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Archaeological Site “Belo Brdo in Vinča”

The People of Vinča

Abstract: *Between 5300 and 4500 BCE, the territory of present-day Serbia and the central Balkans emerged as a cultural center of Europe. At the site of modern-day Vinča, a large settlement developed, functioning as a central hub—or a metropolis—of a cultural complex within which European Neolithic civilization reached its zenith. The archaeological evidence attesting to the remarkable achievements of Neolithic Vinča and the Vinča culture is both compelling and provocative, and rightly regarded as one of the most fascinating phenomena in European archaeology. Technological innovations, the earliest known evidence of ore processing and metallurgy, advanced housing standards, peaceful social relations, care for children, cooperation rather than conflict, trade networks, and dietary and clothing practices strikingly similar to those of the modern era, all contribute to the characterization of the Vinča culture as representing the first truly modern age.*

Key words: *Vinča culture, Neolithic, first modern age, agriculture, progress.*

1. Introduction

Jared Diamond, an American geographer and historian and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1998), argues in his essay *The*

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Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race (1987) that the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture was, in many respects, a catastrophe from which humanity has never fully recovered. According to Diamond, agriculture brought with it social and gender inequality, disease, warfare, and despotism. He further contends that early hunter-gatherers enjoyed a varied diet, unlike early agriculturalists who relied primarily on cultivated cereals rich in carbohydrates but deficient in certain essential vitamins and proteins. In addition to malnutrition and the spread of infectious diseases, Diamond suggests that agriculture facilitated the emergence of another human affliction: deep class divisions. In his later work *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (2012), Diamond concludes that, unfortunately, only within early hunter-gatherer communities did human beings achieve a significant degree of social equality.

Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian, notes in his widely acclaimed popular science book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2019: 86), among other things:

„There is no evidence that people became more intelligent with time. Foragers knew the secrets of nature long before the Agricultural Revolution, since their survival depended on an intimate knowledge of the animals they hunted and the plants they gathered. Rather than heralding a new era of easy living, the Agricultural Revolution left farmers with lives generally more difficult and less satisfying than those of foragers. Hunter-gatherers spent their time in more stimulating and varied ways, and were less in danger of starvation and disease. The Agricultural Revolution certainly enlarged the sum total of food at the disposal of humankind, but

the extra food did not translate into a better diet or more leisure. Rather, it translated into population explosions and pampered elites. The average farmer worked harder than the average forager, and got a worse diet in return”.

He concludes that the Agricultural Revolution was "history's biggest fraud".

Francis Fukuyama, in his book *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (2011: 88), agrees with Rousseau's position that the origin of political inequality lies in the development of agriculture:

„Like chimp bands, hunter-gatherers inhabit a territorial range that they guard and occasionally fight over. But they have a lesser incentive than agriculturalists to mark out a piece of land and say “this is mine.” If their territory is invaded by another group, or if it is infiltrated by dangerous predators, band-level societies may have the option of simply moving somewhere else due to low population densities. They also tend to have fewer investments in cleared land, houses, and the like”.

If we are to believe Rousseau, Diamond, Harari, Fukuyama, and many others who advocate similar views, the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture led to poorer nutrition, the spread of infectious diseases, social and gender inequality, resource-based warfare, tyranny, slavery...

But can we trust this narrative? Did the invention of agriculture truly bring about all of these negative consequences for humankind? Or is the issue rooted in something else—something these authors may have failed to understand? We will examine these claims through the example of the Vinča culture (5300–4500 BCE), one of the most representative cultures of the

European Neolithic. Archaeological data from Vinča and other Neolithic sites in this part of Europe have dramatically reshaped the narrative about the first agricultural societies.

2. Vinča and its Culture

Between 5300 and 4500 BCE, the territory of present-day Serbia and the central Balkans became a cultural center of Europe. At the site of modern-day Vinča, a large settlement emerged, serving as the core—or metropolis—of a culture within which European Neolithic civilization reached its zenith (Radivojević, 2012).

