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# MORE THAN FLOORS AND DOMES – CONTEXTS AROUND OVENS IN THE LATE NEOLITHIC OF THE CENTRAL BALKANS

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ANA ĐURIČIĆ

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## ABSTRACT

Even though ovens are the most prominent feature in the Vinča culture houses, they have often been neglected in the archaeological publications. Usually, only the information about their location or number of floors is provided, but more detailed descriptions are missing. This is also influenced by their poor preservation in the archaeological record, as parts of their upper structure are often missing. But, although fully preserved ovens represent quite a rarity, contexts surrounding them are usually filled with different categories of artefacts and architectural features. These complex contexts that include ovens, offer plethora of information about different socio-economic phenomena in the Late Neolithic of the Central Balkans. Therefore, ovens should be perceived as more than just fire installations for food processing and house heating, as they can offer insight into household organization and symbolic aspects of the Neolithic life. Additionally, ovens located in the outdoor spaces can provide information about settlement organization and social dynamics on a larger scale. In this paper, different contexts around ovens are presented and interpreted – from functional, economic, social, and symbolic perspective.

## ASTRATTO: PIÙ CHE PAVIMENTI E CUPOLE - CONTESTI INTORNO AI FORNI NEL TARDO NEOLITICO DEI BALCANI CENTRALI

Nonostante se i forni sono l'elemento più prominente nelle case della cultura di Vinča, sono stati spesso trascurati nelle pubblicazioni archeologiche. Di solito, solo le informazioni sulla loro ubicazione o sul numero di piani sono proposte, ma mancano descrizioni più dettagliati. Questo è influenzato anche dalla scarsa conservazione dei forni nel record archeologico, poiché spesso mancano parti della loro struttura superiore. Inoltre, sebbene i forni completamente conservati rappresentino una vera rarità, i contesti che li circondano sono di solito pieni di diverse categorie di artefatti ed elementi architettonici. Questi contesti complessi, che includono i forni, offrono una moltitudine di informazioni su vari fenomeni socio-economici nel tardo Neolitico dei Balcani centrali. Pertanto, i forni dovrebbero essere percepiti come qualcosa di più che installazioni di fuoco per la preparazione del cibo e il riscaldamento della casa, poiché possono offrire approfondimenti sull'organizzazione domestica e sugli aspetti simbolici della vita Neolitica. I forni situati negli spazi esterni, invece, possono offrire informazioni sull'organizzazione degli insediamenti umani e sulle dinamiche sociali su scala più ampia. In questo articolo, vengono presentati e interpretati i diversi contesti attorno ai forni – da una prospettiva funzionale, economica, sociale e simbolica.

**KEYWORDS:** Oven, Neolithic architecture, Vinča culture, Late Neolithic, Balkan Neolithic

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** forno, architettura Neolitica, Cultura di Vinča, Neolitico tardo, Neolitico balcanico

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## Introduction

The innovations that occurred and developed during the Neolithic, led to significant changes in the human lifestyle. Agriculture, domestic animal farming, sedentism, pottery production, polished stone tool technology and new ideology compatible with these innovations influenced all areas of the Neolithic life – from architecture and symbolism to economy and social organization.<sup>1</sup> Pronounced sedentism and the increase of cereal cultivation coincide with the emergence of a new thermal structure – oven. They are defined as fire installations typical for agricultural sedentary communities in the Middle East and Europe since the Neolithic Period.<sup>2</sup> Ovens first appear during the Pre-pottery Neolithic B (8800 – 7550. BC) in the Middle East,<sup>3</sup> but are featured more prominently

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<sup>1</sup> e.g., Çilingiroğlu 2005; Cauvin 2000; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Banning 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Lyons and D'Andrea 2003; Haaland 2007.

during the Pottery Neolithic.<sup>4</sup> With that in mind, ovens can be considered as one of the innovations of the Neolithic period that reflect needs of the new lifestyle and can give insight into different aspects of life of the Neolithic communities.<sup>5</sup>

The Late Neolithic of the Central Balkans is represented by the Vinča culture (5350/5300–4500 cal. BC) (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> Those were sedentary farming communities that lived in long-term multi-layered settlements with houses built one on top of the other during multiple occupational phases.<sup>7</sup> The houses were rectangular in plan with one or multiple rooms. Vinča culture houses were built in wattle and daub technique and fixed architectural features, like furniture or symbolic elements were made from mud plaster.<sup>8</sup> Ovens were usually located inside houses, while the outdoor ones have been found less frequently.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 1. Distribution of Vinča culture sites (map by S. Živanović)

<sup>4</sup> Đuričić 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Đuričić 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Porčić 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Vasić 1932; Kraiser and Voytek 1983; Perić 2008; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Јовановић и Глишић 1961; Todorović 1981; Трипковић 2007; 2013; Crnobrnja 2011; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Tringham et al. 1985; Tringham et al. 1992; Трипковић 2007; Васић 1932; Đuričić 2021; 2022.

Fully preserved ovens are rarely found in the archaeological record as, usually, only floors or scattered dome fragments survive. In most cases, their existence or absence in a structure is confirmed, number of floors, their dimensions and sometimes their context are provided,<sup>10</sup> but other descriptions are often missing. That is probably the consequence of poor preservation of this type of fire installation in the archaeological record. Also, lack of interest in this thermal structure could have influenced the amount of available data regarding the Vinča culture ovens. Nevertheless, contexts around ovens are usually well-preserved and filled with different categories of artefacts and architectural features that point to economic and symbolic spheres of the Late Neolithic life.<sup>11</sup>

One additional problem regarding the position of ovens in Serbian archaeology was observed. People in the Balkans are familiar with ovens, as they have been in use up until fifty years ago in rural areas.<sup>12</sup> When the first Vinča culture oven finds emerged, this type of fire installation was common in Serbia, so the archaeologists who excavated and interpreted them often wrote from personal experience, referencing contemporary ovens.<sup>13</sup> They used contemporary ovens to explain both how the Late Neolithic ones were constructed and how they were used.<sup>14</sup> The familiarity with a certain object or a structure can create material and interpretative problems. Due to the abundant knowledge about a certain modern phenomenon, one can forget to give significance to objects and structures that have references in the modern world, neglecting the archaeological data. On the other hand, mistakes can occur when one is not detached enough, and because of the familiarity to the object or a structure and its long tradition of usage in the same geographical context, one just ascribes attributes from the local tradition, especially regarding the symbolic aspect of the object.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the first records of ovens in the archaeological literature were influenced by personal experiences of early investigators, and those interpretations were referenced by later archaeologists, without re-evaluation.<sup>16</sup> Due to this situation, for a long period of time, ovens have not received considerable attention in the archaeological studies.

Whether it is the space organization or the function of the space in their proximate vicinity, ovens can provide a plethora of information. Analysis of architecture and architectural features offers plenty of options for different approaches to the subject of living spaces. One can focus on the technological, social, economic or symbolic aspect of Neolithic life, but we can also put under the spotlight only one type of object and examine what it can tell us regarding all those aspects. In this paper, the object of matter is the oven and it is observed from different perspectives.

The aim of this paper is to present in which way oven remains can be interpreted and which type of information they can offer regarding different aspects of the Neolithic life. They cannot be taken out of the context, so spaces in their immediate vicinity are examined as well. Ovens are put under the spotlight, and they are interpreted from economic, social and symbolic perspectives. Also, subjects of seasonality and home in the Vinča culture is tested based on the location and contexts around ovens.

## Physical characteristics of the Vinča culture ovens

Ovens found at the Vinča culture settlements are described as structures made of clay, with one opening, thick floor (floors), with potshards or stones foundation. They have the shape of a horseshoe and a dome.<sup>17</sup> Fully preserved ovens are extremely rare, so generalisations have often been made based on the ones found at the site of Vinča – Belo Brdo at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the year of 1911, M. Vasić, unearthed multiple well-preserved ovens. In two houses excavated that season, he found ovens: “of more or less conical flattened shape”.<sup>18</sup> The width of oven walls varied from 12 to 15 cm.<sup>19</sup> Inside the House 2 from 1911, which was destroyed by fire, three ovens were found (Fig. 2a). The house had two rooms, and it was found at 3.2 m deep. The northern room had two, and the southern, one oven.<sup>20</sup> The oven from the southern room had a fully preserved dome, flattened at its top and inclined floor (Fig. 2b, Fig. 3). It had only one opening at its front, as all the other Vinča culture ovens. The oven floor was smooth, but damaged due to its continuous use, so the cracks, characteristic for 20<sup>th</sup> century traditional bread

<sup>10</sup> Јовановић и Глишић 1961; Тодоровић и Цермановић 1961; Todorović 1981; Bogdanović 1988; 2008; Šljivar i Jacanović 2005; Трипковић 2007; Пецикоза 2009; Марић 2011; Đuričić 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Đuričić 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Филиповић 1951; Вишекруна 2005; Đuričić 2021.

<sup>13</sup> e.g., Васић 1911, 103; Тодоровић и Цермановић 1961, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Васић 1911; Тодоровић и Цермановић 1961; Đuričić 2021.

<sup>15</sup> e.g., Чаусидис 2010a; Чаусидис 2010b.

<sup>16</sup> Đuričić 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Todorović 1981; Bogdanović 1988; 2008; Пецикоза 2009; Марић 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Васић 1911, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Васић 1911, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Васић 1932, 12.





*Fig. 2a. Prof. Miloje Vasić standing in the House 2/1911 with three ovens (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*

*Fig. 2b. Oven from the southern room of the House 2/1911 (side view) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*

ovens, were visible.<sup>21</sup> It was built on top of three small platforms, so it was slightly uplifted from the house floor.<sup>22</sup> It is the best documented oven from M. Vasić's excavations, with photographs, sketches, descriptions in his journals and the monograph.<sup>23</sup> At the site of Vinča, similar ovens were found in houses from different chronological phases of the Vinča culture – from the first Late Neolithic

occupational layers, until the abandonment of the settlement.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from the ovens found during the early excavation seasons at Vinča, only one almost fully preserved oven has been found so far. It also comes from the site of Vinča – Belo Brdo and it was located in the house 01/06, which was also destroyed by fire. This oven (02/06) had the same characteristics as the one found in 1911.<sup>25</sup> None of the



*Fig. 3. Oven from the southern room of the House 2/1911 (front view) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*

<sup>21</sup> Васић 1932, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Васић 1911, 103-104.

<sup>23</sup> Васић 1911, 1932.

<sup>24</sup> Васић 1932, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Тасић и др. 2007; Đuričić 2019; Borojević et al. 2020.

other ovens found at the Vinča culture sites had *in situ* preserved domes. At best, fragmented parts of the dome were visible around the oven floor, so there were no clear indications on how they looked like, which was the reason why other archaeologists used ovens from the site of Vinča for analogies.<sup>26</sup>

Indications for possible different shapes of oven domes come from oven models – clay figurines found at several Vinča culture settlements. They are miniature, more or less realistic representations of full-scale ovens. In the constructional context, they can be divided into two groups: ovens with fattened domes and ovens with rounded domes. Oven models with flat dome were found at the sites of Progar, Vinča - Belo Brdo and Medvednjak. They all have anthropomorphic attributes and represent the type of ovens found at the site of Vinča, although less realistically.<sup>27</sup> In this case, more significant are the ovens from the sites of Valač and Pločnik,<sup>28</sup> which represent miniature versions of typical domed ovens (with the upper part designed as a half of a sphere) found in the ethnographic literature,<sup>29</sup> well known in the European and Near Eastern tradition. Based on these two types represented in the Vinča culture art, we should leave open the question regarding the shape of Late Neolithic ovens at the territory of the Central Balkans. Ovens with the flat dome (Fig. 4a) are confirmed in the archaeological record, but we should consider the possibility of existence of ovens with a rounded dome, as well (Fig. 4b).

