THE “DANUBE SCRIPT” AND THE GRADEŠNICA PLATTER

A SEMIOTIC STUDY BASED ON MOST RECENT AUTOPSY OF THE BULGARIAN ITEM

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ABSTRACT - The article presents new evidence on the signs of the Gradešnica platter through a direct check of them and applying to them a matrix of semiotic markers and rules in order to inspect the internal structuring of the sign system developed in Neo-Eneolithic times in the Danube basin. The matrix is intended: a) to verify the possibility that these cultures might have expressed an early form of writing; i.e. the so-called “Danube script”; b) to investigate the organizing principles of this system of writing; c) to distinguish inscriptions of the Danube script composed of two or more signs, without of course knowing what any of them stand for, from compounds of signs associated with other communication codes, among which decorations, symbols, and divinity identifiers. The matrix has been recently tested against some recent discoveries selected from the core area of the Danube civilization and from the peripheral regions in order to document how widespread the Danube script was.

Did a Form of Literacy Develop in Neo-Eneolithic Times in South-eastern Europe?

In the Fig. 1 we can see some signs and inscriptions considered by some scholars a specific script of literacy which appeared in south-eastern Europe around 5 300 years BCE, some two thousand years earlier than any other known writing. It is called “Danube script” because it originally appeared in the central Balkan area and had an indigenous development. It quickly spread to the Danube valley, southern Hungary, Macedonia, Transylvania and northern Greece. It was presumably well distributed up to the end of the fifth millennium cal BCE when a social upheaval took place: according to some, there was an invasion of new populations, whilst others have hypothesised the emergence of a new elite and social changes and transformations (Fig. 2).

The existence of a script which developed in ancient times in the middle and lower Danube basin was seriously maintained by eminent archaeologists, historians, linguists, and philologists at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the last century. However, the precocious specimens of a European writing could not be related to the Neo-Eneolithic times due to a lack of reliable dating methods. The shards found at Tordaš, Vinča or in other Danube-Balkan settlements were clearly inscribed with signs of some sort of writing and scholars were in search of links between south-eastern Europe and the more “civilized” regions of Mesopotamia, the Levant and eastern Mediterranean (an assumption consistent with their classical education and with the ideas of that time about the spread of cultures from south-east to the north and west)¹. Discovering at Vinča (on the Danube, 14 kilometres from Belgrade) “incised signs and marks” on artefacts held in a complete block of households with a fascinating stratigraphy of almost 10 meters, Miloje Vasić made the “reasonable assumption” that they belonged to an early Greek colony of 7th and 6th centuries BCE, such as those of southern Italy (Vasić, 1910).

Starting from the middle of the 20th century, the introduction of well-established dating methods determined that the Danube-Balkan inscribed objects belonged to Neo-Eneolithic times, and as a result their signs suddenly became mute being considered just decorations, ownership marks or simple scratches. The invention in south-eastern Europe of an *ars scribendi* in Neo-Eneolithic times was held so unthinkable that the simple possibility of it has been ignored and its evidence given very scant attention.

It was the discovery in 1961 of three inscribed tablets at the settlement of Târătâria-Gura Luncii (Alba county, in Romania) that kindled a wave of controversy regarding the possibility that Neolithic and Eneolithic cultures might have expressed an early form of writing in south-eastern Europe (Fig. 3). Paradoxically, the Târătâria discovery cracked the scepticism of some scholars over the spectacular claim that the Neo-Eneolithic Danube Civilization used an early form of writing, and at the same time reinforced that of others. In fact, since their discovery the Transylvanian tablets have occupied a unique and often contentious position in European prehistory because of the dispute over two main points: their dating and the assertion that their symbols could express a form of writing⁴.

With relation to their dating, the archaeological documentation from the discoverer (Nicolae Vlassa from Cluj Museum) is not completely reliable. Therefore they have been used by some scholars as evidence of a low chronology for the Danube Neolithic period (Hood 1967. 99-102 and 1968; Makkay 1969, 1971, 1984 and 1990); the Tartaria tablets might have belonged to the Vinča C migrations, when such a “writing” system was largely used not only in south-eastern Europe, but also in the area of proto-Sumerian civilizations (Lazarovici Gh. and C. M. 2003. 387). At the same time the Transylvanian tablets have been considered by others scholars as evidence of early Vinča artefacts of the fifth millennium BCE (Gimbutas 1982. 87) or of the