With the discovery of copper ore processing technology, the people of the Vinča culture became pioneers of the earliest metallurgy in Europe (Srejović, 1969). Through uncovering the great secret of material transformation, these first European miners laid the foundations for all future European civilizations. Emerging from the traditions of earlier cultures in the central Balkans, the Vinča culture stands as one of the most important indicators of the autochthonous and authentic character of European civilization and undoubtedly plays a significant role in shaping the European identity.

The archaeological evidence of the remarkable achievements of Neolithic Vinča and the Vinča culture is both thrilling and provocative, and rightly considered one of the most fascinating phenomena in European archaeology. Technological innovations, the earliest evidence of metal ore processing, advanced domestic architecture, peaceful neighborly relations, childcare, cooperation rather than conflict, trade, nutrition, and clothing resembling that of the modern age— all these attributes grant the Vinča culture the character of the first modern era.

The Neolithic, or New Stone Age, marks the emergence of the first human communities whose economies were primarily based on food production, representing one of the most crucial stages in the development of human society and civilization.

Anatomically modern humans have been present in Europe for the last 56,000 years, yet agriculture began only around 8,200 years ago. Why did it take *Homo sapiens* in Europe so long to transition from hunting and gathering to food production? *Sapiens* arrived in Europe during the Last Glacial Maximum. The harsh climate of the Ice Age forced animal populations into constant migration in search of food. As a result, human communities were likewise compelled to move continuously in pursuit of game animals and seasonal edible plants. This hunter-gatherer "economy" was dictated by the climatic and environmental conditions of the time—cold and dry weather, sparse vegetation, and limited food resources. Human groups, therefore, lived in a state of constant mobility, always seeking new sources of sustenance. Due to the severe climate and the demands of a nomadic lifestyle, early humans had neither the capacity nor the opportunity to construct permanent dwellings. Instead, they relied on natural shelters (such as caves), and when conditions allowed, they established seasonal camps.

The end of the Ice Age brought about dramatic climatic changes that fundamentally transformed the natural environment—soil composition, river systems, vegetation, and fauna. At the beginning of the Holocene, many previously migratory game animals had sufficient food to remain in one area, becoming more sedentary. It was precisely these new climatic and ecological conditions that enabled many human communities to

adopt a sedentary lifestyle—not the invention of agriculture itself. Agriculture was a product of sedentism, not its cause.

From the end of the Ice Age (ca. 9600 BCE) until the emergence of agriculture, the climate remained unstable and did not yet permit Mesolithic communities to engage in farming or animal husbandry. These Mesolithic groups began building the first permanent open-air settlements, yet due to continued climatic fluctuations, they still relied on hunting, fishing, and gathering. In the Iron Gates (Đerdap) region, during the Mesolithic period, one of the most complex prehistoric cultures developed, known—after the eponymous archaeological site—as the Lepenski Vir Culture.

The shift in climatic conditions—specifically, the onset of the Holocene Climatic Optimum, during which global temperatures were approximately 0.5 to 2 degrees Celsius warmer than today—provided humans with the opportunity to engage in agriculture and animal husbandry. However, this warming was not uniform across the globe. It began around 10,000 years ago and ended approximately 6,000 years ago. The first Neolithic communities emerged in the southeastern Mediterranean and the Near East during the first half of the 8th millennium BCE, and appeared in Europe by the end of the 7th millennium BCE.

3. The Beginnings of Agriculture

The establishment of the earliest farming and herding settlements in the territory of present-day Serbia coincides with the onset of the Holocene Climatic Optimum (around 6200 BCE), a period marked by climatic stabilization. The emergence of dense forests made it more difficult to track game animals, thereby

disrupting the traditional hunting strategies of Mesolithic communities. These new environmental conditions compelled local hunter-gatherer groups to develop alternative strategies for food procurement.

