Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica, VII, Iaşi, 2000

ALTARS FROM THE STARČEVO-CRIŞ AND VINČA CULTURES

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The end of the early Neolithic is initiated, in Banat and Transylvania, by phenomena related to Vinča A, which are resented differently, according to distance. Vinča A pushes the neolithisation process 200 km to the NNW. The Starčevo-Criş local background is enriched with new elements manifested in ceramics, lithic material, and, especially, in the magic and religious practices.

Fig. 1. Card for altars (data base).

The altars had a multiple functionality; they were used during rituals for the burning of the offers or for the burning of some spices at holidays or when there was a storm or disease. They were also used for keeping the fire, for current lighting (the piece from Gornea can be hanged

and used as a chandelier). Other uses were that of night-watch lamp in the houses with children or sick persons or that of support for idols.

The study of the Neolithic altars is made in a very complex program, by storing the information in data base (*Zeus system*: MAXIM 1999, 8-26, 215-220), following the next structure: conditions of discovery (locality, … complex, culture, phase), depth, manufacturing technique (composition, burning, form), parts of the item that are left, dimensions, section, type and place of the ornament – coding the treasure of terms made by CIMEC). For quickening the data processing operations, there have been made catalogues for ceramic forms, sections and ornaments (fig.1).

The dimensions are taken in the following manner (fig. 2): d1 = the external distance between the legs; d2 = the internal distance between the legs; d3 = the external distance between legs if it is not the same as d1; I 1 = the whole height of the leg; I 2 = the height of the maxime curve of the leg; I 3 = the height till the goblet; I 4 = the whole height of the piece; m 1 = the breadth of the piece; m 2 = the breadth 2 of the piece (just in case); a 1 = the distance from the middle of the table edge to the goblet; a 2 = the distance from the corner of the table to the goblet; a 3 = the depth of the goblet or of the case; R 1 = the diametre of the goblet's brim; R 2 = the diameter of the goblet at the table level.

Fig. 2. Measurement system for the altars.

Tipologically, the altars can be grouped in three general classes: 1) with three legs; 2) with four legs; 3) with no legs at all.

The first big class seems to be the earliest one, and is formed of three sub-classes: a) simple, triangular shaped; b) triangular shaped with protoms on the corners, and c) cup–shaped.

The class of those with four legs consists of the following sub-classes: a) simple rectangular cases; b) simple "tables" with a hollow in the middle; c) simple, rectangular, with fringes; d) "tables" with container; e) "tables" with circular container; f) zoomorphic type.

The third class – the no-legs class – includes the sub-classes: a) support with windows; b) pot type.

The tipology of the forms with the variants for each sub-class is presented in a general catalogue (MAXIM 1999, annexes 9–14), from which we shall take only the types appearing at the chronological horizon Starčevo-Criş – Polichromy-Vinča A (extended till Vinča B).

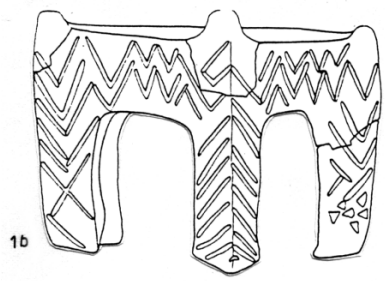
In the Neolithic settlement from Gornea–*Căunița* (BĂLĂNESCU 1979), there were discovered altars with good analogies at Padina, Crnakalačka Bara, Lepenski Vir, Karanovo, Ovčarovo, Gradešnica, Oszentiván VIII and Thessaly (BANNER, PARDUCZ 1947; TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993; *Praistorija Jugoslovenskich* 1979; TASIĆ, TOMIĆ 1969). In contemporary settlements from Romania, there are several such altars at Gura Baciului, Cârcea-*Hanuri*, Grădinile-*Izlaz*, Gârleşti- *Surpătoare*, Valea Lupului, Trestiana, Zăuan and Oradea, Ostrovu Golu, Bešenova (NICA 1977; 1981; LAZAROVICI 1979; POPUŞOI 1980; 1992; LAZAROVICI, LAKÓ 1981; LAZAROVICI, MAXIM 1995).