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²I employ the term “Danube scripts”/“Danube script” as general allocation and “Vinča signs”/“Vinča script” strictly limited to the Vinča culture which developed in the central area of the great Danube basin. This terminology is coherent with the challenge to demonstrate that the “early civilisation” status can no longer limit itself to the regions which have long attracted scholarly attention (i.e. Egypt-Nile, Mesopotamia- Tigris and Euphrates, the ancient Indus valley), but it has to expand to embrace the Neo-Eneolithic civilisation of the Danube basin. The script is only a mark - although important - of the high status of the civilisation which flourished along the Danube river.
³For the “Tordaš script” see Žofia von Torma, Heinrich Schliemann. Heinrich Karl Brugsch, Arthur Evans, H. Schmidt. For the “Vinča script” see Miloje Vasić (1910).
⁴For a survey see Merlini 2004a: 51-63.
latter half of the sixth millennium BCE (Haarmann 1990: 76). Therefore they have been taken into account as the earliest attestations of an Old European script (Masson 1984; Haarmann 2002).

But how old are the Tartaria tablets? For 42 years nobody has considered that they were accompanied by human remains which are still preserved in Cluj, in the basement of the National History Museum of Transylvania. Gheorghe Lazarovici and I, under the patronage of the Prehistory Knowledge Project, in October 2003 went in search of the bones, found them and asked for a 14C analysis to the laboratory of the Department Scienze della Terra of La Sapienza University of Rome. The results are: Rome – 1631 (human bones): 6310 ± 65 yr BP; calibrated 5,370-5,140 BCE (Merlini 2004b; Merlini online). Therefore the earliest attestations to an European script come from Transylvania.

Sometimes events don’t change the course of history by their direct and immediate actions, but by their collateral effects. Indeed in the last few years the possibility that the Tartaria tablets could be the “most ancient European library” has stimulated the re-examination of the archaeological material found in the last century and a half in the Danube basin. And in a number of locations the checks still in progress allowed the re-evaluation of hundreds of inscribed artifacts which predated the earliest Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Therefore, in the last few years a very fast accumulation of archaeological evidence has occurred, supporting the thesis that an European literacy existed in Neo-Eneolithic times: the Danube script. The most exciting discoveries are happening… in museums and in universities’ archaeological collections. Many signs and their combinations, unearthed during the last century’s excavations, were not published by their discoverers because, not having the pattern of decorations or symbols, they didn’t dare speculate that they might express a system of writing.

Other archaeologists didn’t realize that their findings, catalogued and published even from decades ago, might bear inscriptions. They considered that the strange geometrical, abstract and linear inscribed signs to be only badly done decorations, scratched by confused artists. Therefore in reproducing and publishing them, they amended and adjusted them in a more fashionable way by regularizing their shapes or forcing the symmetry of their original patterns (for example, Roska 1941).

A third wave of scholars maintained that the strange signs were some sort of magic-religious symbols or ownership/manufacturer marks (for example Garašanin 1951, 1973; Tringham, Kristišić 1990: 609). If both interpretations failed, the ultimate resource was to consider them simply as random scribbles made by bored and idle potters.

Finally, some scholars simply did not realize that the objects they had discovered bore signs. In the fifties Milutin Garašanin found an inscribed figurine at Supska (next to Cuprije, Republic of Serbia e Montenegro) but he did not notice the evident “A,” “I,” “M,” “H,” “Y” motifs positioned on a large triangle incised on the chest (Fig. 4). This inscription was re-discovered in 2002 by Andrej Starovic (Starovic 2004).

On the other hand, a considerable number of books and articles have been devoted to a (para)scientific fiction aimed to “reading” the “Vinča documents” as alphabetic texts. The crescent attention to a “Neolithic alphabet” in the Balkans is connected to the reinforcing of nationalistic “archaeo-political” pushes in all the countries of Eastern Europe. For example, in the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro Radivoje Pešić is convinced that “the era of the Slavs is coming. For seven decades, the Slav civilization has been living under a heavy pressure, and the world, having accumulated sufferings for so long, could achieve its renaissance for that reason only. Such are the orders of things. The West wanted to throw the East on its knees without any knowledge of the Slavdom. The Slavdom does not bear humiliations and failure, the Balkans as well” (Pešić 2001b: 28) How about the starting point of Slavs’ renaissance? The acknowledgment that the middle Danube basin is the epicentre of early European Civilization and that its “Neolithic alphabet” is one of the main roots of our contemporary alphabet (Pešić 2001a).

