the top. It is asymmetric towards its left as the other figurines from the ritual grave are. The rectangularoid head has an extension in depth of 2.5 cm. The craftsman made at first the big triangle, then 7 lines inside it and the remaining decorations which might represent the hair.

Only one of the truncated arms was broken, the other is original.

In Danube civilization, figurines have been found with one or two features in common with this Tărtăria figurine, but not completely comparable. Similar triangular masks are known from Vinča settlement at 8.5, 8.4 and 8.1 meters deep (*Vasić 1936 III Pl: V, 18, XII, 53, XX, 103*), Gornea, in Vinča A phase (*Lazarovici 1979 pl. XX/A4, B1-4*), Zorleţu Mare, Vinča A3-B1 (*Ibidem XX/D1-3, 9; H1*), Vinča B2 (*Ibidem XXI/J 9,17*) and B2/C (*Ibidem XX/B17*), at Balta Sărată, Vinča B1 (*Lazarovici 1979, XX/I 5-6*)<sup>25</sup>, Parţa, Banat culture – Vinča B (*Ibidem XXI/G7*,

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<sup>25</sup> There are five figurines with a triangular mask similar to Tărtăria one.

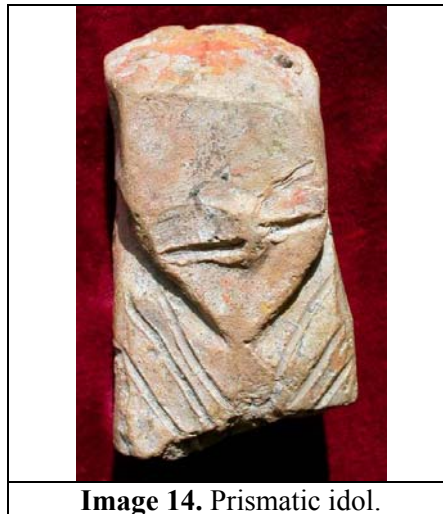
10, 11), Liubcova, Vinča C (*Ibidem XXII/1*), Turdaş (Roska 1941: Pl. 138,10)<sup>26</sup>, Jela (*Winn on-line a: fig. 2 e-f*), Ruginosu.

Similar eyes have been discovered in Vinča B1 phase at Liubcova; in Vinča B2-C at Selevac (*Tringham R., Kristić D., Selevac. 1990: 406 fig. 11.7d*).<sup>27</sup>

Two statuettes from Zorlenţu Mare, situated half way between Turdaş and Vinča, have parallels with the Tărtăria statuette concerning features of both eyes and arms (*Comşa and Rauţ 1969: Fig. 3, 6*). They could be synchronized with the Vinča B1-B2 phase.<sup>28</sup>

II) *A clay statuette, prismatic in shape, deliberately fractured.*<sup>29</sup>

A second fragmented figurine has a prismatic shape. The fragment is deeper than large, measuring 6.6 x 3.5 x 3.8 cm. The original height was 16-25 cm. Excluding a high-pedestalled bowl, this is the biggest object belonging to the ritual grave. After the head dimensions, it might be a part from a house altar.



**Image 14.** Prismatic idol.

A second fragmented figurine has a prismatic shape. The fragment is deeper than large, measuring 6.6 x 3.5 x 3.8 cm. The original height was 16-25 cm. Excluding a high-pedestalled bowl, this is the biggest object belonging to the ritual grave. After the head dimensions, it might be a part from a house altar.

The material is not very fine and includes some little sherds<sup>30</sup> behind the head and on the right side of the neck.

<sup>26</sup> The figurine is from Vinča A3-B1 culture. Only the mask is similar. The head is triangular.

<sup>27</sup> From east area, house 1.

<sup>28</sup> They could not be synchronized with Vinča A2-B culture as Comşa and Rauţ did, because they have been discovered in layers 2 and 4.

<sup>29</sup> The inventory number is P412, considered merely a head. It was published in Fig. 6.2 from *Vlassa 1963; Maxim 1991, 177, Kat. 96*.



**Image 15.** Sherds.



**Image 16.** Finger imprint.

The statuette was hard fired for a long time and uniformly cooked. It was not finished with hands, but with a wooden tool which was also utilized to engrave the decorations. It was not polished, but just clean with hands or leather. In the incisions, on the body, on the mask and on the right eye there are traces of a black color. Eyes have been made pressing fingernail and fingertip. On the left eyebrow and on the top of the head there are traces of a red painting. On the left side, on the same part on the mask and seldom on the body there are traces of yellow ochre painting. It is not very clear if the statuette has female or male gender: the lines of

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<sup>30</sup> One contains more mica than the others.

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the breasts are not evident at all, but according to our contemporary standard it is wearing female accessories (probably earrings) and clothes (a striking tunic with Vs patterns in front and on back).

The head was not modeled separately from the pillar-shaped body therefore the face is on the upper front of it. It is obvious that it is wearing a mask, due to the marks of its application on the face, the large stroke-fissures for eyes, and the pentagonal flat shape of the face. The craftsman started to drill a hole on the far lower area of the mask, but then changed mind and the cavity is only hint.



**Image 17.** The figurine was painted.

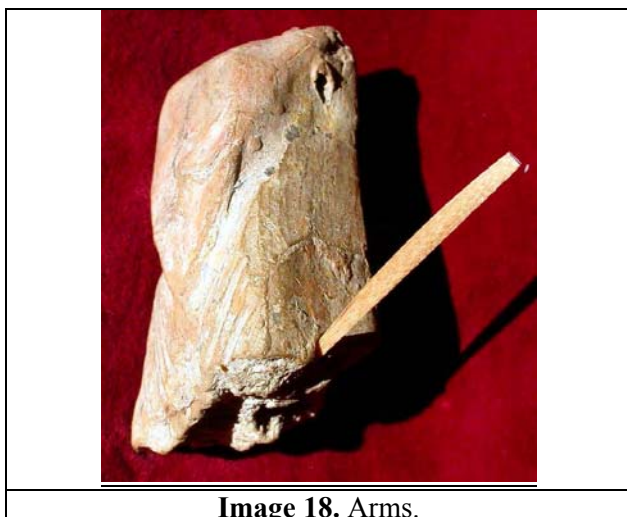
The mask has been deformed under a deliberate torsion from its right to left similar to a knock that hurt it when the clay was still soft. The twisting had the nose as centre, de-squared the oblong fissure for the eyes from the same line of horizon (its left eye is higher then the right), but it did not distorted in the same measure the outline of the mask. Was the deformed shape of nose and eyes due to the intention of representing a particular mythical personage? In ethnographic record several masks occur which, employed in ceremonial rituals, depict mythological beings, the spirits of dead ancestors as well as deities and other beings believed to possess

power over the living. Alternatively, was the disfigured mask wore by the statuette from Tărtăria, as well as its fragmentation, a mark of the passing away of a person (perhaps the human being who has been buried with the ritual pile of objects)? Or was even it the result of a practice that we nowadays consider typical of malevolent actions made during “black magic” rituals?

Other symbolic elements are evident on the figurine from Tărtăria. At first, it was completely painted, mainly in red and partly in yellow. It is not without significance that the mask is bicolor and pigmented with incrustated painting.

Close examination of the statuette reveals eight holes through six perforations made before firing. Two and two punctures are communicant and one can easily image the statuette wearing two large circular earrings or be suspended over an altar. Two deep perforations have been made obliquely on the back of the head and, possibly, they were in original three. The craftsman was not very sure about angulation and direction of the perforations and made more than one attempt. Very interesting are the holes over the armpits which were possibly filled with a stick in order to raise and sustain orante arms which have been broken during a ritual or just to permit the change of a type of arm with another.

There is an obvious connection between the above-mentioned symbolic features of the figurine and the fact that it was deliberately broken, but it is very hard to find it out.



**Image 18. Arms.**

Pentagonal mask and slit eyes of the prismatic figurine are reminiscent of those on figurines from early Vinča. Miložčić claimed on this basis that they support the date for the tablets to the Vinča A culture (*Miložčić 1965: 264, 268*).

According to Makkay, such impressive parallels are known from Turdaş (*Roska 1941: Pl. 138,5, 11*) that he speculated they have been fashioned by the same craftsman and, noticing the

very early date of this typology figurine at Vinča (*Vasić 1936 III: Pl. VI, 22*), he conjectured that it could has been a prototype for the Mureş examples (*Makkay 1974-1975: 18*).

Unfortunately, most of the statuettes cited by Makkay have not prismatic shape.

III) *A fragment of an idol face*<sup>31</sup>

A partial naturalistic human face has been considered a potshard (an anthropomorphic pot with a human face), maybe a container for holy liquid, by Vlassa or a fragment of a lid by other authors (*Makkay 1969*). However, it is actually the upper part of a cylindrical figurine. The statuette is wearing an oval mask typical of the Vinča A art criteria. It measures 4.1 cm. x 3.55 cm. and presents two long strokes for eyes (indicative of a mask). Similar finds have been found at Zorlențu Mare, Vinča B1-B2 (*Lazarovici 1979, XX/D5; H7, 11-12*).<sup>32</sup>



**Image 19.** Human face.

The figurine from Tărtăria exhibits a hole positioned under the mask, upon the chin. Is it clue of the presence of speaking or singing figurines at Tărtăria ritual grave? The human face of the cylindrical statuette is nowadays delocalized in another section of the showcase and not with the other objects of the ritual grave.

IV) *A half bracelet*<sup>33</sup>

A bracelet, made of spondylus shell, measures 8.7 cm. in diameter and is 0.8 cm. thick. It was imported from the Aegean see.

The making is standard and the object was not very well polished. Although a very invasive restoration process, it is possible to discern that the bracelet fits a minute wrist, was worn for a long time and has been deliberately broken during a ritual, in the defleshment process, or due to the secondary burial of the person who was buried with the tablets. In fact, it was broken down exactly in the middle with an abrupt action.

<sup>31</sup> The inventory number is P 416. It was published in Fig. 6.3 in Vlassa 1963; Maxim 1991, 177, Kat. 95.

<sup>32</sup> According to Makkay (*Makkay 1974-5: 18*) similar artifacts have been discovered at Turdaș (*Roska 1941: Pl. 102, 14, 19; Pl. 103, 18*) but they are all lids.

<sup>33</sup> The inventory number is P413. It was published in Fig. 6.4 in Vlassa 1963; Maxim 1991, 177, Kat. 90.



Spondylus gaederopus shell was a typical luxury good in Neo-Eneolithic times with routes from South to Central Europe (*Childe 1949: 118; 1964: 87; Pittioni 54.1: 20, 51-52; Quitta (18) 1960,2: 166-67; Raczky 1948: 96-98; S. Vencel 1959: 739-742* verifying 111 sites; *Horedt K. 1970: 103-104, fig. 7 map*), in Vinča culture at Botoș necropolis (*Nandriș 1976: 64*), in Greece (*Theocharis 1973: 188, fig. 116 map*)

V) *Horns of consecration of a goat as pendant*<sup>34</sup>

Among the pile of the objects, there is a fragment of an “idol-shaped pendant” in form of an “anchor” as the term has been conventionally used, although any connection with a figurine-shape and with sailing or fishing is highly improbable. Discarding both the anthropomorphic and aquatic suggestions, at the first sight the artifact gives the impression to have been used for holding lightweight material in the weaving process as in Greece at Sitagroi (phase V), Servia, Ayios Mamas, and Dikili Tash. Following Elster description, it is not difficult to image the shank of this artifact suspended by a cord or thong slipped through the single hole from a post while “the high upswing of the arms suggests that these could have held supplementary weft threads, reeled off a spindle and then fed from the anchor to the loom” (*Elster 2003: 243*).

<sup>34</sup> The inventory number is P414. It was published in Fig. 6.5 in *Vlassa 1963; Maxim 1991, 177, Kat. 97*.



**Image 22.** Anchor.

It is also significant to indicate that the object is grey with a yellow angoba, quite refined, very well polished with a bone or a stick, and has a lot of fine sand in its composition. It is reasonable to suppose, as Vlassa did, that it was worn as pendent.

The low consumption of the holes testifies that it was not put on for a long

period.

The artifact is 5.7 cm. high and 6.2 large.

The diameter of the “neck” is 2.5 cm. and the diameter of the hole is 0.627 cm.

However, which kind of pendant is an anchor-like shape? We suppose that they were horns of consecration of a goat.



**Image 23.** Puncture not parallel to arms.

VI) A miniaturized phallus-type statuette<sup>35</sup>

A mignon phallus-type statuette is wearing a mask with a high crest, prominent nose, and large stroke-fissures for eyes. It is 3.8 cm. high. The body is 1.2-1.3 cm. in diameter (it is

<sup>35</sup> The inventory number is P419 but on the figurine it was wrongly written 413. It was published in Fig. 6.6 in *Vlassa 1963*; *Maxim 1991*, 177, *Kat. 93*.

elliptic).