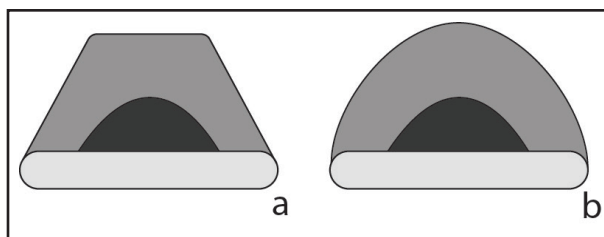


Fig. 4. Potential oven types from the Vinča culture; 4a – oven with a flat top; 4b – domed oven (illustration by S. Živanović)

## Food preparation and house heating

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until now, several interpretations for oven functions have been proposed by different archaeologists. The first one was by M. Vasić, who thought that ovens were used for bread baking, but also for cinnabar roasting.<sup>30</sup> He negated that ovens could have been used for house heating. In his opinion, the lack of second opening meant that fire could not have been started and maintained inside ovens. Instead, M. Vasić proposed that the ambers made in the outdoor spaces were transported into the oven as a fuel. An item interpreted as “mangal”<sup>31</sup> was found in front of one oven, which led M. Vasić to the conclusion, that these objects were used as portable hearths for heating and cooking.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, even though D. Karapandžić did not negate that ovens had a role in cinnabar processing, he argued that they were also used for house heating. He also argued that ovens were used with a burning fire inside and he suggested that some sort of a chimney could have transported smoke out of the house.<sup>33</sup> Some archaeologists proposed that, besides cooking and house heating, ovens could have been used for pottery firing,<sup>34</sup> but this interpretation was negated.<sup>35</sup>

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ovens were predominantly interpreted as fire installations used for bread baking, food processing<sup>36</sup> and house heating.<sup>37</sup> V. Pecikoza argued that while Vinča culture ovens were used primarily for food processing and secondarily for heating, they could not have been used for bread baking. In his opinion, thermal possibilities of Late Neolithic ovens were suitable for bread baking, but the cultivated cereals were not suitable for bread production. He suggested that sour dough could have been made only from *Triticum aestivum*, a cereal that was not cultivated at that time on the Central Balkans and not from *Triticum monococcum* and *Triticum dicoccum*, the ones that were confirmed in the archaeological record.<sup>38</sup> Recent studies have shown that remains of free-threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum/durum*) were found at the Vinča culture sites,<sup>39</sup> but moreover

<sup>26</sup> Bogdanović 1988, 79; Марић 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Петровић 2001, 12-14.

<sup>28</sup> Петровић 2001, 14-15.

<sup>29</sup> Филиповић 1951; Weinstein 1973.

<sup>30</sup> Васић 1932, 15; Đuričić 2021, 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> Similar objects were found in front of Vinča culture ovens, so based on those analogies we can assume that this ‘mangal’ was actually a base for a composite quern. Those bases are also made from mud plaster and look like a large recipient. Đuričić 2019, 330.

<sup>32</sup> Васић 1932, 14-15; Đuričić 2021, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Карапанджић 1933, 545-546; Đuričić 2021, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Тодоровић и Цермановић 1961, 24, 25; Kaiser and Voytek 1983, 342.

<sup>35</sup> Đuričić 2020, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Crnobrnja 2012, 62; Đuričić 2021, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Тодоровић и Цермановић 1961, 25; Benac 1971, 51; Todorović 1981, 15; Трипковић 2007, 95; Марић 2011, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Пецикоза 2009, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Filipović and Obradović 2013; Filipović 2014; Đuričić 2022, 50.



that sour dough could be made from both *T. monococcum* and *T. dicoccum*.<sup>40</sup> Gluten, wheat's storage protein, is responsible for dough leavening, which is a key feature of a sour dough.<sup>41</sup> Every type of wheat contains gluten, so both leavened and unleavened bread can be produced from them. It just depends on dough manipulation.<sup>42</sup> Gluten captures carbon dioxide and forces the dough to expand.<sup>43</sup> Dough can leaven on its own (if it is left long enough to react with air)<sup>44</sup> or by adding some leavening agent such as yeast<sup>45</sup> or lactic acid bacteria gathered from milk.<sup>46</sup> Bread from this type of dough requires constant high heat and longer baking period, which can be achieved only in domed ovens.<sup>47</sup> Traditionally in ethnography, ovens are often described as fire installations used for bread baking,<sup>48</sup> but some records confirm that indoor ovens also served for heating, meat roasting and cooking (Fig. 5).<sup>49</sup> Recent experimental studies have confirmed that Late Neolithic ovens could have been used for all above-mentioned activities.<sup>50</sup>



Fig. 5. Loaves of bread in the experimental oven (photo by A. Đuričić)

At the sites of Divostin (houses 13, 14, 15),<sup>51</sup> Vinča (House 01/06),<sup>52</sup> Banjica (House 2/79),<sup>53</sup> Stubline (Houses from 2008 and 2010)<sup>54</sup> and Jakovo – Kormadin,<sup>55</sup> multiple ovens were found inside the same house, but mostly in different rooms.<sup>56</sup> Solely on the practical level, it could be interpreted that one oven was not sufficient for heating requirements of the entire house, but several fire installations were necessary in order to maintain substantial temperature indoors during the colder period of the year.<sup>57</sup>

## Ovens and storage facilities

The most numerous contexts around ovens are the ones that indicate food storage and processing. Regarding these storage contexts, two previously unpublished houses from the site of Vinča – Belo Brdo should be mentioned<sup>58</sup>. During the 1912 excavation season, two houses with clay compartments (storage bins) next to ovens – house number II (in the journal also known as the House with bucrania or the House at the depth of 2.6 m) and House at the depth of 6.73 m, were unearthed.

<sup>40</sup> Borghi et al. 1996; Samuel 1999; Zaharieva et al. 2010; Đuričić 2021, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Lyons and D'Andrea 2003, 523.

<sup>42</sup> Borghi et al. 1996; Samuel 1999; Zaharieva et al. 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Lyons and D'Andrea 2003, 523.

<sup>44</sup> Belderok 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Miller and Wetterstrom 2000, 1133; Lyons and D'Andrea 2003, 523.

<sup>46</sup> Katina et al. 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Lyons and D'Andrea 2003, 524.

<sup>48</sup> Weinstein 1973, 274; Lyons and D'Andrea 2003, 524.

<sup>49</sup> Вишечруна 2005, 136-137.

<sup>50</sup> Đuričić 2014, 270.

<sup>51</sup> Bogdanović 1988.

<sup>52</sup> Тасић и др. 2007; Вуковић 2011; Borojević et al. 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Todorović 1981.

<sup>54</sup> Crnobrnja 2012; Spasić and Živanović 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Јовановић и Глишић 1961.

<sup>56</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Đuričić 2019.

<sup>58</sup> I want to acknowledge Dr. Vera Bogosavljević – Petrović from the National Museum of Serbia, for giving me an insight into the field documentation from the excavations conducted by Prof. Miloje Vasić. Photographs used are from the archives of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade.



The house II/1912 was destroyed by fire (Fig. 6). It was severely damaged by ditches belonging to later houses. Only its northern and western walls could be determined.<sup>59</sup> The southern, southwestern and eastern sides of the house were destroyed, so its size and number of rooms could not be determined with certainty. Based on the photograph, the house probably had at least two rooms, so the southern, partly preserved wall did not represent the outer, but a partition wall, as a portion of a floor could be seen on the southern side of the wall. Sadly, a possible second room was not preserved. Postholes, different in orientation from the house plan, are visible in the southeast, marking the later house that destroyed that part of the House II/1912. In the eastern part of the house, a concentration of clay balls and loom weights was found.<sup>60</sup> On the east side of the concentration of clay balls, an oven was located, probably belonging to the house that cut through the House II/1912. In the southeast part of the room, two well-preserved bucrania were found. In the northeast part of the house, an oven with an opening was located. The oven opening was oriented towards the south. In the vicinity of the oven, a part of a 'mangal' (a base for the composite quern?) was unearthed. In the north-west corner of the house, a low daub wall, connecting the west house wall and the west oven wall was found. The compartment floor was covered by ash. In the original field documentation, the compartment was interpreted as a small room for ash deposition or a room with wooden furniture.<sup>61</sup>



Fig. 6. House II/1912 (view from the west) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)

The House at depth of 6.73 m was also destroyed by fire (Fig. 7). It was preserved only in its northern part, so its house plan, size and number of rooms cannot be determined (Fig. 8). The south part of the house goes under the profile. Postholes from southern, western and eastern walls were found. In the southeast corner of the house, an oven uplifted from the floor was unearthed. On the west side of the oven, low daub walls that belonged to a small compartment were found (Fig. 9). East, south and west walls of the compartment were preserved, and its north wall, was actually the north house wall. Pottery in form of amphorae, anthropomorphic lids and other

<sup>59</sup> Васић 1912, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Васић 1912, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Васић 1912, 21.





