

SOME ANCIENT SYSTEMS VERSUS THE ALPHABETIC FORM OF WRITING**Mihaela Jipa****PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

Abstract: The standard proof of the linear/alphabetic writing – from the second millennium B.C, precisely 1700 B.C., the sphinx with the proto-sinaitic inscriptions made by the help of a linear alphabet with Egyptian background – is just a late stage in the whole history of writing, due to the fact that, millennia before, the prehistoric communities had been using mostly sacred signs/symbols in order to deliver messages in a visual manner. During the last decades, the term “Danube civilization” has been used as a synonym for Old Europe (M. Gimbutas), emphasizing the stage of that cultural evolution of an agrarian lifestyle, with its own technology, writing system and a complex belief system. However, the Danube script decline period is considered to be the beginning of the third millennium B.C. and despite various attempts to decipher its code, it is still a mystery. This might be one of the reasons for so many consider it to be a dead-end issue, not to underline that the notion of an Old Europe script goes against many of the traditional views when it comes to archaeology or the development of civilization. An obvious problematic part for the group of scientists militating in favor or against the Danube script – being them archaeologists or linguists – is the fact that usually, archaeologists lack any kind of approach to the writing technology, as a cultural process and as a working-system, and the linguists lack the archaeological insight about the way ancient societies developed and how their culture motivated the action of introducing writing.

Keywords: cultural symbolism, archaic forms of writing, alphabetic writing, abstract signs, nuclear writing

The standard proof of the linear/alphabetic writing – from the second millennium B.C, precisely 1700 B.C., the sphinx with the proto-sinaitic inscriptions made by the help of a linear alphabet with Egyptian background – is just a late stage in the whole history of writing, due to the fact that, millennia before, the prehistoric communities had been using mostly sacred signs/symbols in order to deliver messages in a visual manner.¹

That system of writing having a letter for each sound made the great step from the cuneiform systems – signs on clay, c. 2700 B.C. – or from the Egyptian hieroglyphs to the alphabetic writing. Before 3000 B.C., the pictographic writing had been commonly used - that small drawings representing the basic objects and others suggesting the most valuable concepts for that community (as in Mesopotamia and Egypt) - then followed the syllabic writing – a type of phonographic way of writing, in which one sign corresponds to a syllable, as the Akkadian, Babylonian, Hittite (of the ancient Anatolien people) and the Cretan. Still, even in those times, some words had been pictographically represented, differing accordingly to individual texts and making up to 60 per cent of the total amount of signs (the signs with phonetic/syllabic value being around 40 per cent of the written texts).²

¹ Haarmann, 2002: 74-76.

² Haarmann, 2009: 42-43.

More, the latest archaeological discoveries had shown that a way of writing had been used in Europe with more than 2000 years before Mesopotamia: in Varna (Bulgaria) was found the oldest treasure in the world (dated 4500 B.C.), containing massive gold objects on which can be seen certain signs/inscriptions.³ One cannot ignore the cultural relevance of all these findings, in general, for the entire area of the Balkans, even if, as in the case of the Turdaș culture, the Varna signs are probably another pure manifestation of some rituals, prehistoric beliefs – magic, protection and curse – or sacred messages – key symbols, lessons of wisdom. After all, Southeastern Europe represents a region with an exceptionally rich heritage in cultural symbolism. These symbols might be placed single or in groups, but their high degree of abstracting – as forms or as motifs – becomes obvious. However, the cultural roots of this Neolithic symbolism from the Danube Valley go back in time, to the Mesolithic era. For example, with a delay of several hundred years, some abstract motifs from the complex of Lepenski Vir – a Mesolithic site of a culture that is considered to be the immediate predecessor of the Vinča culture - can be traced in the inventory of the Vinča signs.⁴

“In Southeastern Europe, the use of signs reached a higher organizational level than elsewhere, eventually developing into systematic forms of notation and an archaic form of writing [...], markers of high culture. The Danube civilization flourished from c. 5000 to c. 3500 B.C., establishing a network of trade relations.”⁵ Recently, the term “Danube civilization” has been used as a synonym for Old Europe - how M. Gimbutas use to call these territories - emphasizing the stage of that cultural evolution of an agrarian lifestyle, with its own technology, writing system and a complex belief system. The core symbols of all the regions involved are: the spiral, the meander, the “V” sign, others being found in a more limited range, these distinct motifs forming local symbolic networks. An argument to these is the vast archaeological record where the cultural symbolism might have varied locally, the discovered figurines presenting bird-headed appearance in the Vinča region, being long-necked and corpulent in the Hamangia region and highly stylized in the Cucuteni culture.⁶

The pictographic signs on the tablets of the prehistoric settlement of Tărtăria, even after decades from their discovery – 1961, Alba county, Romania – have led to serious controversial aspects among specialists. If some of the archaeologists, mostly foreigners, believe that this incipient way of a “writing system” would represent the oldest written message from the world’s history – as opposed to the standard, classic Sumerian theory – many of the specialists are still having doubts about the existence of a “Danube script” (a system of writing and not just a few signs).

