



Review Article

‘Another brick in the wall’: a step toward a better understanding of the genesis and evolution of the Neolithic in south-eastern and central Europe

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Following a time in which dating through the radiocarbon method seemed to take a back seat, recent decades have seen an uptake again. This is due to new technologies used in sample analysis and the new-found ability to combine radiocarbon data with archaeological information via Bayesian statistics, a method devised and developed largely by experts from the United Kingdom. This methodology is now used by most researchers with the purpose of establishing a thorough chronology in archaeology (Bayliss 2015: 677–80).

One of the important projects that produced a significant impact on the archaeological research in central and south-eastern Europe was named ‘The Time of Their Lives’ (ToTL), a project initiated and led by Alasdair Whittle (2018) and Alex Bayliss. Through the obtained results, along with the immediate effect on pinpointing and adjusting a number of cultural synchronisms, the project itself became a catalyst toward creating a standalone field in archaeology and generated a path of inquiry followed later by many researchers from this corner of Europe. One of the prime examples is *Relatively absolute*, which sums up the results of a number of similar national projects.

And so, it is not a surprise—nor happenstance—that the first chapter is written by Whittle himself who explains the main scopes and accomplishments brought on by the ToTL project towards building a precise chronology. This has contributed to a better understanding of the genesis and evolution of cultural processes and of local, zonal and regional diversity. Yet the chapter also takes a pragmatic tone by indicating the main stages that are to be followed. Starting with the necessity of establishing an internal chronology of habitations sites and followed by defining the traits of the archaeological inventory found in households through creating a typology and serialising which can reveal variables within the settlements but also local and regional nuances. All of these, coupled with modelled ^{14}C data, can provide a more precise outline of cultural areas and of their diversity, which can in turn contribute to a more robust chronology of each region but also to connecting the various Balkan sequences into one.

The next chapter tackles a current theme in the research of the early Neolithic in the Balkans: the impressed pottery ware of the Aegean Neolithic and its connection with painted earthenware from the Thessalo-Macedonian area. By using a methodology that is based on analysing a site's earthenware features, levels and contexts that provide absolute data from Thessaly and Macedonia, the authors discovered the earlier presence of this type of decoration in western Macedonia (beginning with 6350 BC), as opposed to Thessaly (after 6200 BC) and the eastern Aegean (after 6000 BC). This demonstrates that it does not originate in the Near East, as was believed until recently, but rather in the north-western Aegean, from where it spread to other areas, including Ionia and the Adriatic.

Furthermore, the results show that the existence of undecorated ceramic (monochrome) at the beginnings of the Neolithic (EN I) in Thessaly, should perhaps be questioned, especially considering that the monochrome horizon is wholly absent from Macedonia. At Nea Nicomedeia, imprinted decorations appear in connection with white painted ones. These observations carry great weight when it comes to reassessing some of the chronological systems of the Neolithisation process in the Carpathian area; especially in relation to the early stages of the Starčevo-Criş culture, the beginning of which has been connected to the monochrome horizon (also called AnzabegovoIa, or by some Protosesklo) or 'Frühkeramik' from Thessaly and was located in the Danube area between 6100 and 6000 BC (Lazarovici 2024: 7, 27).

The next four chapters detail the research made in the region that is now Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and Macedonia. The first of these presents an approach of the absolute chronology of the Neolithic tells from Pelagonia. After a short overview of the history of research in the region, the focus shifts toward the chronologies of tells that benefit from ^{14}C data, including the tell sites: Topolčani, Mogila, Porodin Veluška Tumba, Tumba Porodin, Markovi Kuli, Trn, Optičari Tumba, Vrbjanska Čuka and Vlaho. Despite the relatively low number of ^{14}C data—some of which are without a certain stratigraphic position—but based on some of the data from the old levels of these tells, in accordance with the typological characteristics of materials, a conclusion is reached that the oldest sites are those from Topolčani and Vlaho, sites that are part of the first wave of Neolithisation. Recently (Naumov & Reingruber 2024), these data and new examples were used in Bayesian modelling, which led to much more precise estimations of the tell chronology from Vlaho (between 6400 cal BC (as TaQuo) and 5980 cal BC), Porodin-Veluška Tumba (between 6000 cal BC (as TaQuo) and 5820 cal BC—last time from a secure unit) and Vrbjanska Čuka (between 6030 and 5760 cal BC). These dates indicate that the Neolithic began earlier in Pelagonia, as the start of the Vlaho settlement follows those from Mavropingi, Reveria and Paliambela, a contemporaneity that is confirmed by some of the earthenware traits. When viewed as a whole, these data can reveal possible pathways of sharing innovations towards Pelagonia and the surrounding area. Thus, the results paint the period between 6000 and 5700 cal BC as a dynamic one, not only for Pelagonia, but also for the entirety of the Balkans.