*Fig. 7. House at Δ6,73 (view from the north) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*



*Fig. 8. House at Δ6,73 and House at Δ6,63 (view from the north) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*



characteristic Vinča culture vessels was discovered inside the compartment. Oven found in this house was rather peculiar in its form. It seems as it was not directly standing on the house floor (Fig. 10). The oven was crooked toward the west. At the west side, oven floor was partly over the east wall of the clay compartment. Only east side



*Fig. 9. House at Δ6,73: clay compartment and the oven (view from the west) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*



*Fig. 10. House at Δ6,73: oven and the clay compartment (view from the east) (photo: Archive of the Archaeological Collection, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)*

of the oven wall was preserved. M. Vasić recorded that it had two floors. Older floor was 43 cm uplifted from the house floor, and based on the preserved wall, its upper part was 52 cm high. Oven platform was 1,05 m long and 85-90 cm wide. M. Vasić thought that the platform was solid, made of clay and it was 43 cm high. He also stated that, after the removal of the oven, the house floor underneath was red and hard from fire and 4 postholes making an irregular rectangle were visible. In the journal, M. Vasić proposed that the postholes were a constructional part, either from the oven or from a chimney.<sup>62</sup> On the photographs, it doesn't seem that the platform was solid and made of clay, but it looks like the oven was rather standing on top of the daub debris. Based on the description, and photographs, another interpretation can be suggested. The oven could have been standing on top of some type of architectural feature made of mud plaster – a larger, more solid table or a bench, which would explain the burnt house floor underneath and the part of the oven floor on top of the wall of the clay compartment. Even though this type of oven was not published so far, clay oven model from Medvednjak showed an oven uplifted from the house floor, standing on some sort of a table (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Clay oven model from Medvednjak (Петровић 2001)

One of the best examples of storage bins comes from the house 01/06 from Vinča. The house had three rooms with three ovens and was destroyed by fire. The ovens in the central and southern rooms were preserved *in situ*, while the oven in the northern room was dislocated.<sup>63</sup> On the northern side of the oven in the central room (oven 02/06), three rectangular storage compartments were located. Compartment walls were made from mud plaster, that turned into daub after the fire. The 30 cm high compartment wall stretched between the oven and the north wall of the room.<sup>64</sup> Inside one of these three storage bins, two pithoi filled predominantly with carbonized emmer grains were found.<sup>65</sup> The remains of emmer, water chestnut and pears were located inside this storage bin as well, but without a preserved container.<sup>66</sup>

The examples of similar storage bins with pithoi and remains of carbonized grain come from multiple Vinča culture sites. In their immediate vicinity, composite querns, often fixed to the house floor, can also be found, completing the food processing set. Besides previously mentioned houses, these sets were also found in numerous houses: house 1 from the trench XIX at Drenovac,<sup>67</sup> house 1/2010 at Stubline – Crkvine,<sup>68</sup> house 2/79 at Banjica – Usek,<sup>69</sup> house 2 at Opovo,<sup>70</sup> and houses 13 and 17 at Divostin.<sup>71</sup> Maybe the most important example is the house at the depth of 6.73 m from Vinča, as it is chronologically the oldest in comparison to the other houses mentioned in this paper. Houses from the other sites, including the House II/1912 from Vinča, all belong to younger phases of the Vinča culture. So, we see that these storage facilities are not just a phenomenon characteristic for the younger Vinča culture, but is a concept known from its earlier phases.

## Symbolic spaces – ovens and cultic objects

Symbolic elements are frequently found inside Neolithic houses. Symbolism in the Vinča culture is most commonly represented through animal and human imagery. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish whether certain objects with symbolic representations have cultic meaning or mundane function. In those cases, the context of the find is crucial.<sup>72</sup> In the Vinča culture the number of cultic objects far exceeds the number of ritual contexts. The cultic objects are limited to, either house contexts and cultural layers within the settlement,<sup>73</sup> or some other specific

<sup>62</sup> Васић 1912, 93-95.

<sup>63</sup> Borojević et al. 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Тасић и др. 2007; Borojević et al. 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Vuković 2011; Spasić and Živanović 2015; Filipović et al. 2018; Borojević et al. 2020; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Borojević et al. 2020; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Perić 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Crnobrnja 2012; Spasić and Živanović 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Todorović 1981; Tripković 2013; Spasić and Živanović 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Tringham et al. 1992.

<sup>71</sup> Bogdanović 1988.

<sup>72</sup> Nikolić and Vuković 2008a, 64.

<sup>73</sup> Николић и Вуковић 2008b, 178.

closed contexts (pits).<sup>74</sup> It is presumed that the presence of symbolic contexts inside houses, signifies that at the territory of the Central Balkans, rituals were conducted inside individual households.<sup>75</sup> For that reason, symbolic contexts inside houses, with specific emphasis on the relation between cultic objects and ovens will be presented.

Bucrania, one of the probably most recognizable cultic objects of the Neolithic period, were found at several Vinča culture sites. The bucrania in the Vinča culture were made from mud plaster and positioned either above the entrance of the house, entrance of the room or in the close vicinity of the oven.<sup>76</sup> At the site of Vinča – Belo Brdo, Jakovo - Kormadin, Gomolava and Stubline, bucrania were found next to ovens and their position suggests that they were placed on a wooden post, just above these fire installations. At the house 1 at the site of Jakovo, next to an oven, together with the remains of two bucrania, ornamented daub object was found. It was interpreted as an altar. Still, this information should be taken with caution, as it is not certain if it really represented an altar,<sup>77</sup> or an ornamented storage bin.<sup>78</sup>

The most prominent feature in the house is an oven. Bucrania are fixed symbolic objects, which probably retain the same position during the entire duration of the house, expressing the ideological rules of furnishing the Vinča culture house. By positioning bucrania in both the physical and symbolic centres of the house, house members are creating a place which commemorates house stories.<sup>79</sup>

Two interesting contexts regarding figurines and ovens should be mentioned, as well. At the site of Stubline, in the house excavated in 2008, next to an oven, a group of 43 schematic anthropomorphic figurines together with 11 tool models, was found.<sup>80</sup> At the site of Belovode, 4 bull figurines and a concentration of pots with animal remains, were found in a house next to an oven.<sup>81</sup>

The position of figurines from Stubline and Belovode, portray the location of objects in the house right before its destruction. They do not record their position in everyday life, like it is with fixed objects such as bucrania, but their placement during their usage. It is unclear if they were left in that position on purpose during the destruction,<sup>82</sup> or they just portray an event which was interrupted by the destruction of the house – the fire. When they were not in use, their position certainly was not on the house floor next to the oven.<sup>83</sup> So, here we have the record of some special event that involved oven – the space which represented the symbolic centre of the house. Probably, the circumstances and events described here were not the same, but the practice was. It seems like the place where cult should be practiced was determined in the Late Neolithic of the Central Balkans, and it was next to an oven.

Clay oven models, even though they are not numerous, represent an important category, especially from the symbolic perspective. Decorated models from Vinča, Progar and Medvednjak (Fig. 11) have anthropomorphic features represented on their domes. All of the models have either meander or spiral ornaments at the back or at the base.<sup>84</sup> Models from Vinča and Medvednjak have stylized human heads represented at the top of the dome and arms which end next to the opening of the oven. Model from Progar is damaged, but it probably also had a human head at the top of the dome. Just above the opening of the oven, two lunulas are presented, which are interpreted as breasts. It also has two arms which end at the opening of the oven.<sup>85</sup> Model from Medvednjak is the only one with a known original context of find. Six bread loaves from unbaked clay were found right next to it, and it was located next to one big post, two meters from a big oven.<sup>86</sup> Oven models from Valač and Pločnik are more realistic representations with rounded domes and they are decorated with incised lines.<sup>87</sup> These clay models emphasize the importance of oven and fire in the life of the Vinča culture communities. Fire transforms inedible into edible, it gives heat and light to people, which is crucial for their existence and survival. Oven models can be perceived as altars. Maybe the conjunction of oven and anthropomorphic figure symbolizes the protector of the house and its inhabitants.<sup>88</sup> No matter if they represent a certain figure, house as a whole, its inhabitants or practice, they have strong symbolic meaning. Either way, ovens held a prominent place in the symbolic life of the Vinča culture

<sup>74</sup> Nikolić and Vuković 2008a.

<sup>75</sup> Николић и Вуковић 2008b, 178.

<sup>76</sup> Spasić 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Јовановић и Глишић 1961.

<sup>78</sup> Spasić and Živanović 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Spasić 2012, 305.

<sup>80</sup> Crnobrajica et al. 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Šljivar i Jacanović 2005.

<sup>82</sup> e.g., Stevanović 1997; Tringham 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Crnobrajica 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Петровић 2001.

<sup>85</sup> Петровић 2001.

<sup>86</sup> Петровић 2001.

<sup>87</sup> Петровић 2001.

<sup>88</sup> Петровић 2001.



communities. It is not just a central place for food preparation, but also for telling stories, therefore the place for storing social memories.<sup>89</sup>

### Social dimension of a Vinča culture oven – household and home

Ovens can serve as important parameters for the distinction of social units, function of a room, house histories or shifts in the household dynamic. In addition, contexts around Vinča culture ovens indicate psychological and emotional connection between the house and its inhabitants. This perception of a living space transforms a house into a home.

Presence or absence of ovens in a structure or a room is often considered as one of the most reliable factors for the determination of the function of that particular structure or a room (dwelling, a place for food preparation, storage facility etc.). With that in mind, B. Tripković (2011) has examined social role of the Vinča culture household.<sup>90</sup> During his research he has focused on architecture (house size, house construction, number of rooms) and the location, number and type of fixed and portable finds. The location and contexts around ovens, played an important role in his analysis. Based on aforementioned criteria, he defined houses or parts of the house as depended or independent units.<sup>91</sup> Household can be defined as a task-oriented residence unit that shared production, co-residence, reproductive and consumptive tasks.<sup>92</sup> The oven, being the food preparation feature, is one of the crucial elements in the independence of a household. Ovens, grinding stones, storage compartments and storage pottery make a complete set necessary for the independence of a household.<sup>93</sup> He has determined several types of household organization models in the Vinča culture. For this analysis, the most important type would be a *house with three rooms* and in this category the House 4/1975 from Gomolava, House 2 from Jakovo and House 2/79 from Banjica, are placed. House 2 from Jakovo and House 2/79 from Banjica have two ovens inside two different rooms (central and left room).<sup>94</sup> The two rooms with ovens were interpreted as independent rooms, and the third room with no fixed structures was interpreted as the storage space, used either by the inhabitants of the central room or by the tenants of both rooms. In B. Tripković's opinion, the central room had the most prominent role within a house. This is where symbolic objects near ovens, like bucrania, were found. Also, the central room was connected to the other two rooms, which literally gave it the most dominant position within a house.<sup>95</sup>

House histories and space modification can be also analysed based on oven remains. Several indicative contexts were found inside Vinča culture houses.<sup>96</sup> One of the examples of house remodelling can be found in the House 2 from Jakovo. The oven in the room 1 from this house, lost its function over time, as it was covered by house floor in the final phase of its occupation.<sup>97</sup> This indicates the switch in the room function, suggesting the change in the number of house tenants or their needs.<sup>98</sup> House remodelling was also present at the site of Divostin, where houses 13, 14 and 15, show signs of room adding. B. Tripković interpreted added rooms as separate households, still somehow dependent on the inhabitants of the original house. Maybe the new part of the house was inhabited by the next generation of house members, due to the lack of long-term storage units in the new part of the house. All of the units have ovens inside, but their orientation differs from the arrangement of the ovens in the original house.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, ovens in the houses 13 and 14 were decorated in the same manner.<sup>100</sup> Both phenomena were interpreted by B. Tripković, as a negotiation in the construction of a new identity by the members of the younger generation.<sup>101</sup> So, we see how ovens can indicate not only the independence of certain house members, but also, point to shifts in household structure and dynamic.

Independent co-residence, food storage and food preparation facilities within a single household can raise a question about increased privacy and emergence of private property. In the Vinča culture settlements, there are numerous examples of indoor (private) storage and food preparation facilities, but they are extremely rare in

<sup>89</sup> Tringham 2005, 100.

<sup>90</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Byrd 1994, 663-664.

<sup>93</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Трипковић 2011; Todorović 1981.

<sup>95</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Јовановић и Глишић 1961.

<sup>98</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Трипковић 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Bogdanović 1988.