However, the historians from Alba-Iulia consider that “these tablets must be placed and interpreted in an adequate context, taking in consideration the fact that similar pictograms showed up also on the vessels of the neolithic Vinča-Turdaș culture, so the signs on the tablets are not singular or accidental, they are part of a cultural process that had been emerging in those times.”⁷ The Danubian signs can be found on thousands of artifacts in Balkans, in the sites of: Parța, Tangiru, Cucuteni, Trypillia (Ukraine), Vinča (Serbia) etc. The Hungarian researcher I. Makkay counted up to 40 sites with similar artifacts spread on the vast area between Hungary and Romania, Shan Winn spoke about 50 places along Danube

³ Haarmann, 2002: 113-115.

⁴ Haarmann, 2009: 45.

⁵ *Ibidem*: 46.

⁶ *Ibidem*: 47.

⁷ Horia Ciugudean, historian from Alba-Iulia: <http://adevaruldespredaci.ro/enigma-tablitolor-cu-semne-pictografice-de-la-tartaria-controversele-dintre-specialisti>, 20.08.2015.

Valley and the linguist H. Haarmann pointed to 23 sites only between Belgrad and Sofia.⁸

If we were to compare the function of these signs with other types of pre-writing systems, the Danube script had been used mostly in a religious context. As opposed to the cuneiforms or the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Danubian signs had been suitable not in an agrarian context but as sacred signs, having magic-ritual powers, therefore the amulets being either positive or negative.⁹ As it had been stipulated before, the signs belonging to the Vinča culture (around 700 different symbols/characters) can be found on various pieces: fragile or odd-looking figurines, pottery, spindles, all kinds of clay artifacts, altars and small-altars etc.¹⁰

An obvious problematic part for the group of scientists militating in favour or against the Danube script – being them archaeologists or linguists – is the fact that „usually, archaeologists lack any kind of approach to the writing technology, as a cultural process and as a working-system, and the linguists lack the archaeological insight about the way ancient societies developed and how their culture motivated the action of introducing writing. The archaeological record of inscribed artifacts from Neolithic and Copper Age of Southeastern Europe is persistently cheapened by many archaeologists as bearing pre-writing signs, potter's/owner's marks, magic-religious signs, or generic „signs”, despite the presence of features that clearly argue against such suppositions. In its comprehensive meaning, the term „Danube script” indicates the original successful experiment with the writing technology of the populations making up the Danube civilizations and not just a „precursor” to writing as some have described it.”¹¹

However, the Danube script decline period is considered to be the beginning of the third millennium B.C. and despite various attempts to decipher its code, it is still a mystery. This might be one of the reasons for so many consider it to be a dead-end issue, not to underline that the notion of an Old Europe script goes against many of the traditional views when it comes to archaeology or the development of civilization.¹²

But the linguist H. Haarmann stipulates that a script can be identified in terms of an operational technology even without being deciphered, how there had been, for a long time, the cases of Linear A and B, the Mayan script or the ancient Indus script. He brings linguistic arguments to the existence of a script in Southeastern Europe, based on two-fold ways: one is to delimitate those signs which appeared, but they were not decorations, religious symbolism or the potters' marks (the so-called “circumstantial evidence”) and, the second one, to identify the properties that the Danube script is sharing with other ancient writing systems.¹³ According to Owens, there had been more “Balkan scripts” – different sign-use in different cultural areas, and Haarmann himself believes that there were at least three gravitations of writing – the Vinča region in Serbia, the Karnovo region in Bulgaria and the Cucuteni one.

⁸ Iulia Brânză Mihăileanu, in a review of Marco Merlini's book (“La scrittura è nata in Europa?”, Rome: Avverbi, 2004), on: <http://adevaruldespredaci.ro/marele-arheolog-italian-marco-merlini-scrisul-s-a-nascut-in-europa-pe-valea-dunarii>, 20.08.2015.

⁹ Harold Haarmann's interview, on: <http://istorieveche.ro/2015/08/27/harald-haarman-interviu-despre-civilizatia-dunareana>, 02.09.2015.

¹⁰ John Black, Artificial Intelligence researcher, on: <http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/danube-valley-civilisation-script-oldest-writing-world>, 05.09.2015.

