



Book Reviews

DIE NEOLITISCHES TELLSIEDLUNG IN GÄLÄBNIK BY JURAJ PAVÚK AND ANETA BAKAMSKA

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This volume neatly bookends two of the principal features of the Aegean–Balkan–Carpathian ('ABC') Neolithic – the endless debates over typo-chronology and the immense richness of settlement finds. In the former, the tell stratigraphy of Argissa Magula, in Thessaly, Greece, casts a long shadow over Balkan Neolithic studies. Vladimir Miložić's sequence of five stages for the Early and Middle Neolithic (Aceramic; Monochrome; Proto-Sesklo; Pre-Sesklo; and Sesklo) is largely responsible for three issues for the spread of the Balkan Neolithic: the existence of an aceramic stage in Greece and the Balkans as well as in the Near East, the existence of a monochrome stage without painted pottery in the Balkans and the possibility of a threefold division of the Early Neolithic in the Balkans. While we cannot state for certain that all three possibilities have been conclusively falsified for the Balkans, this is now the most likely interpretation of the mass of new site evidence accumulated since Miložić's excavations in the 1950s. Unfortunately, the third dubious possibility is the basis for Pavúk and Bakamska's otherwise impressive monograph on the site of Gălăbnik. Moreover, throughout post-Miložić discussions of Greek and Balkan Neolithic chronology, there has been a virtually unchallenged equation between 'pots' and

'people' that has long since been discarded in other regions of Europe and beyond. Welcome to the Balkan Neolithic!

The Gălăbник volume, dedicated to the late Mikhail Chohadzhiev, is divided into two parts. After the introduction in Chapter 1 (46 pp), Chapters 2–7 present the site and its impressive finds (220 pp). The second part (Chapters 7–12: 98 pp) is of a very different character and represents a synthesis of Juraj Pavúk's long-held views about the chronology and development of the early farming period in the Balkans – views which ignore AMS dates and never mention the ten AMS dates from Gălăbник! It is a sign of the importance given to Pavúk's views that only the second part is summarised in English (pp.395–403) and Bulgarian (pp.404–413). The English version is, in the main, well translated, featuring the memorable 'demonic diffusion' by which Childe explained the spread of the Neolithic into the Balkans (p.400). In view of the unfortunate lack of English summary of the site and its finds, I shall focus this review on the site and finds, leaving those readers fascinated by the dubious intricacies of the regional variations of the Proto-Starčevo group to consult the published summary. The maps on pages 302, 344 and 374 show the distributions of the main pottery groups discussed in the book, while the type-fossils associated with these groups are illustrated on pages 294, 340–342. The overall conclusion of a two-stage process of Neolithization from the South, following Raiko Krauß *et al.*'s (2017) AMS chronology and caught exactly in Paul Halstead's phrase 'Like rising damp', is summarised on Karte 9 (p.374): the first stage pertains to sites dated before 6050 cal BC, the second sites dated before 5900 cal BC.

Tell settlement was a characteristic of the Macedno-South Bulgarian zone, with relatively few tells settled in the Early Neolithic to the north and west. One such is Gălăbник, in the upland Radomir Basin (680 masl) near the modern town of Pernik in the Upper Struma valley, which lies intermediate between the Bulgarian Thracian lowland, the upland Sofia Basin and the Vardar valley. The key site in its microregion, Gălăbник was investigated by a joint Bulgarian – Slovakian project led by Pernik Museum and the Archaeological Institute, Nitra, with excavations from 1979–1993, mostly using pensioners and school students but sadly no students of archaeology. Gălăbник is the first site with all finds and architecture to be fully published from the Struma valley. Indeed, it could be claimed to be one of only two fully published tells in the Balkans – the other being Sitagroi-Fotolivos. We continue to await the full results of such key sites as Karanovo, Asmashka Mogila and Kovachevo.

The 4-m stratigraphy, comprising ten building horizons (BHs), shows that Gălăbник is one of the longest-lasting early farming settlements in the Balkans. The site stratigraphy is divided into two phases – the Gălăbник (or Proto-Starčevo) group, comprising BHs I–VI, with a transitional BH VII to the Starčevo group (BHs VIII–X) – a division first made by Srejović at Lepenski Vir. Gălăbник

constitutes the first substantial excavation of a West Bulgarian tell settlement using open area excavation. Three large areas comprising a total of 1356m² allow the study of over 20 complete or partial house-plans. In the Gălăbnik phase, the tell covered a diameter of 300 m (9–10 ha), while active river deposition reduced the Starčevo phase settlement to a 200 m diameter (6–7 ha). However, the settlement size may have been even bigger, since an off-tell Early Neolithic culture level was found under sterile alluvial sediments at depths of 1.2–1.7 m. This instance of off-tell settlement is important, since few excavators look for this kind of practice.