<sup>101</sup> Трипковић 2011.

the outdoor (public) spaces.<sup>102</sup> Restricted social network for sharing, production and consumption activities is considered to be main indicator for the emergence of private ownership and household-oriented communities. It is visible through spatial organization of the settlement, organization of house interiors and the relation between domestic and outside spaces.<sup>103</sup> Indoor food preparation and storage facilities and their virtual absence in the outdoor spaces indicates that Vinča culture communities were probably household-oriented. Also, private storage may imply private crop cultivation and animal farming, further implying the presence of private ownership of agricultural land and domestic animals.<sup>104</sup> Houses build one on top of the other, house remodelling and room adding can point to private property and inheritance. So, building land could have been subjected to ownership<sup>105</sup> and inheritance, as was proposed for the Near Eastern Neolithic communities.<sup>106</sup> It was suggested that the Vinča culture was a patrilinear society. Three models were proposed. By the first model, the eldest son would inherit the household, and other sons would build the life from zero. By the second model the inheritance was divided between all the sons equally and the third option assumed that all inheritors continued the life in the same household.<sup>107</sup> In each of the cases, ownership of private property is suggested.

Until now, we have been talking about houses, but that is not the same as home. Many researchers argue that an emotional based relationship with the dwelling place is what determines the very nature and essence of home, distinguishing it from a house.<sup>108</sup> Home is a virtual place, a repository for memories of the lived spaces. With regard to place identity as affiliation, scholars have explored how people use places to forge a sense of attachment or home. Such identification with space often involves emotional ties to a place, but it may also involve a sense of shared interests and values.<sup>109</sup> In attempting to clarify the relationship between house and home many researchers, particularly architects and historians, have examined the ways design, spatial organization, and furnishings of domestic dwellings influence and inflect concepts and/or ideologies of a home. In other words, household designs, furnishings and organization constrain or facilitate cultural and historical modes of relating between the people who share these spaces. How these ideas were manifested aesthetically varied according to social, cultural and historical contexts. The physical dwelling or shelter is described as simply one aspect of home. Moreover, it is generally recognized that the relationships between the terms house and home must be established in varying cultural and historical contexts.<sup>110</sup> Given these definitions of home, we can try applying them to the Vinča culture houses.

From the aforementioned descriptions of contexts around ovens, regarding economic, symbolic and social aspects, we can draw some conclusions about set of requirements which one house in the Vinča culture should fulfil. Ovens with often multiple floors and foundations either of potshards or broken stones, are regularly found inside houses. Some ovens were rebuilt more than once, which is evident based on the number of floors, indicating care and longer period of usage.<sup>111</sup> Symbolic and functional contexts found in their vicinity, indicate that the space around the oven was a focal point of a house, integrating the mundane and metaphysical spheres of the Vinča culture life. Furnishing regulations are especially displayed in this food processing area, where the biggest concentration of fixed mud plaster architectural features (oven, clay bin, composite querns, bucrania) is located.<sup>112</sup> Those regularities are not respected in only one part of the Vinča culture, but are a widespread phenomenon, and each year with new excavations we have more and more similar contexts inside the Vinča culture houses. Symbolic contexts around ovens with bucrania<sup>113</sup> and figurines<sup>114</sup> presented above, show that this was more than a physical centre of the house and it might have even represented a stage for some rituals. Maybe the space around the oven was the one where house memories were recorded and where the emotional connection to the house was displayed. So, can we call a Vinča house, not just a house, but a home as well?

<sup>102</sup> Đuričić 2019, 379.

<sup>103</sup> Byrd 1994, 640.

<sup>104</sup> Đuričić 2019, 379.

<sup>105</sup> Tringham et al. 1992; Stevanović 1997, 387.

<sup>106</sup> e.g., Byrd 1994; Hodder 1990; Watkins 1990.

<sup>107</sup> Porčić 2018.

<sup>108</sup> Moore 2000, 210.

<sup>109</sup> Cuba and Hummon 1993, 112-113.

<sup>110</sup> Mallett 2004, 63, 65-66.

<sup>111</sup> Todorović 1981; Bogdanović 1988; 2008; Пецикоза 2009; Марић 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Đuričić 2022, 58.

<sup>113</sup> Spasić 2012.

<sup>114</sup> Crnobrnja et al. 2009; Šljivar i Jacanović 2005.

## Outdoor ovens

As it was mentioned earlier, almost all ovens come from enclosed, house contexts. Indoor storage facilities, lack of communal projects (except ditches), reflect the increased privacy and tendency for private ownership within Late Neolithic communities at the territory of the Central Balkans.<sup>115</sup> Such organizational pattern would explain the lack of outdoor ovens. Due to the fact that Vinča culture settlements had closely packed houses, with no space for private backyards, outdoor facilities could be interpreted as communal property. Communal storage and food preparation facilities are in an opposition to self-sustaining independent households with their own private property.<sup>116</sup>

The site of Opovo differs from all previously mentioned sites. It was located in the marchland, containers for long-term storage and storage bins are extremely scarce, the consumption of domesticated cereals was limited and the percentage of consummated game was significantly higher than in other contemporaneous Vinča culture settlements.<sup>117</sup> Archaeozoological analysis has shown that 65–70% of faunal material belonged to wild animal taxa, while remains of pigs were not detected at this site.<sup>118</sup> This points to hunting as a dominant procurement strategy at Opovo.<sup>119</sup> Total of six above-ground houses, from three building horizons, was found, but only one of them (House 2), had an oven inside.<sup>120</sup> The houses were not as big and as well-constructed as houses from other Vinča culture settlements. Also, six outdoor ovens were found at the settlement – four in building horizon 2 and two in building horizon 3.<sup>121</sup> The site of Opovo was therefore interpreted as a specialized settlement with seasonal or short-term occupation.<sup>122</sup> That would explain the lack of self-sustainable independent households and the cohabitation of several social units that temporarily resided within their own private dwellings, but prepared food in communal, shared spaces. Nevertheless, the location of ovens can maybe, help us determine in which period of the year the site was occupied. Above-ground houses are present at the site, but they lack indoor ovens or other types of fire installations. So, outdoor ovens, found at the site of Opovo, could have been used for food preparation, but not for house heating. Those evidence could further suggest that the settlement was inhabited during the warmer months when the heating of the house was not a necessity. According to that scenario, members of several house units seasonally inhabited the settlement, living separately, but preparing and/or consummating food together. The presence of several ovens during one occupational horizon could be due to the number of individuals present at one time with no specific social ties connecting them, or materialization of different social groups of people with some sort of social ties that shared supplies and food. In either way, the evidence from the site of Opovo, shows less autonomous groups with more emphasized social network for sharing food production, (or) preparation and (or) consumption activities.

Nevertheless, ovens could not have been outdoors without some type of cover. Ovens must be sheltered and protected from weathering – rain, snow, extreme heat. 20th century outdoor traditional domed ovens are always under some sort of roofed structure.<sup>123</sup> Maybe the outdoor ovens had similar roofed structure as the one made for the experimental Vinča culture oven in Stapari, Užice (Fig. 12).

## Discussion

Even though Vinča culture ovens have not received substantial attention in the archaeological publications, they are an important piece of the Neolithic puzzle.<sup>124</sup> By focusing on the ovens, information about the Vinča culture architecture,<sup>125</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Đuričić 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Byrd 1994.

<sup>117</sup> Tringham et al. 1992.

<sup>118</sup> Orton 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Tringham et al. 1992; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>120</sup> Tringham et al. 1985.

<sup>121</sup> Tringham et al. 1992.

<sup>122</sup> Tringham et al. 1992, 384.

<sup>123</sup> Родич 2010, 134; Weinstein 1973; Gur-Arie et al. 2013, 4337.

<sup>124</sup> Đuričić 2021.

<sup>125</sup> Đuričić 2019; 2020.





Fig. 12. Experimental Vinča culture oven with a roofed structure (photo by A. Đuričić)

spatial organization,<sup>126</sup> building techniques,<sup>127</sup> characteristics of building materials,<sup>128</sup> food production,<sup>129</sup> symbolic practices<sup>130</sup>, social organization<sup>131</sup> and even function of entire settlements<sup>132</sup>, can be obtained.

In the Vinča culture, ovens are often detected only on their floor level (firebed), due to the taphonomy processes and the degradation of the material<sup>133</sup>. Oven floors are always preserved in the form of compact hard burnt clay layers, as they represent the part of the oven which is exposed to the highest and the most consistent temperature. Oven floors are made from clay, but this material transforms in contact with high temperatures. Fire is started directly on the floor. The fuel transforms into embers which radiates heat long after the flame is gone. Over time, this continuous contact with fire and ambers transforms clay into hard and compact mass.<sup>134</sup> The oven building experiment conducted at the site of Vinča – Belo Brdo, has provided some important insight regarding the preservation of ovens in the archaeological record.<sup>135</sup> Even though the oven is exposed to the fire inside, its upper structure – dome, which is made of mud plaster (clay mixed with chaff), does not transform into burnt daub. The temperature generated inside the oven is not substantial enough for the transformation of the material. Thus, the domes were from dry, not burnt daub, while they were in use. Because of that, remains of oven domes can be preserved in the form of burnt daub only if the house was destroyed by fire, and even then, dome remains can be

<sup>126</sup> Perić 2017; Crnobrnja 2012; Spasić, Živanović 2015; Todorović 1981; Tripković 2011; Spasić, Živanović 2015; Tringham et al. 1992; Bogdanović 1988; Тасић и др. 2007; Borojević et al. 2020; Đuričić 2019.

<sup>127</sup> Đuričić 2014; 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Đuričić 2020.

<sup>129</sup> Тодоровић и Цермановић 1961, 25; Benac 1971, 51; Todorović 1981, 15; Трипковић 2007, 95; Марић 2011, 78; Đuričić 2014; 2019; 2021.

<sup>130</sup> Spasić 2012; Crnobrnja et al. 2009; Šljivar i Jacanović 2005.

<sup>131</sup> Tripković 2011; Đuričić 2019.

<sup>132</sup> Tringham et al. 1992.

<sup>133</sup> Đuričić 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Đuričić 2019; 2020.

<sup>135</sup> Đuričić 2014.

mistaken for fragments of other architectural features like furniture or walls.<sup>136</sup> When the house was not destroyed by fire, just like house walls, domes cannot be preserved, as dry daub deteriorates with time, due to different environmental and post-depositional processes. This explains the reason why fully preserved ovens are extremely rare, and why only a few examples were found in the Late Neolithic of the Central Balkans.<sup>137</sup>

Based on the provided examples, it is clear that ovens can offer a lot of information about various aspects of the human life in the past. They should be perceived as an important factor in the life of the Vinča culture communities. They occupy a central place in a room and are often surrounded by storage bins, pithoi, stored food (especially cereals) and composite querns – elements necessary for cooking and bread baking.<sup>138</sup> These fire installations accumulate and radiate heat for a prolonged period of time, making them suitable for house heating during colder periods of the year.<sup>139</sup> These fixed arrangements around ovens indicate how living spaces were organised in the Vinča culture. By being found in multiple settlements they represent regulations in house furnishings, understood and applied throughout the Vinča culture territory.<sup>140</sup>

Ovens are also surrounded by symbolic elements, like bucrania or figurines. Bucrania are usually fixed on posts, so they represent a permanent feature that marks a special place in a house.<sup>141</sup> Groups of figurines were also found around ovens, indicating the location of a performance.<sup>142</sup> We cannot say with certainty what was the nature of the performance, but by being conducted in the centre of the house, a cultic practice can be assumed. Oven models, with or without anthropomorphic features, also attribute to the symbolic importance of these fire installations. Even though we do not know what their exact meaning was, they might have represented altars or a manifestation of an installation that provided life.<sup>143</sup> All of these examples emphasize the symbolic dimension of the oven and the space it occupied.