Generally, the triangular shaped altars (1a) are of case-type (fig. 3); there is only one example, discovered at Karanovo, which is table-shaped. This group of triangular-shaped, case-type altars seems to be the oldest and has the largest number of variants: with straight or stretched feet, with the space between the feet rectangular or made out of arcades. For the Romanian area we mention the types 1a-d discovered at Gârleşti-*Surpătoare* (NICA 1994, fig. 3/14) and Ostrovu Golu (LAZAROVICI 1979, pl. X B/26, 28-31).

This variant has analogies in the Bulgarian area, at Karanovo, Ovčarovo, Gradešnica (TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993, fig. 84/3, 95/6, 206-207) and in Yugoslavia (TASIĆ, TOMIĆ 1969, pl. XIII/6), Hungary

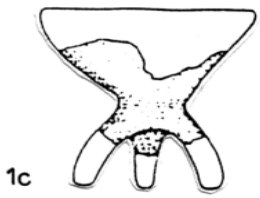
(BANNER, PARDUCZ 1947, pl. IX/7-8, 12) and Greece (THEOCHARIS 1973). In Romania most triangular altars were discovered at Ostrovu Golu (LAZAROVICI 1979, pl. X B) and Cârcea (NICA 1977; 1981). A special piece has feet that are convex in the central area like mildly flexed human feet.

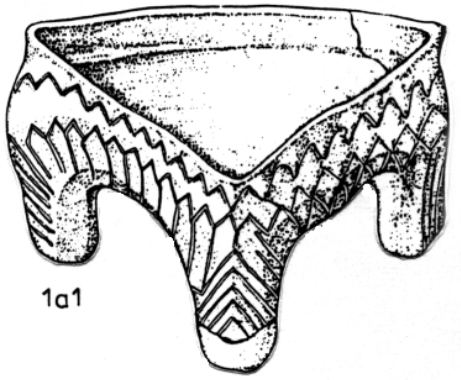
Fig. 3. Altar type 1a. **Fig. 4. Altar type 1b.**



Of the second kind (1b) of triangular altars with case (fig. 4) we can mention the discovery of a variant with the feet slightly stretched, with cut arcade and protoms at the corners at Gornea (BĂLĂNESCU 1979, fig. VII/1) and Ostrovu Golu (LAZAROVICI 1979, pl. X B/22). This sample has analogies at Vinkovci-*Trznica* (*Praistorija Jugoslovenskich* 1979, fig. XLII) and Gradešnica (TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993, 206).

Fig. 5. Altar type 1c. **Fig. 6. Altar type 1a1.**





The third sub-class (1c) consists of cup-shaped altars with three feet (fig. 5). Only one piece was discovered on the Romanian territory, that of

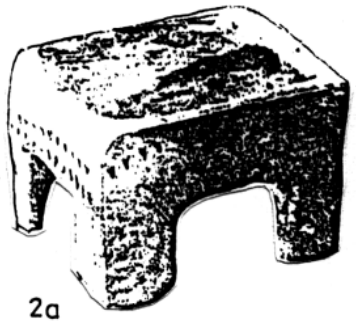
Zăuan-*Dâmbu Cimitirului* (*The hill of the cemetery*), in a Starčevo-Criş level IIIB–IVA (LAZAROVICI, LAKÓ 1981).

Another most particular example is the one discovered by M. Nica at Cârcea (the variant 1a1), which has the feet slightly bent in the central part, leaving the impression of a flexed human foot (fig. 6).

This category of triangular altars have been decorated with incisions, mostly disposed in zig-zag on the upper edge of the case, groups of parallel incisions on the arcades, some oblique ones to mark the foot, interlocked U–shaped incisions, pricks in registers, excised triangles, alveolo; excised chess table (especially in Karanovo area: TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993). Among the combined ornaments we mention the decoration on the altar from Cârcea, made of incisions under the margin of the case, zig-zag turning into a wave, a pseudo-fence over the arcade formed of parallel vertical lines, the space between them filled with a zig-zag line. On the feet there are parallel oblique lines, which are united in the centre like a fir tree sketch.