The critical issue for excavation was the depth of the modern water-table at 3.7–3.9 m. The earliest horizons – BHs I–III – were explored only by a small sondage excavated below the water-table, with water-pumps in constant operation. This meant that BH IV was the most productive layer of the Gălăbnik phase because it lay above the level of the water-table whilst still maintaining excellent timber preservation. At the end of the Gălăbnik phase, there was a 2-metre-high tell but subsequent hydrological changes meant much more alluvial and colluvial deposits on the upper layers of the tell than before (the key site section is Plan 17, on pages 64–5, covering BHs. IV–X). This change coincided with the change from the use of Gălăbnik Group pottery to the use of Starčevo pottery. One of the biggest failings of the monograph is the lack of palaeo-environmental investigations, not least sedimentological studies of the tell levels. The authors seek to correlate human activity, climate fluctuations and river changes to wood preservation at Gălăbnik (p.29) but do not present enough precise scientific data to achieve this. A great opportunity is missed for the creation of a floating dendro-chronological sequence despite the preservation of structural timber and wooden hooks, shovels and hafts in BH V. But it is clear that the tell developed in an active wetland environment, as did several other sites in South Bulgaria (eg, the Pernik and Ezero tells and the Kardzhali site).

The ten Building Horizons are summarised in the introductory chapter (pp.38–44, with some informative site photos). BHs in each phase were partly destroyed by later pits – especially the Bronze Age and Medieval pits cutting the Starčevo houses, none of which survived complete. But there were also many Starčevo pits, unusually containing few sherds but mostly burnt daub fragments. This is one of the few cases of support for my notion of the exchange of pit material with the (ancestral) cultural sphere (Chapman 2000): the pits were dug to obtain building clay, while the fill contained fragmented house remains. Earth to earth, if not ashes to ashes But the Starčevo pits were not so destructive of the Gălăbnik Group houses, which survived as complete houses of up to 10 x 4 m in size, with almost square houses closely paralleled at tell Karanovo. Moreover, wooden remains of the earlier houses survived as patches of wood sealed by yellow plaster.

Despite continuity in the use of post-holes, yellow plaster floors and pitched roofs lacking central posts, there is one major difference between the Gălăbник Group and Starčevo Group houses. In the former, the walls were made of several layers of clay slabs – a technique specific to the Struma valley and called ‘*Stampflehmtechnik*’ (in Bulgarian, ‘*glinobitna*’; the closest French equivalent is ‘*pisé*’), with support provided by posts set in low clay walls. However, the development of wattle-and-daub techniques in the Starčevo group provided greater structural stability and this technique became much more widespread than *glinobitna*. The Starčevo-phase house daub often contained fragments of mussel shells, indicating an enchainment link between houses and the river.

The most interesting social facet of the Gălăbник houses was the varying intensity of house superposition – the construction of a house directly above an earlier version, as first identified by Bailey for Copper Age Ovcharovo (Bailey 1996). All of the house plans from BHs III to X are shown on a single diagram colour-coded by BH (Plan 19, p.66), revealing that almost all superposition occurred in the Gălăbник phase, with up to four re-buildings of the ‘same’ house. This is suggestive of household continuity in dwelling and possibly land and artefact ownership. The group of houses in BH IV comprised House 278 – twice as big as any other house – and two other smaller structures – perhaps a ‘farmstead’ or domestic grouping. A possible ‘street’ has a surface made of a yellow-green clay layer.

The architectural report for Gălăbник is not as rich and well-illustrated as the report on the Early Neolithic houses in the Balgarchevo volume (Perniceva-Perets *et al.* 2011) but it contains many insights into the site *habitus* and the connections between Gălăbник and adjacent regions – especially the *glinobitna* technique typical for the Struma valley and the square houses so characteristic of South Bulgaria. The Gălăbник houses show both continuity and change between the two site phases.

Turning to objects, one of the most intriguing questions concerns the impact of the strongly contrasting site formation processes in the two site phases on the artefact assemblages presented in this volume. Unfortunately, there are only two comments on this key theme. First, it was noted that far more Starčevo Group coarse ware vessels were secondarily burnt than those of the Gălăbник Group, since there were few burnt houses in the latter. Secondly, the contrast between the paucity of ground and polished stone objects in the Gălăbник Group was because later dwellers took the tools for re-use from relatively undisturbed houses, as compared with many such tools in Starčevo Group houses because the houses were more strongly burnt and therefore inaccessible. This observation begins to approach the debate over whether ‘burnt house assemblages’ represented ‘living assemblages’ or were created on the stage of a house-to-be-burnt for multiple reasons (see Gaydarska 2020, 52–3, 193–4).

It is acknowledged that the socially significant differences in fine ware decoration between the two phases provided the definitions for the phases – the white-on-red painted decoration of the Gălăbnič phase (BH I–VI), the white-on-red and red-on-red painted wares of the Early Starčevo group (BHs VII–VIII) and the classic black-on-red painted style of the Late Starčevo group (BHs IX – X). But a second major issue is the extent of non-ceramic differences between the site's two main phases, since these non-ceramic objects were often key elements of the household *habitus*.