The mask is 1.7 cm. in length and it is asymmetric towards its left as the other figurines from the ritual grave are. The cylindrical statuette was finished with hands and not with a tool.

For the mask and cylindrical shape see for comparison Zorlențu Mare, Vinča B1 (*Lazarovici 1979, pl. XX/2+3, H4*) and Vinča B2 (*Ibidem XXI/B5*), and Parța, in the Banat culture (*Ibidem XXI/GG1, 3, 11*).

#### VII) A statuette of phallus type<sup>36</sup>

A large figurine of phallus type is possibly one of the “statues with ... cylindrical-or-prism-shaped body”, according to Vlassa. The cylindrical statuette is typical of Vinča art criteria. Similar pieces have been found in Vinča A at Gornea, (*Lazarovici 1979, pl. XX/A 4, 10-11,15*), and in Vinča B1/B2 at Zorlențu Mare (*Ibidem XX/D2*) and Balta Sărată (*Ibidem XX/K5*).

The statuette from Tărtăria was schematically molded from middle fine clay mixed with some fine mica, but rough made, polished only with hands, and refined with a stick of wood which has also been employed to trace the decorations. It was fired at high temperature. The color is brown-read. We recovered traces of a yellow slip on the body. Its left part is black because it was put inside ashes. The figurine is 8.2 cm. tall and it is clearly of female gender due to clues of a breast on its right. The face is round, less high then large (4.2 cm. x 4.4 cm.), set on the top of the body at an angle of 45 degrees (*Makkay 1974-5: 18*) and it is asymmetric towards its left as the other figurines from the ritual grave are.

<sup>36</sup> The inventory number is P418. It was published in Fig. 6.8 a and b in *Vlassa 1963*; *Maxim 1991, 177, Kat. 92*.



**Image 26.** Big phallus.

The presence of a mask is indicated by large stroke-fissures for eyes, marks where the mask is hanging at the face, and the V ornament along the jaw with analogy at Gornea in Vinča A culture (*Lazarovici 1979, XX/44*), in Vinča A3-B1 at Zorlențu Mare (*Ibidem XX/D9*) and Balta Sărată (*Ibidem XXI/5*). Two holes are discernable at both side of the mask, possibly for earrings or to give the figurine the possibility to be suspended. Two deep cavities mark the nose, which is very prominent. There is a large hole positioned on the far lower part of the mask resembling an opening mouth. It was made before firing and still now it is possible to distinguish yellow soil inside. Are we in

presence of a speaking or singing figurine, as the mignon phallus?

Originally it had arms, but they have been intentionally broken. The bottom is minute but it is sumptuous and the buttocks are well marked.

Cylindrical statuettes are well known in Vinča A or early Vinča B1 cultures but parallels are not complete for the range of features of the Tărtăria piece. Phallus statuettes have been found at Gornea and Zorlențu Mare (*Comșa and Rauț 1969: Fig. 1, 1,4-6, 8-10; Fig. 3, 8*), Turdaș (*Roska 1941: Pl. 137,13; 138, 7*)<sup>37</sup>, Vinča (*Vasić 1936 III Pl: X, 38; XIII, 62*)<sup>38</sup>, Potporanj (*Bruckner 1968: Pl. IV. 1*)<sup>39</sup>, and Žabalj in the Voivodina (*Bruckner, Jovanović, Tasić 1974. Fig. 42*). See also *Kalmar-Maxim 1991* and *Luca 1991: 177-231*.

#### VIII) An alabaster figurine<sup>40</sup>

On a deliberately broken object made of gray alabaster and with a little part in marble, one can see human features: a statuette wearing a mask of Vinča A or B type.

Vlassa annotated, among the artifacts of the pit, two alabaster idols “of the Cycladic type with may have analogies with the Aegean world’s plastic”. However, the existence of such stone and marble figurines is well known also in early Vinča

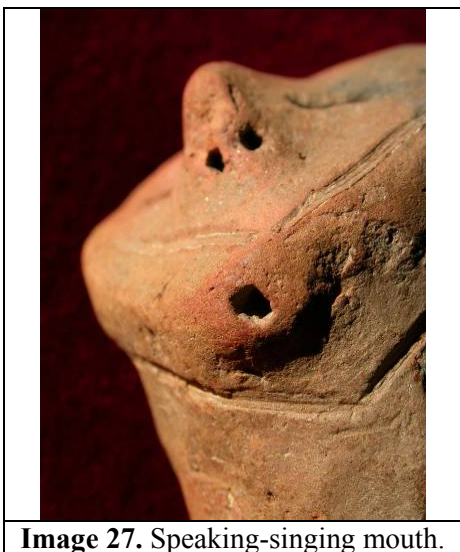
<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, in the first case the eyes are different and the mask is nor rounded as at Tărtăria statuette. The second figurine is more or less similar to the Tărtăria one.

<sup>38</sup> At a dept of 8.9 and 8.4 meters.

<sup>39</sup> The cylindrical shape is the only feature shared by Potporanj and Tărtăria figurines.

<sup>40</sup> The inventory number is P417. It was published in Fig. 6.7 in *Vlassa 1963; Maxim 1991, 177, Kat. 94*.

culture. See for example the scepter from Gornea, belonging to the Vinča A phase (Lazarovici 1979, XX/C1).<sup>41</sup>



**Image 27.** Speaking-singing mouth.

The Tărtăria statuette is 10.5 cm high and 0.75 cm. thick. Having being cut in vertical, its original thickness should have been 1.5 cm. A figurine which can be confused for an alabaster idol of Cycladic type was brought to light in the older diggings too, from K. Horedt (Vlassa 1963: 492 and foot-note 12, 493/494, fig. 11).

### 5.B Entire objects

IX-X-XI) The three inscribed tablets<sup>42</sup>

### 5.C Another cultic object from the pit

According to an oral communication mentioned by Höckmann, the 28 figurines were found in the pit among the sherds of a clay vessel (Höckmann: 1968: 65, 66) and, after a revision of the material from Tărtăria, Vlassa mentioned two channeled fragments of great importance coming from the bottom level of his excavation and not mentioned in the preliminary report (Vlassa 1969. Fig. 8-9). We do not know the final destination of them because they had not an inventory number, but other eight fragments are incorporated in a high-pedestalled bowl reconstructed and kept in the Cluj museum and with parallels in the early Vinča culture (Vlassa 1969. Fig. 5; Maxim 1991, 177, Catalogue 86). Checking the inventory of the museum, we discovered that the object was positioned inside the range of the finds from the ritual grave: P 415.

Actually, Vlassa recovered a fragment of a typical Vinča A3 bitronconic vessel – fine, well executed, in blacktopped technique, hard fired, and very well polished – from which he discretionally recreated a high-pedestalled bowl. The blacktop should be 4 cm. less high, therefore its tallness should be around 24 cm. The cup is 16 cm in diameter at the mouth and exactly half (8 cm.) high. It is capable of 1.9 liters. The base is 10.6 cm. in diameter and the feet 4. The cup has two protuberances which are not perforated as in other occurrences.

<sup>41</sup> Another intentionally broken figurine considered “a marble idol of Cycladic type” has been found at Tărtăria by Horedt in 1943. The discovery happened in trench B at a depth of 200-222 cm. It has inventory number IN 14.877. The figurine is 11 cm. high. Hips are very large: 6.1 cm, whereas shoulder are 5.0 cm. and middle bust 4.3 cm.

<sup>42</sup> The respective inventory numbers are: P 409 for the discoid piece; P 410 for the perforated rectangular piece; P 411 for the undrilled rectangular piece.

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The blacktop was very used during its life and then intentionally broken with a tool such as a mallet or a stone working from inside. Maybe it was the cup employed during the ceremony after the death of the person buried at Tărtăria, afterward ritually fragmented, and in part widespread.



**Image 28.** Alabaster figurine.

*XII) A high-pedestalled bowl in blacktopped technique*



**Image 29.** Tartaria Cupa.

Concluding the presentation of the objects found in the pit, we want to put to light that it would be very important to have a complete publication of them and of the pieces from the Tărtăria settlement, because they are a key element in dating the magic-religious complex due to the problems in the stratigraphic data. Nevertheless, many questions arise. The first regards the pile of objects. Why have all the artifacts been deliberately broken? Why was the head of the statuettes always saved? A ritual mask is worn by all the figurines, but why it is always asymmetric towards left? There are clues of black magic at Tărtăria deposition?

Other queries come up concerning the relationship between the tablets and the other cultic finds. Why are the tablets the only pieces deposited intact? They were affected by calcium, but not the other objects. Were the two piles of artifacts discovered separate by Vlassa? In this case, the tablets cannot be dated by direct association with the Vinča statuettes.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless the best parallels indicate a similar date for the Tărtăria pit and its finds, their belonging to the central territory of the Danube civilization, i.e. the Vinča area, and their fitting to the early phase of the Vinča culture (*Makkay 1974-5: 18; Lazarovici 1977; 1981; 1991: 93*). We have also to make a note of the not complete stylistic resembling with other objects from the same cultural complex, if we do not limit the comparison to a single or a couple of features.

The crowd of the queries on the Transylvanian wonder is directly connected to Vlassa's reticence. Why his publications account 32 finds from the pit, but he put only 12 of them in the register of the museum's inventory and published information and photos about no more than 11 artifacts in connection with the magic-religious complex? And why did he include the pedestalled cup into the ritual pit, according to the inventory of the museum and his personal communication, but he decided to publish it separately and to locate it apart in the showcase?

The next step of the present article will be the investigation of the fact that the Tărtăria tablets are dubiously dated archaeological artifacts.

## 6 Are the *famous* Tărtăria tablets *in-famous*?

According to some scholars, the tablets could be a modern imitation. It is easy, although not enough, to answer that a direct analysis of the fake pieces made in Transylvania are straightforward to recognize because they are rough making.<sup>44</sup>

Other scholars judge the inscriptions just a Vlassa's "game". And there are those who are suggesting, in no uncertain terms, that he was a counterfeiter. According to this point of view, as archaeologist Vlassa had the skills for a perfect forgery and one has to talk not about the "famous Tărtăria tablets", but the "in-

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<sup>43</sup> This question was posed by Zanotti (*Zanotti 1983: 87*).

<sup>44</sup> See also Masson 1984 on this point.

famous one”. Regarding this point is significant, although not decisive, to collect the testimony of Vlassa’s colleagues that he started to study the topic of the tablets not before but after the Tărtăria discovery.

According to a third wave of scholars, the tablets are not from Tărtăria. They could come from another Transylvanian site, from another region of the Danube civilization, or even much farther (e.g. from Near East) and have been erroneously attributed to Tărtăria. In *Istorie Veche*, V. Dumitrescu underlined some likenesses between the circular tablet and pieces from von Torma’s collection, observed that this assembly has been spilt up in various museums of the region, and challenged as superficial and not very likely Vlassa’s interpretations on the tablets and the objects of von Torma’s collection, as well as the direct analogies he established between Transylvania and Mesopotamia (*Dumitrescu 1972: 93 foll.*).

Other scholars expressed the persuasion that the tablets come from another site of Danube region. For example in *Studijne Zvesti* V. Dumitrescu ascertained them to the Cucuteni style and technique (*Dumitrescu 1969: 92*).

According to the last grouping of scholars, the Tărtăria tablets could have arrived from Near East.

### **7 New evidence from the chemical and mineralogical analysis**

If the aspect of the objects as well as style and technique of the incisions exclude the possibility that the tablets have been imported from Near East, what about the other two hypothesis regarding their foreign origin? Can we determine the origin of their matter?

In order to establish some firm points, the *Prehistory Knowledge Project* asked Lucreția Ghergari and Corina Ionescu to study the tablets under the microscope at the Faculty of Geology, Geological Department of Cluj University. On this occasion, it was observed that the pieces showed a “chestnut reddish color” as stated by Vlassa (*Vlassa 1963: 492*) and that they are crystallized, to the point of looking like tuff. Vlassa also observed that the tablets were “poorly burnt” and advanced the possibility of a secondary burning. “In the museum vacuum autoclave”, was his secondary thought?

Vlassa asked to E. Stoicovici (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj) a chemical and mineralogical analysis of the tablets and idols from the cult pit. The main result was that all have the same chemical-mineralogical composition (*Vlassa 1977: 14*). Our analysis confirms that all the tablets have the same type of material which contains a very small quantity of clay and a lot of sand with different minerals. The manufacture of the tablets from local material proves they were not imported.<sup>45</sup> At the most, they could come from other areas of the same region. According to our geological analysis, the sand has crystals of quartz typical of the mountain 20-25 km. west from Tărtăria and very well known in Neolithic times for the gold mines.

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<sup>45</sup> This observation is consistent with Winn 1981: 186.

The sand of the tablet bearing the hunting scene is less fine than the one of the other two.

