

# ALL SHADES OF GRAY: THE CASE OF “VINČA SCRIPT”\*

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**Abstract:** *The problematic term the Vinča script denotes a number of incised ornaments and signs on the surface of the pottery of the Vinča culture – one of the most important “cultures” of the South Eastern European Neolithic. The modes of use and abuse of this phenomenon and the very term the Vinča script have changed through time, eloquently testifying about the paradigm shifts in the European archaeology, at the same time indicating dangerous contaminations of archaeology by pseudo-archaeological ideas. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of a script in the Neolithic cultures of South Eastern Europe surfaced occasionally as an argument for the short „historical“ chronology and Near Eastern influences. During the 1980s the idea of the Vinča script emerges again in Serbia, this time from the pseudo-scholar circles, and is massively supported by the media. The Vinča script becomes the central motif of a much larger pseudo-scholar movement. Unfortunately, over the last years the term the Vinča script – falsely represented by the media as a new and equally valid interpretive paradigm – seeps into the general public discourse, and even into archaeology itself.*

**Key Words:** *Vinča script, Danube script, Neolithic script, Etruscan script, Serbia, pseudoarchaeology.*

Original scholarly article

UDC: 003.315(497.11)(049.2/.3)  
903”634”(497.11)(049.2/.3)  
902/904:001.94(049.2/.3)

Received: 01.08.2017.

Accepted: 23.10.2017.

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\* The paper is the result of the project *Archaeological Culture and Identity in the Western Balkans* (No. 177008) founded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. This is the extended and improved version of the paper *Izmišljanje tradicije: „vinčansko pismo”* (*The Invention of tradition: “Vinča script”*), published in Serbian in the journal *Etnoantropološki problemi* V/2, 2010, 239–258.

## СВЕ НИЈАНСЕ СИВЕ: СЛУЧАЈ „ВИНЧАНСКОГ ПИСМА”\*

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**Апстракт:** Проблематични појам „винчанско писмо” односи се на извесне урезане орнаменте и знакове на керамици винчанске културе – једне од најзначајнијих „култура” у неолиту југоисточне Европе. Употреба и злоупотреба овој феномена и самој термину „винчанско писмо” временом се мењала, те с једне стране речито сведочи о променама парадигми у европској археологији, док с друге указује на опасне контаминације археологије псеудоархеолошким идејама. У XIX и у првој половини XX века идеја о писму у неолитским културама југоисточне Европе понекад се појављивала као погрешна крајња „историјске” хронологије и блискоисточних утицаја, што је као интериоритативна парадигма, потпуно срушено новом C-14 хронологијом. Осамдесетих година XX века идеја о „винчанском писму” појављује се у Србији поново, овој пута из потпуно других – псеудонаучних кругова, жестоко подржана медијском кампањом. „Винчанско писмо” убрзо постаје централни мотив многа шире псеудонаучној окрети. Нажалост последњих година појам „винчанског писма” – медијски лажно представљен као нова и равноправна интериоритативна парадигма – из псеудонауке, по принципима сјојених судова, прелива у ширу јавност, па чак и у археологију.

**Кључне речи:** винчанско писмо, дунавско писмо, неолитско писмо, етрусско писмо, Србија, псеудоархеологија.

Оригиналан научни рад

UDK: 003.315(497.11)(049.2/.3)

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Примљено: 01.08.2017.

Чика-Љубина 18–20, 11000 Београд

Прихваћено: 23.10.2017.

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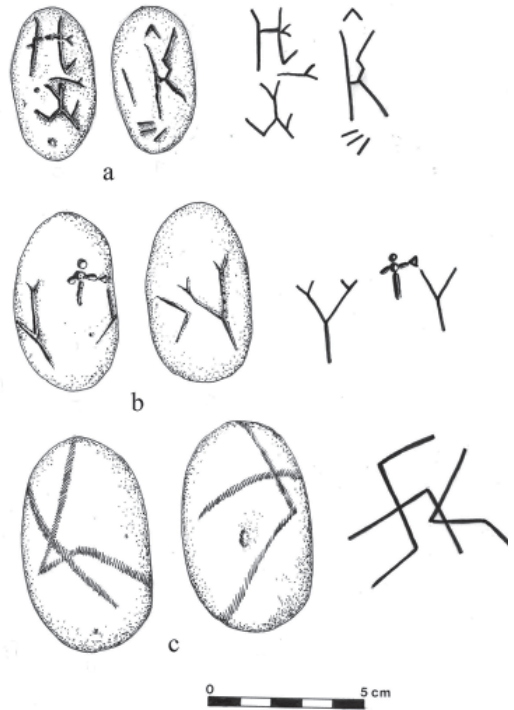
\* Овај чланак је резултат рада на пројекту Археолошка култура и идентитет на Западном Балкану, бр. 177008 који финансира Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја Републике Србије. Он представља проширену верзију рада Измишљање традиције: „винчанско писмо“ објављеног на српском језику у часопису Етноархеолошки проблеми 5(2) 2010, 239–258.

## EIGHT STONES PROLOGUE

Deciphering ancient scripts is not as difficult as it may seem. It can even be very amusing. Let's take a look at the following example:

We have in front of us eight enormously important artifacts with signs on them – a script or a proto-script that can illustrate all the complexity of the process of interpretation of prehistoric signs. These are three cylindrical seals (Figs. 1a, b, 2f) and four oval plates with incised signs (Figs. 2d, 2e, 2g, 2h), as well as one pebble with painted ornaments (Fig. 1c). All three are found at the Greek island of Corfu (site Imerolia Varvaras), in two archaeological field campaigns, in the layers preceding the Mesolithic deposits (8 000 BCE). Let us remind that the Mesolithic cave Sidari is on the same island of Corfu.