At the same time, small groups of Neolithic communities from northwestern Anatolia began arriving in the Balkans and the Danube region, bringing with them the so-called “Neolithic package,” which included domesticated animals, cereal seeds, and pottery.² It appears that this incoming “Neolithic package” arrived as a solution to the challenges faced by the local population, which may explain why the newcomers were accepted peacefully. In any case, the encounter between local Mesolithic hunter-gatherers and incoming farmers gave rise to an original form of Balkan Neolithic culture.

During this period, the Balkans—and the territory of present-day Serbia in particular—stood at the forefront of historical developments. The communities inhabiting this region developed two important Neolithic cultures, named after their respective type-sites: the Starčevo culture (6200–5300 BCE) and the Vinča culture (5300–4500 BCE).

² The movement of Neolithic communities from Anatolia toward Europe was most likely triggered by climatic changes. The event that occurred 8,200 years ago was a period of abrupt cooling—by approximately 1–3°C across large parts of the Northern Hemisphere—which lasted for around 160 years. The initial hypothesis for the cause of this event pointed to the sudden drainage of proglacial lakes Agassiz and Ojibway. These lakes emptied into the Labrador Sea over a span of approximately 0.5 to 5 years, disrupting the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation and thereby cooling the North Atlantic region. This global climatic disturbance resulted in what has been described, over the following centuries, as a “mini-ice age” (Weninger, 2006: 66).

In the early and middle Neolithic (the Starčevo culture), due to soil exhaustion on cultivated plots, settlements were frequently relocated, and little attention was paid to the construction of permanent dwellings.³

The Vinča culture emerged on the historical stage in the second half of the Neolithic period. During this time, thanks to the enrichment of exhausted soil through fertilization, a community for the first time lived in the same place over several decades and generations, thus conceptualizing the dwelling as a permanent residential structure. This significant transformation in the economic practices of Neolithic communities is archaeologically recognizable through increasingly intensive stratification, i.e., the formation of vertical stratigraphy, as well as the appearance of residential houses resembling modern dwellings.

The advanced construction skills represent one of the most distinctive features of the Vinča culture. By combining clay, sand, and straw, they produced a high-quality composite material (mortar), which was applied to the wooden framework of the walls as well as to the floors, over floor beams. The presence of straw in this mortar created an effective thermal insulation. A developed heating system, consisting of stoves and smoke outlets, made their houses energy efficient (Janković, 2021).

Most scholars specializing in the Neolithic and the process of Neolithization agree that the transition to a Neolithic diet resulted in a significant decline in dietary diversity and nutritional quality, with diets becoming

³ The predominant form of dwelling within the Starčevo culture consisted of semi-subterranean pit-houses (semi- dugouts) with tent-like, dual-pitched roofs.

richer in carbohydrates but poorer in proteins (Tasić, 2009).⁴ Anthropological evidence unequivocally indicates that the sedentary lifestyle contributed to *Homo sapiens* becoming more gracile⁵, a change that most scholars associate with a reduced intake of animal-derived proteins. However, was Neolithic nutrition truly significantly poorer, and is gracilization solely attributable to lower consumption of animal protein? I am of the opinion that these assumptions deserve reconsideration.

With the transition to agriculture, the intake of carbohydrates increased; however, this does not imply that Neolithic communities ceased consuming animal-derived proteins. When discussing the quality of Neolithic diets, the focus should not be on whether the intake of animal proteins decreased compared to previous periods, but rather on whether this intake was sufficient for a healthy and balanced diet. In addition to agricultural products (domesticated animals and plants), Neolithic diets still included hunted animals as well as wild edible plants and fungi.

⁴ Within the framework of the “Mali Dunav” Project at the Center for Fisheries and Applied Hydrobiology (Faculty of Agriculture, University of Belgrade) in Radmilovac, three houses representing the three most significant prehistoric cultures of the Serbian Danube region (Lepenski Vir culture, Starčevo culture, and Vinča culture) have been reconstructed. The project team consisted of Prof. Zoran Marković from the Faculty of Agriculture in Belgrade; architect Hristivoje Pavlović; Radoljub Nikolić, a master builder specializing in traditional materials; and archaeologist Dragan Janković, curator of the Museum of the City of Belgrade.