The last category (1c) of the cup-type altars is almost never decorated. An exception is a piece which has the four feet marked with a couple of deep, vertical incisions.

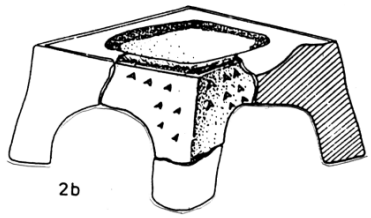
Fig. 7. Altar type 2a.



The second class is more varied. The case-altars are grouped in the first sub-class (2a), with the variants given by the position of the legs and the arcades. This category, like the cup-type ones, does not have ornaments (at Cristuru Sîrbesc (MÜLLER-KARPE 1968, Taf. 182/C4), Beşenova (LAZAROVICI 1979, pl.X B/9), except for two pieces, one from Karanovo, with small impressed triangles, the other one from

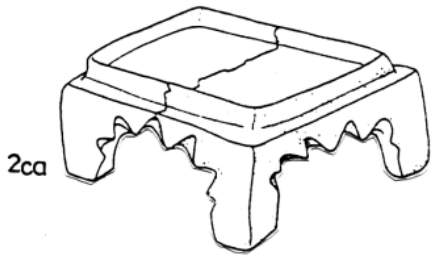
Ostrovu Golu with very small incisions, groupd in interlocked triangles, belonging to the type 2a (*Ibidem*, pl. X B/27). This category lasts very long, and in the stage Vinča B, when it is very rich in ornaments, the corners are pulled up (lobes), and they sometimes present animal protoms. Such kind of altars were discovered at Cernat, Transylvania (LAZAROVICI, SZÉKELY 1995).

Fig. 8. Altar type 2b.



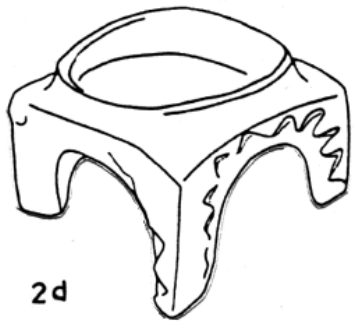
The simple table–altar (2b), with a circular cavity in the middle (fig. 8), is a kind of altar met in several archaeological sites, often without decoration, or, like at Gura Baciului (LAZAROVICI, MAXIM 1995, fig. 29/2), decorated with little triangles. This kind of altar was discovered at Grădinile-*Izlaz*, Ocna Sibiului, Gura Baciului, Oradea, Leț, Valea Lupului and Beşenova (LAZAROVICI 1979, pl. X B; PAUL 1995). The nearest analogy, but not identical, is at Bitolia Moghila.

Fig. 9. Altar type 2c.



The altars with fringes (which may imitate table cloth) are particularly beautiful (fig. 9), although they have no other ornament (2c). There are three variants we know of: table with cavity (Donja Branjevina: KARMANSKI 1988); table with rectangular container (Koprivac: TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993, fig. 64/3) and with round container, discovered in Cârcea-*Hanuri*, pit 1, 1,70 m deep (NICA 1976, fig. 8/1; 1977, fig. 13/1).

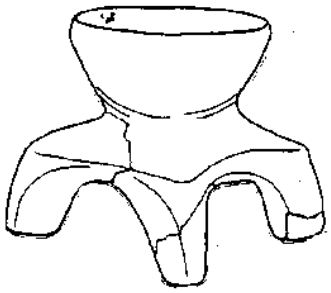
Fig. 10. Altar type 2d.