Despite the absence of statistical data on this issue, two patterns stand out from the descriptions of the multiple object types. There is strong evidence for continuity of use between the two phases for most types, especially the figurines, the triangular and rectangular lamps (here termed 'altars'), the pintaderas and 'sling-bullets', the bone and antler tools as well as the ground and polished stone tools and ornaments. However, at the more detailed type level, there were often differences between Gălăbnič and Starčevo Group usage, as in the triangular lamps, of which all Type A examples occurred in BHs I–VI, while Type B examples were almost all found in BHs VII–X. The collection of 46 zoomorphic figurines is one of the largest groups found in the entire Balkan Early Neolithic and underlines its difference from the Thessalian Early Neolithic, which lacks zoomorphic images (Nanoglou 2008). It is rare to find an object class not in both phases, as with the clay loom-weights found only in the Starčevo group and suggestive of more intensive, probably household textile production. A rare case of quantitative data comes in Johnson Fish's petrological analysis of ground and polished stone tools, which shows a generalised collection strategy from mostly Upper Struma basin sources in both phases, with no single rock type reaching 20% in either phase. While 12 rock types were used in both phases, five were restricted to the Gălăbnič phase and nine to the Starčevo phase. These data do not betoken major changes in the *habitus* from one phase to another.

What is fascinating about the objects is the tendency to individualisation in the handled cups, the decorated lids, the pintaderas and the loom-weights – all examples of potentially personal objects used by specific individuals. This tendency pertains to the most famous nephrite object from Gălăbnič – the 'sceptre' (see image, above). Found in the BH VII culture level without a more specific context, this comprised a very large, partly broken faceted axe over 36cm long, worked from a large nephrite block. The 'sceptre' has correctly been interpreted as a symbol of power – unique among the nephrite industry which is typical of South West Bulgaria and the Ovče Polje. Individualised objects can also be recognised in the fired clay, bone and polished stone rings, a clay rattle whose lack of painted decoration and precise shape suggests it may have been a toy, a bone metapodial point with a stylised (?anthropomorphic) head, a white-on-red painted anthropomorphic vessel from BH V with modelled eyes within the painted design and the rare

examples of miniature chairs and tables, including a chair from the Starčevo House 178. All of these objects had close and personal links to individuals in the settlement.

This can hardly be more true for the most extraordinary object in the entire Gălăbniț settlement – the necklace(s) of a combined length of over 14 m comprising over 10,000 beads. The necklace was found in an area of 1 m² in a Starčevo-phase House 139 (BH VIII), next to a vessel containing chickpeas and a flat shell ring (?*Spondylus*). The stone beads were made of serpentinite, limestone, illite and volcanic tuffs, while the shell beads were of *Spondylus* and other species. Several proposals for the reconstruction of the necklace are presented, including a set of six necklaces each with different bead materials. The observation that one group of perforated shell beads was burnt and in bad condition merely underlines that the beads were collected from many different sources, including one or more burnt houses and curated as a site treasure enchaining much of the community.

It is important to return to the pottery assemblages at Gălăbniț in order to place it in a wider context. The general picture of Anatolian, Greek and Balkan white-on-red painted wares as presented at the 2021 Oxford workshop, organised by Tania Dzhahfezova, was that painted wares usually formed 5–10% of a site assemblage. The high figure of 33% fine wares in BH IV (17% white-on-red, 16% monochrome burnished wares) shows a strong emphasis on display, food serving and consumption that underlines the social significance of Gălăbniț in its regional context. The main novelty in the Oxford meeting was the presentation of several technical analyses of fabrics and pigments. This was not a focus of the Gălăbniț study, whereas Stefan Chohadzhiev's (2007) chemical analyses of white paints identified calcium oxide in the Gălăbniț Group and silica dioxide in the Starčevo Group. Vuković and Perić' study of the motor skills used by pot-painters of red-on-red and black-on-red Starčevo vessels showed higher motor skills for black-paint users and greater skill variability for red-paint users, with the red-paint users declining over time as a 'failed tradition'. The overall conclusion of the Oxford meeting was a huge variability in the regional sequences of monochrome and painted styles. This result confirms John Nandris' (1970) characterisation of the First Temperate Neolithic as united by coarse ware styles and non-ceramic objects (slotted antler sickles, rod-head figurines, bone spoons, etc.) and differentiated by regional fine ware styles showing regional identities. This result also applies to Gălăbniț, with strong continuities between the two main phases in coarse wares and most non-ceramic object types and the principal difference in fine ware decorative styles marking their changing regional identities in the sixth millennium cal BC.

The principal merits of the Gălăbniț volume are the presentation of the tell stratigraphy and architecture, the full range of small finds and the massive corpus of illustrated pottery – surely the basis for future volumetric analyses of vessel types. But the old Balkan failing of a lack of a

summary and interpretation at the end of each chapter makes it hard to draw general conclusions from the monograph. Those who like to chew the fat on painted wares, triangular altars or zoomorphic figurines will surely appreciate this book more than the general reader seeking enlightenment on Neolithic lifeways. The Gălăbni volume stands, Janus-like, at the end of traditional typo-chronological studies and the transition to more scientific, more analytical and more social accounts of early farmers. This reviewer for one hopes the transition will come about sooner than later.

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