⁵ In anthropology, the term “gracilization” refers to the process of anthropological change whereby the human becomes progressively less robust.

With the shift to a sedentary lifestyle, Neolithic communities reduced their territorial range but still had access to ample edible flora rich in minerals and proteins. It seems unrealistic to expect that they would forgo available nutritional resources from their environment. Paleolithic and Mesolithic groups transmitted knowledge across generations regarding which plants and fungi were edible and which were not. There is no reason to assume this valuable knowledge transfer ceased.

Available archaeological evidence indicates that early Neolithic communities, alongside agricultural production, continued hunting and gathering. This mixed economy persisted through the later and final Neolithic periods, although hunting and gathering were significantly reduced. The introduction of new food sources, rather than the abandonment of traditional ones, contributed to a healthy and balanced diet.

Through the adoption of agriculture (animal husbandry and crop cultivation), Neolithic sapiens developed alternatives to dwindling hunting resources and, by utilizing edible natural resources, established not only a sustainable food system but also sustainable development.

Vinča pottery represents the pinnacle of ceramic craftsmanship and design not only in the Neolithic but throughout prehistory. Neolithic Vinča people possessed, alongside utilitarian vessels, decorative ceramic containers used for special occasions. Besides an impressive culture of habitation, it is evident that they had a high culture of living. These data challenge the deeply flawed and stereotypical perception of Stone Age communities as primitive and underdeveloped.

A substantial body of archaeological evidence indicates that Neolithic sapiens produced linen textiles through weaving. They had already developed complex technology for producing linen yarn. Based on numerous archaeological findings, it is possible to reconstruct Neolithic clothing culture (fashion), which bears remarkable similarities to contemporary styles.

As I have already mentioned, the Vinča culture emerged in the middle of the Neolithic, at a crucial moment when Neolithic communities in the central Balkans transitioned from extensive to intensive agriculture. Here we confront another stereotype that has become established in scholarship: the shift to intensive farming did not occur through the introduction of the plow, but rather through the fertilization of arable land.⁶ By enriching the exhausted arable land, the need for cyclical shifting (slash-and-burn or shifting cultivation) ceased, and from that moment conditions were created for the permanent use of cultivated land, which led to the establishment of permanent settlements. The permanent use of arable land decisively influenced the emergence of private property.

The intensified use of obsidian, from which exceptionally sharp blades were made, is also

⁶ For a long time, it was thought in scholarship that manure was not used as fertilizer until the Iron Age and Roman period. However, a team that published a report in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* discovered enriched levels of nitrogen-15, a stable isotope abundant in manure, in charred grains of cereals and legume seeds. The samples were taken from 13 Neolithic sites across Europe. The team analyzed the abundance of stable carbon and nitrogen isotopes in 124 samples of barley, wheat, lentils, and peas—around 2,500 grains or seeds in total—from Neolithic sites across Europe dating from approximately 6,000 to 2,400 BCE (Bogaard, 2013).

noteworthy. Perhaps the increasingly frequent utilization of this raw material for producing composite tools enabled contemporary communities greater efficiency in securing food for domestic animals during the winter months. This likely facilitated the keeping of larger numbers of livestock, which in turn increased the production of manure for their fields and gardens. Fertilized land not only yields consistently but also produces significantly higher yields, allowing for the creation of food surpluses. These surpluses enabled some members of Neolithic communities to be relieved from direct food production, marking the moment that initiated the emergence of trade.