The incised signs on these seals and plates have been interpreted in various ways. Two schools of interpretation dominate. According to one group of authors, such as Cyrus Gordon and Leo Zinder, and before them even Arthur Evans, this is an example of a proto-script, the oldest layer of Aegean-Mediterranean syllabarium – a syllabic script later developed into the Linear A script and then, naturally, into Linear B and, above all, into the Cypriot script, which, according to Gordon, preserved even older layers of the Cretan linear scripts. The influences upon the Near Eastern, Phoenician script have even been postulated, concerning the Semitic connection with the Linear A (Evans 1909; Gordon



**Figure 1.** Deciphered meaning of the incisions on ancient stones from Corfu?

1971). This thesis is supported by the characteristic syllable **Y**, *ni* (one of the first to be identified in the Linear B – Amnisos). The syllable *ni* is prominent on both cylinders (Fig. 1.a, b), especially on the one on 1b, along with the syllable **H**, *ta* on the cylinder 1a. On the Figs. 2d, 2e, and especially 2g, this sign is very clear. This gave rise to further readings of the inscriptions, mainly based upon the analogies with the East Mediterranean phonetic script, above all with the Phoenician and then Etruscan. The renowned Etruscologist Giuliano Bonfante thus identified on the Fig. 2d the word **UNAU**, linking it to the Etruscan goddess Uni, and further to the Roman Iuno (Bonfante and Bonfante 2002). Leaning upon this line of argument, other more reputable, or less reputable researchers, have interpreted the Fig. 2e in various ways. Thus Max Miler first read **SW** and then **MW**, or **MU**, according to the Phoenician *mem* and *waw* (Müller 1859). This interpretation was then pursued by Helena Blavatsky in her theosophical book “The Secret Doctrine” as an irrefutable proof that the continent Mu existed and that it had been the cradle of the phonetic script (Blavatsky 1888). The similar procedure was applied by the researchers of the “Vinča script” who, on the grounds of the Cyrillic alphabet, also read the word **MU**.

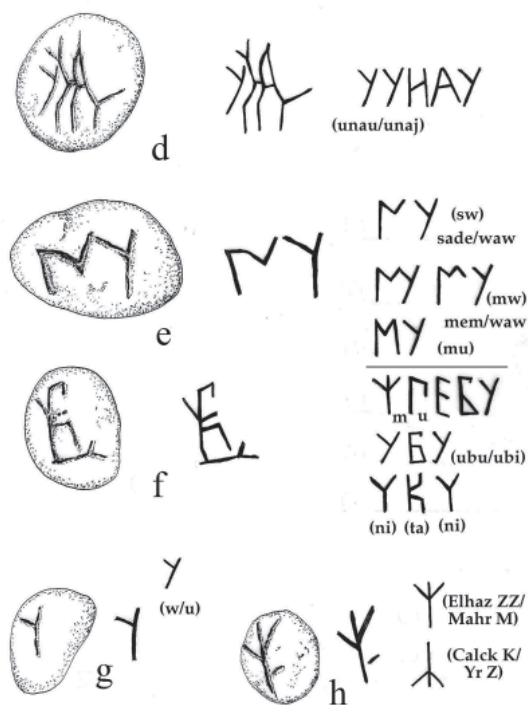


Figure 2. Deciphered meaning of the incisions on ancient stones from Corfu?

Tamaz Gamkleridze goes even further, identifying on the painted pebble (Fig. 1c) (a typical Mesolithic tradition – think about the Asylien) the old Semitic sign ~~X~~ *alep*, paradigmatically standing not only for the consonant but also for the syllabic structure of groups. The interpretations of Pešić and Kljakić, stating that this is proto-Cyrillic (letters X, K, and Y) should, in our opinion, be disregarded as superfluous.

The cylindrical seal on Fig. 2f is by far the most problematic. Ventris read it as *ni-ta-ni* (or Mitani – the name of the Near Eastern kingdom), and the Phoenician-Etruscan school saw the word **UBU** on it (Ventris 1954). The latter was then interpreted by some of our auto-didact etymologists as the Serbian word “**UBIJ!**” (“**KILL!**”),

and the stone was identified as a magical instrument for killing at distance – a practice identified among the Australian Aborigines. The third reading of this inscription is the most interesting: Miler and Bonfante see in it the combination of German runic and Etruscan alphabets, and therefore conclude that this is the missing link in the development of the runic script into the Etruscan alphabet (Müller 1859; Bonfante and Bonfante 2002). According to their interpretation, the first two letters are runic *MU*, and the other three the Etruscan *EBU* and the whole word *MU-EBU* is linked to the inscription on the Fig. 2e.

The introduction of runes in the discussion is especially important since all the researchers into the runic script (including Gwido von List) are unanimous that the Fig 2h contains the old Germanic rune (Von List 1908). There are, however, disputes whether this is the older of later runic *futhark* (alphabet) and how the whole artifact should be oriented, and four different interpretations emerge. If the sign is oriented upward, this is the powerful apotropaic rune *Elhaz* (*Z*) of the old *futhark* signifying deer, or *Mahr* (*M*) of the later one, signifying (the first) man. If, on the other hand, it is oriented downward, this is the incised rune *Calk* (*K*) of the old *futhark*, erroneously called the “rune of death”, signifying the inverted *Elhaz* rune and symbolizing a vessel, the end of a process, natural death, but also the Holy Grail; in the later *futhark* this is the rune *Yr*, *Igdrazil*, the German Tree of the World, where the entrance to the underworld is situated, and therefore again linked by some to the “rune of death”. And so on, and so on...