The second chapter with a Yugoslavian topic presents the analysis of further ^{14}C data, here from The Republic of North Macedonia, from Cerje-Govrlevo, a site situated to the north of Pelagonia, on the southern slopes of the Vodno mountain. These reveal that the structures that overlay the defence trench of the site of Trench II can be dated, through average data, between 5950 and 5850 cal BC, or between 6000 and 5750 cal BC (95.4% probability).

It is estimated that the trench itself was created before 6000/5950 cal BC, which suggests that the beginnings of the Cerje-Govrlevo settlements are at least partially contemporaneous with those from Amzabegovo and Veluška Tumba and may be even older than the one from Vrbjanska Čuka, northern Pelagonia. These similar results support the conclusions of the previous study, according to which communities of settlers and farmers chose first higher altitude areas and colonised the lower parts of the territory only centuries later. Unfortunately, much like the previous study, in the absence of detailed analyses of archaeological materials, the absolute dates cannot be correlated with typological stages of the archaeological record of the site.

The next chapter is a contribution by our Serbian colleagues and opens with the presentation of a site from central Serbia: Jablanica. We must mention here, that at the start of the twentieth century, Miloje Vasić left a great mark on this site's research as one of the most important European scholars as well as one of the first in the Balkan region to have applied the stratigraphic method of researching multi-strata settlements. The new surveys discussed here—although they targeted a rather limited surface—establish that the stratigraphical sequence includes five habitational horizons with the last one destroyed by agricultural activity. The ^{14}C data come from short-lived samples and underwent Bayesian modelling while the model itself was built using stratigraphic information. The data place the beginning of the settlement in the now-excavated area between 4815 and 4711 cal BC (at 95% probability) and the end between 4776 and 4634 cal BC (at 95.4% probability). This is contemporaneous with the levels that are between 4.5m and 3.5m in the settlement from Vinča, during the C and D1 stages of the eponymous culture. The study then concludes with an analysis of animal bones and bone tools.

The second Serbian contribution is based on new research from Potporanj and Vršac-At. Through the analysis of the data from the two locations, a much-debated theme of the past decades resurfaces: that of considering relative and absolute chronology in southern Banat, with major implications for the correlations of the relations of cultures and cultural entities from Banat, Transylvania and the Pannonian area. Even though some excavated material is published, such as in Felix Milleker's research (1938), the lack of stratigraphic observations severely impedes the outlines for coherent conclusions. Even the excellent research of Rastko Rašajski and Šarolta Joanović unfortunately also failed to bring further clarification as most of the materials remain unpublished. Given this underwhelming context, the initiative of the Serbian colleagues proved to be more than welcome. New and recent surveys and research allowed for important observations, especially regarding the absolute chronology of the two sites that existed between 5331 and 5207 cal BC or 5188 and 5122 cal BC (horizon IV at Potporanj) and 4720 and 4673 cal BC (end late Neolithic occupation at Vršac-At). Correlating to Vinča culture terms: between the middle of phase Vinča A (between 9m and 8.8m at Vinča) and Vinča D1. These dates also indicate that the end of the Potporanj settlement is within the Gradac stage and that the site at Vršac-At begins during the Vinča D1 stage. Although, for now, these dates have only limited value, the future analysis of materials with the 'correspondence method' in correlation to the modelled ^{14}C data, will provide important observations towards both the evolution of Vinča earthenware styles and other cultural entities that are specific to the Banat area.