The development of trade and communication allowed Neolithic communities rapid and dynamic growth—both economically and socially—and opened access to new markets and raw materials. Situated at the crossroads of strategic routes (the center of the Belgrade confluence), Vinča became the largest marketplace in contemporary Europe, not only due to the exceptional value of its own products but also because of rare raw materials and items sourced from various parts of Europe. Vinča was located on the main routes along the Danube and its tributaries, which enabled the settlement to develop into a major commercial, economic, and cultural center of the time.

Evidence of lively trade activity among the inhabitants of Neolithic Vinča is primarily demonstrated by finds of obsidian (volcanic glass), which was highly sought after and valued throughout prehistoric Europe. Neolithic traders from Vinča procured obsidian—used to make very sharp blades—from the Carpathians (Tripković & Milić, 2009) and subsequently distributed it to other regions. In addition to obsidian, trade connections with distant areas are confirmed by finds of

bracelets and other decorative items made from Spondylus shells, originating from the eastern Mediterranean. Vinča also acted as an intermediary in the trade of raw materials from the interior of the Balkans, such as salt, rock crystal, marble, and copper ore. The inhabitants of Neolithic Vinča also had their own highly sought-after and valued local raw materials, obtained from nearby Avala—primarily cinnabar, which was ground to produce a highly desired red pigment. Besides cinnabar, Avala was rich in malachite, azurite, and ochre, from which they made jewelry components and pigments.

The emergence of food surpluses during the Late Neolithic allowed a portion of the community members to engage in non-agricultural activities such as processing, crafts, and trade. This initial specialization enabled increasingly intensive trade and the rise of merchants for whom trading became a profession. With the appearance of traders and artisans came the need for a different organization of settlements, namely their urbanization, so it is not surprising that the first urban settlements appeared at this time. Some authors refer to these as proto-urban settlements; however, based on the generally accepted criterion that urban settlements are those where more than half of the population derives their livelihood from non-agricultural activities, some of these settlements can certainly be classified as urban and city-like. The houses in Neolithic Vinča were arranged in rows, with their longer sides oriented southeast to northwest. Between the rows of houses, clear communication pathways—streets—are visible. The houses lacked yards and were placed with their narrower sides directly along the streets. The organization of the settlement, with compact houses lining the streets, raises the question of whether Vinča was organized as an urban settlement. The absence of evidence for animal

husbandry and the layout of tightly packed houses without yards suggest that Vinča in the Neolithic was organized as an urban settlement. The inhabitants lived there permanently over many generations. Its central position relative to surrounding settlements, long duration, and urban character justify characterizing Vinča as a metropolis.

4. Religion and Spiritual Life

Favorable climatic conditions and new technologies enabled Neolithic communities to progress rapidly, not only in terms of material goods but also through a significant transformation in their relationship with life, nature, and everything surrounding and permeating them.

Thousands of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, face-covered lids, altars, and ritual vessels discovered in Vinča culture settlements indicate a developed mythology and well- formed religious thought. These artifacts are the most valuable material witnesses of the spiritual life of Neolithic people. Through objects of cultic use, alongside religion, the development of Neolithic art can also be traced. These items were modeled and decorated to represent the highest artistic achievements of their time.

Anthropomorphic figurines can be considered a hallmark of the Vinča culture, making it one of the most recognizable cultures in world prehistory. Archaeologists interpret these extraordinary artistic objects, created within a strict canon, as cultic or religious artifacts. There are various archaeological interpretations regarding the role of anthropomorphic figurines in Neolithic society. Some view them as instruments used in rituals related to fertility and ancestor cults; others believe the angular

facial forms with pronounced eyes represent masks; while some see them as portraits.