There is, of course, a much realistic (and truthful) explanation: I found these pebbles leasuring on a beautiful Corfu beach, there are no “signs” on them, but traces of marine fauna, and the painted ornament is part of the geological structure of the stone (Fig 3)<sup>24</sup>. Why, then, all this persiflage, this pseudo-scientific collage about eight stones with non-existent signs? In the words of Alan Sokal, the splendid critic of pseudo-science:



**Figure 3.** A pebble from a Corfu beach

<sup>24</sup> Let us consider the difference between the photograph (Fig. 3) and the diligently and accurately executed drawing of the stone (Fig. 2d). A drawing allows for a greater degree of personal interpretation than a photograph (which is in itself, we should bear in mind, also a kind of interpretation).

*“The targets of my critique have by now become a self-perpetuating academic subculture that typically ignores (or disdains) reasoned criticism from the outside. In such situation, a more direct demonstration of the subculture’s intellectual standards was required. But how can one show that the emperor has no clothes? Satire is by far the best weapon; and the blow that can’t be brushed off is the one that is self-inflicted”* (Sokal 1996, 62–64). Besides, the references in the above text are the real existing books but, of course, there is no mention in them of the eight non-existent artifacts or signs on them. Referring back to authoritative volumes in a wrong context is one of the frequent strategies of pseudo-scientists, including the ones that deciphered “the Vinča script”. The natural disinclination of readers is taken into account to check every note, especially when at the first glance they seem perfectly reputable and credible. The intention of the short satire of the eight stones is precisely to demonstrate the way in which the so-called Vinča script was deciphered. The method is fairly simple and based upon the universal human inclination (*pareidolia*) to recognize patterns even where they do not exist: a face on the surface of Mars, animals and other figures in clouds or cracks in stone, or, as we have just seen, the natural pigmentation of pebbles (Nickell 2004, 15–17; Feder 2001, 206). One of the most famous examples of “reading” of natural fractures in stone is the Runamo inscription in Sweden, read throughout decades in various ways, until the famous Danish prehistorian Jens Worsaae conclusively demonstrated that this was in fact a perfectly natural, geological phenomenon, and that the mysterious runes were not there (Andersson 1947, 135, 222, 223).

In the case of “the Vinča script”, the pattern in which the “interpreters” recognize “letters” is made up of ornaments, scratches or various signs incised onto Neolithic pottery.

On the other hand, the intention of this contribution is to point to the serious and disturbing fact that the alleged Neolithic script of South-Eastern Europe, following such free association method, without any scientific grounds, but lavishly supported by media, has fought its way through from the margins of pseudo-science to journals, forums and institutions of academic science, finally becoming a term used, unfortunately, without quotation marks, in scientific texts.

## ORIGINS OF THE IDEA

Would chemists agree today to engage in a serious debate over the theory of phlogiston? Or astronomers about the geocentric system, and geologists on the subject whether the Earth came to be in 4004 BC? Of course not. Because these are the ideas belonging to the history of science, once acknowledged, even



very consistent in their place and time, but abandoned as paradigms and even ridiculous from the modern standpoint. Why then the Serbian archaeologists agree to be involved in the dispute over "the Vinča script" (or Danubian, Lepenski Vir, as you wish)? Why do esteemed institutions (such as the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) agree to accept as valid the topic that belongs to the museum of ideas, along with the phlogiston theory or the story that pottery sherds grow of themselves in the ground?

Let us first examine the history of the idea of "the Vinča script". The Vinča culture is Late Neolithic culture named after the archaeological site near Belgrade (Garašanin 1979; 1982, Chapman 1981). It spread over the region of the Central Balkans approximately from 5300 to 4300 BCE, or according to some more recent data, to 4650 BCE (Borić 2009). During the excavations in Tordos (modern Romania) in 1879, Sophia Torma identified signs on the Neolithic ceramics, and Hubert Schmidt, by the beginning of the 20th century even compiled the reference table of the "script" from Tordoš and the Near Eastern scripts (Torma 1879; Roska 1941; Schmidt 1903, C. Renfrew 1976, 101–109). We should bear in mind, however, that this is the time of the very beginnings of the historical chronology based upon typological parallelism and the idea „*ex Oriente lux*”, i.e. the decisive influence of the Near Eastern civilizations upon the creation of the European Neolithic. In this context, the idea about the Neolithic script in the Balkans, received from the Near East, was logical, consistent and taken as one more proof of a wider chronological pattern (Renfrew 1976, 101–109, 200–205). The first researcher of Vinča, Miloje Vasić spoke of the signs on the pottery and figurines, using various terms over time: "marks" (taking them to be marks of workshops, ownership marks of families or clans), "incised signs", "letters", "letter signs", "graffiti" (Vassits1910; Vasić 1932; 1936). Although he gradually changed the chronology of Vinča, erroneously linking the site first to the Bronze Age of the Aegean, and then to Ionia of the 6th century BCE, Vasić did not explicitly state that the signs from Vinča were a real script, even though this would add a strong argument to his bizarre dating. In their "patriotic" endeavor, the pseudo-scientific adherents to the idea of the great, autochthonous, literate, pra-Serbian Vinča civilization as the fount of the European literacy, quote from Vasić's writings and tear his words from the original context and the time of their first publication (Kljakić 1993, 48–58). They obviously do not know that Miloje Vasić considered Vinča to be a late, foreign colony from the 6th century BCE, not the magnificent Neolithic culture of the Danube valley.

The later systematizations of the signs from Tordos and Vinča and their "readings" also follow the chronology of the European prehistory according to Gordon Childe. The tablets from Tartaria in Romania (Makkay 1969), from a dubious archaeological and stratigraphic context, were one of the principal arguments in favor of the preservation of the traditional historical chronological

system. J. Makkay even tried to stretch the chronology in order to link the Balkan Neolithic to the literate cultures of the Near East, in order to explain the formal similarity between the Tartaria tablets and the written monuments from the Near East (Renfrew 1976, 200–205).