According to the analysis of mixture and paste, the tablets cannot be analyzed by C14 method not only due to thermic stress, but above all because they are made mainly of sandy clay. They contain too little carbon; therefore, it is impossible to determine their isotopic chronology.

On the surface of the pieces there seems to be a high concentration of calcium carbonate. Only a grass fiber was discovered and it is located on the superior part of one tablet.

This fiber was covered with a clay stratum and with a carbonate scab. However, the original slip has been modified by the untoward baking and, consistent with the microscope analysis, by an acid bath the tablets suffered at Cluj museum just after their discovery. As we have anticipated, in fact the tablets had been left for a while in a hydrochloric acid bath for the cleaning of the calcareous deposit from the surfaces.

The chemical process did not affect only the surface. Since the mixture of the material contained many calcium carbonates, numerous cracks appeared during the process of cleaning.



**Image 30.** Grass fiber.

Because the artifacts are mainly made of limestone, although the treatment with hydrochloric acid was intended to clean only their surface it deeply affected the calcareous inclusions and the binding of the material. In fact Vlassa thought that the abundant calcium was due to

the humidity in the pit and did not had in mind the possibility that the tablets have been made of some sort of “Neolithic cocciopesto” very famous in Roman times (mixture of lime, sand and pieces of brick or potsherds, used for pavements and the plaster of walls).

After the pieces had been cleaned by the restorer in the hydrochloric acid bath and many small cracks appeared, the pieces have to be conserved. For this purpose, they were covered with a special fluid (nitro-varnish and diluents) and placed in a

drying chamber at a low temperature for the deep penetration of same fluid. This treatment affected all the three pieces. The tablet bearing the hunting scene was clean more intensely than the other two.



**Image 31.** Calcar areas destroyed.

Now we have all the elements necessary to answer to the question why were the tablets affected by calcium and not the other objects: it was not because they have been recovered separate by Vlassa, but because the tablets have calcium inside and it went on their surface. If the chemical action cleaned the surface of the artifacts, at the price to ruin their internal structure, calcium is still now exiting and, in a number of years, the

Transylvanian tablets will be covered again by a white surface. The process is very clear comparing the photos made by Lazarovici in 2000 and the photos made by Merlini in 2006.

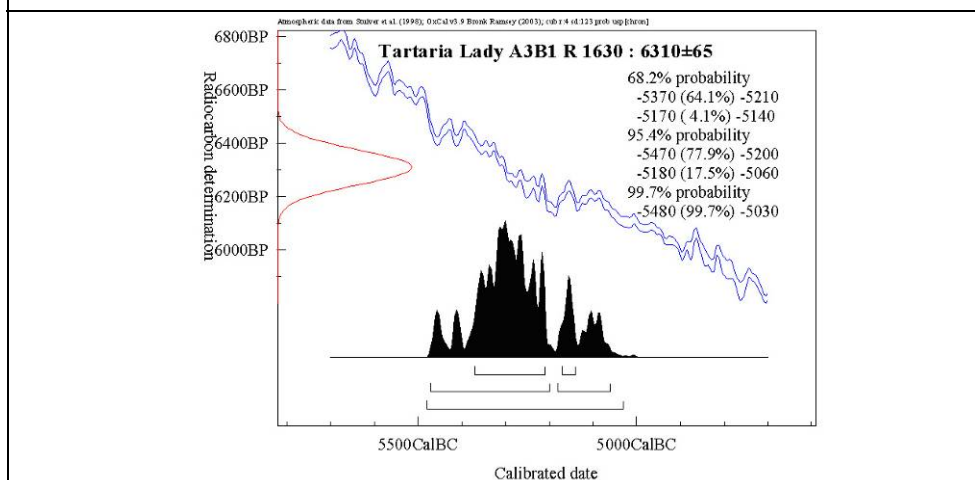
To reanalyze the tablets a thin section analysis of them would be necessary, but it will be very difficult since the pieces belong to the “treasure” category as Romanian cultural heritage and they follow special rules for preservation and investigation

#### **8. The age of the human bones found with the tablets: 5370-5140 BC (calibrated)**

For 42 years, nobody has considered that the tablets were accompanied by human remains which are still preserved in Cluj, in the basement of the National History Museum of Transylvania. Under the patronage of the *Prehistory Knowledge Project*, in October 2003, we went in search of the bones and found them. Then we asked for an anthropometric analysis of them from the University of Iași and sent a sample of them to Rome to the Laboratory of the Department “Scienze della Terra” of La Sapienza University for a C14 analysis.



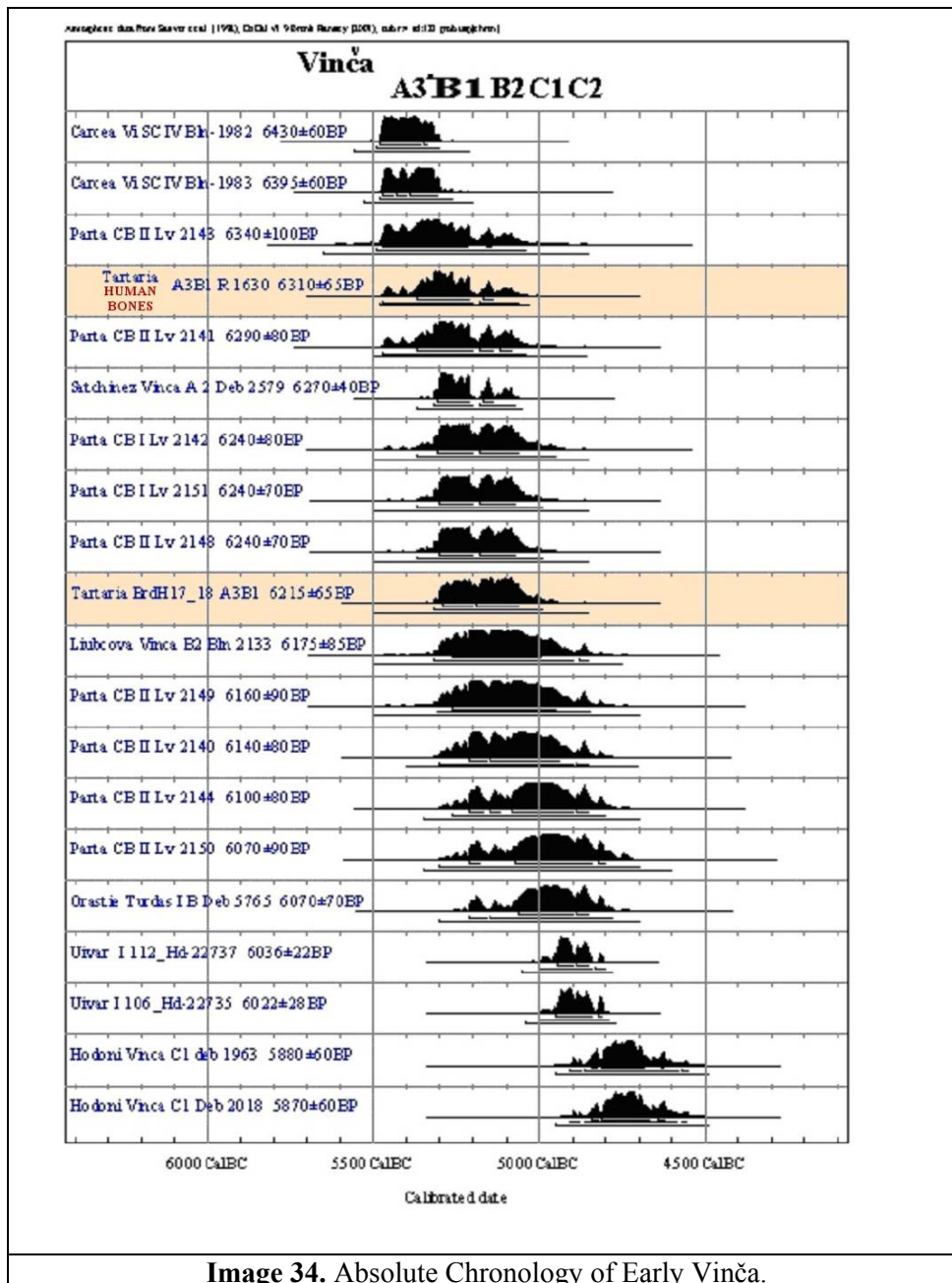
**Image 32.** Human remains.



**Image 33.** Human bones dating.

The uncalibrated age of the C14 analysis made by the Laboratory of the Department “Scienze della Terra” of La Sapienza University has been converted in the corresponding calibrated age using the data and the procedures reported in Stuiver Minze and Reimer Paula J. (*Stuiver and Reimer 1993*). The results are: Rome – 1631 (human bones):  $6310 \pm 65$  yr BP (calibrated 5370-5140 BC) (*Merlini*

2004a: 289; Merlini on line). Therefore the earliest attestation to a European script comes from Transylvania.



If one compares the chronostratigraphic sequence of Transylvania and Banat sites with the C14 age of the human bones discovered by Vlăsa in the ritual pit, one

can place Tărtăria complex into the early Vinča period (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). They might belong to Starčevo-Criș IVA discoveries (contemporary with Vinča A2), as those from Cârcea, Banat culture I (*Mantu 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2002*) or to early Vinča as those from Liubcova, Orăștie, Turdaș I and Uivar (*Mantu 1995; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; Laszlo 1997; Schier and Drașovean 2004*).

Vlassa connected the ritual pit containing the tablets with a pit house he has found nearby (*Vlassa 1962; 1964 fig. 8, 11*). Indeed, if one examines the excavation levels one notes that: a) the pit house goes from the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> level of excavation to the 16<sup>th</sup> / 17<sup>th</sup>, while the ritual pit could have been positioned between the base of layer 11<sup>th</sup> and layer 14<sup>th</sup> (fig. 17), but level 12<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> are part of pit-house n. 2; b) the distance between the two structures is only 70-90 cm; c) and they belong to the same archaeological complex. We verified the close relationship between the ritual pit and the pit house by comparing the radiocarbon data of the human bones from the former and the animal bones from the latter. As mentioned above the radiocarbon date for the human skeleton is level h11, Rome – 1631 = 6310 ± 65 yr BP (1σ, 5.370 - 5.140 Cal BC). The radiocarbon date for the animal bones found at the bottom of the pit house is level h16+h17, Rome – 1655 = 6215 ± 65 yr BP (1σ, 5.280-5.060 Cal BC) and the radiocarbon date for a mixed cultural level from the cleaning of the profile and by the excavation made by Horedt, Rome - 1630 = 6200 ± 65 BP (1σ, 5.260-5.050 Cal BC). Radiocarbon data sustains that the ritual pit and the pit house are coeval.

#### 9. Why the tablets cannot be intruders into the Vinča layer from later and upper levels

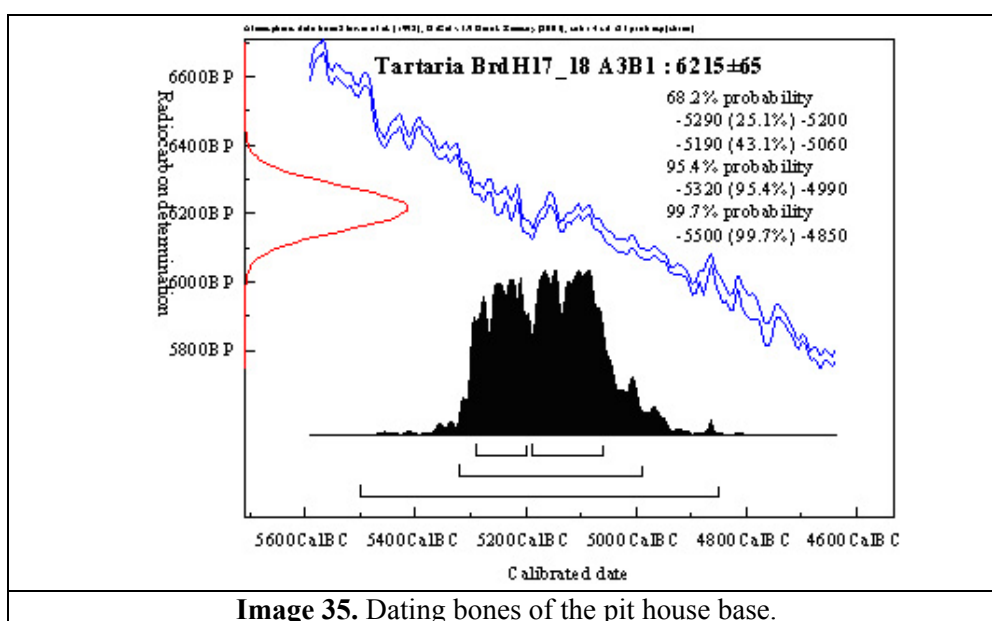


Image 35. Dating bones of the pit house base.