The majority of anthropomorphic statuettes depict female figures with exaggerated eyes. To understand the great disparity between female and male statuettes, we must start from the fact that since its emergence, *Homo sapiens* has expressed itself through symbols and symbolism. In Neolithic communities, survival did not depend on hunters and warriors but on the kinship of fields and crops. Considering that the mother is the symbol of life and birth, the large number of female figures can be explained. The celebration of life, birth, and fertility forms the foundation of Neolithic cults. On the faces of the anthropomorphic figurines, oversized eyes dominate, while mouths are generally absent. This can also be interpreted through the symbolism of the mother. The mother symbolizes birth but is also a symbol of vigilance and care. A mother does not sleep when children are sick or in trouble; she carefully watches and protects them. It is quite certain that in their religion these figurines also had a protective character. Today, when embarking on a long and uncertain journey, we often hear, "May God protect you." They probably said, "May the Great Mother protect you." Thus, in their symbolism, the mother had to be watchful, likely the reason for the exaggerated eyes. The absence of the mouth served to emphasize the eyes even more, highlighting vigilance. It is evident that Neolithic sculptors, when modeling figurines, focused not on form but on the essence and symbolism of the mother. Many anthropomorphic figurines depict outstretched arms, a universal symbol of welcome and openness throughout all times.

The absence of sexual characteristics on many figurines can be interpreted as a result of omitting details that were understood or implied during the modeling process. Similarly, the absence of eyes on figurines from the final phases of the Vinča culture — the so-called "bird- faced" figurines — may be explained in this way. Columnar figurines from the early phases of the Vinča culture, as well as some steatopygous statuettes depicting symbols of male fertility from the earlier Starčevo culture, can be seen as an integration of both the feminine and masculine principles — reflecting the equal significance of agriculture and hunting in the economy during those Neolithic periods.

In addition to anthropomorphic figurines, prosopomorphic lids (vessel lids featuring human faces) are among the most distinctive features of the Vinča culture. These prosopomorphic lids, which appear in Neolithic Europe only within the Vinča culture, are striking and artistically sophisticated objects. Each lid depicts eyes, a nose, and ears — but never a mouth. While these lids functioned as covers for amphorae, their cultic or symbolic function appears to have been even more important. The exaggerated eyes and ears served the purpose of watchfulness and protection of the vessel's contents. It is clear that the intention was not to portray the face of a cat, owl, or any other specific animal — but rather to emphasize the essence: being watchful, being responsible. The success of Neolithic communities can, in part, be attributed to their insistence on vigilance — that is, responsibility toward the family, the community, oneself, and nature. In relation to nature, we must always remain watchful (i.e., responsible) so as not to cause harm. Unfortunately, we ceased to be watchful long ago

— and since then, we have damaged much. In the Neolithic value system, being watchful — both in essence and in symbolism — meant protecting others from one's own irresponsibility and potential destructiveness. While we protect ourselves from others instinctively, protecting others from ourselves requires a very high level of awareness.

5. Beliefs on Life and Death

So far, only two necropolises have been discovered in the territory of the Vinča culture. One was found in Botoš⁷, containing 18 graves (Grbić, 1933–1934), and the other in Gomolava, with 27 graves (Mikić, 1989). In both necropolises, the deceased were laid on their side in a flexed position. Aside from these two necropolises, several individual graves have been found at different sites. The relatively small number of discovered necropolises and graves prevents us from reliably reconstructing the Vinča communities' treatment of the deceased. However, we may approach this important question indirectly, by analyzing other credible archaeological indicators. Archaeological evidence of violence in Neolithic communities does exist — but it is exceedingly rare.⁸ Violence, in all historical periods,

⁷ Botoš is a settlement near Zrenjanin.

⁸ At several archaeological sites in Central Europe associated with the Neolithic Linear Pottery culture (*Linearbandkeramik* or LBK), mass graves have been discovered containing skeletal remains that exhibit signs of trauma, torture, and, in some cases, possible cannibalism (e.g., *Vrable-Velke Lehemby* in Slovakia; *Kleinhadersdorf* and *Schletz-Asparn* in Austria; *Talheim*, *Herxheim*, and *Schöneck-Kilianstädten* in Germany). Archaeological scholarship has yet to provide a definitive interpretation of these undoubtedly intriguing and scientifically provocative findings. Whether these remains reflect the aftermath of warfare, massacres,