The advocates of the short historical chronology in the Serbian archaeology were very reluctant to abandon the argument based upon the Tartaria tablets, but the “radiocarbon revolution” and the calibration of the radiocarbon dates rendered completely ungrounded the idea of the Vinča culture as the direct diffusionist product of the Near Eastern (proto)literate civilizations (Garašanin 1979, 207; Renfrew 1976, 93–120). The majority of the Serbian archaeologists, even when they have not agreed upon the origins of the Neolithic in South Eastern Europe, did not consider the Vinča signs as a script. The exception is Jovan Todorović, who ascribed a greater importance to the signs (Todorović and Cermanović 1961), and in 1969 spoke about the connections between the Aegean and the Danube valley, but introducing the thesis that the influences ran in the opposite direction: from the Balkans to the Near East (Todorović 1969). Of course, one of the principal reasons for the restrained approach of the majority of the Serbian archaeologists concerning the hypothetical Neolithic script is the fact that the archaeological material does not indicate at all that the incisions on the Vinča pottery are anything else than sporadic non-systematic signs. Thus the idea about a Balkan Neolithic “script” in the new archaeological and chronological context became irrelevant. Or so it seemed.

## RESURRECTION AND THE ETRUSCAN CONNECTION

How did the idea of the Vinča script resurrect? Who did breathe new life into an old theory with an esteemed position in the museum of obsolete ideas? In the year 1987, from extremely unreliable sources (daily newspapers), the reports started seeping about a sensational discovery of a certain Professor Radivoje Pešić. He supposedly deciphered not only the Vinča script but also the Etruscan one, establishing that it was the same language (and the script), which is, of course, Serbian (Pešić 1987).

But Pešić has an antecedent. It is Svetislav Bilbija, an alleged expert in the Etruscan script from the mysterious Institute for Etruscan Studies in Chicago (never heard of by any Etruscologist). Bilbija was a Serbian political exile, moving after the World War II first to Italy and then to USA (Milosavljević 2006, 34–41). In Chicago, he published the book *Old European Language and the Origins of the Etruscans* (Bilbija 1984). There he interpreted the Etruscan language, and many other ancient languages, on the grounds of the Cyrillic alphabet and



the Serbian language. He was deeply impressed by the Cretan Linear and Arthur Evans, and it is indeed very strange that he did not know that Linear B was deciphered. Bilbija wrote in 1984: "*The deciphering of the two or more systems of writing discovered in Crete has not been successful till today. These systems of writing should have testified the imagined pre-Greek culture on the island of Crete. This could not have been proven because the Greeks as an ethnic national community or a nation did not exist then*" (Bilbija 1984, 41). So Ventris and Chadwick were gravely mistaken. Bilbija introduces in his reading the Lydians, Lycians, and other peoples of Asia Minor, and the Etruscans as well, but they all spoke an old variant of the Serbian language (*rašanski*), and the Cyrillic alphabet is directly derived from their script. Bilbija's reasoning is very simple but interesting as an example of logical mistakes:

- all the Etruscan letters look like the Cyrillic ones, so it is obvious that they have the same vocal equivalents,
- the Etruscan texts, therefore, can be easily read by applying the Cyrillic alphabet,
- the Etruscan letters are created according to the Serbian words beginning with respective letters, and they also graphically resemble the given notion (*acrophony*). For example, M is like the waves of the sea (*more*), D is like a house (*dom*), U like a hook (*udica*) or a bay (*uvala*), R like a plow (*ralo*), and so on.

Once read, in spite of the odd results, the texts are then easily translated using the similar Serbian words. For example, not taking into account the diacritical signs and word divisions, if Bilbija saw *bok*, it was translated as a *book*. Translation at last! Like any other ingenious discovery, this was unspeakably simple. One of the most amusing translations by Bilbija is the one saying: "*ala sipa žar u Peruna*"<sup>25</sup> (Bilbija 1984, 143–146). This is in fact one of the rare easily readable Etruscan texts on the fresco from the Tomb of Orcus, where the names of the deities are written along with their visual representations: Aita (Hades), Phersipnai (Persephone), and Cerun (Geryon) (Wellard 1973, 141).

Bilbija must be credited for his diligence. His book is almost three hundred pages long and he applied his bizarre system on many Etruscan inscriptions. His reading of the golden tablets from Pyrgi is interesting: here the unknown owner offers his land to the ancient Serbs (*Rašani*) to multiply and prosper there without compensation. The meaning of these tablets from the end of the 6th century BCE is partially known, thanks to the parallel Phoenician text: it expresses the gratitude of the Etruscan king of Caere, Thefarie Velianas, to the goddess Uni on the occasion of the third year of his reign (Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, 65/68). The text, however, is not a literal translation into the

<sup>25</sup> Perun is one of the names of the supreme deity of the Slavs.

Phoenician, but at least one word is identified in the Etruscan: *ci*, meaning three (Robinson 1995, 152–154).

Bilbija offers extensive comments along with his translations of every word, but his hilarious interpretations, based upon formal similarities of the Serbian words to his readings of the Etruscan words, is lost in the translation into English.

### “DISCOVERY”?

And then Professor Pešić entered the scene. Several years after the publication of Bilbija’s book, the sensational news appeared in the Serbian press about Pešić’s deciphering of the Etruscan script and the Vinča one as well. In his initial public appearances and newspaper articles, Pešić did not extensively mention Bilbija’s discovery. True, in his book *The Vinča Script* (edited and published after Pešić’s death) a short and reserved review of Bilbija’s work is presented (Pešić 1995, 75–76), and his name is also mentioned in the list of illustrations. Pešić, however, readily accepts Bilbija’s method of reading the Etruscan texts, advancing it without crediting the predecessor. Vanity is obviously present in the pseudo-scientific circles as well. On the occasion of one public speech, Pešić announced: “The Etruscan word roots are Slovene, and the archaeological documentation for this is so obvious that it cannot be overlooked” (A. Palavestra, personal notes). Pešić’s reading of the tablets from Pyrgi is based upon that of Bilbija but is not the same. The transliteration differs substantially, and the translations even more. The reading is very symptomatic and politically laden. The Serbs were betrayed and abandoned by the neighbors even in the antiquity.