As inferred from the values of the radiocarbon data, the surveys were performed in another area of the ^{14}C plateau. To establish the entire cultural evolution of the sites from Vršac-At, it seems best to complete the current study of materials that reveal the stratigraphic information found in Rašajski and Joanović's research. Along with few pieces of Starčevo-Criş earthenware (as discovered in several areas in 1976 and 1977), these materials point to a high ratio of Vinča C2 earthenware, but also elements of Turdaş and Foeni. Some of the shapes and decorations from At, which appear on other sites from Banat (Lazarovici 1979; Lazarovici & Lazarovici 2006: 569–71), have their best parallels in the Turdaş culture from Transylvania; the pinpointing of their stratigraphic and chronological position could provide further knowledge to the purpose, intensity and particularities of the relations between the cultural entities originating from these two provinces in the late Neolithic. Alongside these, painted ceramic materials and typical shapes with analogies at Foeni and other sites (Braungart 2021, 2022) could contribute towards filling out the cultural tableau that they are a part of, while adding to our understanding the cultural processes that have taken place in Banat and the surrounding areas (Draşovean 2006, 2021, 2022).

Katarina Botić's contribution concludes the former Yugoslavian part of the book and presents the current status of the absolute and relative chronology of the Late Neolithic in northern Croatia. First the history of research of the relative chronology is outlined then the scope of the study, which is to discuss the conclusions of the chronology of the area's Neolithic impact on a regional and micro-regional level based on ^{14}C data. After an analytic presentation of the Sava-Drava-Danube interfluvial data, a possible chronology is introduced, despite the lack of dates for each site, but based on the combination of the results of the Bayesian modelling of ^{14}C data with the archaeological record. In this the author places the Neolithic's beginnings around the start of the sixth millennium and concludes that the transformations that took place to the north and south of the Drava after 5400 BC remain mostly unknown. Despite this, it was possible to make observations about the cultural evolution and its regional aspects: Vinča A, early Linearbandkeramik (LBK) and the Ražište style in the central area and in Baranya County; Korenovo followed by Brezovljani in the Moslavina-Bilogora area and classic Sopot with significant Vinča influences on the eastern side. Along with these observations, the author mentions that the current state of research is affected by the absence of a stratigraphic context and a majority of ^{14}C data, by a reduced quantity of data originating from short-lived samples but also by the fact that the data were used without taking micro-regional diversity into account. In Botić's opinion, a good start would be the development of a complete chronology of the important sites and their inclusion into the micro-regional chronology.

The last chapter of the book confirms the truth in P. Ovidius Naso's verse: *finis coronat opus* (the end crowns the work). It consists of an encompassing synthesis of the current stage of research on establishing the absolute chronology of the Neolithisation process, of the Sopot culture genesis and the Sopot/LBK interconnections in western Hungary. This effort, which began with the ToTL project, was successfully continued with projects financed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office of Hungary. Based on research performed in the last decades—with the ones from Balatonszárszó-Kis-erdei-dűlő, Tolna-Mözs-Közégy-Csádés-földek, Alsónégy, Szederkény-Kukorica-dűlő and Versend-Gilencsa standing out—important contributions to the understanding of the start and

development of the Neolithic life have been made. They show how communities in this area evolved as well as the cultural processes that took place in the middle of the sixth millennium, characterised by an increase in population and number of settlements, which encouraged the further expansion of the Neolithisation process in central Europe. Beside these, absolute data provided us with the emergence date of the Sopot communities. By expanding the application of this methodology to other sites on the banks of the Danube, it is estimated that they will contribute to a better understanding of the expansion of this culture along the river. The ^{14}C data have also greatly helped with discovering the connections with the LBK and Lengyel communities.

Contrary to what one would expect, the book does not end with a synthesis of conclusions. This task is thrust upon the reader. Even so, this volume is not only a very useful and practical presentation of the current state of research but also an encouragement to apply modern methodologies in archaeological research at a large scale, from excavations based on stratigraphic criteria to multidisciplinary analyses of found materials, in such a way that, to paraphrase G.W.F. Hegel, 'we can reach the result while also taking in the road itself'.

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