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'SHRINE WITH BUCRANIUM' — A TENTATIVE INTER-
PRETATION OF THE TÄRTÄRIA SIGN 3,5

On present evidence, it is reasonable to accept a historical connection between the Tărtăria tablets and the so-called Tordos group of signs on the one hand, and the Mesopotamian pictographs on the other. It seems that, at the transition from the fourth to the third millennium, and more precisely between the years 2900 and 2800 B. C., the art of pictography reached the Balkans in the framework of a general cultural influence (Schachermeyr's 'Kulturtrift') from the Near East. Within South-East Europe the culture most markedly affected was the Vinča-Tordos. Merchant adventurers plying between the Middle and Lower Danube, the Cyclades, Anatolia and Mesopotamia may well have been the intermediaries. But, whatever their origins, it is apparent that extremely strong influences from Mesopotamia and Anatolia extended not only over the entire Vinča-Tordos and Vinča-Pločnik culture, but also to the contemporary and partly related cultures of South-East and Middle Europe, notably the Tripolje — Cucuteni — Gumelnița — Tisza — Lengyel — Moravian 'painted-ware' cultures. Part of the evidence for these contacts is to be found in the Tărtăria signs, and especially in the signs 3,5 a-b-c and 2,4 b-c. What follows will be concerned with the former of these signs.

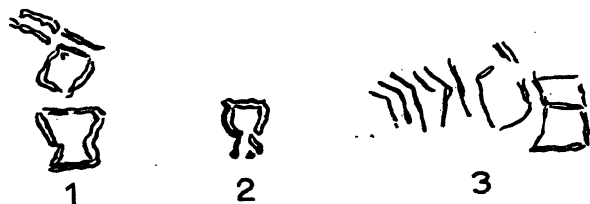


Fig. 1—3

This sign, Tărtăria 3,5 (Fig. 1) was divided by Falkenstein¹ into three elements, a-b-c. He identified segment c with Tărtăria 3,2b (Fig. 2), and compared it with the Uruk pictographs ATU 543

¹ A. Falkenstein, *Zu den Tontafeln aus Tartaria*, Germania 43, 1965, Taf. No. 3, 5 a-b-c

and 810. In fact, much better Mesopotamian analogies may be quoted, both from Uruk (Fig. 9 = ATU 644) or from Jamdat Nasr (Fig. 5 = Langdon IX, 28 rev.). The Mesopotamian sign is drawn sometimes with a medial line (Figs. 6–10), and, less frequently, without (Figs. 4–5). The former may be called variant 'a', the latter variant 'b'. Tărtăria 3,5c may be taken to correspond in general with variant 'a', if we postulate that it is imperfectly executed, the medial line being lacking. As proof of this possibility, we may refer to a similar sign from Tordos, incised on a clay bead-shaped weight (Fig. 3)², similar to variant 'a'. The Tordos signs are contemporary with and related to those of Tărtăria.

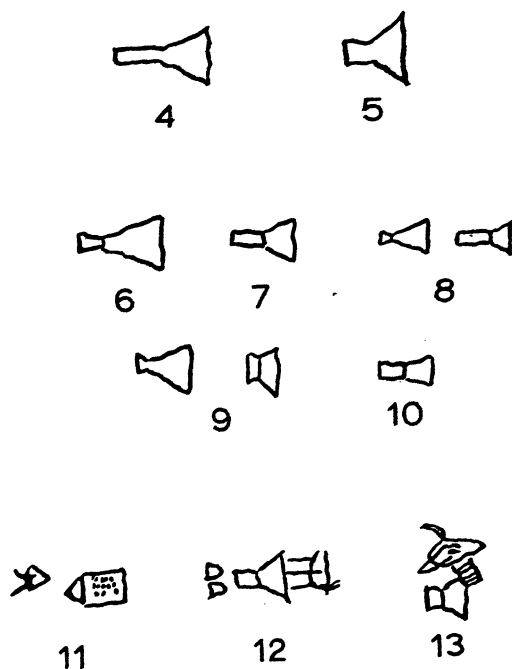


Fig. 4 – 13

Deimel remarks that the prototype of variant 'a' seems to be „ein turmähnliches Gebäude . . . , dessen unterer Teil schräge Mauern hat, wie die unterste Stufe des Ziggurats in Ur“³. Both he⁴ and

² M. Roska, *A Torma-Zsófia-Gyűjtemény az Erdélyi Nemzeti Múzeum Érem- és Régiségtárában*, Kolozsvár 1941, Pl. CXXIX, 11: J. Makkay, *The Late Neolithic Tordos Group of Signs*, Alba Regia 10, Székesfehérvár 1970, A37, 1. Our sketch shows the group of signs turned 90° to the right. The simple signs to the left drawn cannot be interpreted.

³ A. Deimel, *Šumerisches Lexikon* (ŠL) II 2, no. 128

⁴ ŠL I, no. 122

Jaritz⁵ interpret the sign ('Ub' and 'Gb'), as 'Rohrhütte', while Langdon translates it as 'house' or 'temple'⁶. Variant 'b' is seen by Deimel as originally a representation of "Keule und Schlachtmesser, Hauptinstrumente des Metzgers"⁷.

The elements a + b, as Falkenstein called them, of Tărtăria 3,5 (Fig. 1) may be compared with the central feature of Tordos A37,1 (Fig. 3). It is suggested that in each case a bovine head in profile is depicted. The full-face bucranium recognized by Falkenstein on Tărtăria 3,4b may be compared⁸.

Several Mesopotamian signs associate a building with a bucranium: for instance, a pictograph from Uruk showing a bull's head above a house (Fig. 11), a schematized bull's head over variant 'a' of our 'shrine' sign on a tablet from Jamdat Nasr (Fig. 12), and a similar case from Jamdat Nasr where the bucranium, in profile, was considered by Langdon to represent specifically the *Bos indicus* (Fig. 13)⁹.