Multiple ovens can be found inside a single house. Usually, they are in separate rooms, and they give an economic independence to the house members who occupy the space in question. By analysing the arrangement of ovens within a house, household dynamics can be observed. House remodelling and changes in numbers of rooms and ovens can indicate how household dynamics changed over time.<sup>144</sup>

Even though ovens were usually found inside houses, outdoor ovens at the site of Opovo are in accordance with the rest of the archaeological material that suggests special function of this site as a specialized settlement with short-term occupation.<sup>145</sup> In this case, ovens can maybe pinpoint the occupation season and the social organization of the settlement, where residents lived in separate houses, but shared food related activities.

Ovens are the centre of everyday house life and a symbolic centre of the house.<sup>146</sup> On one hand, they can provide us information about the symbolic aspect of the life in the Neolithic community, and on the other hand, being the division unit between different groups of house inhabitants, they can give us insight into the social organization of the house. Vinča culture houses are the places where practical, symbolic and emotional spheres overlap. Fixed arrangements of the Vinča house interiors are known and applied all over the territory of this culture. These regulations confirm that in the Vinča culture practical and symbolic spheres cannot be separated. Ovens with storage bins, pithoi, grain remains and fixed composite querns, clear symbolic elements and representations, at the same time show practical – economic function of the oven and the basic function of the central space in the house. We can name it the first level. On the second level, that arrangement represents economic independence of the social unit occupying that space. On the third level, the arrangement with symbolic attributes shows the cult – symbolic, ritual sphere of the Vinča culture community located at the centre of the house next to the economically important features which embody the life itself. The zone of transformation by fire – transformation from inedible to edible.<sup>147</sup> On the fourth level, the entire arrangement is a widespread phenomenon and it can be found, not just at one site, or in one region, but throughout the Vinča culture. It represents a fixed set of furnishings, rebuilt and cleaned spaces with clear symbolic meaning, which signifies that the house was not just a place for bare survival, but a home, a space where individual and/or group identity is presented.

<sup>136</sup> Đuričić 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Đuričić 2020.

<sup>138</sup> Spasić, Živanović 2015; Đuričić 2021; 2022.

<sup>139</sup> Đuričić 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Đuričić 2022.

<sup>141</sup> Spasić 2012; Đuričić 2022.

<sup>142</sup> Crnobrnja et al. 2009; Šljivar i Jacanović 2005.

<sup>143</sup> Петровић 2001.

<sup>144</sup> Tripković 2011.

<sup>145</sup> Tringham et al. 1992.

<sup>146</sup> Tringham 2005.

<sup>147</sup> Tringham 2005, 100.



## Conclusion

By examining ovens from only one perspective, we would lose a plethora of information regarding the everyday activities and the perception of home in the Late Neolithic of the Central Balkans. Ovens are an important piece of the puzzle in the interpretation of the everyday life,<sup>148</sup> but also in the reconstruction of symbolic practices<sup>149</sup> and social organization.<sup>150</sup> By analysing ovens, more information about Vinča culture interior design, furnishings and spatial organization can be obtained. The next step is to examine oven building techniques which can help archaeologists understand Vinča culture mud plaster architecture better, thus allowing more accurate reconstruction of the Late Neolithic living spaces.

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<sup>148</sup> Perić 2017; Crnobljaj 2012; Spasić, Živanović 2015; Todorović 1981; Tripković 2011; Spasić, Živanović 2015; Tringham et al. 1992; Bogdanović 1988; Тасић и др. 2007; Borojević et al. 2020; Đuričić 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Spasić 2012; Crnobljaj et al. 2009; Šljivar i Jacanović 2005.

<sup>150</sup> Трипковић 2011.

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# SIX SASSANIAN ARTWORKS ENGRAVED WITH HUNTERS: KING, CROWN PRINCE, ARISTOCRAT OR PRETENDER TO THE THRONE?

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PARASTO MASJEDI KHAK, SEYED MEHDI MOUSAVI KOUHPAR  
HASAN KOHANSAL VAJARGAH, CUI QILONG

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on six Sassanian plates that have caused contradictory opinions about those depicted on them. Considering these works and a historical context, the authors have assessed the prevailing opinions and expressed their own views and probabilities. As such, the person engraved on the four Sassanian works is probably a prince who ruled northern and northeastern regions of Iran during the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and was in contact with nomadic tribes between Iran and China.

## ABSTRAIT: SIX ŒUVRES SASSANIDES GRAVÉES DE CHASSEURS : ROI, PRINCE HÉRITIER, ARISTOCRATE OU PRÉTENDANT AU TRÔNE ?

Cet article se concentre sur six plaques sassanides qui ont suscité des opinions contradictoires sur celles qui y sont représentées. Compte tenu de ces travaux et du contexte historique, les auteurs ont évalué les opinions dominantes et exprimé leurs propres points de vue et probabilités. Ainsi, le personnage gravé sur les quatre œuvres sassanides est probablement un prince qui régna sur les régions du nord et du nord-est de l'Iran au cours du IV<sup>e</sup> et du début du Ve siècle après J.-C. et qui fut en contact avec des tribus nomades entre l'Iran et la Chine.

KEYWORDS: Silver Plates; Sassanians; Iran; China; Northern Wei.

MOTS-CLÉS : plaques d'argent ; Sassanides ; L'Iran; Chine; Wei du Nord.

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## Introduction

Ardašir I, with a revolt against last Parthian king Artabanus, established the Sassanian Empire which officially endured for 424 years, from 224 to 651 AD. During this period, several members of the Sassanian family and for a short period of time, rebels from important clans ascended the throne.

Islamic sources like *Al-Tanbīh wal-Ishrāf* mentions images of twenty-seven kings from the Sassanian dynasty<sup>1</sup> among them, there were twenty-five male and two female royals. Today, based on archaeological, numismatic and classic sources, about 40 people in Iran ascended the throne during that period, which apart from Sassanian kings, included military commanders as well as members of noble families such as Mihran (Bahrām Chobin, 590-591 AD; Shahrbaraz, 629 AD), Ispahbudhan (Vistahm, 591-597 AD; Farrukh Hormozd, 630-631 AD). The emergence of people outside the house of Sasan as kings of Iran or similar efforts by Sassanian princes and nobles who were not legitimate to sit on the throne appeared at the beginning of the weakness of this dynasty and the situation became intense in later years in a way that between 623 AD and 628 AD, more than ten people reached the power whose names and terms are not well known.<sup>2</sup>

After the downfall of Sassanians, in 651 AD, and the retreat of Sassanian princes to Transoxiana, at least four people named Pērōz/Firuz (651-677 AD) who was the son of Yazdegerd III, Narseh (677-709 AD) who was the son of Pērōz III, Bahrām (or Bahrām VII, 709-710 AD) and Khosrow or Khosrow V (728-729 AD) claimed their kingship over Iran. Yazdegerd and Sassanian princes, in the hope of help from Chinese emperors (Taizong 599-649 AD and Gaozong 649-683 AD) from the Tang dynasty, moved toward that region. According to Chinese sources, these princes, despite many efforts and the help from Turkish forces, failed to achieve their goals and remained in the Chinese court as military commanders.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Mas'udi 2010, 99-100; Tafazzoli 2014, 277.

<sup>2</sup> Jalilian, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Compareti 2003; Daryaei 2003.



Numerous artifacts survived from this period. It can probably be said that silver and golden plates of the Sassanian era are among the most significant and beautiful works left from this period. Some even believe that whatever the purpose of making and using the reliefs was, it was transferred to Sassanian plates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the plates replaced the reliefs and the tradition of producing silverware continued during the reign of Šāpur I or Bahrām I until the time of Khosrow I.<sup>5</sup>

The research on these works began at least in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of some Sassanian specimens present in the National Library of France by Chabouillet. Preliminary studies were mostly about classification and chronology of these artifacts.<sup>6</sup> With the studies by people like Orbeli and Trever (1935) and later by Harper, a new stage began for interpreting the content and nature of these works. In his study, Harper identified and introduced three styles of silver plates. Studies on these plates showed that they are classifiable into three principal groups of Early, Middle, and Later.<sup>7</sup> Brunner, too, on the basis of inscriptions on some of the works, classified them into three groups where the first is related to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, the second group to the time interval of 500-695 AD and the third group to 700 AD.<sup>8</sup>

Except for a few limited pieces, most of these artifacts have been obtained from unauthorized excavations or farmers' activities and from illegal antique markets, and therefore the archaeological context from where these artifacts were unearthed remains unclear, a problem that exists with most Sassanian plates.<sup>9</sup> The fact that these specimens are out of the archaeological context has made it difficult to determine their date on a specific chronology. Nevertheless, by matching the crown form of some samples with the identified crowns of Sassanian kings, it is possible to date and identify the person engraved on the plates. It should be noted that Harper, Erdman, and Herzfeld pointed out that crowns depicted on Sassanian rock reliefs and vessels do not always correspond to designs on official coins.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the sorting of these plates is still valid based on the role of the kings through comparing them with coins. The study of Sassanian coins goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps a book published by Silvestre de Sacy can be considered as the oldest work on Sassanian coins.<sup>11</sup> One of the most comprehensive research on the typology and classification of Sassanian kings was conducted by Robert Göbl, the result of which was the publication of a valuable book entitled *Sassanian Numismatics*.

This research will focus on six Sassanian vessels. It will point to opinions about those periods (in samples that have already been published), about the characters engraved and then the authors will evaluate them and correct some of the comments. These six works, except for three samples, do not have detailed information about their finding location or even when these plates were made.

## Introducing Specimens

As mentioned before, six Sassanian works will be studied in this research. Among them, two have been obtained from Iran's Mazandaran province, with one being kept in the Iranian National Museum and other at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the United States. The third sample is in the Azerbaijan Museum in Tabriz. The fourth sample is in the Cincinnati Museum. The fifth is being preserved in the Shamakhi History-Ethnography Museum in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The last sample obtained in China is being kept there.

The first specimen in the Cleveland Museum of Art is a circular stone plaque and has been registered with the number D. 19-1/4 in. 63.258 (Fig. 1). This is a unique Sassanian artwork in terms of its material and type that is engraved on a stone from the Bronze Age.<sup>12</sup>

This work, which has the engraving of lion hunting, is a Bronze Age stone disc and is found in Bronze Age cultures of Gorgan/Hesar in North-northeastern Iran. The rider is depicted holding a bow in the left hand while pulling the string with his right hand. His aim is a lion that is about to jump towards him from the front. Another lion (or the same?) is engraved underneath the horse's foot and is dying. An arrow archery bag is engraved on the right and a sword grip on the left of the rider. His beard is passed through a ring at the bottom, and he is shown wearing an earring. The rider is crowned with a crescent and two cylinders with two spherical balls above. A ribbon is hung on the crown of the crescent. At the bottom of the crown is another.

<sup>4</sup> Harper 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Akbari 2019, 184.