Pešić’s translation runs as follows:

*“And the darkness brought in all the misery inconsolable and brought in thoughts of destruction and the goddess condemned us SLOVENES who lived here and you fled away and abandoned us and all the lands RAŠANSKE and we all scattered throughout ITALY miserable and betrayed by our leaders who do not think of the generations to come and all the SLOVENES who could have had a fortunate destiny so gratitude is to these treacherous sons”*(Pešić 1995, 51–62, Pl. V)

Pešić was not as diligent as Bilbija, so he left us without commenting on every word. But the (good) Slovenes and the (bad) Italics are discovered. We also discovered that in the ancient Serbian-Etruscan *gratitude is to these treacherous sons* translates as *gulišč čva sniuf*. So the Etruscan, i.e. Rašanski language,

was now spoken by nearly everyone. Faced with such a competition, Pešić soon abandoned the Etruscan. Greater deeds were awaiting him.

But, who was Radivoje Pešić? His personality keeps eluding. Since his books do not state any biographical data, let us take a look at the reports of the others. One his biographer states: "*Radivoje Pešić (1931–1993). Born in Veles, Macedonia. In the mid 1960s moved to Italy. Became the University professor there. Discovered the Vinča script, translated the Veles book. Died in Vienna. His importance acknowledged after he died*" (Milosavljević 2006, 33). The newspapers were more abundant, but contradictory, citing many universities and institutes where Radivoje Pešić allegedly worked (Istituto di Balcanologia, Roma /Trieste; Institute for Oriental Studies, Arezzo; Istituto degli studi orientali, Milano; Department of Oriental Archaeology of the University of Florence...). One of his specialties was Oriental paleontology (Stanković 2004). The newspapers reported that because of the deciphering of the Vinča script he had to escape from Serbia to Milan and Rome (Jovanović 2004). A rich and ramified biography indeed. Unfortunately, however, his scientific biography and bibliography qualifying him for such esteemed post, are not available, so it comes as no surprise that no one from the Italian universities heard of many of the listed departments and institutes, let alone Professor Pešić himself.

### TO NEOLITHIC AND BEYOND!

Let us now take a look at the most important, pivotal work of Pešić. It is published in the book of newspaper articles edited and published after his death in 1995, *The Vinča Script* (Pešić 1995). Along with the leading article on the Vinča script, the book includes several other texts on the alphabet from Lepenski Vir, the origins of the Etruscan script (11 pages), and several variations of these topics. In the main article (8 pages), Pešić devotes the first three pages to the history of research of Vinča and its chronology, with special attention paid to the radiocarbon dates (obsolete, not calibrated), and determines the chronology of the Vinča culture "between V and IV millennia BC". He goes on to the history of research at the site Banjica (outskirts of Belgrade) and reports that 150 fragments with impressed letters and signs were found there. Pešić further cites and interprets the researchers A. Cermanović and J. Todorović. Since he uses the non-calibrated chronology, Pešić concludes that the time span between the Vinča script and the proto-Sumeric one is merely 373 years, Vinča preceding the Near Eastern example. Finally, the last three pages of Pešić's article are devoted to concluding remarks. He examined, recorded and classified the material. Here are the conclusions:

“I scrutinized in detail the fragments of pottery with letters, incisions and inscriptions from Vinča, Banjica and other archaeological sites, made transcripts and records, and classified the material. I established that the Vinča script has several versions (or schools) of its letter signs. From a large number of signs, I distinguished 57 characteristic ones. Out of this number 14 are recognizable as vowels. However, the repeated analysis showed only five that can be accepted as vowels, while the rest can be considered as variants. Among the other signs, which can be classified as consonants, variants can be identified, so their final number is 43. Consequently, the Vinča script has an alphabet of 26 letters. But, along with the letter signs, each of them having its own vocal value, in the Vinča script we encounter the ligatures as well. The ligatures are also very recognizable. We identified 23 ligatures in our table, the ones representing clearly the principle according to which the Vinča scribes created their ligatures so that on the base of this overview other, new ligatures can be recognized. It is very characteristic, and we shall stress it, that the Vinča orthography uses dots, one or several, in the middle of words, which is later recognizable in the literacy of the subsequent civilizations” (Pešić 1995, 22–23).



Figure 4. The incisions on the Vinča pottery from Banjica (after Jovan Todorović 1969, Pl. I)

There has never been a discovery so groundbreaking and yet achieved so simply, described so succinctly and supported with no arguments whatsoever, over a single passage of text: the pottery fragments examined, the letters counted, the consonants detected, as well as vowels, variants, and ligatures. Naturally, the “examination of the pottery fragments“ refers mainly to the illustrations in the papers on the Neolithic site at Banjica (Fig. 4)(Todorović and Cermanović 1961, 41–43, Pl. XXXII–XXXIV; Todorović 1969, 77–84, Pl. I–XII). For Pešić the starting point is not concrete archaeological material, but published **drawings**, in other words – interpretation, just like in the case of the stones discussed above (see

footnote 1). He then proceeds following the system of formal similarities and the method of Rorschach's inkblots, separating and systematizing "letters" from these drawings (Fig. 5). Then, through the „comparative analysis“, he concluded that similar signs exist in various scripts around the world: Brahma, Linear A, Linear B, Cypriot, Phoenician, Ancient Greek, West Semitic, Runic, Glagolitic (Fig. 6). The most obvious similarities are, of course, with the Serbian Cyrillic – as much as twenty matching letters, and „the Vinča script includes the whole Etruscan alphabet“. Pešić concludes: „It is conclusive that the other peoples, to a lesser or greater degree, directly or indirectly, took over the signs from the Vinča script for their own alphabet. Some signs are transferred with their identical shape, some are stylized, while in some cases only an inspiration was used. In any case, the Vinča script was the source of literacy for many civilizations, or numerous literacies formed under its influence, considering its most ancient date“ (Pešić 1995, 23–24).