As noted in § 4, some scholars, perhaps in an effort to explain the incongruity of the signs on the tablets with their expectations, have insinuated that they were intruders into the Vinča layer from later and higher levels. Challenging their assumptions, how can we assert that bones and tablets are synchronous?

First, let us point out again that these scholars are following an obsolete chronology. They do not realize that the Turdaş culture they refer to was born at the beginning of the fifth millennium BC on a Vinča B grounding and developed after the Vinča C migrations with the concomitant social shock and cultural collision. On the basis of the new excavations carried out at Turdaş and Orăştie one has to consider this cultural group more recent than the Tărtăria human being and belonging to the Late Neolithic at the time of Tisza, Stoicani-Aldeni and Pre-Cucuteni cultures.<sup>46</sup>

Second, even if the present-day position of the pit on the sloping edge of the mound could mean that some of its upper portion had been eroded through time, the key point is the establishment of the epoch when it might have happened. Let me consider how the tablets' intrusion occurred in the Zanotti's reconstruction. In hope of ascertaining the true location of the Tărtăria tablets, he attempted to recreate via computer the area of trench G (where the tablets were found) as it was prior to the 1961 dig. Using a combination of map enlargements, sections and Vlassa's original photographs, he hypothesized the proximity of the ritual pit to the original surface prior the excavation. However, in his artificial and untested study he did not realize that the river once ran underneath the settlement and had eroded a side of it. The very steep bank still proves this and the line of the ancient course can be traced beneath. This natural phenomenon gave to the slope a different inclination from that presumed by Zanotti. His reconstruction of the sediments is only valid not before but *after* the Vlassa excavation; surely it looked different four thousand years ago, by the time of Baden-Kostolac culture.

Gheorghe Lazarovici and Zoia Maxim did a topographic survey on this controversial point. They evidenced that, if nowadays the high terrace of the Mureş river shows a very abrupt bank eroded by the flood in the area of about 200 m. with the trenches made by Kurt Horedt, Nicolae Vlassa and Iuliu Paul, in Neolithic times the settlement did not have an eroded tell shape, but it laid on a terrace whose limit was at a distance of minimum 10-15 meters from it.

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<sup>46</sup> Radiocarbon data for Turdaş culture are: Turdaş, pit house 1/1993: Deb-5775 5790±70 BP, (4734-4549 CAL B.C.), pit house B2/1994: Deb-5765±70 BP (5044-4895 CAL B.C.); Orăştie – Dealul Pemilor, pit house 1/1992-1993: Deb-5762 = 5825 ±60 BP, (4768-4582 CAL B.C.) and pit house 2/1994 : Deb-5775 = 5790±55 BP (4734-4582 Cal B.C.). See Luca, 2001, 140-142, pl. VI-IX.



**Image 36.** The old river way.

Lazarovici and Maxim' reconstruction is on tune with Makkay's one: "It should be mentioned that on the photographs of the two profile walls of area G no such a sudden slope of at least 2 m is visible; on the contrary it can be postulated that both the levels and the surface were horizontal" (*Makkay 1974/5: 14*).

The conclusion is that the feature of the pit and the tablets' position were not disturbed by the Baden-Kostolac pit (30-40 cm) which is supposed by Zanotti to have cut as deep as 2 meters. The leakage angle of the reconstructed slope by Zanotti measures around 45° but in reality it is 70-80°; a fact which indicate that the erosion was natural and intense as shown in image 38 where "Vlassa G" indicates the trench in which the ritual complex have been found (*Lazarovici Gh. and Maxim 1991: 22*).

Basing on these evidence Lazarovici and Maxim criticized the Zanotti doubts in very harsh terms, considering them "unreasonable or naive" and his remarks to be "childish and untrue".

Milisauskas's latest work (*Milisauskas 2002*) carefully avoids to taking part in the controversy.

Makkay challenges the hypothesis of the destruction of the upper portion of the ritual pit both by human disturbing or digging and by natural erosion. Concerning the first point he explains that there are no traces of damage of the pit. Even if it could be, they occurred only contemporaneously or immediately after the deposition of the tablets: "The original 'mouth' of the pit thus could have been disturbed only by a digging contemporary with the *lower* (Tordos) level or originating from the time immediately after it (i.e. before the Tordos-Petrești level).

There is no trace however of that, nor is it mentioned by the excavator, and if there were, it would confirm the dating of the pit to a period earlier then the Tordos-Petrești level". The same conclusion is also valid if the destruction of the mound of the pit would be consequence of natural erosion. "In the case of a horizontal leveling (i.e. in Tărtăria), erosion may only destroy the current uppermost layer, i.e.

before later (e.g. Petrești or Coțofeni) layers are deposited on it” (*Makkay 1974/5: 14*).



**Image 37.** The location of the ritual pit.

One should also consider that the ritual pit is too narrow and funnel-shaped to allow a falling down of a hoard composed by the tablets and the associated 29 artifacts. As Vlassa stated in his unpublished PhD

dissertation: “The diameter

(of the pit), 40 cm, shows that is impossible to believe that the pit belong to the Coțofeni culture, which was ca. 4 m up” (*Vlassa 1977: 13*).

Vlassa also reminded, “We do not know any Coțofeni site that contains Turdaș type idols, alabaster Cycladic idols, or signs of Turdaș type on the shards (*Vlassa 1977: 14*). A key argument for the changing of the dating challenging Vlassa’s stratigraphic position of the complex was the presumed Early Bronze age of the “anchor”. Nonetheless, Neustupný did not cite any parallels to back his claim (*Neustupný 1968a; 1968b*) and in fact Vlassa pointed that this piece is similar to the “anchor” pieces from the archaic period (beginning of the “azzura”) at Poliochni and in the surroundings has many analogies with the Vinča ones (*Vlassa 1972: 368, n. 5; 1977: 14*). *Makkay (1974/5: 16)* and *Lazarovici Gh.-Maxim (1991)* documented that if this object had little to do with the “anchors” or hooks (viz *Elster 2003*) of the early Aegean Bronze Age or Coțofeni period, several similar artifacts have been found in the Neo-Eneolithic of Southeastern Europe.

Finally yet importantly, we crossed two photos made by Vlassa: south profile of G trench with the pit house and north profile of G trench with the ritual complex. One can see the dark, thick and undisturbed layer 0.5 m above the mouth of the pit but at least 1 m. under the Coțofeni level (fig. 26 and fig. 18, recovering *Vlassa 1963 fig. 3, 4*). Relating these photos by following the same line of the profile, one can check, although with some difficulties, that the pit was dug from the lower layer into the virgin soil as stated by the excavator. In the PhD dissertation, he maintained, “The deepness of the pit...shows that is impossible to believe that it could belong to the Coțofeni culture, that was ca. 4 m up. We also remember that

the Turdaş level of our excavation was covered by a fired adobe platform belonging to a surface dwelling from the level II (Turdaş-Petreşti) and on top of it was another similar platform from the level III (Petreşti- Turdaş)” (*Vlassa 1977: 13*).



**Image 38.** Photo Pit House.

We think that a part of the pit (ca. 1/3, 1/4) was destroyed during K. Horedt or N. Vlassa excavations. This could be observed in one of the Vlassa's photos, which offer information regarding the depth and the size of the destroyed pit. Because of this, some pieces and bones might be

absent.

#### **10. The localization of the cultic grave and the pit house. Our reconstruction of the stratigraphy of the excavation layers**

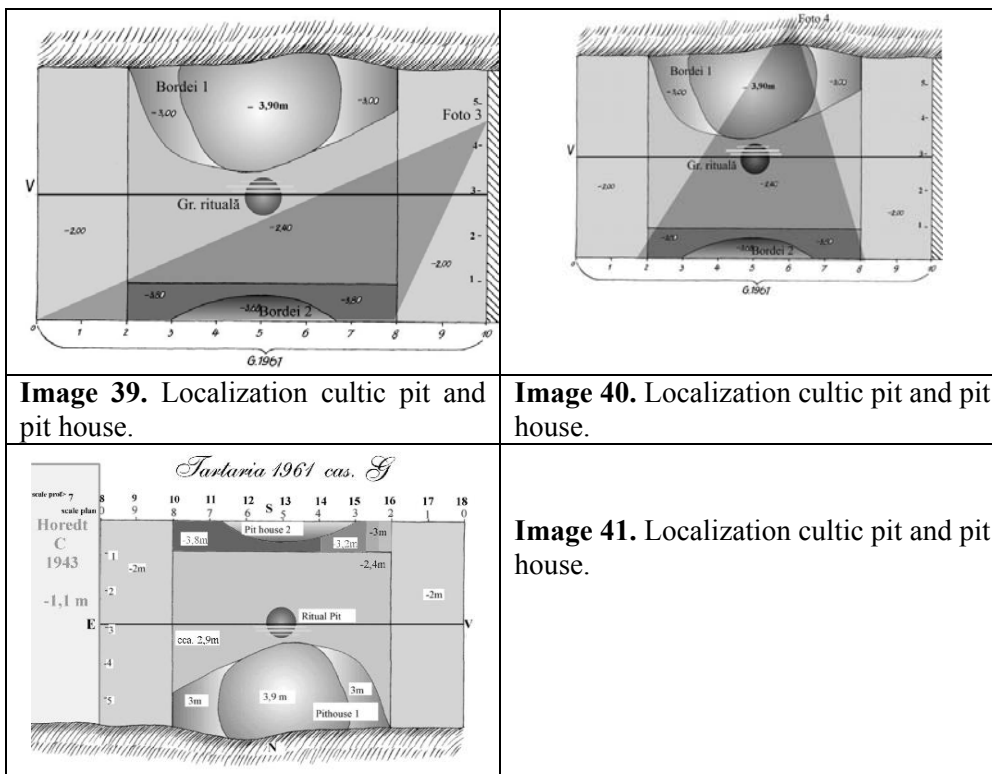
Now we can answer to the question regarding the localization of the cultic pit and the pit house because we are able to infer the perspective of Vlassa's two photos we have above mentioned and published.

We can also understand why the archaeologist in charge did not put the ritual grave inside the stratigraphy of the excavation made at Tărtăria. First, the drawing was made the day *before* the conclusion of the digging at a distance of around 150 cm. from the place where the pit was discovered the following and last day. Second, he underestimated the importance of the discovery before the recognition of the incised signs in the laboratory.

In conclusion on this point, metabolizing N. Vlassa's information we can reconstruct the profile of the excavation layers from trench G.

1. The first level of habitation (Vlassa's Turdaş layer) contains pit-houses and perhaps surface dwellings. It belongs to the Vinča culture, phases A2-A3. The term "Turdaş" is an anachronism. In the years 1961-1963 the term referred to M. Garašanin's chronologic system, according to which Turdaş – Vinča is the Old phase, contemporary to Vinča A şi B, and Vinča – Pločnik is the recent Vinča C-D phase. The Turdaş settlement belongs to phase Vinča B2/C, C1-C2 at Lazarovici (1977b; 1981; Lazarovici – Merlini 2004; 2005; C.-M. Lazarovici, Gh. Lazarovici

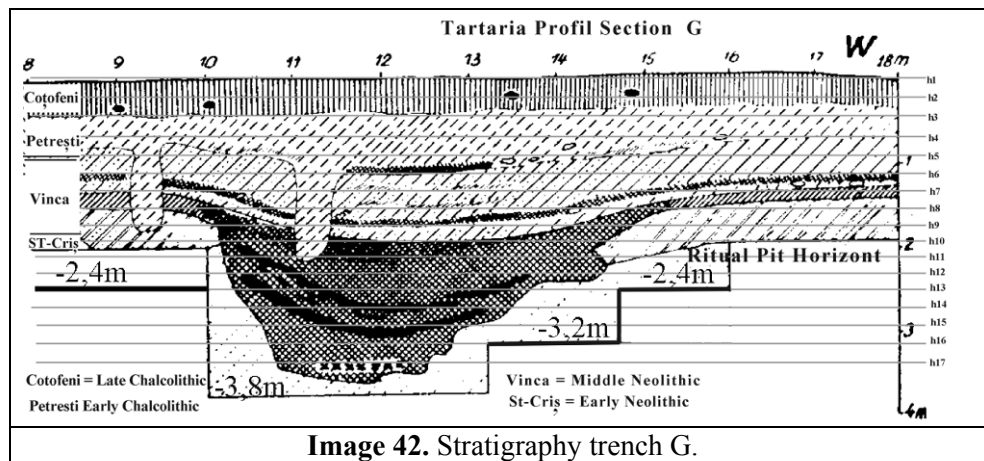
2006, p. 117 ff.; p. 477 ff., 568 ff.). After studying and publishing the materials from Turdaş from P. Bela's and M. Roska's sections (Lazarovici – Kalmar/Maxim 1991a p. 124 ff.; Lazarovici Gh., Maxim Z. 1996) and Adrian Sabin Luca's digs, as well as the C14 dating (Luca 1993; 1996a; 1966b; 1998c; 1998-1999; 2001; C.-M. Lazarovici 2006), Turdaş is dated to the Vinča C phase. The Vinča A2-A3 settlement was fortified (see below the settlement catalog index).



