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BALKAN NEOLITHIC SCRIPTS*

This study concerns the question of whether there was a 'script' in use in Greece in the Final Neolithic period, c. 4,500–3,200 B.C., and whether this may have influenced the scripts of the Bronze Age Aegean. For many years the earliest writing was considered to be that from Uruk dated to c. 3,100 B.C. Recent evidence (1998) from Prof. Dryer's excavations in Egypt would date writing there in the tomb of King Scorpion to c. 3,400–3,200 B.C.; while even more recently announced finds (1999) from Dr. Meadow's excavations at Harappa in the Indus Valley would suggest a date of 3,500 B.C. for the development of writing there. The earliest evidence for writing in Europe comes from Minoan Crete on the "Cretan Hieroglyphic" sealstones from Archanes Fourni, c. 2,000 B.C.¹

In the 1980s there was noticed a system of writing in the Balkans of the Final Neolithic period. This was identified as Pre-Writing by Winn and E. Masson, who considered whether this constituted a Vinca 'script'. They concluded that it was a 'precursor' of writing. At Tartaria in Romania were discovered in 1961 three baked clay tablets, initially considered by some to have similarities in Mesopotamia, but now generally seen as local documents.² The Tartaria

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¹ See E. Grumach and J. Sakellarakis, *Die neuen Hieroglyphensiegel von Phourni (Archanes) I*, *Kadmos* 5, 1966, 109–114 for the Archanes Fourni inscriptions.

² See S. M. M. Winn, *Pre-writing in Southeastern Europe. The Sign System of the Vinca Culture ca. 4000 B.C.*, 1981, and E. Masson, *L'écriture dans les civilisations danubiennes néolithiques*, *Kadmos* 23, 1984, 89–123. These tablets are extensively discussed in M. S. F. Hood, *The Tartaria Tablets*, *Antiquity* 41, 1967, 99–111 and in C. Renfrew, *Before Civilization*, 1973, 73–74, 106, 193–194, 204 and fig. 38, and see pls. 8 and 9, for 'Proto-Writing' from Bulgaria (Gradetsnica and Karanovo) c. 4,000 B.C. It may be of note that two of the three Tartaria Tablets have suspension holes as do many "Cretan Hieroglyphic" clay documents.

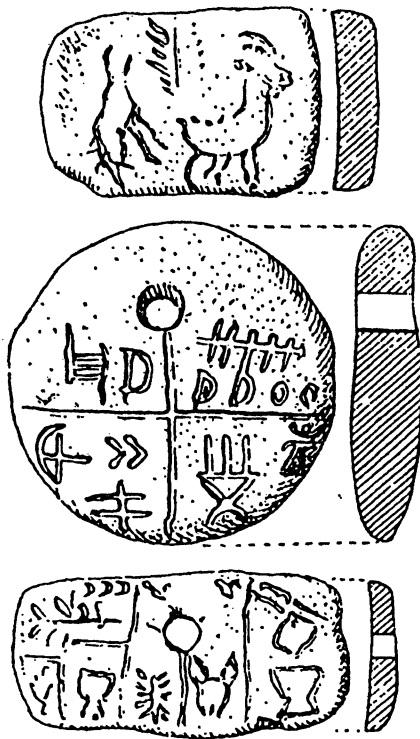


Figure 1. The Tartaria Tablets c. 4,000 B.C. (Renfrew, 1973, 194, figure 38).

Tablets are dated to the Vinca culture, c. 4,000 B.C., i.e., within the Final Neolithic period (Figure 1).

The Tartaria Tablets and associated signs of Proto-Writing from the Balkans would seem to be dated to the Final Neolithic period, i.e., the Transitional Period from Stone to Bronze Age Civilization, c. 4,500–3,200 B.C., before the appearance of writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indus Valley.³ Proto-Writing in the Balkans comes from places in Romania (Tordos, Tartaria, Gulmenitsa) and Bulgaria (Gradesnica, Karanovo) along with Vinca in Yugoslavia, which have connections with the Neolithic farming communities of Sitagroi and Nea Nikomedeia in North Greece.⁴ There are widespread signs from 37 sites in the Balkans during the Transitional Copper Age.

³ See the two following articles on Neolithic Culture in Greece, K. Dimakopoulou, *The Transition to the Bronze Age: The Neolithic Heritage*, 1996, 191–197 for the Final Neolithic/Chalcolithic/Transition Period and G. Kourtessi-Philippakis, *Neolithic Culture in Neighbouring Regions: The Haimos Peninsular*, 1996, 178–182, for developments to the North.