So, this is the groundbreaking text referred to for over three decades by many national-romantic amateurs and specialists of all kinds. Probably nobody read it properly. Or nobody understood that it is not an abstract of a much larger corpus of material, a study published in Italy, for example, a study under whose voluminousness oak tables crack in prestigious libraries. It is not even a short introduction to an extensive oeuvre on comparative analysis of literacy. Nothing of the above – this is the whole famous study on the Vinča script. Here, on the three pages (large font) is the whole corpus of the alleged material, arguments, hypotheses, testing, comparative analyses, synthesis. It is all there, or more precisely, there is nothing there! A meager newspaper article, almost touchingly naive.



Figure 5. „First systematization of the Vinča script“: consonants (after Radivoje Pešić 1995, Pl. XI)

	STAROFENIČANSKO	LATINSKO	VINČANSKO
1.	┆	G	┆
2.	≡	X	≡
3.	Y	B	Y
4.	I	Z	I
5.	⊕	T	⊕
6.	↓	K	↓
7.	┆	L	┆
8.	≠	Z	≠
9.	○	C,K	○
10.	+	T	+

	KIPARSKO	LATINSKO	VINČANSKO
1.	↑	KA	↑
2.	∧	KO	∧
3.	≠	PA	≠
4.	↓	LI	↓
5.	+	LO	+
6.	⊓	MO	⊓
7.	≠	E	≠, ≠, ≠
8.	○	ŽA	○
9.	Y	U	Y

**Figure 6.** The „comparative analysis“ of scripts (after Radivoje Pešić 1995, Pl. XXII)

Once when the Vinča script was “deciphered”, everything was easy. The fascinating new directions of research were opened. Pešić and his associates could read anything. And miraculous discoveries came their way: the antiquity of literacy unexpectedly deepened, and the key proofs for it originated from the Serbian territories. The alphabet of Lepenski Vir was „read“ and the Mesolithic literacy was „discovered“. Let’s take a look at Pešić’s explanation of the ancient Mesolithic alphabet: „*At Lepenski Vir we discovered three signs. They are in stone, placed or dug in near the altar. Their shapes are A, Δ, Λ. Observed from various angles, they change their shape and suggest new contents. The changes in light in various parts of the day take part in this process, causing them to merge or separate, or*

*with the change of the position of the observer, compose a new form, which in turn gives them new contents. This process indicates eternity*“ (Pešić 1995, 13). The ingenious people of Lepenski Vir could write anything using three lines only. And the meaning changes from morning till evening, and if looked upon upside down, something absolutely new emerges. Fascinated by this discovery, Dragan Jacanović, an archaeologist from Požarevac and former chair of the Prehistoric section of the Serbian Association of Archaeologists, cried out: „*It is simply impossible that such a great civilization as Lepenski Vir did not have a system of recording and communicating by some sort of a script. Nobody gives us the right to state that the script did not exist!*“ (Jacanović 2004, 8).

This was not the end. The diligent researchers led by Pešić went further on into the past. In 1992, at the site Ljutovica, the associates of the unknown „Slavonic Institute“ from the monastery of Prohor Pčinjski by Vranje, discovered the traces of literacy from „early Palaeolithic, Acheulean epoch,



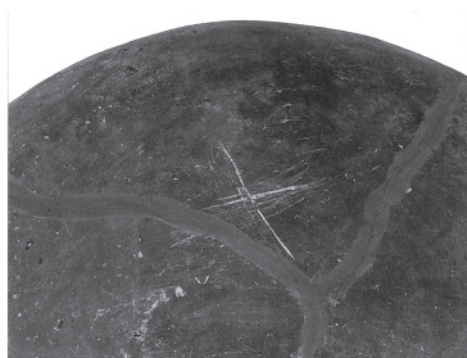
between 700 000 and 160 000 years old". The documentation was submitted by Ljubomir Kljakić, the associate of Pešić, and the daily newspapers reported on the discovery. Pešić himself was the director of research and the analysis was undertaken in the „Kljakić Archive“ in Belgrade. This was not only literacy but also a calendar and a cosmic triangle. Some signs and symbols „*have a microscopic structure and cannot be read without technical equipment*“. Some are „*written in the technique of chemical deposits*“ and, of course, „*under various light conditions, the whole surface emits different message*“ (Kljakić 1993, 182, Pl. XLI, XLII).

The imagined story from the biography of Pešić is symptomatic: the persecuted scientist expelled from the country for his discoveries by the mighty official Serbian archaeology. The survey undertaken by the journal *Galaksija* (*Galaxy*) in 1987, concerning the alleged discovery by Pešić, pointed to two interesting facts. Firstly, the large majority of the most prominent Yugoslavian archaeologists at the time (Dragoslav Srejšović, Milutin Garašanin, Alojz Benac, Borivoj Čović, Nikola Tasić and so on) rejected Pešić's idea about the Vinča script. Secondly, nobody even heard about Radivoje Pešić and his work prior to his appearance in the newspapers (Stojančev 1987).