<sup>6</sup> Harper 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Herrmann 1977, 125.

<sup>8</sup> Brunner 1974, 109-121.

<sup>9</sup> Herrmann 1977, 125; Orbeli 1938; Harper and Meyers 1981, 8.

<sup>10</sup> see Harper 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Silvestre de Sacy 1793.

<sup>12</sup> Masjedi Khak and Khazaie Kouhpar 2022.





*Fig 1. A stone disc in the Cleveland Museum of Art, discovered in Sari.*

The second specimen kept in the Museum of Ancient Iran is similar to the first one. It is a silver plate with engraving of a rider hunting two lions (Fig. 2).

On the silver plate kept at the Museum of Ancient Iran (Fig. 2), image of a person is engraved who is mounted on a horse. He is shown turning backwards and with a bow ready to release the arrow toward a fleeing lion. Another lion (?) is also under the rider's foot that is already dead or dying. The fallen lion rests his head on his left hand and seems to have bitten, and in this respect is similar to the Sari Disc kept in the Cleveland. The rider has a crescent at the top of his crown, and like Cleveland, there are two cylindrical projections with two spheres at the top.



*Fig 2. Sassanian silver plate at the Museum of Ancient Iran, discovered in Sari.*

Except for the differences in the direction of movement of lions and horses, and subsequently the king engraved on a silver plate in the National Museum in terms of releasing the arrow in the Parthian shot, the two plates are similar. However, the small space on the stone disk caused the artist to remove some of the details, and perhaps this limited space caused the artist to remove the margins instead of reducing the proportion of designs, turning around the horse's head to the centre of the image.

Regarding the finding location of these two works, it is reported that the silver plate was apparently found in 1954 along with another plate (Fig. 1) with identical engraving near the Sari railway station.<sup>13</sup>

Various opinions have been expressed about the two aforementioned Sassanian-era works and the nature of the person engraved. About the silver plate Vanden Berghe says: "The image is probably one of the sons of Šāpur II (perhaps Šāpur III) who intended to hunt two lions".<sup>14</sup> Sami, however, attributes the image to Ardašir II while he

<sup>13</sup> Sami 2009 Vol.2, 120; Vanden Berghe 1959, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Vanden Berghe 1959, 7.

was a crown prince<sup>15</sup> but he does not give a reason for that. Another view on the plate is by Ghirshman. He tells about the silver plate as: since the victory over the animal (lion) is a royal privilege and there is no crown image on any coin, he is a Sassanian prince who dreams of becoming the king. Regarding the date of the work, he believes that the half-crown of the prince engraved on the plate is similar to the half-crown of Hormozd I and Šāpur II, and therefore this work belongs to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> or the early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the Sassanian disc, the catalogue of the Cleveland Museum of Art has attributed this to Ardašir II.<sup>17</sup> Kaveh Farrokh and his colleagues believe that this person (on the Sari silver plate) is probably Šāpur III.<sup>18</sup>

But apparently the researchers have not paid much attention to similarities between the two people engraved on disc and plate. Shepard (1983) and Masjedi Khak & Khazaie Kouhpar (2022) have pointed to the similarity between the two, with Shepard considering both as Ardašir II. The basis of this viewpoint is their similarity with a relief image of Ardašir II at Taq-e Bostan. But Masjedi Khak and Khazaie Kouhpar in their research found this attribution as incorrect. They argue that Shepard was probably mistaken while calling Ardašir II in Taq-e Bostan similar of the two engraved people based on their crown depictions because the lower part of Ardašir's crown in Taq-e-Bostan is broken and this has made the crescent above the plate and disc similar to Ardašir's crown, but in fact Ardašir's crown, like other recorded examples of Sassanian kings, has a single sphere not a crescent. In addition, the material used in Ardašir II's sphere is obviously different from those depicted in the Sassanian plate and disc. In Taq-e Bostan, the ball is made of net or alike through which even the pleat of the king's hair is visible and clear, while they are completely different in disc and plate samples which seem to be made of metal or other strong material on which the decoration is created and thus no hair design could be seen. Masjedi Khak and Khazaie Kouhpar explain the character of these two works based on places of their finding and production (at least the Sassanian disc, which belongs to the Bronze Age culture of northern Iran) along with historical events that occurred in those regions and express the possibility that the person in question is Kāvūs (Kayous), the son of Kawād I (Kavadh I) and the elder brother of Khosrow I (Anoširavān), who according to the law of inheritance and seniority was to replace Kawād I after his death, but he rebelled and considered the throne as his right (Ibid).

The third plate is kept in the Museum of Azerbaijan in the city of Tabriz. Little is known about it and is almost anonymous. The aforementioned work is said to have a history of about 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.<sup>19</sup> Farrokh et al. find the nature of the person engraved unclear, despite its similarity to the above two works and the attribution of the National Museum silver plate to Šāpur III. In this plate, the scene is similar to the Sari plate. The depicted personality is riding a horse with a bow in his hand and ready to release the arrow toward a lion that is fleeing and has its back to the man. Another lion (?) is beneath the foot of the horse and like the other two plates, places the



Fig 3. Sassanian plate at the Tabriz Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Sami 2009 Vol.2, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Ghirshman 1962, 209.

<sup>17</sup> Shepard 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Farrokh, Moshtagh Khorasani and Dwyer 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Yasinzadeh 2010, 64; Farrokh, Moshtagh Khorasani and Dwyer 2018.



head on his left hand as if his hand were inside his mouth. This plate has differences in detail, for example, the person does not have a beard ring and has a cape on his back and the bottom ribbon of the crescent is not visible in his crown. This person has an upward crescent at the top of his crown and two bars at the top of his forehead, at the end of which there are two spheres. So far, no comment has been made about the person engraved on this plate.



Fig 4. Sassanian plate in the Cincinnati Museum, USA.

The fourth plate in this research is the one being preserved at the Cincinnati Museum of the United States. This also lacks enough details and has been registered with an accessing code of 1957.387. Its finding location is also exactly unknown and Iran, or in general Central Asia, was recorded for the same. The material used in it is white bronze (Bronze with high percentage of tin) and was purchased by the Kevorkian Foundation. The approximate date or name of the person engraved on the plate is not mentioned on the museum page, but the Wikimedia site attributes it to the late Sassanian and the early Islamic era (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). Like other plates mentioned in this research, this also depicts a horse rider in the posture of hunting lions. Here, the rider, unlike previous designs, is using a sword instead of a bow while hunting the lion. While a lion is jumping from behind to the rider and the horse, the rider seems turning back in a squeaky manner and hitting the lion's right arm with the sword in his right hand. However, like other plates, another lion (or the same) is fallen under the horse and is dead. The rider is wearing a crown with a serrated edge just above his forehead. In the upper part, a crescent-shaped crown is carved upward, which is decorated. Although the decoration is different from other crowns, unlike the previous three where persons are depicted with two cylinders, they are not seen here.

The fifth specimen of this study is the one found at Shamakhi in Azerbaijan and is currently being preserved at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>20</sup> Dan attributes its manufacturing to the third century AD and calls it a royal hunting scene but does not mention which Sassanian king he might be. Harper says it can be classified into Group 1.<sup>21</sup> Group 1 includes the most ancient vessels whose dates reach to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

Like the plate of the Cincinnati Museum, here the rider turns backwards like Parthian shot and targets an ibex with a bow. The crown of the engraved person is a little different from the aforementioned four and has a form like a leaf but is similar in general. However, this person, too, like in the plate of the Cincinnati Museum lacks cylinders and spheres in his crown.

The last study sample is a silver plate that was found in China. This was discovered in 1981 in a grave in Xiaozhan village of Datong city in China's Shanxi province.<sup>22</sup> This plate was recovered from a grave that is related to the Northern Wei dynasty. The deceased is named as Feng Hetu, an officer in a military academy and was responsible for the supply and maintenance of horses for the imperial cavalry unit.<sup>23</sup> It must be remembered that Feng Hetu

<sup>20</sup> Dan 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Harper 1983, 47-48.

<sup>22</sup> Harper 1990; Ma 1983; Fu 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Ma 1983.

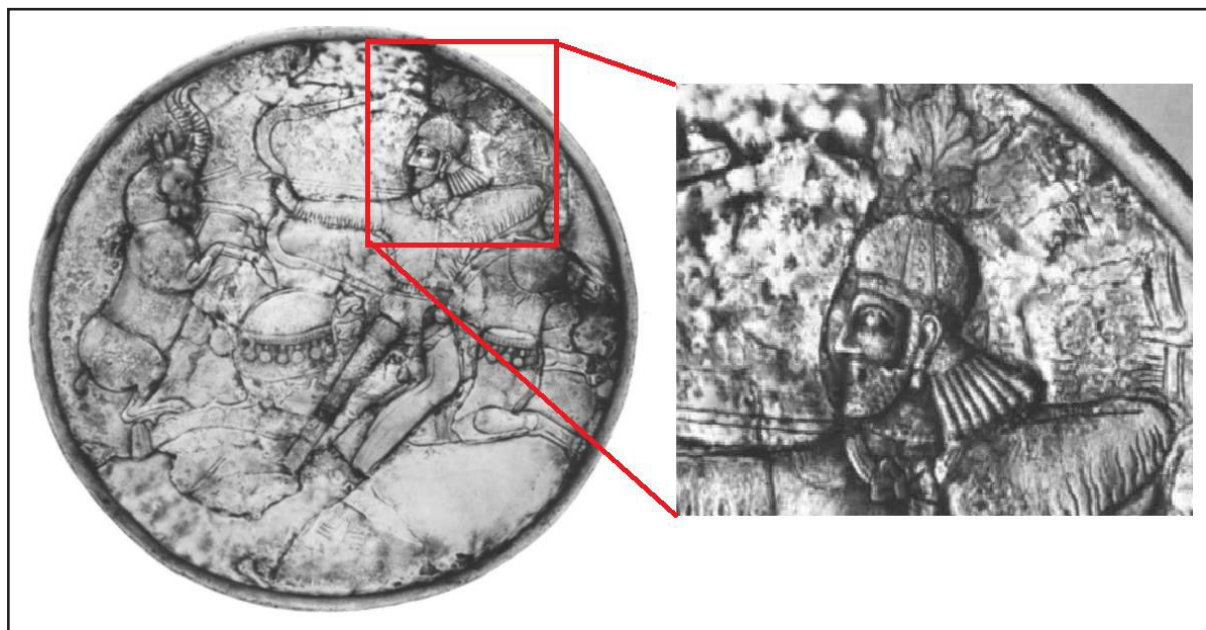


Fig 5. Engraved depiction plate from Shamakhi (Harper 1983, pl. 18).

belonged to Xianbei,<sup>24</sup> one of the non-Chinese nomadic tribes and was known as Five Hu.<sup>25</sup> Xianbei is a Chinese transcript of a native name. The language of the Xianbei people may be close to some Turkish words of the late Mongolian language. Interestingly, the hair colour of the Xianbei people was different from native people as Chinese sources mention about the different hair colour of Wang Dun, who was trying to usurp the throne. The sources tell that he had light hair colour which he inherited from his mother who was from the Xianbei tribe.