⁴ See C. Renfrew, M. Gimbutas and E. Elster, *Sitagroi: A Prehistoric Village in North-eastern Greece*, 1986, for a discussion of this important site in Macedonia.

As copper working spread south from the Balkans to Greece, then why not perhaps a 'script' too? The writing in question, however, is perhaps symbolic and religious, not a true 'script' as such.

In Crete the most important places in the Final Neolithic period were Knossos, Phaistos and Kastelli-Phournis.⁵ In 1992 Hooker, in discussing the Early Balkan 'Scripts' and the Ancestry of Linear A, dismissed such a simple and straightforward connection as had been put forward by Haarmann who had looked in detail at the 'Old European' inscriptions.⁶ It would perhaps be better here simply to present the evidence of possible Neolithic inscriptions before proceeding to a discussion.

In 1994 was published⁷ the 'inscription' from the University of Thessaloniki excavations at Dispilio on the shore of the lake of Kastoria in Macedonia in North Greece. This was dated to c. 5260 B.C. according to C14 readings at the Dimokritos Laboratory in Athens (Figure 2).

In 1997 the Hellenic police confiscated a 'Neolithic Treasure' which was put on display in Athens Archaeological Museum.⁸ This 'Neolithic Treasure' consists of 53 gold objects (it is not known if they were or were not found together) which should be dated to the Final



Figure 2. The Dispilio 'inscription' from Kastoria c. 5260 B.C. (TA NEA, 15/2/94, PANORAMA, 3).

⁵ See G. Owens, Καστελλι-Φουρνής. Το Αρχαιότερο Χωριό της Κρήτης, Αμάλθεια 114–115, 1998, reprinted in English as Kastelli-Phournis, Mirabello, The Oldest Village in Crete, Cretan Studies VII, 1999, 1–17. From Kastelli-Phournis comes a vase, Neolithic Culture in Greece, 1996, #165, dated to Final Neolithic and for which similar pieces are known from Troy I. It is perhaps of note that Kastelli-Phournis has produced no Minoan pottery and the nearby Minoan Palace of Malia has no preceding Neolithic settlement, unlike the Palaces of Knossos and Phaistos.

⁶ See H. Haarmann, Writing from Old Europe to Ancient Crete – a Case of Cultural Continuity, Journal of Indo-European Studies 17, 1989, 251–275 and J. T. Hooker, Early Balkan 'Scripts' and the Ancestry of Linear A, Kadmos 31, 1992, 97–112 for a full discussion and references.

⁷ For the Dispilio-Kastoria 'inscription', see TA NEA, Panorama, 15-2-1994, 3 and the drawing which is reproduced here.

⁸ See K. Dimakopoulou, Ο Νεολιθικός Θησαυρός, National Museum, 1998, especially nos. 12, 16 and 53, for the 'inscription' which is reproduced here. The exhibition was in Athens 15-12-98 to 28-2-99 and the catalogue was published in late 1998. Even if they are signs they still need not necessarily date to the Neolithic period since the context is not known.

Neolithic/Chalcolithic/Transitional Period c. 4,500–3,200 B.C. One of these, #12, has marks which some would consider possibly to be signs of a script. The most likely provenance of these objects is considered to be Macedonia or Thessaly in North Greece (Figure 3).

It may also be of interest to chart scholarship over the last quarter of a century on the subject of a Neolithic 'script' and civilization in the Balkans.⁹

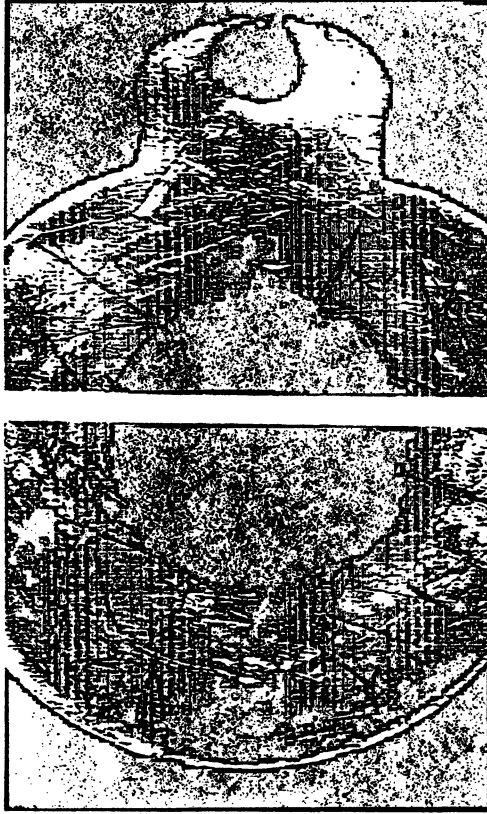


Figure 3. The Neolithic Treasure 'inscription' c. 4,500–3,200 B.C. (Dimakopoulou, 1998, 16 and 53, #12)