It is significant, however, that the idea of a pra-Serbian alphabet *Vinčanica* then malignantly grew and found a fertile soil in the quasi-historical, quasi-linguistic and quasi-archaeological fairytale about a great and mighty Serbian people, offering in the past to the whole ungrateful world the fruits of its civilization (Neolithization, alphabet, metallurgy, etc.). Naturally, the model is well-known and not original at all. It almost precisely follows many other similar nationalist abuses of science, such as Kossina's Indo-Germanic theory, so skillfully used by the Nazi *Ahnenerbe* – the mighty SS organization for preservation and promotion of the German cultural heritage (Arnold 2006, 158,160). It is noteworthy that *Ahnenerbe* was very receptive for all the alternative and pseudo-scientific subjects, as long as they confirmed and promoted the idea of the German supremacy, from mystique, the search for the Holy Grail, to the expeditions to Tibet, Iceland (Thule), alternative ideas about the Ice Age, Antarctic, and so on (Levenda 2003, 167–257). Interestingly, today the supporters of the thesis of „the Serbs – the most ancient people“ continuously fight the „official“ archaeology“ in public, labeling their opponents as adherents to the „directed Nordic theory“. This is a frequent defense mechanism, known in psychology as projection. It is difficult to list all the derivatives of the „discovery“ of Pešić in the popular pseudo-scientific literature. Specialized publishers and journals are devoted to this subject. But the general public is certainly entitled to this, just as to UFOs and Atlantis.

## NOVI SAD CONFERENCE AND THE "DANUBE SCRIPT"

It is much more important, though, that some esteemed scientific institutions opened their doors to the fervent adherents of the idea of "the Vinča script", probably fearing that they might be labeled as a hard conservative dogmatist. This brought some far-reaching consequences. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (the Novi Sad branch), in association with the mysterious Californian Institute of Archaeomythology (Sebastopol, USA), organized a conference *Signs of Civilization* (May 24–29, 2004). The results of this venue can be discussed at considerable length, but the most obvious one is that the followers of Radivoje Pešić were satisfied since they considered that at the Novi Sad conference "the Vinča script" was verified in the most prestigious Serbian scholarly institution. They were however upset by the new label „the Danubian script“, used by the archaeomythologists, instead of the established term „the Vinča script“. The review of the conference was published in the very esteemed and the oldest Serbian scholarly journal *Letopis matice srpske*, written by a certain Aleksandar M. Petrović, a philosopher, and a librarian, the author of the book *The Prehistory of the Serbs*. Leaving aside the fact that Petrović established



a



b

**Figure 7.** The real „Vinča script“. Exhibit from Novi Sad (a) and pottery fragment with “formulaic group” from Crkvine (b) (after Andrej Starović (ed.) 2004, 54, and Andrej Starović 2011, Pl. VIII/1)

that the Linear B script is some 1500 years older than the Linear A, it is important to note that he praised the archaeologists, such as Bogdan Brukner and Andrej Starović, for accepting the truth of Pešić: „It is laudable that Brukner completely changed his views, thanks to reading the books of Maria Gimbutas (...) He was shining with satisfaction but did not find it appropriate to express his regret, even indirectly (...) Undoubtedly, Pešić as a scientist would have been very satisfied with this conference (...) The Vinča culture undoubtedly possessed a system of written communication accessible to everyone, confirmed Starović with the conviction brought as a fresh breeze by Win too“ (Petrović 2004, 475, 479–480).

The conference was accompanied by the exhibition of the Neolithic artifacts with the alleged signs and inscriptions. Even the most inspired viewers could hardly see the signs, let alone a script or inscriptions, on the exhibited objects and potsherds (Starović ed. 2004, 33–97). One could see geometric ornaments, certainly abstract symbols (present in any art and universal human expression), an occasional pair of crossed lines – a more or less permanent sign with various possible meanings, but no script (Fig.7a).

When in 2005 the reputable archaeological journal from Ljubljana, Slovenia, *Documenta Praehistorica*, published a group of texts devoted to Neolithic signs (the authors were selected according to the similar criteria as in the case of the conference in Novi Sad), the theoretical framework became apparent for the recognition of the Danube or the Vinča script. Marco Merlini, an Italian journalist, a member of the Archaeomythological Institute and the author of the project “The Prehistory Knowledge“, laid down in a lengthy contribution the semiotic approach to the features of “the Danube Script“, and explained why the signs of the script can hardly be discerned from ornaments: „*Writing and decoration can both be finalized to transmit messages, packages of information. The whole world outlook of prehistoric farmers was expressed in the ornamentation: the Land and Underground World, the Sky, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Plants, Animals, and People... Observant people can see complete ‘texts’ composed from ornaments: it is raining, grain is falling to the ground, it is sprouting... (Videiko 2002). (...) Some signs (for example, A, V, M, X, +, and some naturalistic motifs such as sun, rain, bird, tree) can be, depending on the context, either a written sign or decoration (Gimbutas 1991). Script signs and decoration can live together on the same object. (...) Both written signs and decoration could have been conceived for aesthetic purposes*” (Merlini 2005, 239, 241).

Following such criteria, it is indeed very easy to recognize a script anywhere, even among the clouds. The Merlini hypothesis is a good example of a bad hypothesis in terms of Karl Popper – the one that does not exclude anything and is therefore scientifically completely useless and non valid (Popper 1972), impossible to refute since, according to Merlini’s criteria, everything can be a sign, an ornament and a script at the same time.

After the same fashion, following the principle encompassing virtually everything, Merlini states: “*The Danube Script is a very archaic system of writing, so it consists probably of a mix of logograms, ideograms, pictograms and some limited phonetic elements occasionally and marginally marked. Logograms, ideograms, pictograms were mainly derived from the language of abstract symbols*” (Merlini 2005, 241). At the same time, he neglects the fact that in the case of the most ancient autonomous scripts (cuneiform, Egyptian, Chinese, Mayan) the cognitive priority was to represent words rather than sounds, and that in all the known cases the abstract form was a later stage in the development of literacy. In the words of

the linguist Vanja Stanišić: *“The simplified abstract forms represent a later phase in the evolution of the script, in the case of autochthonous literacy always preceded by image script, and this initial phase is not present in the case of the Vinča culture”* (Stanišić 1996,434). Stanišić convincingly demonstrated in several texts that the so-called “Vinča script” is, in fact, a misunderstanding at the best and that the isolated medley signs cannot constitute a script (Stanišić 1992, 1996, 2002).