The Position of the Danube Script Inside the Danube System of Communication

The early European writing is lost and what remains of it is unfathomable and tenaciously resists the efforts of anyone attempting to decipher it. Nothing is known about the existence of such a reference language. Moreover, it is too ancient for us to hope to find something like the multilingual “Rosetta Stone” which would permit us to translate it into a known language. Though it is now lost and it is unlikely it will ever be possible to decipher it, some scholars are using semiotic approach tying to crack some elements of its genetic code (Haarmann 1995, 1998a, 1998b; Merlini 2002b, 2003b, 2004a, online: Winn on line).

According to these semiotic researches, Danube script is a very archaic system of writing and possibly not capable of encoding extended speech or long narratives because phonetic elements are not or are too limitedly rendered in writing. It consists probably of a mix of logograms, ideograms, pictograms and only some phonetic elements occasionally and marginally marked. The connection with the conceptual sphere is much stronger than the connection with the phonetic sphere. Other ancient writings of this type are the Elamite script, Indus script, the hieroglyphs of the Phaistos disc, the Chinese writing on oracle bones, and the Olmecc glyphs.

Although the Danube script was only in statu nascenti probably and had a very weak association with phonetics, it should not be confused with other communication channels used by those Neo-Eneolithic populations such as religious symbols, geometric decorations, devices for memory support, star and land charts, ritualistic markings, numeric notations, family identifiers or community affiliation marks as well signs stating the owner/manufacturer of an artefact. The Danube System of Communication was composed of several elements of which writing was only one. It is a very exciting means of communication for us, but having only been developed at the primary stage by the people of the Danube area it was possibly not the most important communicative device for them.

Signs (of writing and of extra-writing) apart, the rich polysemous system for communication included also anthropomorphic figurines, language, mythology, rituals, folklore, etc. The integration of typological and semiotic studies in the common problematic of the enculturation and other symbolic prehistoric communication means will be an opportunity to approach the deep symbolic and the advanced social development of the communities of the Danube civilization (Nikolova 2005). These notes that I submit to the discussion move some steps in the direction of a future detailed contextual analysis: documentation of the location of the findings, correlation with the features in the houses and especially their relations with the other symbolic objects and means for communication.

The problem is that the distinction between the Danube script and the other communication means is not so evident. First, signs of
writing could co-exist on the same object with marks of other informative codes. In fact sometimes more than one channel of communication was in use at the same time on the same vase, figurine or spindle whorl. Second, when inspecting the internal structuring of the in the Danube Communication System evidence of the presence of a writing system in a very archaic phase becomes noticeable, therefore the outline of its signs as well their organization in the space were not clearly distinguishable from the other communication channels. In particular they share the same geometrical roots (showing sometimes the same outlines) with decorations, symbols, divinity marks, owner-manufacturer marks, chronographic representations, astral signs.

However, an object considered a mignon phallus-like artifact standing on an altar (Gimbutas 1991: 313) offers us some reference points, because it is a communication “three-faced Janus” which combines a plastic representational code, a graphic symbolism and an inscription and the linear writing system portrayed is in *statu nascenti*. The object was found, in 1976, at Ocna Sibiului (in Romania) in a “community dwelling” dedicated to a religious cult. It belongs to the first phase of the Pre-Cris II culture and is 8,000 years old (absolute dating). Both the phallus and its support are made of stone (micaceous girstone). (Fig. 5)

According to the discoverer, Iuliu Paul, the object is not a phallus at all but a small and high schematized conic statue having 2 centimeters at the bottom and 4.5 centimetres height. Its style reminds a similar piece made of calcite found in the sanctuary no. 21 from the VII layer of the Çatal Hüyüük settlement, dating back to the 6 500-6 200 BCE but not bearing any inscription. James Mellaart, the former head of the excavations at Çatal Hüyüük, asserts that the statuette corresponds to a bearded man riding a bull (Mellaart 1963). Hökmann believes that it represents an embraced couple (Hökmann 1968). Comparing the two interpretations, Paul chooses the second and extends it also to the Ocna Sibiului statuette suggesting that it has been modelled under a strong Anatolian influence. The minute statuette is that of a bearded man, carved in bas-relief to enable us to identify his features, bound to a woman nowadays unrecognizable. On its right side the object possibly bears the sun and crescent moon which are the cosmic symbols of the embraced couple. Thus the Transylvanian statuette, although similar in shape and general features to that from Anatolia, differs from the latter because the main message (the embraced couple) is suggestively represented not only iconographically but also through a combination of incised symbols (Fig. 6).