This last variant makes the passage to the group of table-shaped altars (fig. 10) with round container (2d). This is the most numerous

category, and the most diversified, both as form and ornaments. Among the 13 variants, seven were discovered on the Romanian territory. The variant 2d was discovered at Gornea (complex Vinča A), Ocna Sibiului and Leţ, with analogies at Obre I (*Praistorija Jugoslovenskich* 1979, fig. LIV/3, LIII/6) and Maroslele Pana (MÜLLER-KARPE 1968, Taf. 162/D1). The variants 2da, 2db, 2dc, 2dd, altars with "eyes", were discovered at Beşenova with good analogies at Iaz and Lepenski Vir (SREJOVIĆ 1969). The most beautiful pieces come from Donja Branjevina (KARMANSKI 1990, fig. I/1, 3). This category of altars is decorated with network and zig-zag incisions. The pieces decorated with zig-zag and the space beneath the incision painted with rough red are very beautiful.

Fig. 11. Altar type 2e.



Three variants of the group 2e (fig. 11): 2ea, 2eb, 2ec can be identified at Gura Baciului. The difference between them comes from the position of the legs and of the container (Gura Baciului, Ocna Sibiului, Oradea, Turia, Leţ). These have good analogies at Trestiana, Bitolia Moghila, Starčevo, Tečić, Donja Branjevina, Cristuru Sârbesc, Beşenova, where they are usually not decorated. These altars are sometimes decorated with ornaments made of triangle, circular or angular imprimations (MÜLLER-KARPE 1968, Taf. 143/C22, 182/C1; LAZAROVICI 1979, pl. X B/2, 7, 10, 13; *Praistorija Jugoslovenskich* 1979, pl. XVIII/5; TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993, fig. 66/3; LAZAROVICI, MAXIM 1995, fig. 29/1, 3-4).

The cup altars with four legs are the most frequent in our country. Most of them were discovered at Beşenova (LAZAROVICI 1979, pl.X B), in some variants given by the position of the legs and the form of the cup. Most of the analogies are at Donja Branjevina (KARMANSKI 1993, fig. XVI/1), Starčevo (*Praistorija Jugoslovenskich* 1979, pl. XVIII/5) and Karanovo. Others are at Cristuru Sârbesc (MÜLLER-KARPE 1968, Taf. 182/C1), Oradea, Sabac, Maroslele Pana, Tiszaug-Topart and Szentes.

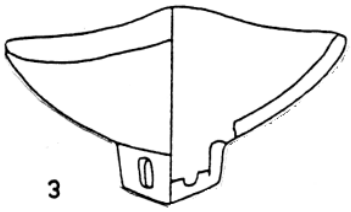
The rectangular altars with protoms, offered by the discoveries from Sarvas and Donja Branjevina, are known in our region only in the next stage, Vinča B1-B2.

Fig. 12. Altar type 2f.

2f

The zoomorphic altars (fig. 12) have animal protoms and, sometimes, protoms resembling an animal tail (2f). The ornaments of these pieces are made by way of a very fine incisition. A special kind is the bird-altar. This kind of altars are known on Romanian territory only in Vinča culture, stages B1- B.

Fig. 13. Altar type 3.



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A particular type of altar from the third class (fig. 13) is the one having a support with windows (3) and the rim with lobes (pulled up at corners). This was discovered at Ostrovu Golu and at Donja Branjevina (KARMANSKI 1988, fig. VIII; 1993, fig. XVII/1-R) from where most of samples come. Other variants of this group have not been encountered in Romania at this chronologic level.

The altars know a real boom of variants under the impact of Vinča Culture and of the polichromy from the IIIB/IVA phase of the Starčevo-Criş Culture.

The analysis of the altars is only at the beginning because most of them have not been described in the literature, by their manufacturing technique, and many times their precise conditions of discovery are not given. This hardens our intercession and we can not put them into data base. As new information will complete the data base, we will be able to analyse more accurately this category of objects that seem to be specific to our Balcanic area. The diversity of these pieces and their large number prove unity in diversity, a cultural and spiritual unit in this area, a cultural explosion which would not have taken place if the phenomena relating to Vinča A had been violent.

The relations between these three cultures Starčevo-Criş, Vinča and Karanovo were good, and the links with the Anatolian space were

uninterrupted, so that the coming of the Vinča communities did not have a negative influence on their cultural development. On the contrary, it gave an impulse to this development. The altars here mentioned are an eloquent example.

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