14



15



16

Fig. 14 — 16

One may compare a seal impression from Ur (the Royal Cemetery, SIS 4) which shows a bovine head in profile above a tower-like

⁵ *Schriftarchäologie der altmesopotamischen Kultur*, Graz 1967, no. 222

⁶ *OECT* 7, Oxford 1928, no. 372

⁷ *ŠL* I 563, no. 221

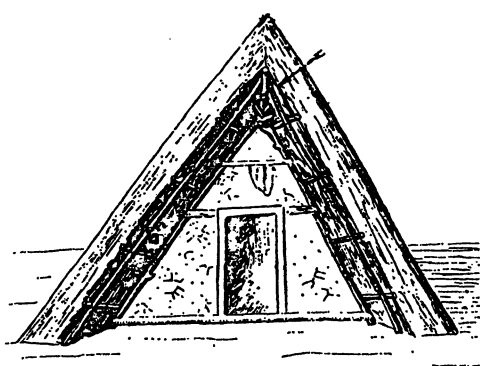
⁸ *ŠL* II 2, no. 297

⁹ *op. cit.* Pl. III 11, convex side, and no. 127

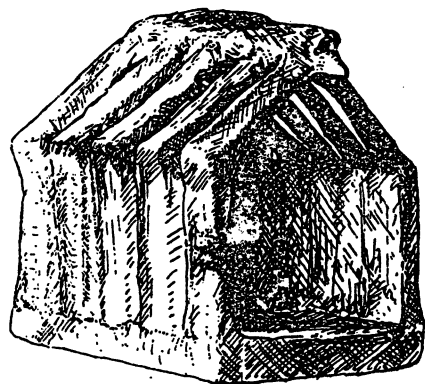
building (Fig. 14)¹⁰, a similar Proto-Elamite stamp (Fig. 16)¹¹ and a further representation from Mari (Fig. 15)¹².

The Mesopotamian pictographs evidently depict minor shrines or temples, the bucrania with which they were surmounted symbolising the god there venerated or some tutelary spirit ('Torgott'). There is much archaeological and literary evidence to support such an interpretation: for example, a small Sumerian terracotta found at Nippur represents a simple shrine with a standing male god in the interior and a protective figure of an animal (ram or bull) on the gable¹³; and in the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur the latest Eridu shrine built by Urnammu and his grandson Bursin is referred to by a few lines of the so-called Eridu Hymn as follows:

- 28 „dein Dachbalken ein 'Himmelsstier' von
leuchtender Form, kunstvoll gestaltet
29 ...
30 dein ... ist ein Wildstier, der die
Hörner erhebt“¹⁴.



a



b

Plate I

- a) Reconstruction of Late Neolithic shrine at Szegvár-Tüzköves. Clay bucranium hung from the gable, marked with an arrow (J. Csalog, *Acta Arch. Hung.* 9, 1958, 99).
b) Reconstructed clay house (shrine?) model from Rőszke-Lúdvár with dog's head on gable (O. Trogmayer, *Arch. Értesítő* 93, Budapest 1966)

¹⁰ L. Legrain, *Ur Excavations III, Archaic Seal-Impressions*, Oxford 1936, Pl. 24, 441, or Pl. 38, 441

¹¹ P. Amiet, *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, Paris 1961, Pl. 35, 554

¹² *ibid.* Pl. 107, 1412

¹³ L. Legrain, *Terra-cottas from Nippur*, Philadelphia 1930, 24, no. 158; J. Makkay, *Early Near-Eastern and South-East European Gods*, *Acta Arch. Hungarica* 16, Budapest 1964, 49, Pl. IV, 9

¹⁴ A. Falkenstein, *Die Eridu-Hymne*, *Sumer* 7, 1951, 121. Cf. R. D. Biggs, *ZfA* 61, 1972, 193–207

We are familiar of course with model houses or shrines of clay, surmounted by animal heads, from South-East European sites. Some are as old as the Early Neolithic (for instance, an example from the Körös culture at Hungary with a dog's head on the gable¹⁵), and these seem to have been invented locally with no external stimulus. The much later examples, from the Vinča B-C period and later, including the real buildings containing clay bucrania, consisting of bulls' skulls coated with modelling clay, from Vinča and Kormandin in Yugoslavia¹⁶, were probably inspired from the Early Chalcolithic of Anatolia¹⁷.

But neither the early nor the late shrines with bucrania of the Balkans can be considered as prototypes of the Tărtăria and Tordos pictograms with which we have been concerned, for the Balkan shrines (i. e. model shrines) of both periods were gabled structures with quadrangular ground plan, while the pictograms, as we have seen, show round towers or small (round?) shrines of different construction. The Tărtăria and Tordos signs appear then to be copied from a peculiarly Mesopotamian series of symbols showing round buildings surmounted by bucrania.

¹⁵ O. Trogmayer, On the Dwelling of the Körös Group, *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 93, Budapest 1966, Fig. 1: J. Makkay, *Altorientalische Parallelen zu den ältesten Heiligtumstypen Südosteuropas*, *Alba Regia* 11, Székesfehérvár 1971, 137–144, with further literature. Here Pl. I b.

¹⁶ B. Jovanović — J. Glišić, *Station énéolithique de Kormandin*, *Starinar* 11, Beograd 1961, fig. 37, 1–2, p. 141. They were worked on cattle skulls, standing on pillars at a distance of 1.1 m. apart inside a building.

¹⁷ N. K. Sandars, *Prehistoric Art in Europe* 1968, 120