In the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, one of the elites of Xianbei called Tanshihuai succeeded in uniting the scattered people of his community and established a new Xianbei Empire, but it collapsed after his death. In the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, tens of Xianbei tribes lived under three rulers who dominated an area from the Yellow River toward the east to the vicinity of present-day South Korea.<sup>26</sup> The Northern Wei Empire founded by the people of Tuoba was one of the branches of Xianbei.<sup>27</sup> By this way, it was distinguished that Feng Hetu was from a powerful tribe and also had the important backing and travelled in various parts in order to perform his duties.

In the plate discovered, a scene depicts a person hunting for a boar with a spear. In this scene, there are three boars attacking the man. The person hit the above boar attacking him on the right with a spear but there is another boar simultaneously approaching him from below while a third attacks the person from the left direction whose head the man hit with his right foot. The type of head covering of this person is not clear enough, but the ribbon as well as the pearl decoration that extends from his forehead to the back indicates he had head covering. Although he lacks a crescent that was visible in the previous samples but unlike the two plates of Cincinnati and Shamakhi, the person engraved on this silver plate has two cylindrical rods with two spheres on top of them. Some Chinese researchers call him Bahrām I (fourth Sassanian king)<sup>28</sup> and some others attribute its manufacturing period to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century AD (Fu 2019). Based on its decorations, Fu believes that the work was probably produced in Central Asia. Although he has tried to relate this work to Central Asia and even further east but his statements and arguments are based on insufficient information.

As far as Ma is concerned, he links the engraved person to Bahrām I based on physical features such as beard, eyes, and nose, as well as the existence of a plate depicting him boar hunting. He says that if the person is really Bahrām I or the work was made during his time, then this is approximately of 273-276 AD that was contemporary to Emperor Wu from the Western Jin Dynasty.<sup>29</sup> Fu has, however, attributed the engraved hat, costume, and the person to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Harper 1990.

<sup>25</sup> Holcombe 2019a.

<sup>26</sup> Holcombe 2019a.

<sup>27</sup> Pearce 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Ma 1983.

<sup>29</sup> Ma 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Fu 2019.



Fig 6. Plate recovered from Feng Hetu's grave (Skupniewicz 2019, Fig. 9)

If we consider the period of Feng Hetu as contemporary to the plate and if this could have been a gift of an Iranian delegation to China, the time of its making goes back to the early 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.

## Discussions

Six Sassanian works were introduced during the course of this study, none of which until today, matches the identified Sassanian crowns. All these works are presumed to belong to the periods between 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries and the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Nevertheless, these six crowns have something in common which is unlikely to have been accidental. The identified elements in Sassanian crowns include: Korymbos, Crescent in front of the crown and above the forehead; Vector placed around the crown; Wings and head of a bird that can be seen in some crowns, and Light ray blades. In his study on Sassanian coins, Gobl introduced a group of eight crowns,<sup>31</sup> none of which is identical to the crowns under study.

For convenience, we identify the elements distinguishing the six plates from the formal forms. Actually, these elements are not repeated in any of the known Sassanian crowns. The first is a crescent at the top of the crown. Although in Sassanian crowns there is a large sphere (Korymbos) at the top, this is clearly different from the crescent in the aforementioned six crowns in terms of their shape as well as the nature. Korymbos is actually a type of hairdressing, in which, the king's hair is placed in the shape of a ball above the head and may be covered with netting or fabric, but the crown crescent in these plates (five plates) there is no hairdressing, rather they are made of metal or other solid material that contain decorations as well (Fig 8). These five works are different from each other in terms of decoration and in case of the Shamakhi Plate, there are some differences in details, but in general, they are similar.

The second distinguishing element of these works is two cylindrical rods attached to the two spheres at the end. Although there are crescents on the crowns of some Sassanian kings, none of the kings has this image on their

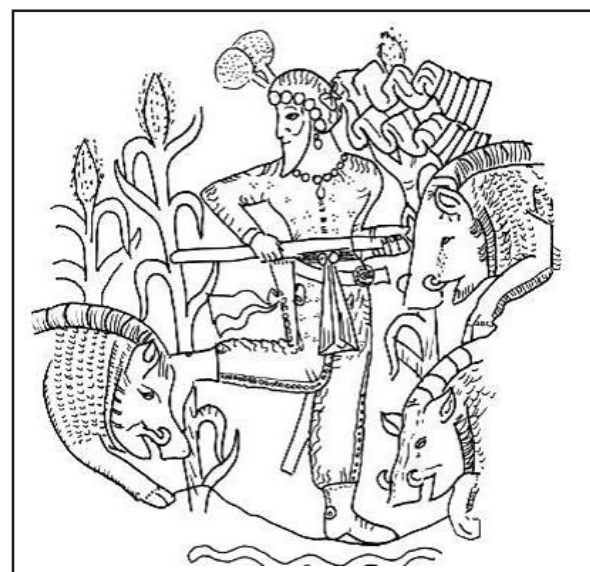


Fig 7. Depiction and design in Chinese plate (Skupniewicz 2019, Fig. 9)

<sup>31</sup> Gobl 1971, Table XIV.



identified crowns. Analysis and symbolism of these two spheres require separate interpretation, which is beyond the scope of the current study. These two rods and spheres are exactly repeated in four works, namely the Cleveland Disc, the Sari Silver Plate, the Tabriz Plate, and the Datong Plate. In brief, the combination of these two elements can be shown as follows:

- Crescent with two rods and a sphere: The Cleveland Disc, the Sari silver Plate, the Tabriz Plate.
- Crescent: The plates in Cincinnati and Shamakhi museums.
- Two rods and spheres: The Datong Plate

Assuming that the persons depicted on these six works are one and the same, the question arises as who the person actually is? Is he a king or a claimant to the throne? It is possible that this is related to the period when he was a crown prince, then why do we not see any trace of it in the official crowns? Was he just a member of a noble family?

Based on the proposed dating for these works, it is possible that the crowns belonged to one person. As a result, the proposed dates must be closer to each other. Harper, while categorizing the Sassanian plates, puts the Sari and Shamakhi Plates in one group considering them the oldest. In this case, the Sassanian disc of Cleveland, which was obtained from the place of the silver plate of the National Museum (Sari's plate), belongs to this time. The Tabriz Plate also belongs to the same time interval. Chinese archaeologists have also attributed the Datong Plate to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The only different dating in this period is for the Cincinnati Plate, which most likely to be flawed and this work too is closer to the suggested time frame for other plates. In fact, in this case, all the works are closer to each other temporally. Do these works belong to the third and fourth centuries? The plate found in China and the person buried in the tomb provides information about the historicity of these artifacts.

Based on the inscription on the gravestone, the person buried inside was Feng Hetu. Ma says that calculations by Zhiwen shows Feng Hetu was born in 438 AD and died in 501 AD i.e., he lived during the rule of Gaozong (471-499 AD) that was the peak of the cultural and economic prosperity of the Northern Wei dynasty.<sup>32</sup> His death, according to the inscription, was in 501 AD which was the second year of the rule of Emperor Xuanwu from the Northern Wei dynasty.<sup>33</sup> While Harper has written the death of the man in 504 AD,<sup>34</sup> but he seems to mean the time of the deceased's last resting place because Feng Hetu's burial site was elsewhere, and he was moved to a new grave in his hometown two or three years later. If we consider Feng Hetu's life to be the time of making the plate if the plate was a gift from the Iranian delegation, in the recorded documents, Iranian representatives went to China ten times, all in the period between the second half of the fifth century (567 AD) and the beginning of the sixth century AD.<sup>35</sup> Were they official representatives of the Sassanian Empire or merchants or any other possible group? Ma writes the years of ten Iranian delegations to Chinese courts in the following order: (1) 455 AD, (2) 461 AD, (3) 466 AD, (4) 468 AD, (5) 476 AD, (6) 507 AD, (7) 571 AD, (8) 518 AD, (9) 521 AD, (10) 522 AD.

Ma also enumerates four possible scenarios for the plate, although he himself considers the first as the more probable one:

1. This plate was initially transferred from Iran to Qiuci or Yandi and then it fell into the hands of the Northern Wei dynasty following its establishment and later it was given to Feng Hetu as a reward.
2. It was brought to Yiwu, an ancient city in Mongolia, by a special Iranian envoy and then given to Feng Hetu as a gift.
3. Feng Hetu himself could have acquired it from Shanghu or from Iranians residing in Luoyang.
4. The people of the Feng Hetu tribe got it from the western region or from Wangshen complexes or other places such as Hejian.

According to the inscription on the tomb of Feng Hetu, one can at least be sure that if these works belong to one person, their date will not be much later than 504 AD, although it is probably older than this and after one hand to another finally reached to Feng Hetu long after the plate was made.

Now, if these riders were one, which class they belonged to? The Nobility? The royal family? Or Prince? or King?

It is very much unlikely that this person was an aristocrat/noble for several reasons. First, hunting lions, which is represented in four works, is an act of royal monopoly, and such by the nobility is a kind of attack on the legitimacy and credibility of the king himself. Second, the type of crown is a sign of kingship, and based on reliefs depicting nobles with hats distinguish them completely from the crowns discussed in this research. In addition, it is unlikely

<sup>32</sup> Ma 1983.

<sup>33</sup> Fu 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Harper 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Fu 2019.

that any of the nobles would be allowed to order a plate with their depictions on them like Sassanian kings (in terms of the proportion of works remaining till date). Also, Sassanian artists and craftsmen produced these works upon the order of the kings, and assuming that a king would have ordered a plate to honour a noble, but accepting that he would order several more plates with royal insignia such as the crown and the lion hunting seems improbable. Even if it were so, which nobleman was so worthy that not even his name is mentioned? And what important job he could have accomplished to deserve such respect? In addition, although some people were allowed to have a crown, this was only with the permission of the king. Procopius mentions in this regard:

“When the Mirranes, defeated in battle and with the greater part of his men lost, came back to the Persian land with the remainder of his army, he received bitter punishment at the hands of King Cabades (Kawād). For he took away from him a decoration which he was accustomed to bind upon the hair of his head, an ornament wrought of gold and pearls. Now this is a great dignity among the Persians, second only to the kingly honour. For there it is unlawful to wear a gold ring or girdle or brooch or anything else whatsoever, except a man be counted worthy to do so by the king.”

(Procopius. 1914, Book I, Chapter 17: 26-28).

Even, in case of permission to put the crown on the head, the issue of making plates and royal relics with the depiction of a person other than the king is a separate issue that makes us more confident that he is either a king or a crown prince.

Another question is whether this person was a rebel and a claimant to the monarchy? The answer is somewhat convenient with high probability of correctness. But such a possibility with regard to the period discussed in this research is very weak. It is because the fact that apart from Kāvūs, all usurper kings and rebels came to power years after the date of Feng Hetu’s tomb. And only Kāvūs remained in this period.