2. The second level, named by Vlassa *Turdaş - Petreşti*, actually belongs to the Vinča B phase, a time during which the settlement extended and changed to surface dwellings. Numerous ceramic imports appear during this time, about 3%, in the cultural group Lumea Nouă, CCTLNZIS complex, phase II. The settlement extended at this time to about 7-8 Ha (see the catalog index) (C.-M. Lazarovici, Gh. Lazarovici 2006, p. 477 and following).

3. The third level, which Vlassa named *Petreşti – Turdaş*, belongs to the Petreşti culture, phases AB.

4. The materials discovered by K. Horedt, most of them inedit, were collected at great depth and mixed (0,30 – 0,60 cm), for which reason the materials can only be separated typologically. Even so, they allow for establishing the extent of the settlement in various phases.



Here is the stratigraphy after our revision (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2005-2006*):

H11↑ excavation level Starčevo-Criș II and Vinča A3; level of the ritual pit

H10↑ excavation level Vinča A3 + materials from pit house (nr. 2.3) maybe the pit house 1.

H9↑ excavation level Vinča A3/B1 + materials from pit house (nr. 2. 3)

H8↑ Horizon from excavation of pit house nr. 2 and + materials from pit house (nr. 2)

↓H12-H13 excavation level, pit house 2.3 + 2.2, Vinča A3/B1

↓H14-H15 excavation level, pit house 2.2, Vinča A3/B1

↓H16-17 excavation level, pit house 2.1 Level with C14 data (Rome 1655, 6210 ± 65), Vinča A3/B1

H7↑ excavation level Vinča B1 + materials from Vinča A3

H6↑ excavation level Vinča B1 and CCTLNI – Lumea Nouă group

H5↑ excavation level Vinča B2 and CCTLNI – Lumea Nouă group mix with Petrești AB.

### 11. The enigma of the charred human being, the cultic sacrifice and the cannibalistic ritual

As we have already mentioned, in Vlassa excavation report the pit was filled with earth and ash, the bones laid at the bottom appeared “scorched and disjointed, some of them broken” and they were supposed to be associated with the three clay tablets covered with strange signs and a small pile of offerings. These three key observations directed him to interpret the pit as a “magic-religious one”; bones, tablets and objects as a “sacrificial offering”; the human being as a Great Priest or a Shaman that was cremated during a sacrificial ritual (*Vlassa 1962*).

The Vlassa hypothesis is based on unstable archaeological ground but is less eccentric than many scholars think. At first, his impression that the bones have been burned might be related to the spongy and foamy aspect of some of the big ones,

with holes and swellings. Not having in mind to make the anthropological analyze, N. Vlăssă did not washed the bones.

Regarding the human sacrifice, this ritual was occasionally practiced in the Transylvanian Neolithic to ask for the protection of superhuman forces. There is much archaeological evidence that reveals, in a very concrete way, the sacrificial practices. A not so rare custom was to execute a human being as a foundation sacrifice when a new building of any importance was started: the burial at the base of the pillar in Căscioarele sanctuary was probably of this kind and also the child-corpse interred under a Turdaș dwelling after a bloody sacrifice. In the latter case, the sacrifice of a pure and perfect creature as a child was a necessary step to consecrate the building.

However in the Danube civilization we have also the opposite pole: a malformed child<sup>47</sup> five or six years old was curled up in a basket - hands and feet tied forcing him into a contracted posture - and buried in a little pit on the top of the tell of Hârsova. It was found in 1993 during an archaeological program of French-Romanian collaboration between the Ministry of Culture/Francophone, (Directorate of Cultural Inheritance and Sub directorate of Archaeology) and the Romanian Ministry of Culture. From the preserved excrement found about the rectum, the researchers deduced that this was undoubtedly a deliberate death. The corpse was located among the foundation trenches, along the support posts of a large building. Are we in the presence of a foundation ritual connected with a sacred voluntary act of eugenics? According to the French-Romanian team this hypothesis is supported by evidence at other tells.

Confident to have under observation the burned remains of a sacrificial ceremony, the excavator jumped to the unproven conclusion that a cannibalistic ritual had taken place in Tărtăria (*Vlăssă 1976: 31*). This hypotheses was based on a weak circumstantial evidence, but not weird because there is documentation on a few cannibalistic ceremonies in order to communicate with gods and spirits in the Danube civilization. For example only a few kilometers from Tărtăria, at Orăștie, there have been found remains of roasted human bones and crushed big bones for extracting the marrow. Two skullcaps have been cut just over the ocular arcade to hold them on the palm and use for libation. In this case, the bones have not been used as food but as a tool (*Luca 2001*).

At Parța, Banat culture, level 6, there are many cases of foundation offerings in the buildings, especially in the sacred ones. In the foundation of the east wall of House P8, dwelling next to the Sanctuary 2 (with a monumental bust idol inside), 3 small pots with bones have been find (*Lazarovici et alii 2001: 111*). We have also discovered fragments of human jaws in level 7a, pit house 30, and in the hut 29 (*Ibidem: 88, 275*) and human bones in other pits too. In the river border, eastward from the site, on the bottom of pit III (a Tiszapolgár pit house, of 1,50 x 1,30 m), under the plastered floor, a quarter of a human skull (man) was discovered (*Lazarovici et alii 2001: 275*).

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<sup>47</sup> With a deformation of the skull and spinal column.

At Scânteia, site of Cucuteni A3, many human bones, 173 fragments, have been discovered in the area of the houses or pits, fired or not (*M. Lazarovici, D. Botezatu, L. Ellis, S. Țurcanu 2003: 297-306*). In 1999 at Bolgrad (Northwestern Black Sea area) was found by Newcastle University a large fragment of a human skull, among potsherds and animal bones, in a semi-subterranean dwelling belonging to the Gumelnița Culture. Preliminary examinations at the Laboratory of the Institut de Palaeontologie Humaine, have shown the occurrence on the surface of the skull of three artificially perforated holes and grooves indicative of cannibalism (*Dolukhanov 2000*). It was previously mentioned the burial site of a child unearthed at the Hârsova tell. Ritual cannibalism is suggested by the discoverers because of the scattered human bones discovered among the remains of meals and various refuse in domestic waste zones.

Some scholars challenged the Vlassa interpretation of a cannibalistic sacrifice and suggested that the Tărtăria human being was probably a priest, a shaman, a spirit-medium or a high dignitary (*Chapman 1983*) who had died in a fire and was buried with ritual articles he valued while alive. Other scholars speculated that he was the supreme priest and he had been burnt as he finished his serving time, according to the Sumerian tradition, as a sacrifice honoring the great God Saue (*Tonciulescu 1996*).

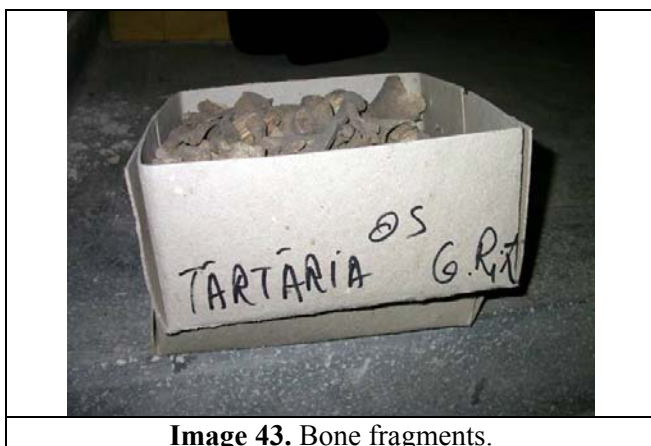
What happened really in Tărtăria? A sacrificial ritual, a cannibalistic ceremony, or a conflagration? Not any of them, for the following four reasons (*Merlini 2004b*).

Firstly, in the case of both ritual and secular cannibalism it is possible to find some selected remains (in particular from head, arms, legs). In the excavation at Scânteia (Moldavia, Romania) some remains of the skullcap and of the arms have been found (*Lazarovici M. personal communication*). In Iclod, a buried beheaded man held a portion of his skullcap on his hand. Regarding Tărtăria bones, we have found too wide a range of them and many are useless as food (i.e. ribs, hip-girdle and vertebrae). Moreover, we didn't find any skull fragments.

Secondly, in a banquet the bones are scattered on the ground among the remains of meals, sometimes refuse in domestic waste zones, or crushed by dogs. In Tărtăria, they were packed and accompanied by ritual and high status artifacts.

Thirdly, the bones were broken in a natural way and not, for example, crushed to extract the marrow as that one found at Orăștie.

Finally, the bones are not burnt. Not at all. The fragments of the big bones have traces of spongy / foamy and are of a dark brown color. Therefore, it was legitimate to suppose it was the consequence of thermic stress suffered by them during their history. It could have implied the partial or total carbonization of the collagenous converting it, by charring, into elementary carbon. We asked chemical and anthropological expertise. Chemical tests at the Laboratory of the Department "Scienze della Terra" of La Sapienza University of Rome have on the contrary excluded processes of converting the bones into carbon. The dark brown color is due to the absorption of oxygen hydrate and insoluble humates coming from the burial place.



**Image 43.** Bone fragments.

Only one bone, belonging to an animal, shows traces of scorching and it was mixed in amongst the human bones, which do not have evidence of burning (*Lazarovici Gh., Miu 2004*). Animal and human bones might have been placed together during the inhumation process, possibly in relation to rituals concerning the worship of a person who

possessed some special and / or secret knowledge and became a revered and terrific ancestor.

Our working hypothesis is that the charred-like color of the big bones and the “exploded” appearance of some part of them are also due to their discarnation process. We do not think that a body preparation happened as an excarnation by processor corpse dismemberment<sup>48</sup>, because we did not find any clear sign of knife, razor, blade, bird beak or claw or animal fang. The act of depriving or divesting of flesh was made by the simple decomposition of the body on the first burial stage or exposing it to natural events although in this phase of the research we cannot exclude a very delicate mechanical bone cleaning of soft tissues, using for example fingernails as the tribe Chokta did in North America.<sup>49</sup>

The little bones of the individual belonging to the tablets have an off-white color such as those from the chest and the shoulder-blade. This coloring might be related to long exposure under the sun's rays during the defleshing process (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). Similar situations and rituals have been recognized

<sup>48</sup> In the same area, excarnation was typical of the Late Coțofeni culture (in tumulus, *Lazarovici, Meșter 1995*).

<sup>49</sup> In a South American tribe Bororo the primary funeral takes place on the second - third day after death. The body is buried not far from water, 14 days later it is exhumed, the flesh is removed from bones; and then, during a feast, the skeleton is decorated and prepared for the final secondary burial. One of the decarnation methods in the tribes of North Australia is described by W. Chesling: "The deceased is painted and dressed, then buried in the earth or placed on a special stage, or affixed to a tree. Later on, the deceased's relatives pick up the bones and keep them until they find it possible to place them into a grave pillar decorated with ornaments. In an Arnhemland region, bones are extracted from the body, and flesh is eaten out...". Decarnation also took place in the tribe Chokta of the southern part of North America; it was a duty of a specially chosen man to clean the bones of a deceased tribesman in 2-4 months after death with his fingernails. The flesh was burned and the bones ultimately buried within a year.

from the end of the Coțofeni culture up to the Early Bronze Age (*Lazarovici Gh., Kalmar/Maxim 1987-1988; Lazarovici Gh. 1998; for the discarnation of Tărtăria bones viz Merlini 2004b*). Our hypothesis has been supported by the anthropological expertise of Georgeta Miu from the Center of Biological Research which belongs to the Romanian Academy, Iași branch (*Lazarovici Gh., Miu 2004*).

If the bones are not charred, also the other two traditional hypotheses fail: an accidental death by fire or a cultic sacrifice of the corpse by fire.

## **12. The puzzle of the corpse's identity**

In general, the bones found into the ritual pit are supposed belonging to an adult man considered to be a priest, a shaman, or a high dignitary on the basis of the associated artifacts and the cremation ritual designed for a very special person.

Nevertheless, the anthropometric analysis that the *Prehistory Knowledge Project* asked to the Centre for Anthropological Research of Romanian Academy of Science at Iași ascertained that the bones belong to a female, very ill and very old for the standards of that times. If one wants to go on with the image of a ritual pit and a cultic context, one should start to talk about the Tărtăria priestess, shaman-woman or dignitary-woman. In this phase of the research we prefer to talk about "Milady Tărtăria" and to indicate her as a "revered holy woman" as well as a terrific one with a pivotal role in an inclusive community capable of only moderate formations of leadership and policy (*Merlini 2004a: 289*).

Let us try to outline an identikit of Milady Tărtăria on the basis of the anthropometric analysis made at Iași by Georgeta Miu.