⁹ See M. Gimbutas, *Old Europe* c. 7000–3500 B.C.: the Earliest European Civilization Before the Infiltration of the Indo-European Peoples, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1, 1973, 1–20; J. P. Mallory, *A Short History of the Indo-European Problem*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1, 1973, 21–65; and C. Renfrew, *Before Civilization. The Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe*, 1973, for the state of play some 25 years ago. In addition see C. Renfrew, *Problems in the General Correlation of Archaeological and Linguistic Strata in Prehistoric Greece: the Model of Autochthonous Origin*, in R. A. Crossland and A. Birchall eds., *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean*, 1973, 263–276. The ideas in this paper were further developed in 'Archaeology and Language' some 15 years later.

In 1973 there were different views as to whether the users of a script in the Final Neolithic would have been Indo-European speakers. Gimbutas and Mallory both saw the Balkan Neolithic civilization as pre- and non-Indo-European. Gimbutas dated the expansion of the Indo-European Kurgan people to the second half of the Fourth Millennium B.C. while Mallory would place it a little earlier. Renfrew on the other hand was beginning to question the whole dating of prehistory.

In 1987 Renfrew published the results of his own reconstruction by concluding in 'Archaeology and Language' (p. 288) that "It seems likely that the first Indo-European languages came to Europe from Anatolia around 6000 B.C., together with the first domesticated plants and animals, and that they were in fact spoken by the first farmers of Europe." Mallory on the other hand has offered a revised version of the late Fourth Millennium traditional position advocated by Gimbutas but he would date the Indo-European expansion slightly earlier than her in the late Fifth or early Fourth Millennium B.C.¹⁰

The last decade has also seen a number of works which have contributed, to varying degrees, to an increased understanding of Neolithic civilization. In 1989 Gimbutas published 'The Language of the Goddess'. Unfortunately it adds little to the subject of script and prehistory.¹¹

In 1996 the best introductory and comprehensive work on Neolithic Greece was published by the Museum of Cycladic Art in Ath-

¹⁰ See C. Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language. The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, 1987, for the more controversial position and J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans. Language, Archaeology and Myth*, 1989, for the revised traditional position on the Indo-European problem held a decade ago. Mallory asked (p. 180) "if the Indo-Europeans were in Crete since 6000 B.C., why can't we read Linear A?"; see G. Owens, *Evidence for the Minoan Language (1): The Minoan Libation Formula*, *Cretan Studies V*, 1996, 163-206 and plates XVIII-XXII for the present author's opinion that it is possible to both "read" and more importantly to "understand" Linear A.

¹¹ See however R. Tringham and M. Conkey, *Rethinking Figurines: A Critical View from Archaeology of Gimbutas, the 'Goddess' and Popular Culture*, in *Ancient Goddesses*, L. Goodison and C. Morris eds., 1998, 22-45 as well as a number of articles on the 'Mother Goddess', including the Introduction and Chapter 6 on the Minoans by the joint editors. This work uses Gimbutas as a point of reference in a well balanced discussion on the Mother Goddess and not as a Holy Grail. In addition see G. Owens, "All Religions are One" (William Blake 1757-1827). *ASTARTE/ISHTAR/ISHASSARAS/ASASARAME. The Great Mother Goddess in Minoan Crete and the Eastern Mediterranean*, *Cretan Studies V*, 1996, 207-218.

ens.¹² This work, 'Neolithic Culture in Greece', covered subjects such as habitation, agriculture etc., tools, pottery, stone vessels, weaving-basketry, metallurgy, figurines and models, jewelry, exchanges and relations, burial customs and perhaps most importantly, in regard to writing, seals as well as an extensive catalogue of 333 objects. This work offered a panorama of Neolithic civilization in Greece, based upon more than 1000 sites, by a new generation of scholars, and was the first attempt at such an overview in almost a quarter of a century since the works of Theocharis.