The statuette’s parallelepiped base was found next to it. The dimensions of same are 4 cm long, 2 cm high and 2.5 cm wide. It bears an inscription composed of “N”, “X”, “V”, “A”, “<”, “>” motifs, parallel horizontal lines and a lozenge. The signs have a simple rectilinear shape and are organised along a linear sequence. According to Paul they are “ideograms made in a linear manner” (Paul on-line). If one compares them and the signs of writing in Haarmann’s inventory1, one finds that they have a more archaic and not well-standardized pattern (Fig. 7).

The text, of course, is not decipherable. But one can note that, albeit the small statue mainly bears mainly male symbols (and its actual shape is phallus-like), the altar presents an inscription predominantly composed of female signs. In particular, the lozenge is placed in a central position and is slightly in relief like the bearded man on the statuette. It is also associated with some pairs of signs executed similarly to those from the statuette representing sun and crescent. The only difference is the fact that the predominant technique on the base seems to be the excision (Paul 2002).

Statuette and altar form a “cultic assemblage” which represents the oldest existing combination between plastic illustration, symbols and signs of linear writing, and which maybe construed as a conversion-table between these three different types of communication codes. Iconic representation, symbolism and writing message are elements of the same symbolic complex, the one reflecting or partially defining the others. Whether or not one agrees with Leroi-Gourhan’s interpretation of most of the abstract signs as gender related, it is significant his discovery that figuration (animals in Upper Palaeolithic messages) and abstraction were related in an organize mode and were, in some sense, of equivalent value (Leroi-Gourhan 1964).

One can presume that on Ocna Sibiului “cultic assemblage” a single message could be transmitted through three channels and therefore that they are narrating, each in its own code, the same myth. But what is the myth being reported by the Ocna Sibiului “non-phallus”? It probably involves a narration which acts in Danube basin as the foundation of all the regional spiritual beliefs and which was common also to other primitive agricultural societies. It could well concern the creation and re-creation of the world, which is closely connected with the conjunction of the opposites expressed by the sacred union between a female and male divinity (*ieros gamos*). This mythic drama consists of sexual union, birth, death, and re-birth; i.e. “the mystery of the life cycle”. It is therefore possible that the small statuette and its base are the earliest example of Danube art which employs together iconography, magic-religious symbols and signs of a linear writing for the narration of the myth, the motion of the universe as a perpetual sexual act between Sun and Moon, which is the mother of all other myths (fertility, re-birth, the vitality of water…).

But what need was there to transmit the same myth by the use of three different codes (iconography, symbols and written text)? The deniurgic meaning of a sacred sexual intercourse rendered in a plastic way is mentioned above. Regarding the language of symbols, it conveys meanings in a synthetic way and the effectiveness of a symbolic message can be measured by means of its own fundamental essentiality. For Christian believers the minimal sign of the cross evokes a complex myth. Two segments placed cross-wise immediately recall the figure and the story of Christ, already handed down in a sequence of events, both oral and written. Similarly the astral symbols, sun and moon, were probably used on the small statue of Ocna Sibiului to fix and convey the essence of a spiritual message, the power and the blossoming effect of *ieros gamos*, by simply triggering the memory of the observer.

Ultimately the sequence of linear writing signs on the altar although in an archaic style was used to mark the various passages of the myth on the divine creation and maybe detailed the makers’ drama that were recalled during collective rituals. It is possible to imagine that the inscription was the graphic expression of oral formulas, depicting real sounds which were organised in a logical sequence. Were these single words? Stems of words? Some sort of mantras? We do not know for certain, and probably never will.

If a mythic story can be transmitted by more than one code, we cannot obviously expect each iconic detail or symbol to correspond to a linear written sign (or vice-versa). However, it is important to observe that the ritual object of Ocna Sibiului shows us the foundations of the combined use of iconographical code, archaic magical-religious symbols and signs of a linear writing; and these are the same writing signs which, when inscribed or painted on other artefacts in...
different patterns, are able to narrate us other myths.

The “non-phallicus” informs us that the inscriptions in Danube script were not just used to evoke the name of the divinity or some of its attributes, recall the name of the worshipper, contain a ritual formula but sometimes they were also employed as “mythograms”, which are texts able to narrate us myths, stories and epoques. The mythograms purpose was probably “to record (fix), preserve and transmit this kind of spiritual knowledge. It might also have induced the spectator to recall and orally express the whole myth, as well as to perform the related ritual practices” (Paul 2002).