### *Sex and age.*

The skull and pelvis are missing (from the latter there are only some fragments), so that sex and age determination of the subject has some limitations. Based on metric and morphological features of the long bones (entire or fragmentary) and others (collar bone, vertebrae, talus, heel bones, and fragments of the belt bones from pelvis area) we consider that she is a female of 50-55 years old. The age was estimated based on: resorption of the spongy tissue, the aspect of the pubic area and some particular pathological degenerative processes of some bones.

### *The height.*

The height is 147 cm, indicative of a small woman. It was calculated on the basis of classical known methods (radius, cubitus and tibia length).

### *The anthropological type.*

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

Based on the available data we believe that all this features indicate the Mediterranean type.



**Image 44.** Distorted femur.

*Paleopathologic aspects.*

A degenerative process of the bones has been identified on the right femur (the cervix and the head of the femur). This degenerative-arthritis process contributes to the modification of the diaphysis aspect (the bone is thicker and shorter) and have caused an ankylose for the femoral articulation as seen in the image which compare the Tărtăria femur and a distorted one.

It is possible to observe the same degenerative process on three dorsal vertebrae (maybe 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>): the body of the vertebrae is half than a normal one in size because of the destruction of the tissue (on the right side).

This kind of malformation did not cause neurological lesions. It is possible that this degenerative process affected also the ribs related to these vertebrae (some fragments show this process). The lower part of the articular surfaces of the pubis shows a similar destruction process.

We do not 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 the pain must have been a commonplace experience for Milady Tărtăria for the last 10-15 years of her life.



**Image 45.** Distorted vertebra.

But her death can be related to other reasons.

The osteoporotic (osteoporosis) degenerative process which was affected Milady Tărtăria wasn't a simply 'silent process' that typically affects post-menopausal women and involves loss of bone mass but probably an acquired disease. A supplementary expertise done by Dinu Oneţ, radiologist and physician at the Neuro-surgery Clinics of Cluj-Napoca, suggests some explanation for this kind of deformity. Radiological expertise and clinical analogies indicate at least three possibilities: *gummatous osteoperiostitis*, *osteomelite* or *tuberculosis*. We do not exclude a form of *syphilis*, an ancient, endemic and not necessary venereal disease (Dennie 1962; Baker and Armelagos 1988; Marcsik 1994; HersHKovitz et al. 1995; Merlini 2004b).

Osteoperiostitis are skeletal lesions of infectious origin which commonly appear on the major long bones, especially the tibia (Steckel, RH, JC Rose, et al. 2002: 142-155). They are found as plaque-like deposits from periosteal inflammation, swollen shafts, and irregular elevations on bone surfaces (Ortner and Putschar 1985). Most lesions are non specific but they often are caused by *Staphylococcus* or *Streptococcus* organisms. Osteoperiostitis has proven very informative about patterns and levels of community health in the human past (Larsen 1997).

Pyogenic osteomyelitis (bone inflammation) is the most common kind of pathology seen in ancient skeletons and it is usually the result of infections of microorganisms that produce pus (Mays, Taylor 2002).

Tuberculoze osteo-arthritidă este o boală foarte veche, cauzată de un bacil (mycobacterium tuberculosis) care probabil a precedat genul *Homo*. În Europa cea mai veche dovadă de T.B. la oameni a fost găsită în regiunea de Heidelberg (Germania), unde un tânăr bărbat (5000 î.Hr.) a fost descoperit cu dovezi patologice de tuberculoză a coloanei vertebrale și a vertebrelor toracice 3<sup>rd</sup> și 4<sup>th</sup> colapsate (Herzog 1998).<sup>50</sup>

În ceea ce privește sifilisul, endemul sau non-venerealul sifilis (treponematoză fiind cauzat de *treponema pallidum* sau ceea ce este comun cunoscut ca *bejel*) și venerealul sifilis nu sunt aceleași boli. În ambele cazuri implicarea scheletică este extensivă și în cele din urmă fatală; totuși, modul de transmitere este diferit. Forma venereală a bolii este transmisă prin contact sexual, în timp ce forma non-venereală este transmisă prin contact cu pielea, aparținând în copilărie (Ortner and Putschar 1985). Originea sifilisului este o discuție în desfășurare, dar prima dovadă a sa a fost revelată de un italian înmormântat<sup>51</sup> și unul polonez (Carter 1998: 532)<sup>52</sup>. Chiar dacă osteoperiostita gummată, osteomielita pyogenică, tuberculoza și endemul sifilisului se manifestă diferit<sup>53</sup>, simptomele lor sunt foarte asemănătoare și au afectat Doamna Tărtăria în copilărie.

### *The posture*

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<sup>50</sup> Tuberculoza, conform majorității istoricilor medicali, a devenit o problemă medicală atunci când oamenii au început să domesticeze animale și să consume carne și lapte de animale infectate. Consumul de carne și lapte de animale infectate a dus la transmiterea bolii la populația umană.

<sup>51</sup> Descoperirea în 1992 a sifilisului într-o mormântă la Pantanello Necropolis (Metaponto) a demonstrat că boala a existat în Europa cu 2,500 de ani în urmă. Prezența sifilisului a fost detectată prin examinarea rămășițelor umane. Sclerotic hyperostosis ( îngroșarea și îngroșarea peretelui cranial) a fost un efect al acestei boli (Carter 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Pentru decenii sifilisul a fost considerat că a fost introdus în Europa de echipa lui Christopher Columbus, după călătoria sa în Haiti în 1492, deoarece epidemii de această boală nu au fost înregistrate în Europa înainte de atunci, dar s-au răspândit pe toată continentea din Spania imediat după întoarcerea sa (Dennie 1962). Evidențele osteoarheologice, totuși, susțin teoria că boala a existat în atât în lumea veche, cât și în lumea nouă înainte de călătoria lui Columbus și că sifilisul din secolul al XV-lea a fost probabil o transmutație adaptivă a unei boli non-venereale din lumea nouă adusă înapoi în Europa de către echipa lui Columbus. Când a ajuns în Europa, boala non-venereală sifilis s-a transmutat și a devenit o boală venereală virulentă (Baker and Armelagos 1988). Înainte de aceste epidemii, sifilisul era pur și simplu nedistins ca o boală separată și era adesea confundat cu lepra. Există o referință la "venereal" lepra și "ereditar" lepra în secolele al XIII-lea și al XIV-lea. Dar lepra nu s-a răspândit prin contact sexual și nu a fost transmisă de la mamă la copil, așa cum este sifilisul. (Vezi și Herskovitz, Rothschild, Wish-Baratz și Rothschild 1995; Marcsik 1994. Istoria tuberculozei și sifilisului în Egiptul antic este descrisă în Armelagos și Mills 1993).

<sup>53</sup> De exemplu, sifilisul oaselor este comun simetric, osteomielita pyogenică este mai puțin așa și leziunile articulare de tuberculoză sunt de obicei asimetrice, în contrast cu alte forme de artrită. (Vezi "Last Lecture: Paleopathology" în *Anthropology* 156, Spring 2002).

Milady Tărtăria limped on her right leg since her youth because of her thicker, anchylosed and shorter right femur and leg. She had a posture forming a > (an arrow) because of the degenerated, decalcified and fragile spine. She had also the tendency to angle towards the right because a scoliosis had deformed the right side of her chest and her right shoulder. There is an unpublished Neolithic figurine kept at the National Museum of Athens that can give an idea of the Milady Tărtăria.

### **13. A consecrated grave of a novel ancestor and not a ritual pit or a votive deposit**

Now that we have accumulated more evidence about Tărtăria, let us go a little deeper into the relationship between the revered and terrific holy woman, her abode, the ritual pit, the cult inventory, and the tablets.

With reference to the intricate interactions between the first three elements, following the same lines of plane at the north and south profile of the Vlassa excavation it is possible to relate fig. 27 (depicting the north profile of G trench and the ritual pit) to fig. 38 (regarding the south profile of G trench and the pit house). The results are synthesized by fig.47, which connects in the same image the ritual pit and the pit house; therefore, the two structures were not only contemporaneous but also belonged to the same archaeological complex under the same roof and were functionally connected.

In Neo-Eneolithic times, it was not infrequent throughout Southeastern Europe that household activities occurred in areas nearby pit houses. We suppose that Milady Tărtăria lived in the pit house and kept the sacral inventory inside the “ritual pit”, a sort of box with magic tools, which was in fact located under the same roof and possibly provided magical protection of the abode. The cult associations are important because they connect the inscribed tablets and the ritual paraphernalia, and relate both these to a building with a special function. Indeed they make a little more intelligible the functional relationship among ritual pit, pile of liturgical artifacts among which tablets bearing signs and dwelling under the framework of an passionate magic-religious life with elaborate symbolism and intense ceremonialism developed by a small early farming community with a not very marked social hierarchy.

Scholars are divided on the existence of temples, sanctuaries and community altars in those times because some still maintain that liturgies were held solely within the household field.<sup>54</sup> Milady Tărtăria’s dwelling possibly evidences another

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<sup>54</sup> The monumental bucrania found at Gomolava (Brukner, 1988, 33, 3/7-8; Lazarovici et alii, 2001, I.1, 275-276, 297-298: fig. 250/1-2, 250/3), Vinča (M. Garašanin, 1958, 20; D. Garašanin, 1968, fig. 28; Babovic, 1984, cat. 212; Staljo, 1986, cat 218), the monumental human heads found at Fafos, Predionica (Staljo, 1979, cat. 264) and Zorlențu Mare (fig. 29, in House 4) the existence of sanctuaries, sanctuaries and communitarian altars (Lazarovici Gh, Lazarovici M. 2003). The presence of several communitary sanctuaries at Magiare, Vrbska Humka (in Macedonia at Vinča A - Starčevo- Criș level, information Garašanin, 1981, 1984; Sanev, 1988, 9-10), Pața and Kormadin at Mănăstioara – *Cetățuia*, Vrancea

kind of sacral layout neither a temple or a shrine (completely dedicated to religion) nor an ordinary dwelling (where the sacred space was limited to a fireplace/oven and/or an altar). In the Tărtăria dwelling, a substantial area might have been devoted to and specialized for magic-religious rituals while the rest might have been associated to daily life, nevertheless a daily life which was at full time and with every action connected to the spiritual path of the initiate. We postulate the existence of special abodes belonging to old holy ladies, often related to the numerology of the 7.



**Image 46.** Milady.

Such hypothesis is sustained by two religious discoveries from Poduri and Isaiia (in Moldavia, Romania) both containing 42 pieces (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). Milady Tărtăria's home might be been a structure comparable with the present-day ashrams of sadhus<sup>55</sup> in Hindu culture: dwellings with a living as well as a retreating room with a large corner area consecrated to liturgies or with a second room set apart and specialized for cult.

A crucial point for the interpretation of the function of the tablets and their signs is that Vlăsa and most of the scholars consider the pit a cultic sacrificial hallow filled with a votive hoard, a dedication deposit, or a pile of

offerings. In fact it was a cultic pit during the life of Milady Tărtăria but after her dead it became a ritual grave. Her bones underwent through a defleshing process that could have required a period of between some months to 6/7 years. After the stripping of the flesh bones and part of her tools might have been returned to where

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district (Romania orientale), Căscioarele (Romania meridionale) evidences the existence of religious structures. Several clay models of Trypillian houses and temples have been found, which help to reconstruct (reproduce) ancient architecture. An interesting collection of clay temples has been collected by Sergej Platonov of late. Literally, these finds corrected our notion about prehistoric architecture of Old Europe between 4200-3500 BC. One of them represented rectangular in plan building on platform, based on six strong pillars. The roof of the temple is semicircular, frontons are decorated with a crescent, which is similar to bull (or cow?) horns. The entrance to the temple is represented as an arc, decorated with five images of crescents. The walls are decorated with antropomorphous pillars and spiral snake symbols. The model was covered by red paint, and an incised ornament was enchased with white paint. On other models roofs were painted, it looks like they were covered by rush floor-mats. The best example of a communitary altar is the sanctuary at Kormadin, Vinča C level (Jovanović, 1960; 1991 and bibl.; 1991; Sandars, 1968/1985, 203, fig. 179b). In the Sanctuary at Kormadin (fig. 50) the cult furniture, including decorated boxes with places for offerings, columns, monumental idols, walls decorated with sacred symbols is related to a naology as at Parța (Lazarovici et alii, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> A holy man, sage, in general with ascetic style of life.

Milady Tărtăria had spent her life. It is possible that during this time-lag the house was abandoned. We can relate the first filling levels to this period (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). It means that pit and pile of objects should not be in a straightforward manner and promptly read through the categories of giving directed to an other-worldly power and for supernatural returns (votive deposition) but primarily through the category of death liturgies socially significant and reflecting the social standing of deceased need. Consequently at Tărtăria the human body constituted a form of dedication and a means to facilitate communication with superpowers *only* though distinctive dead liturgies and burial in a sacralised space.