¹¹ Marco Merlini, on: www.academia.edu/3035626/Introduction_to_the_Danube_script_from_the_book_Neo-Eneolithic_Literacy_in_Southeastern_Europe, 05.09.2015.

¹² Haarmann, 2009:48.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 49-50.

¹⁴While writing may not have originated in the region around Vinča, the Vinčian cultural complex played a significant role in the spread of literacy.

As an argument for the ancient usage of non-phonetic writing, the Chinese system of characters proves to be even nowadays *ideographic* (ideas that can be depicted: house, dog, pot) or *logographic* (the abstract notions: generous, friendship), meaning that it is the case of an one-word writing at once. In the same manner of the conventional use of signs, in Egyptian hieroglyphs a “woman” is visually evoked by a graph depicting a sitting female, while in Sumerian writing, the more complex concept of “divinity” is evoked by using a star. This is the pattern of intentionality which governs the formative process of ancient writing systems.¹⁵

Consequently, one is confronted with the question of what the boundaries are between writing and non-writing. If pictography is an ancient form of writing (as used in the oldest Sumerian accounting tablets) how does it differ from the picture sequence in a pictorial narrative (as in Paleolithic and Neolithic rock carvings around the world)? The answer is that any form of writing – being it either *ideographic/logographic* or *phonographic* – functions according to the principle of a “1-to-1” equivalence:

- pictography: one picture (iconic/naturalistic sign) as the representation of one single idea or concept;
- syllabic writing: one sign (iconic as in the Mycenaen Linear B or non-iconic/abstract as in cuneiform writing) for an equivalent one syllable of a certain language;
- alphabetic writing: one abstract letter (non-iconic sign) representing one sound of a given language.

The pictorial narratives lack this formula of 1-to-1 equivalence. In the historical retrospective, one can notice that none of the early writing systems of Old World started out as a phonographic system, but only in the course of time the writing systems had become associated with the sound structure of the languages which were rendered by their signs.¹⁶

Going back to the Danube script, a multitude of individual signs have been identified in the cultural strata of this civilization. According to Starović, their number exceeds 1000 in the Vinča region alone, iconicity and abstractness being clearly recognizable, the abstract signs forming the majority. Haarmann identified their main subcategories: animals, human beings and parts of the body, plants, tools or utensils, structures with different functions, natural phenomena and some difficult to identify stylized pictures.¹⁷ Among the abstract motifs one can find basic forms, such as: the circle, the square, the triangle, different strokes and dots. In all ancient sign inventories both categories of iconic and abstract signs are being merged. However, the Danube script abounds with abstract signs and geometric motifs, their proportion being very similar to the Indus script. Also, both systems include the techniques of producing variants from basic signs by using auxiliary signs, such as dots and strokes or other additional components. More, the motif of the cross is found, as a basic sign and as a basic element in derivations, in both Danube and Indus script. However, the often met “V” sign from the Danube script is absent from the Indus one, and the same for the motifs of the spiral and the meander.¹⁸

However, it must be again underlined that the Danube script cannot be compared to the alphabetic forms of writing, the similarities of shapes of the signs with some alphabetic signs having no value. Projecting modern ideas about writing onto the prehistoric cultures

¹⁴*Ibidem*.

¹⁵*Ibidem*, 53-54.

¹⁶*Ibidem*, 57.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, 58.

¹⁸*Ibidem*, 60.

where these principles cannot be applied leads to errors. One simple argument is that the number of signs for alphabetic writing had varied between a minimum of 13 letters (the Tahitian) and a maximum of 38 (for Armenian), the most alphabets in the world having 20 or 30 of them. As opposed to these, all ancient writing systems are composed of several hundreds of signs, due to the fact that each individual idea or concept required an individual logographic sign. Of course that, later on, when the syllabic/phonographic systems emerged, the number of signs had been naturally restricted.¹⁹

When approaching the topic of the Danube script, Haarmann speaks about the “nuclear writing”, drawing our attention on the fact that the texts from those millennia were extremely short, many of them having just one single sign, without marking the plurals, for example, focusing only on the message itself and omitting what we call the grammatical elements. Nuclear writing was therefore a great interpretative effort for the reader. This nuclear/logographic way is typically for archaic systems of writing, another example being the oldest clay tablets discovered in the cultural strata of Uruk III and IV (South of Mesopotamia), dating from 3200 and 3000 B.C.²⁰ As we have seen, the mixture between the spiritual and the practical domain made up the functionality of all these archaic signs.

To conclude, the theory of the Danube script is obviously based on solid research of the ones favoring it, the opponents rejecting it without an appropriate consideration.

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¹⁹*Ibidem*, 62.

²⁰*Ibidem*, 63-64.

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