The Ocna Sibiului ritual object is also important because it testifies that the Danube Neolithic population invented a linear writing based on a threefold Palaeolithic and Mesolithic heritage: a range of visual indigenous symbols which persisted for several thousand years, specific principles in the spatial distribution of the signs and an archaic native spiritual tradition.

**A Matrix of Semiotic Markers and Rules for Checking the Possible Clues of a Script in the Danube Basin**

Although the Danube script has a very weak association with phonetics and we are not able to read it at all, it should not be confused with other communication channels used by the Neo-Eneolithic Danube populations. But how to distinguish in the field, with a reasonable degree of probability, if a sign or a grouping of signs belongs to the writing system or to the decorative sphere, the symbolic language, the divinity marks, the owner-manufacturer marks, the chronographic representations?

I submit to the discussion a matrix of basic semiotic markers and rules in order to distinguish bi- and more-signs texts of the Danube script, without of course knowing what any of them stood for, from compounds of signs associated to the other communication codes, among them decorations, symbols, divinity identifiers. Of course these indicators and guidelines are in progress because one will be able to distinguish without errors the different communication channels only when one is be capable of reading the script. But, on the other hand, one will not even be capable of reading the inscriptions if one is not able to isolate their signs from the others. It is really a loop that one has to break step by step and by progressive approximations.

**How to distinguish script signs from ornamental motifs?**

The signs of writing have some peculiarities that distinguish them from the decorations, but it is not always a confident distinction. If it is a difficult distinction, it is easy to explain the reason why:

i. Writing and decoration can both be finalized to transmitting messages, packages of information. “The whole world outlook of prehistoric farmers was expressed in the ornament: the land and Underground World, the Sky, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Plants, Animals and People… Observer people can see complete ‘texts’ composed in ornaments: it is raining, the grain is falling on the ground, it is sprouting…” (Videiko 2002). The important communicative role played by the ornamentation is outlined by the fact that sometimes it was located on invisible part of the vessel or of the object (Nikolova on-line).

ii. Script signs and decorations share the same geometrical root, that’s why they sometimes show the identical outlines. Their derivation from the alike graphic source is so strict that some signs of the Danube script appear to be a development of the schematic decorations on Lepenski Vir and Vlasac boulders or an evolution of the linear ornamentations on Starcii evo vessels.

iii. Some signs (for example, Α V. M, X, + and some naturalistic motifs as rain, sun, bird, tree) can be, depending on the context, either a writing sign or a decoration (Gimbutas 1991).

iv. Script signs and decorations can live together on the same object.

v. Signs of writing and decorations could both have been conceived to fulfil an aesthetic satisfaction.

Dealing with such subtle confines between a decorative design and a written text, and facing an uncracked script, which semiotic criteria can one use in order to distinguish between artistic applications and script? Here there are some instructions on the side of the writing system vs. the decorative design:

- If one sets apart for a moment the exceptional signs that can be involved in writing messages as well in artistic ones, script signs are well identifiable in their individuality, conventional, standardized and repertorable in a precise and systematic inventory (in the progress of being built and with much effort by the scholars who are also dealing with regional variants and chronological modification).

- It is more probable that geometric, abstract, high schematic, linear and not very complex signs (as for example Y, M, N, X motifs)

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7 Shan Winn in Usa, Harald Haarmann in Finland, Gheorghe Lazarovici in Romania, Andrej Starovic in the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro, Adamantios Sampson in Greece are occupied to built inventories of Danube script signs.
stay inside the script framework than inside the ornamental one.

- Only signs of writing can be modified by three techniques: a) duplicating-multiplying them; b) turning them round as in a mirror, turning them upside down, turning them round and upside down at the same time; c) applying diacritical marks to them as small strokes, crosses, dots and arches. The sophisticated rule of multiple variations occurs only to signs of writing. On this basis a V can be transformed, for example, into a V+, a V/ or a V. The variations can be simple (applying only one diacritical mark to a root-sign) or complex (applying two or more diacritical marks to a root-sign).

- Signs of writing occur isolated as well in groups.

- When in groups, signs of writing show an asymmetric coordination and they prefer a linear alignment (but a linear alignment is not an absolute prerequisite for a writing system). The lack of symmetry arouses doubts about their decorative attributes. Sometimes the space is organized in registers, in columns or in lines to facilitate reading and writing, but Danube script signs are not symmetrically positioned inside the afore mentioned frames.

- Signs of writing can be combined by ligatures. A ligature occurs when two or more signs are written or printed as a unit.