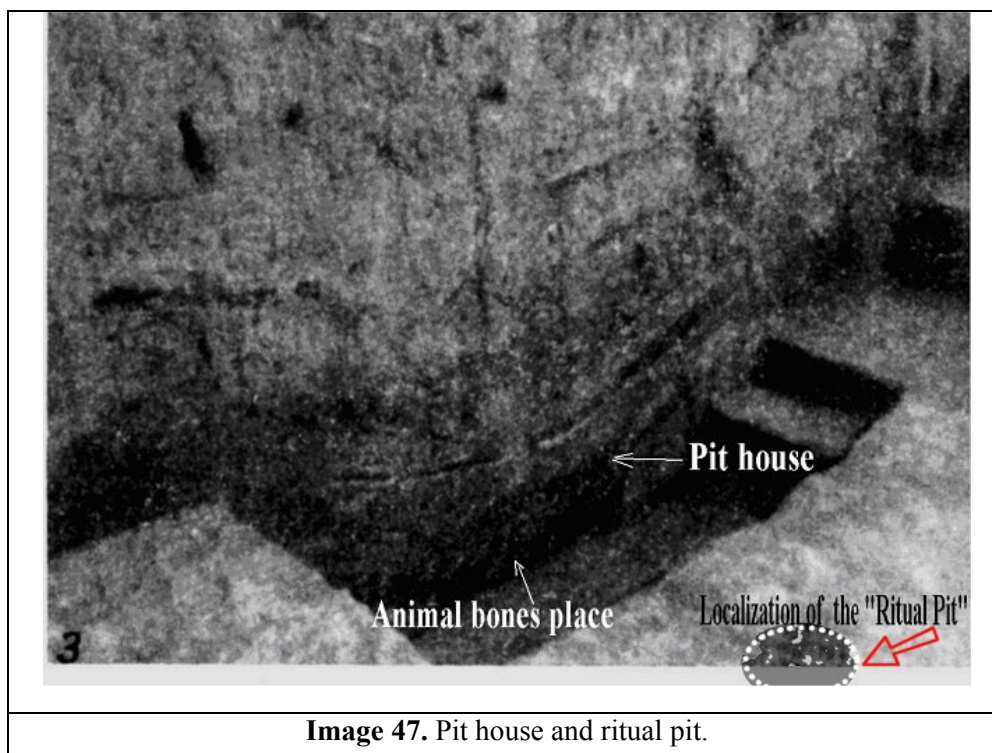
The shape and the extent of the ritual grave did not permit the deposition of a *buried person* and this fact confirms that the human bones had been put there after the *defleshing* process. The Tărtăria pit could be evidence of a secondary burial. Did a double funeral rite occur with the deposition of the disarticulated skeletal remains, the tablets, and the core part of every associated object? If one follows the Krum Băčvarov's suggestions about Bulgarian Neolithic on the secondary burial as a conclusion of a two-stage process of post-mortem body treatment, the Transylvanian reburial was based on some kind of public rite of devotion or initiation (*Băčvarov 2003*). The context of a previously occupied site suggests that the deposition in a pit was possibly associated with socialization of the dead and ancestor worship constituting an exchange between the living and the neo-ancestor aimed at consecrating or at least symbolizing the continued significance of a distinctive ancestral place. The deposition of the hoard in a house apparently reinforced the principle of concentration of finds and ritual in the domestic domain, but one has to remember the above-mentioned particularities of Milady Tărtăria's dwelling.

At Tărtăria the two principles of fragmentation (the bodily dismemberment and the deliberate breakage of objects, and the sharing of both kinds of fragments among people) and accumulation (grouping and interring together in a set the emblematic parts of the body and the artifacts) worked together thereby reinforcing distinctive social relations and identity (on a household, ancestral lineage or community level?).

Georgeta Miu has observed that the skull and many small bones are missing, in particular those from palms, feet, and pelvis even if from the last some fragments remain. The absence of fragile bones might be the result of a natural process of defleshing and disarticulation (*Lazarovici Gh., Meșter M. 1995; Lazarovici Gh. 2000*). But what about the other bones? Fragments of them might have been utilized to connect the most recent ancestor, Milady Tărtăria, with her living kinsfolk or/and might have been passed on to enchain a third party. The relationship by means of fragmentation and socialization processes might have involved not only the revered and terrific holy woman's tools but also her skeletal material.

At the present, we are unable to explain the absence of the skull bones. In many cases of corpse decarnation, skull bones as well as teeth still exist even if the small bones of the face have disappeared. Therefore, we presume that the absence of the bones from the cranium might be related to its relocation due to the skull cult (our

opinion and bibliography, *Lazarovici Gh.-Maxim 1995*). Nevertheless we have to check once more the documentation from the older excavations, made by Horedt and Vlassa, to be sure that some bones have not been mixed in with other materials or misplaced at the moment of clearing the profile (fig. 38). The last possibility is supported by Vlassa's photos, where one observes that the pit was truncated (fig. 27) (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*).



**Image 47.** Pit house and ritual pit.

#### **14. Milady Tărtăria and her casket with magic tools**

The social life of cult inventory has two phases: before and after the dead of Milady Tărtăria. With regards to the first phase one can observe that the most of the artifacts belongs to different cults related to fertility and fecundity and their sovereign mysteries (the female divinity and her hypostasis: Mother Earth, Fertile Mother, giver and taker of life, holy darkness of the womb, divinity of pregnancy, protector of life, mistress of animals and plants etc.). Extremely sacred objects, they have possibly been surrounded by taboos (as highlighted by the results of overlapping two of the tablets) and employed in an elaborate cycle of rituals involving every stage in cultivation, preparation for war, ritual initiation, death. These formalized ceremonies have probably been accompanied with song, dance, and music. Every figurine of the ritual pit is wearing an elaborate mask which possesses, impersonates and expresses its resident power during ceremonial rituals:

a mythological being, an animal spirit, the spirit of a dead, a human or totem ancestor as well as a deity and another being believed to possess power over the living. The context portrays Milady Tărtăria as a cult leader and perhaps a full-time specialist. Of course, questions pose more questions. One can note at a glimpse that some figurines have a phallus-like shape, but why have they been modeled in such a particular form?

We have already noticed that the artifacts were not “items of faith” deposited in an act directed at communication with or concerning supernatural powers in hope of a return (magic protection, success, health, the flourishing of crops, animals or family) but deposited in a funerary complex in connection with death rituals and that some of them were broken, intentionally or unintentionally, and buried as incomplete items, while others are entire and interred as complete items. After Milady Tărtăria’s death, her liturgical tools were possibly broken during a ceremony. It is of course theoretically possible that these objects might not have been necessarily ritually “killed” but broken accidentally or by misuse, but one has to observe that the presence of magic-religious, exotic, not functional, and more or less precious items would mark a very unusual pattern of a discard collection. Secondly, the figurines made of clay have been deliberately divided in two parts, retaining the entire upper part (head included), for burial in the pit. Therefore, they have been submitted to an intentional and methodical breaking process. Closed eyes and absence of mouth are peculiar of some of them and are both traits that remind the dead. In a process that transforms matter into being, it is possible that that some figurines were manufactured at the time of Milady Tărtăria’s death and used in rituals to represent the newly dead. Once the spirit of the person was free or during the secondary reburial process, the figurines could have been broken and sacrificed tying the living into the power of the neo-ancestor and by doing so asserting a political claim of continuity and belongings.

The deposition of the statuettes as incomplete items was due not to the fact that they were discarded as refuse because of their broken state but to a fragmentation ritual which could be connected: a) to the rupture of the relations between their owner and the divinity; or b) to an enchainment procedure enacted through the fracturing of some objects in fragments which were shared among kinsfolk, acquaintances and associates in order to establish a magic relationship between the newly dead and the living; or c) to the spread of some fragments throughout the settlements and the fields to guarantee fertility (*Chapman 2000; 2001*). The core part of every sacral tool was not dispersed but collected in a hoard associated with the tablets and buried in the ritual pit during a devotion or initiation ceremony or simply kept apart.

If some fragments of the intentionally broken figurines may have been circulated among the living in order to enchain the ancestor and people with the same ancestor solidifying the group at the same time, it is important to observe that the deposited parts of the whole are so distinctive that the whole is obviously represented. And why are the inscribed tablets are the only entire artifacts? This

interaction between fragments, parts as whole, and complete items is an important issue for future exploration.

### 15. Transylvanian tablets and the sacred script for initiates

The problem of the signs from the tablets and what do they mean is a very complex subject. Tărtăria markings are believed by a growing number of scholars to be a very early form of writing and not just symbols but the interpretation of them is far from being elucidated. If some researchers are daring to give a definite meaning to those signs, the tablets are some sort of Rorschach test where people project into the inkblots the fantasies they already have in their mind. In any case, the new archaeological data we are presenting in this article compel us to develop some semiotic considerations about the genetic code of the emblematic signs of Tărtăria (Merlini 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2004a; 2005).

At first the Tărtăria tablets evidence that the Danube script was mainly a sacred system of writing employed in liturgies and in expressing magic-religious beliefs. It was not primarily used for commercial transactions or for recording administrative documents, but for communicating with the super-human forces. In fact inscriptions have been often found on objects – such as tablets as well as clay female figurines, votive offerings (sometimes *ex-votes*), libation vases, miniature vessels, spindle whorls, seals, temple models, and loom weights – all connected with a religious context.

The Tărtăria tablets attest also that the Neo-Eneolithic communities of the Danube basin were just at the first stages of the development of a script of literacy. It is a very archaic system of writing and possibly not capable of encoding extended speech or long narratives because phonetic elements are not or are too limitedly rendered in writing. It consists probably of a mix of logograms, ideograms, pictograms and only some phonetic elements occasionally and marginally marked. The connection with the conceptual sphere is much stronger than the connection with the phonetic sphere. Other ancient writings of this type are the Elamite script, Indus script, the hieroglyphs of the Phaistos disc, the Chinese writing on oracular bones, and the Olmecs glyphs.

If 7,300 years ago the Danube script was in *statu nascenti* and a considerable part of it was a key element of the religious-mythical system, consequently its signs had often the same outlines of sacred symbols, in particular the geometrical and abstract ones, from which they had derived. This every so frequently originates confusion into the researchers employed to crack Danube script code, but witnesses at the same time that numbers of signs of this system of writing have their origin from the sacred language of symbols.

The religion was a system of symbols and texts by which human beings communicated with their culturally defined universe characterized by super-human

powers as well as human powers. Common models of ritual action<sup>56</sup>, embedding symbols and texts<sup>57</sup>, realized the extra-human and inter-human communication, mediating also between the individual's conflicting needs for self-expression and self-containment.

The Tărtăria tablets point out the mainly cultic, initiation-ritual nature of the Danube script. Indeed many meanings might be esoteric and revealed only on the occasion of specific initiations (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). The question of the non-visibility of some texts is indicative of magical associations and sacral meaning of the Danube script connected with initiation processes. It is not for accident that texts were sometimes on a non-visible portion of the ritual tools. For example the magic-religious inscriptions positioned along four rows on the Gradešnica platter were visible only when it was moved, stored, or transported, but not when in use. During the rituals, they faced the ground possibly for the giving and the taking of earth-forces. Was the non-visibility not only a supplementary symbolic meaning but also an integral part of the symbolic message and a necessary condition for setting symbols and inscription into motion? (*Merlini 2005*). Also the cultic, discoid medallion recently found at Turdaş and belonging to the level of the Turdaş grup had been used with its inscription facing the ground. In this case, the inscribed artifact was located in the middle stratum of a pit among the ashes of a deep steep dwelling, maybe a granary or a shaman's habitation, and accompanying six vessels containing cereals (*Luca 1993; Merlini 2004a*).

Concerning the Tărtăria tablets, it is noteworthy to consider the possibility of overlapping the two tablets which both bear a round hole and are divided into cells. Indeed the hole on the rectangular tablet fits perfectly the hole on the circular one and the former tablet perfectly covers the upper register of the latter with their cells in perfect alignment. This could mean that the two tablets have been worn as necklaces one over the other as pendant and the resulting compound between the rectangular and circular tablets may have created a relationship of overt (seen) and esoteric (hidden) signs (i.e., the signs on the upper register of the circular tablet would have been covered). The fact that the two punctured tablets could have been utilized as superimposed exoteric and esoteric amulets is indicative of the magical associations of the script (see *Makkay 1968: 286; Hood 1967: 111; Reiner 1960: 148 ff.*). Was the sacred assemblage particularly in use during initiation ceremonies? (*Merlini on line, Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). If this was the case, it does not facilitate any attempts to decipher the incised signs since one is dealing with texts which challenge the un-expressible, which not only reveal but also conceal and sidetrack, and finally which indicate something to mean something else.