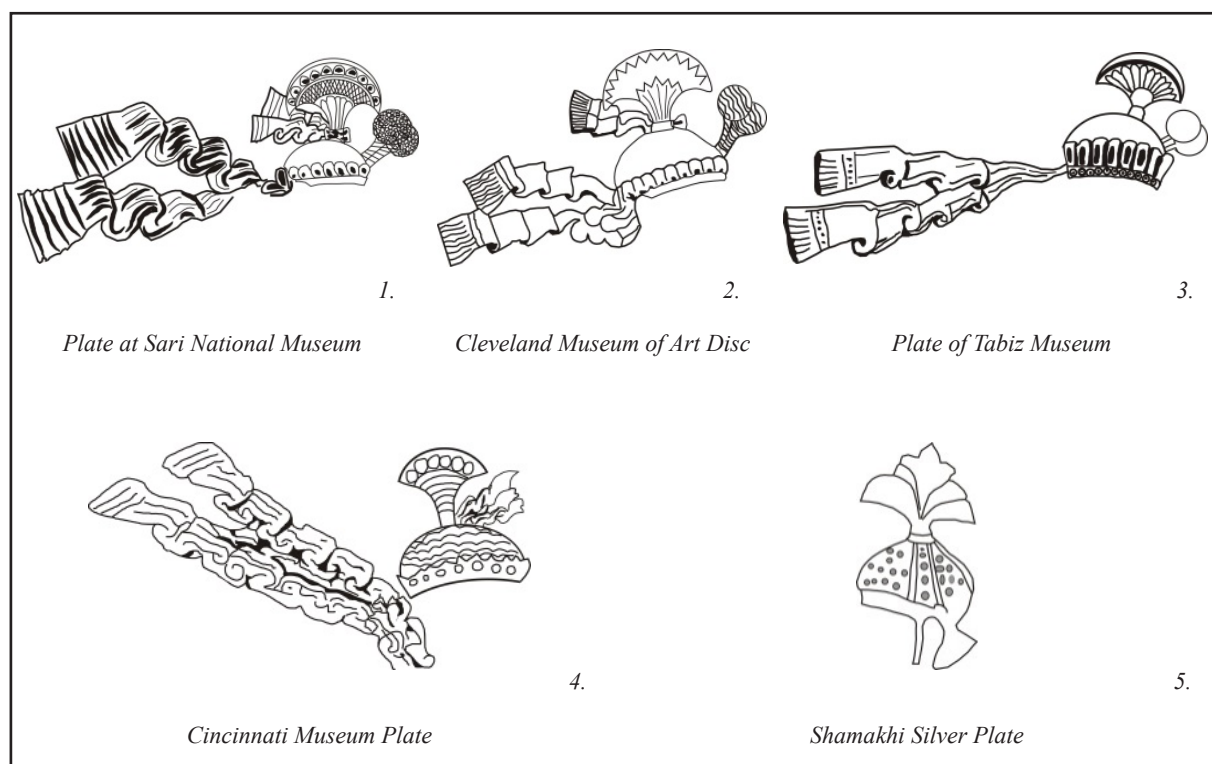
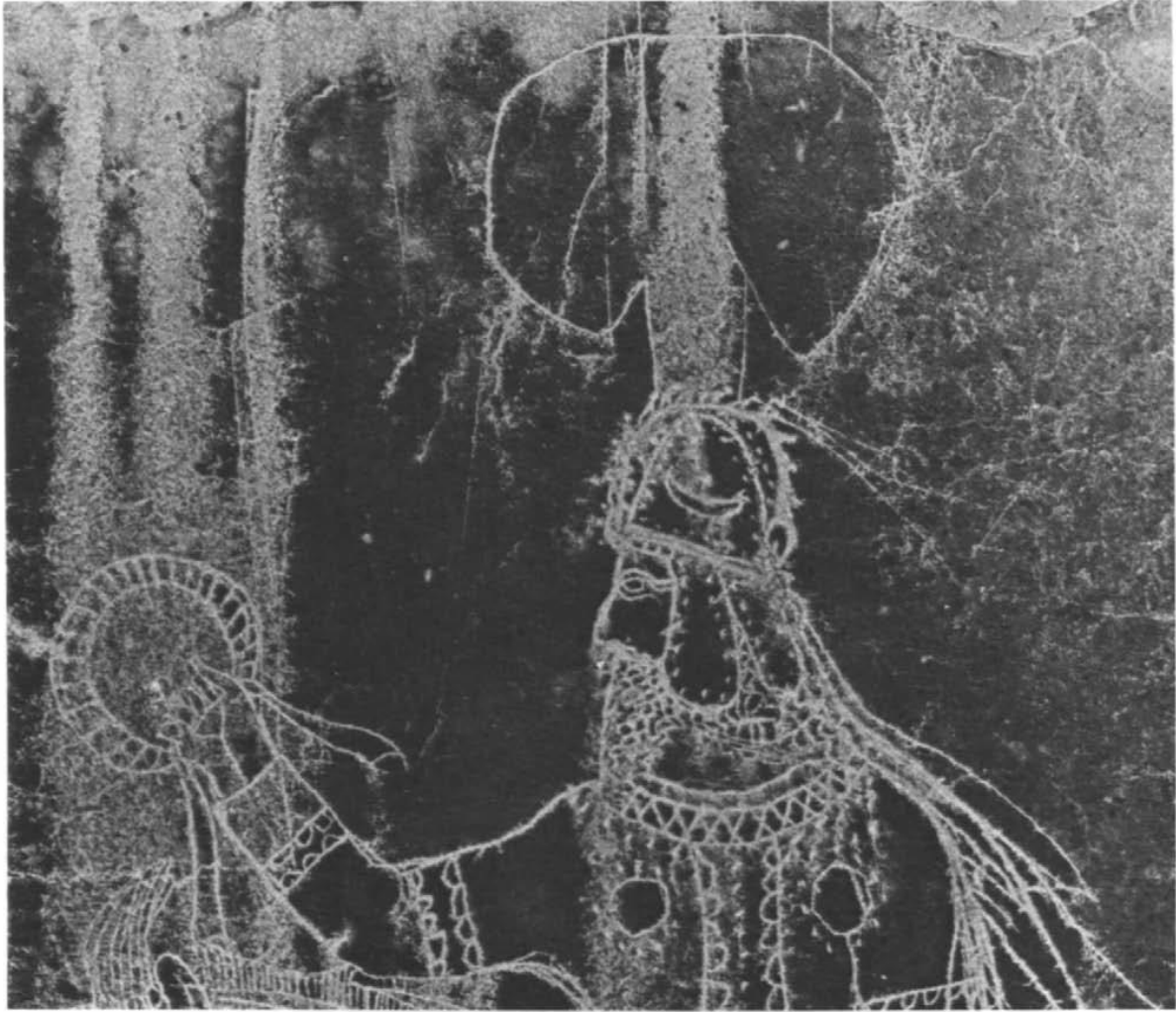


Fig 8. The design of five crowns with crescent-like projections on top of them.

Among the remnants of the Sassanian period, a person with a very similar headgear can be found. He is Prince Šāpur Sakanshah, who left a memento of himself and two inscriptions while visiting Persepolis. This person is the son of Hormozd and the brother of Šāpur II.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the time interval between the reign of Šāpur II and the death of Feng Hetu can be considered as an approximate date for the plates studied in this research.

<sup>36</sup> Daryaee 2001.



*Fig 9. The Image of Sapur Sakanshah carved on Takht-e-Jamshid with a similar crown (Harper 1983, Fig. 19)*

## Conclusion

Given the great importance of Sassanian plates in terms of artistic and aesthetic nature as well as archaeology, due to the lack of inscriptions and being out of their archaeological context, they cannot be dated with ease. Here, some points can be noted:

First, several plates of Ardašir II can be confidently attributed to another person but there is no credible evidence showing that this person was Ardašir II.

Second, these plates cannot represent usurper kings of the empire either, because the time period of these works is definitely much prior to the time this group of kings took the helm of power. The nobility was also not allowed to make crowns and several plates with designs of hunting lions and, hence, they can also be excluded from such probabilities.

Third, these people are also not the remnants of Sassanians after the collapse of the empire, because like usurper kings, they are out of the time period of these plates.

Fourth, if these people are not even one person, they are definitely Sassanian princes, and leaving aside a little caution, we can claim that they were the crown prince's not the kings. Despite the existence of six plates with engravings, there is not a single coin or relief showing one of the elements depicted in these crowns. As such, a prince wore a new official crown after ascending the throne, and therefore there were no traces of the crown of previous era on coins or other artifacts, an issue that has already been raised by some researchers before. For instance, Richard Frye say that it seems that some wore special crowns to determine successors and for other purposes.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Frye 1984, 302.



Taking into account the aforementioned points, at present, the approximate date of the plates under study could be between 302 AD and 504 AD.

Although the identity of the engraved personalities cannot be documented and firmly discussed, the depiction on the Cleveland Disc as well as on the plates of Sari and Tabriz can be considered one person with confidence. There is possibility that these six works belong to one of the 15 kings who ascended to the throne during the aforementioned period, either Šāpur Sakanshah or Kāvūs.

The available inscriptions from Feng Hetu's tomb make it easy to suggest an end date for these plates, but due to the nature of ethnic life of the Xianbei people and also the presence of nomadic tribes in the Sassanian territorial domain, especially in eastern and northeastern regions, an exact dating cannot be possible. Invasion of tribes in northeastern Iran before the Sassanian period has also been reported. After a battle with the Romans, Ardašir I was involved in the east of the empire, the nature of which is unknown<sup>38</sup> and the question remains as whether he was involved in a battle with the tribes that invaded his territory?

The Sassanian Empire, at least since the reign of Šāpur I, witnessed rising conflicts in eastern and northeastern regions.<sup>39</sup> In the inscription of Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, the names Abarshahr in Khorasan, Herat and Merv are mentioned, which show that the realm of Šāpur I and Ardašir was extended to northeastern regions.<sup>40</sup> The Sassanian conflict with invading tribes in Central Asia dates back to at least 350 AD when Xionite tribes invaded the territory of Šāpur II. The tribes seem to have been the same Hun.<sup>41</sup> After defeating the northeastern tribes, Šāpur used them to advance his military goals in the war against the Romans.

Around 425 AD, simultaneously with the rule of Bahrām V, Hun tribes crossed Merv and advanced towards Khorasan<sup>42</sup> and Bahrām sent gifts to king of Huns to deceive him.<sup>43</sup> Between 443 and 451 AD, during the reign of Yazdegerd II, several wars with Hun took place in northeastern regions of the Sassanian Empire. During the reign of Pērōz in 459 AD, battles with the Hun continued and then the headquarters of Pērōz's military operation was located in the Gorgan region. He later went to a war with the Hun in 483 AD and was killed.<sup>44</sup> During the reigns of Kawād and Khosrow I, wars continued with the tribes invading eastern and northeastern parts of the empire.

It is possible that this Sassanian plate might have been looted before 504 AD and could have even gone hand in hand several times among the nomadic people before reaching Feng Hetu, thus it may be years or centuries old since its making. At the same time, it is also possible that the object reached him directly and in a shorter period of time. To find a clearer answer, we have to wait for archaeological findings in Iran or other regions.

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<sup>38</sup> Fray 2007, 471.

<sup>39</sup> Ghafouri 2016, 159.

<sup>40</sup> Fray 2007, 472.

<sup>41</sup> Kim 2019, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Ghafouri 2016, 180.

<sup>43</sup> Ghafouri 2016, 181.

<sup>44</sup> Ghafouri 2016, 181-182.

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