Reference should be made to the important work of Schmandt-Besserat who systematically studied thousands of clay tokens from the Neolithic period and claimed to have identified an administrative system that could be described as pre-writing.¹³ The largest collection of Fourth Millennium tokens is from Uruk which has produced the first evidence of writing in Mesopotamia c. 3,100 B.C., thus supporting the link from tokens to writing and indeed justifying the term pre-writing. For the 'inscriptions' from Final Neolithic Greece, along with the Tartaria Tablets and Vinca Signs etc. from the Balkans however, the term proto-writing is perhaps more appropriate as they may well be the first stages of a script as opposed to the administratively related but distinct token system.¹⁴

¹² The title of the exhibition and book was translated from Greek as Neolithic Culture, whereas πολιτισμός could have been better translated as civilization. The exhibition was in Athens February '96 to May '97 and the catalogue was published in 1996. This work offers a framework within which many-faceted Neolithic Greece can be placed and understood by prehistorians. See Δ. Π. Θεοχαρης, *Η Νεολιθική Ελλάς*, 1973, revised and reprinted as *Νεολιθικός Πολιτισμός*, 1981 by M.I.E.T.

¹³ See the work of D. Schmandt-Besserat over a decade and a half starting from *The Earliest Precursors of Writing*, *Scientific American*, 1978, no. 238, 50–59 and culminating in *Before Writing*, Volume 1, *From Counting to Cuneiform*, 1992, with her important conclusions based upon a large data base of tokens. In addition see A. Robinson, *The Story of Writing*, 1995, for a well illustrated account of writing over the last 5000 years and p. 52–67 for Proto-Writing, and F. Coulmas, *The Writing Systems of the World*, 1989, for a discussion of the relation between writing and language and p. 1–54 for Theoretical Perspectives on Pre- and Proto-Writing. See R. Rudgley, *Lost Civilizations of the Stone Age*, 1998, in which he uses archaeology and anthropology to argue that the Stone Age civilization was much more advanced than is commonly credited.

¹⁴ Whether these scripts will ever be deciphered is quite another matter but see M. Pope, *The Story of Decipherment, From Egyptian Hieroglyphics to Linear B*, 1975; A. Robinson, *The Story of Writing*, Part II ch. 4–8, 68–155 for sections on Cunei-

In the latter half of the present decade, the question of whether the Neolithic ancestors of the Minoans were likely to have been speaking an Indo-European language has recently been discussed by Owens (1996, 1997, 1999) and Renfrew (1998).¹⁵ The latter (Renfrew 1998, 259), in discussing the present author's position, said "The suggestion that Minoan should be regarded as an Indo-European language has indeed been put forward by a number of scholars, more recently Owens (1996, 1994). He accepts the likelihood that the Minoan language of the Late Bronze Age was the descendent of the Proto-Minoan spoken by the first, Neolithic inhabitants of Crete, brought by them from western Anatolia. His position is thus to be distinguished from that of scholars such as Palmer (1958; 1965) who relate the Minoan language to the Luwian of the later Bronze Age of western Anatolia, the presence of which in Crete would be the product of more recent population movements." The present author ended his paper on Evidence for the Minoan Language by suggesting that a Proto-Indo-European-Pelasgian-Anatolian language was spoken in the Neolithic Aegean, i.e., Neolithic Anatolia, Crete, Hellas and Thrace.

One may perhaps conclude, in a cyclical rather than in a linear manner, by re-stating the question in the title. Was there a 'script' in Final Neolithic Greece and if so did this 'script' influence Minoan Crete? Did the Indo-European speakers of Bronze Age Crete inherit, adopt and adapt a script from their linguistically related neighbours in the Neolithic Balkans, much as the Mycenaean Greeks would subsequently adopt and adapt a script from their linguistically related Minoan neighbours on Crete?

form, Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Linear B, Mayan Glyphs and Undeciphered Scripts; and F. Coulmas, *The Writing Systems of the World, Part III Practical Problems – Decipherment*, 205–224 for discussions on achieving a decipherment.

¹⁵ See C. Renfrew, *Word of Minos: The Minoan Contribution to Mycenaean Greek and the Linguistic Geography of the Aegean Bronze Age*, Mycenaean Seminar given in London (5-11-97), summary in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 42, 1998, 225. A revised version of this paper appeared under the same title in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 8:2, October 1998, 239–264. See also G. Owens, *The Structure of the Minoan Language*, *Kritika Daidalika*, Studies Hooker, 1997, 103–140. A revised version of this paper appeared under the same title in the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 27, 1999, 15–55. See also the present author's paper *Pre-Hellenic Languages of Crete: Debate and Discussion*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, forthcoming, for comments on Yves Duhoux's paper on the Minoan language(s) in the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 26, 1998, 1–40. See also G. Owens, *The Lexicon of the Minoan Language*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, forthcoming, for the author's latest offering on the subject.