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<sup>56</sup> For ritual action I mean not only formal rituals performed by consecrated professionals, but also many acts of everyday household life which were imbued by religious-mythical significance and incorporated utilitarian and symbolic functions (Viz. *Nikolova on-line* who researched three case studies in depth: spinning and spindle-whorls, ornamented pottery and burials in the villages).

<sup>57</sup> Victor Turner even considers the rituals as aggregations of symbols (1975:59).



### Conclusions

Our investigation reconstructed quite clearly the discovery circumstances of the Tărtăria tablets:

- In Romanian historical context where the cross section excavation was at that time not used in any archaeological investigation, Vlassa sketched the stratigraphy of the trench dig at Tărtăria but did not put the ritual grave inside it because: firstly the drawing was made by him and Attila Laszlo the penultimate day of the excavation campaign at a distance of around 150 cm. from the place where the pit was unearthed the subsequent and last day; and secondly he undervalued the discovery before the recognition of the incised signs in the laboratory.
- The tablets were wet, soft and covered with limestone.
- Confusing a sort of “Neolithic cocchiopesto” (pulverized live calcium mixed with water in order to bind clay, sand, and different minerals) with a presupposed calcareous crust and thinking that the abundant calcium was due just to the humidity inside the pit, the restorer put the tablets under a hydrochloric acid treatment, removing not only the superficial calcium as a slip but also destroying their internal structure from the surface.
- Vlassa noticed the incised signs and realized the importance of the discovery only after the cleaning of the tablets.
- In order to contrast the fragility of the pieces, due to many cracks that appeared during the process of cleaning with hydrochloric acid, Vlassa decided to impregnate the tablets in a vacuum autoclave baking them. Nobody knows how long and at what temperature they were baked, but it should not have been over 100-150 degrees to avoid ruining them.
- After having recognized that the tablets were inscribed by signs of writing and having well in mind the arguments of the critics on stratigraphic data, in the last period Vlassa listed 5 scholars against his interpretation overwhelmed by 30 who “supported and completed” his point of view as well as TV and radio programs,

press articles and the presence of the inscribed tablets in school books (*Vlassa 1977: 15-18*). Considering to have carefully published his discovery, he spent more efforts on the hypothesized Mesopotamian influences in Transylvania than on the description of the excavation and its findings.

Re-publishing the artifacts found in the sacral grave with the tablets, we verified that they and the tablets belong to the same assemblage and challenged some scholars' insinuations, perhaps in an effort to explain the incongruity of the inscribed signs with their expectations on dating, that the tablets were intruders into the Vinča layer from higher and later levels. Indeed the stratigraphic situation that we settled up allows a direct association between the tablets and the other finds. Also the best typological parallels indicate a similar date for the tablets and the other objects, their fitting to the early phase of the Vinča culture, and their belonging to the central territory of the Danube civilization, i.e. the Vinča area, although a not very high stylistic resembling of the Tărtăria figurines with others from the same cultural complex if we do not limit the comparison to a single or double feature.

Our analysis of mixture and paste of the tablets under the microscope rejects the hypothesis that they could be a modern or ancient forgery, as well as a Near East import. We verified that all the tablets are made of the same material which is from local sources and contains a very small quantity of clay and a lot of sand. Therefore they can not be analyzed by C14 method not only due to the suffered thermic stress, but above all because they mainly contain sandy clay. Having the tablets been made of a sort of "Neolithic cocchiopesto", the acid bath they suffered at Cluj museum did not affected just their surface, but deeply ruined the calcareous inclusions and the binding of the material. If the chemical action cleaned the calcareous deposit from the surface of the artifacts, at the price to ruin their internal structure, a high concentration of calcium carbonate is still now present inside the tablets and it is slowly exiting at a point that in a number of years they will have been covert again by a white surface.

The C14 analysis assigned an age of  $6310 \pm 65$  yr BP (calibrated 5370-5140 BC) to the human bones recovered with the tablets in the ritual grave. Therefore it confirms the placing of Tărtăria complex into early Vinča culture as the discoveries from Liubcova, Orăștie, Turdaș I and Uivar, or into the Starčevo-Criș IVA culture (contemporary with Vinča A2), as those from Cârcea, Banat culture I (*Lazarovici Gh., Merlini 2004*). Metabolizing N. Vlassa's information and making some graphic inferences, we made a complete revision of the discovery circumstances establishing the precise localization of the ritual grave and setting up the stratigraphy of the trench were it has been unearthed.

The analysis of the human remains allows us to challenge the mythical and consolidate scenery that a human sacrifice, a cremation during a sacrificial ritual, a

cannibalistic ceremony, or a conflagration occurred in Tărtăria. The pit could be evidence of a secondary burial as a conclusion of a two-stage process of post-mortem body treatment. A double funeral rite occurred with the deposition of the disarticulated skeletal remains together with the tablets and the core fragments of every associated object, during some kind of public rite of devotion or initiation possibly associated with the socialization of the dead and the worship of the deceased person who possessed some special and/or secret knowledge and became a revered and terrific ancestor.

In fact the anthropometric examination ascertained that the bones belong to a very special person: a female, Mediterranean type, very old for the standards of that times (an age of 50-55), very ill and in pain (due to a degenerative-arthritis process causing malformation since her early age), limping on right leg and having a posture forming a > (an arrow) since her youth. Crossing the analysis of the human remains with the ritual pit and cultic context, we can indicate her as a “revered holy woman” with a pivotal role in an inclusive community: “Milady Tărtăria”.

The radiocarbon data sustains that the sacral pit containing the tablets is coeval with a nearby pit house. Archaeological evidence establishes that ritual pit and pit house are contemporaneous, belong to the same complex being under the same roof and are functionally connected. Milady Tărtăria, a cult leader and perhaps a full-time specialist, lived in the pit house and kept her liturgical artifacts among which the inscribed tablets inside the “ritual pit”, a sort of box with magic tools. If scholars are divided between those who maintain the existence of temples, sanctuaries and community altars in Neolithic age and those who limit the presence of liturgies within the domestic domain, Milady Tărtăria’s dwelling evidences another kind of sacral layout neither a temple or a shrine (completely dedicated to religion) nor an ordinary house (where the sacred space is limited to a fireplace/oven and/or an altar), but a dwelling with a substantial area devoted to and specialized for magic-religious rituals and the rest associated to daily life, nevertheless a daily life plug-in with the spiritual path of the initiate. We postulate the existence of special abodes belonging to old holy ladies, often related to the numerology of the 7.

A crucial point for interpreting meaning and function of the tablets and their signs is that the pit is not – as commonly considered – a sacrificial pit full of offerings but a ritual grave. In fact it was a cultic pit during the life of Milady Tărtăria but after her dead it was transformed into a consecrated grave and during a ceremony her remains as well as key fragments of her tools returned where she had spent her life. Therefore pit and pile of objects, inscribed tablets included, should not be promptly read, as generally done, as offered “means of faith” to facilitate communication with an other-worldly power or in hope of supernatural returns (votive deposition) but primarily through the category of socially significant death liturgies and burial: reflecting the social standing of deceased need, performing ancestor worship, constituting an exchange between the living and the neo-ancestor,

and make holy or at least symbolizing the continued significance of a distinctive consecrated space. At Tărtăria the two principles of fragmentation (the dismemberment of the revered body and the deliberate breakage of magic objects, then the sharing of both kinds of fragments among Milady Tărtăria's living kinsfolk as well as passing on to a third party) and accumulation (grouping and interring together in a set the emblematic parts of the body and the artifacts) worked together thereby enchainning the most recent ancestor with the living persons and reinforcing distinctive social relations and identity.

In conclusion on this point, the social life of the inscribed tablets and the other cultic artifacts has two phases: before and after the death of Milady Tărtăria. With regards to the first phase, in the present article we advanced some hypothesis regarding the cultic inventory with correlate liturgies and sovereign mysteries among them we pointed out the presence of speaking or singing figurines. We also observed that only the tablets are entire and interred as complete items, while all the other cultic objects have been submitted to an intentional and methodical breaking procedure and deposited as incomplete items. In a process that transforms matter into being, it is possible that some figurines were manufactured at the time of Milady Tărtăria's death and were used in rituals to represent the newly dead and then broken and sacrificed tying the living into the power of the neo-ancestor and by doing so asserting a claim of continuity and belongings. Besides some artifacts might have been surrounded by taboos and other might have been employed in rituals that nowadays are considered of "black magic". These occurrences pose new questions about the identity of the buried person and about the possible connections with the tablets and their signs.

The last query is: if the Tărtăria tablets are so ancient to be employed by some scholars as the icon on the *possibility* that South-eastern Europe developed in Neo-Eneolithic times its own system of writing which predated the Near East regions by 1000-2000 years, are we certain that that they are actually bearing written signs? Are we confident to consider them the earliest attestations of an old European form of writing and not mere bearers of symbols? In this article we presented some working hypothesis on the genetic code of these emblematic signs, but this complex issue is the key question for the future investigation.

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**Figure captions**

1. The group of the three inscribed tablets from Tărtăria.
2. The region where the Danube Civilization and the Danube Script flourished seven millennia ago. It should be considered that the Danube Script (framed in green) was used only in the core area of the Danube Civilization (framed in red).
3. The site of Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii.
4. The location of the prehistoric settlement of Tărtăria-Groapa Luncii.
5. The setting of the localization of the excavations.
6. The Tărtăria stratigraphy with the location of the ritual pit. Profile of the trench G made by N. Vlassa and the different levels of excavation.
7. The ritual pit on the north profile of G trench as projected in the photo profile of N. Vlassa.
8. The place of the ritual pit after J. Makkay and others is wrongly located on the south profile.
9. The page of the inventory of the National History Museum of Transylvania at Cluj which lists 12 objects under the address “groapa rituala”.
10. The group of the Tărtăria artefacts in a showcase of the National History Museum of Transylvania at Cluj.
11. Intentionally broken male figurine with truncated arms, rectangularoid head and triangular typical Vinča A mask.
12. The statuine was covert by red ochre and then with yellow one.
13. The craftsman made on the rectangularoid head of the figurine the big triangle, then 7 lines inside it and the remaining decorations which might represent the hair.
14. Deliberately broken feminine figurine of prismatic shape.
15. The material of the prismatic figurine is not very fine and includes some little sherds behind the head and on the right side of the neck.
16. Eyes of the prismatic statuette have been made pressing fingernail and fingertip.
17. The prismatic figurine was completely painted, mainly in red and partly in yellow.
18. The holes over the armpit were possibly filled with a stick in order to raise and sustain orante arms or to permit the change of a type of arm with another.
19. A partial naturalistic human face which has been mistaken for a fragment of a pot or a lid with human face.
20. A deliberately broken bracelet made by a very perishable material.
21. The point where the bracelet was intentionally broken in two parts.
22. A fragment of a pendant in form of horns of consecration of a goat.

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23. The “anchor” found at Tărtăria has the perforation running parallel and not orthogonally to the arms. Therefore, it is a very unproductive suspended object for the weaving process, but could have been worn as pendant.
24. A minute phallus-type figurine.
25. The asymmetric mask of the mignon phallus-type figurine.
26. A large figurine of phallus type.
27. A large hole is positioned on the far lower part of the mask of the massive phallus type figurine resembling an opening mouth. Are we in presence of a speaking or singing figurine?
28. An intentionally broken alabaster figurine.
29. The blacktop possibly recovered by Vlassa inside the ritual grave.
30. Organic mixture from modeling, final stage.
31. Detail of the round tablet with some calcareous areas destroyed by acid treatment.
32. The tablets were accompanied by human remains which are still preserved in Cluj, in the basement of the National History Museum of Transylvania.
33. Diagram of data obtained from the human bones belonging to the ritual pit.
34. Absolute Chronology of Early Vinča.
35. Diagram of data obtained from the animal bones found at the base of the pit house.
36. The river once ran underneath the settlement and had eroded a side of it. The very steep bank still proves this and the line of the ancient course can be traced beneath.
37. Location of the excavations made by Horedt, Vlassa and I. Paul on the slope.
38. The pit house. South profile of G cassette made by N. Vlassa (photo by N. Vlassa).
39. The perspective of Vlassa’s photo n. 3 in *Vlassa 1963: 487, fig. 3*.
40. The perspective of Vlassa’s photo n. 4 in *Vlassa 1963: 487, fig. 3*.
41. The localization of the cultic pit and the pit house.
42. Our reconstruction profile with excavation layers of trench G based on information from N. Vlassa.
43. The fragments of the big bones are of a dark brown color and some parts of them have an “exploded” appearance as if they had been burnt; but this was not the case. The inscription on the box: OS (Romanian for bones); GRI (= groapa rituală i.e. ritual pit).
44. A degenerative process of the bones has been identified on the right femur.
45. Distorted vertebra.
46. A Neolithic figurine kept at the National Museum of Athens that can give an idea of the Tărtăria
47. Our reconstruction of the connection between the ritual grave and the pit house on the basis of a revision of a Vlassa’s photo.
48. Two tablets have been worn as pendant one over the other.