tends to arise during times of social crisis. Given the scarcity of violent evidence in most Neolithic cultures, it is evident that Neolithic communities were highly effective in managing crises. What is certain is that Neolithic cultures were not structured as warrior societies. The people of Vinča were not warriors; they had no warrior cult, and no cult of death. They did not glorify death — they celebrated life. They honored the mother as a symbol of life, birth, and fertility. Their approach to death and the deceased was clearly fundamentally different from that of the warrior cultures that emerged after the decline of Neolithic civilizations. In these later martial cultures, death was glorified — often serving as a motivator for sacrifice and violence. The celebration of death became a cultural model in all subsequent warrior-based civilizations.

6. Social Organization

Neolithic societies were fundamentally egalitarian—this is clearly evidenced by the archaeological absence of social inequality and class stratification. Even though private property, surplus production, and trade existed in these communities, there are no signs of social hierarchy! This suggests some modern misinterpretations in our understanding of the past. It means social stratification is

or are connected to cultic or religious practices remains an open question. This phenomenon appears to be absolutely unique and occurs only very rarely in other European Neolithic cultures. While these discoveries clearly indicate the presence of violence during the Neolithic, to claim that the Neolithic period as a whole was characterized by widespread violence would be an oversimplification—and arguably serves a sensationalist agenda aimed at drawing public attention to the research topic.

not inherently linked to the emergence of private property, as Rousseau suggested, nor to surplus production, as Marx and Engels proposed, nor to trade. So, what does stratification depend on? Fundamentally, it hinges on a society's system of values. In every social system where exploiting human labor was accepted, social stratification emerged. In Neolithic cultures, exploitation of others' labor was unacceptable—hence, it did not occur. So what was driving surplus production?

These surpluses allowed some community members to leave food production behind and pursue other activities. Some of them became traders, traveled, and brought back raw materials and goods not available locally, as well as new information, knowledge, technologies, seeds, and ideas. They shared this knowledge freely—it was considered a public good, not something to be hoarded, unlike in many later periods (Harrari, 2019). In the Neolithic value system, surplus production served the collective well-being, not the enrichment of individuals.

Given the surprising sophistication of Neolithic societies, a pertinent question arises: how did they handle leadership? In an egalitarian system, someone with extensive knowledge would have been immensely useful to the community. But what happens when a community member realizes how much they know? What does this awareness represent? Today, many might say “knowledge is power,” or even “power and privilege”. Yet, what we may have long forgotten is that knowledge should not be power or privilege—it is, above all, responsibility. In such societies, a potential leader would be someone willing to assume responsibility for others without accruing personal privilege. Had privileges existed, they would leave archaeological traces—but in

most Neolithic communities, there are none, simply because there were none. That's not to say such leaders gained no benefit; rather, the benefit was non-material. Psychological research shows that people experience the greatest and most lasting happiness when their efforts contribute to the well-being of the entire community—and this is especially true in a value system that recognizes such contributions. Imagine a person in such a society, whose daily contributions bolster communal welfare—everyday, their confidence grows, and they live with true contentment. Is there any material possession that can substitute for that kind of happiness? Certainly not.

7. Conclusion

As we have seen in the example of the Vinča culture, the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture did not lead to poorer nutrition, poverty, social or gender inequality, wars over resources, tyranny, or slavery. Harrari is correct when he states that “the average farmer worked harder than the average forager”. However, agriculture was neither a trap nor the greatest deception in history. *Homo sapiens* consciously chose the “harder path.” But why? To understand this, we must explore the motivations behind the shift from foraging to farming.