Stretching of criteria allowing claiming script in almost everything is apparent in the contribution of Andrej Starović to *Documenta Praehistorica*: *„Finally, I would turn to the anthropological, and even palaeo-sociological point of the main question (script or not?): perhaps this is surprising, but it becomes irrelevant. In other words, if one wants to elaborate on the further significance of the phenomenon, then the fact that a regular system of written communication existed is satisfying”* (Starović 2005, 259). It would be interesting to know according to which “palaeo-sociological” method Starović concluded that the dilemma is irrelevant, pursuing in the same passage – without argument whatsoever – to undoubtedly state that the “Vinča script” is a regular system of written communication – in other words, a script. In the next paper, “Written signs on ceramic objects from the Vinča culture settlement of Crkvine”, Starović goes a step further. He states seven categories of signs, based upon a theoretically and methodologically not explicated “analytical module” classification: representation of numerals, ideographs, pictographs, logographs, ligatures, patterns, and “formulaic” groups. He further stresses that *“diversity of sign types in such a small collection (and especially different logographs, used to create sign groups, and even “formulaic” 9-sign groups) testifies possible semiotic value that goes beyond simple ideographic system of written symbols”* (Starović 2011,164–165, 167). Beyond indeed! In other words, Starović establishes in a circular argument the complexity of the alleged semiotic system by introducing his own categories of signs, not clarified in any way, nor scientifically verified. Far-reaching conclusions such as these offered by Starović, as well as his comprehensive list of complex categories of written signs, require a detailed theoretical foundation and methodological explication, far beyond the offered statement that the classification was executed according to “potential communicational role of the signs themselves” (Starović 2011, 164). Without this, we still remain in the domain of freehand interpretations of *Rorschach’s inkblots* (Fig. 7b).

## EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES

A script entails signs with independent meaning understandable to others without oral explanation. Colin Renfrew rightly stresses that the signs in the Balkan Neolithic, as in many other places and other times, probably were *„ a private code, significant only to the potter who made it“* (Renfrew 1976, 204).

According to Ranko Bugarski, a script is „*a system of communication among people via conventional visible signs, especially linguistic*“, and „*linguistic units on various levels of language structure can be considered as script*“ (Bugarski 1997:10). A script mainly means WORDS that can be PRONOUNCED, not notions. There is, of course, a notional script, but it is not abstract. Even if we accept more than dubious material and „recognition“ of signs among the abundance of ornaments, symbols, and accidental scratches, the Vinča signs are too abstract and geometrized even to be a notional script (where are notions and words?). On the other hand, these signs are too scarce, heterogeneous, isolated and unsystematic, without a single text, sentence, or even a word, to be a phonetic script.

The „Vinča script“ is merely one of the loops in the long chain of various invented traditions, always flourishing at the times of challenged identity of a community, as a surrogate of legitimacy and an element in national and social cohesion (Hobsbom 2002a, 22; Hobsbom 2002b, 442; Radić 2005; Radić 2016). Eric Hobsbawm says, explaining the use of study into the invented traditions by historians: „Invented traditions are important symptoms and therefore indicators of the problem otherwise undetected and of the development difficult to identify and date by other means. They are evidence“ (Hobsbom 2002a, 22). Although pseudo-scientific narratives are themselves evidence of a wider social problem, the one named by Umberto Eco as „Ur-Fascism“ (Eco 1995), for the „Vinča script“ there is no evidence. In the words of Garrett Fagan: „In the final analysis the claims of pseudoarchaeology are best judged by their results. Thereby is the genre’s ultimate characteristic revealed: the zealous pursuit of the investigative dead-ends (...) They are signpost on the road to nowhere.“ (Fagan 2006, 43–44)

Someone has to say out loud that this is, from the ingenious „discovery“ of Pešić on, a case of the Emperor’s new clothes. On the grounds of the evidence presented, it is conclusive that the Vinča script does not exist. Not even a proto-script. After the exhibition in Novi Sad and the published catalogue, I am inclined to say that even signs are sporadic. It is more plausible that Pešić & co. found their script on the pebbles from a beach.

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## Све нијансе сиве: случај „винчанског писма”

Резиме

Проблематични појам „винчанско писмо” односи се на извесне урезане орнаменте и знакове на керемци винчанске културе – једне од најзначајнијих „култура” у неолиту Југоисточне Европе. Употреба и злоупотреба овог феномена и самог термина „винчанско писмо” временом се мењала, те с једне стране речито сведочи о променама парадигми у европској археологији, док с друге указује на опасне контаминације археологије псеудоархеолошким идјама. У XIX и у првој половини XX века идеја о писму у неолитским културама југоисточне Европе понекад се појављивала као потврда кратке „историјске” хронологије и билскоисточних утицаја, што је као интерпретативна парадигма, потпуно срушено новом C-14 хронологијом. Осамдесетих година XX века идеја о „винчанском писму” појављује се у Србији поново, овог пута из потпуно других – псеудонаучних кругова, жестоко подржана медијском кампањом. „Винчанско писмо” постаје централни мотив много ширег псеудонаучног покрета, где се откриће писма везује за праисторијску југоисточну Европу (наводно још од палеолита, мезолита, Лепенског Вира, преко етруског, лидијског и других истинских писама, па све до ћирилице и латинице). Наравно, такозвано „винчанско писмо” у немирним временима пољубљених етничких идентитета и политичких превирања на Балкану, прераста у еклатантни пример злоупотребе прошлости у дневнополитичке сврхе. Нажалост последњих година појам „винчанског писма” – медијски лажно представљајен као нова и равноправна интерпретативна парадигма – из псеудонауке се, по принципу спојених судова, прелива у ширу јавност, па чак и у археологију.