At the end of the Pleistocene, due to unfavorable and rapid climate changes, many large mammals became extinct (such as the woolly mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, and giant deer). Already by the beginning of the Holocene, *Homo sapiens* in Eurasia was faced with diminishing hunting resources. After the end of the last Ice Age, favorable climatic and ecological conditions led to a rapid increase in the human population. The more our population grew, the more hunting resources

declined. This reduction in available game was not catastrophic, but it was noticeable enough for people at the time to become aware that, in the relatively near future, there would be little left to hunt. Agriculture was *Homo sapiens*' response to the decreasing availability of wild food. For generations, Mesolithic hunter-gatherers sought alternative sources of food (just as we are doing today—albeit, arguably, in a misguided way). This was, therefore, a long-term process—not a sudden revolution, as is often claimed in archaeological literature. Some Mesolithic communities faced this challenge earlier, others later. Agriculture began to be adopted in regions where favorable climatic and ecological conditions made farming and animal husbandry viable. Agriculture requires a stable and predictable climate. At the beginning of the Holocene, the climate in Eurasia remained highly unstable. In the Near East (the Fertile Crescent), the climate stabilized earlier than in Europe. That is why Neolithic cultures appeared in Europe somewhat later.

As we can observe from all these verifiable and precise archaeological data, agriculture was neither “the worst mistake in the history of the human race” nor a “catastrophe,” as claimed by Jared Diamond (1987), nor was it “the greatest fraud in history,” as Yuval Noah Harari suggests (Harrari, 2019). Agriculture was the “more difficult path” that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers consciously chose in order to secure the future of the species. We can reasonably assume what might have happened to our species if agriculture had never emerged and if sedentary Mesolithic hunters had continued relying solely on hunting. It is not difficult to anticipate the scale of the disaster—one from which humanity might never have recovered. If there ever was a real trap for *Homo sapiens*, it was the moment we accepted privileges and everything they inevitably brought with them.

In these early agricultural cultures, archaeological evidence does not indicate the existence of privileges or privileged individuals—and when there are no privileges, there is no competition over them. They did not compete among themselves! What is the alternative to competition? Cooperation! And that means competition is not inherent to our species—cooperation is. We are not a competitive species! Humans have the potential to compete, which has been demonstrated and proven, but the human species is definitely not competitive by nature. In fact, competition was imposed upon us. When did that happen? At the moment privileges were imposed on us. When were privileges imposed? In the region of Eurasia, this occurred at the end of the Eneolithic period (Copper Age), with the formation of the first states. The first states were created by a minority that imposed a certain social system on the majority. To rule the majority more easily, that minority granted privileges to a portion of the majority. Why do some people receive privileges? Not because we are good people or especially important, but because it makes it easier to manipulate us. When someone receives a privilege, they cling to it, protect it, and are capable of doing all sorts of things to preserve it. Likewise, they protect and defend the one who granted them the privilege. Only when privileges entered our lives did competition enter our species. If there are no privileges, then there is no competition over them! What are we competing over today? Resources? No—we are still competing over privileges. And only the most powerful compete—not over the lack of resources, but over the control of resources. Why do they compete over control? Again, because of privileges! Where is competition in its original sense in all of this? Nowhere—

it's all classic manipulation. If we had been truly competitive, we wouldn't have survived the Ice Age. We have survived to this day as a species thanks to cooperation, not competition.

Our species is not inherently selfish, nor are our genes selfish, as Richard Dawkins (1976) claims. So who is selfish, then? The system is selfish. The majority of social systems, from the formation of the first states to the present day, have been created in such a way that a minority imposes them on the majority. In modern consumer society, the system is fundamentally based on selfishness. The more selfish we are, the more useful we are to the system, though not to ourselves. This modern system favors selfishness. The more selfish someone is, the more successful they are. That's why the system continually encourages selfishness.

Homo sapiens from the Stone Age showed us the true human essence! What we are today is not our essence; all later systems have reshaped us through manipulation. If we truly want to understand the real human essence, we must get to know our Stone Age ancestors. And to truly know them, we must discard the existing narrative, stereotypes, and prejudices. They showed us that man is not, after all, a wolf to man, which means Hobbes was definitely wrong.

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