- When in combination script signs do not form a harmonious design, but a functional one (although they are sometimes positioned in an aesthetic way).

- The use of dots and vertical strokes in separating signs or grouping of signs is a strong marker of the occurrence of an inscription.

- An inscription can mix both abstract and naturalistic signs.

- Signs of writing don’t suffer from horror vacui; they never saturate the entire available space.

Ornamentations have completely different purposes, rule of composition and organizational principles. We can select those we feel are necessary for comparison with those of signs of writing:

- If one sets apart for a moment the ambivalent signs that can be ornaments vehiculating messages as well as signs of writing, decorations are gathered in a specific collection: the corpus of the artistic motifs.

- When one deals with geometric, abstract, high schematic, linear and uncomplicated signs (for example Y, M, N, X motifs) there are many possibilities to be outside of the decorative framework. In fact it is difficult to appreciate the pleasing of the eye by such “unusual” ornaments: their outline is graphically banal and much less decorative than motifs such as spirals or labyrinths. Maybe it is more productive if we consider them as a means of writing or of symbolic messages.

- The artistic signs can be varied by duplicating-multiplying them or turning them round as in a mirror, turning them upside down, turning them round and upside down at the same time, but they are not subjected to the technique of multiple variation which is a key characteristic of the Danube script. Therefore decorations don’t become more complex by the application to them of diacritical marks as small strokes, crosses, dots and arches.

- Ornamentations occur preferably in groups; one-sign decorations are very rare because they are preferably symbols.

- In general (but there are important exceptions) the space is not organized in different registers, in columns or in lines which are typical of a script layout.

- An ornamental element is in general arranged with others in order to capture the symmetrical balance able to exalt the aesthetic value of the object. The rhythmic and symmetrical repetition of a geometrical motif is the principal feature of the decorative system of the Danube Civilization (Todorova, 1978). If the search for graphic harmony drives the scribes to systemize the decorations along repetitive and regular patterns, they the patterns are not necessarily linear. When forming combinations, it is not infrequent that the ornamentations are arranged according to a hierarchical principle: the units are grouped to create ever-widening patterns. In conclusion, a decorative motif is very rarely based on the asymmetric combination of its units.

- Ligatures are absent in the field of ornamentation.

- An ornamental element is in general arranged with others in order to cause pleasure in exercising the sense of regularity and order. But since the greater artists of the Danube Civilization were aware that an excess in a standardized monotony of a decoration could dilute its fascination, they went in search of those variations in the signs outlines and in the signs patterns able to provoke the aesthetic pleasure in the point of balance between boring repetition and confusion deriving from an excess of innovation, a tangle or an alteration in the proportions. The exploration of the complexity generated from slight variations in the framework of general homogeneity is one of the key principles by which the European Neolithic and Eneolithic realized artistic masterpieces.

- In a decorative design dots and vertical strokes are in general not used to separate signs or groups of signs. If so, they are positioned in a symmetric way.

- In general, in ornamentation there is no mix between abstract signs and naturalistic motifs.

- It is non infrequent that a decoration, hit by horror vacui, saturates the entire available space (Table 1).

How to distinguish script signs from symbols?

In the Danube Communication System, signs of writing and symbols could superimpose in many spheres and the objective difficulties to distinguish between writing and symbolic messages are so hard to render the first invisible to many scholars. The reasons for the overlap between the two communication channels are the following:

i. Writing texts and symbolic language can both be finalized for the transmission of messages, packages of information. In Neo-Eneolithic social systems, writing was only at the primary stage therefore symbolism was a much stronger device for communication. It sets up its force strength on:
### Contraposition
- **Inventory of the script vs. corpus of the ornamental motifs**
- **Sign outlines**
- **Techniques and restrictions in modifications**
- **Balance between isolation and grouping vs. inclination to grouping**
- **Space organizational principles**
- **Ligatures**
- **Functionality/aesthetics**
- **Dots and vertical strokes**
- **Abstract and naturalistic mix**
- **Horror vacui**

### Signs of writing
- If one sets apart for a moment the exceptional signs that can be involved in writing messages as well as in ornamental ones, signs of writing can be collected in a precise and systematic inventory.
- Geometric, abstract, high schematic, linear and not very complex signs belong, with more probability, to the script framework.
- Signs of writing can be modified applying to them diacritical marks such as small strokes, crosses, dots and arches as well as duplicating-multiplying them or reversing them as in a mirror, inverting them, reversing and inverting them at the same time.
- Signs of writing occur singly as well as in groups.
- When in groups, signs of writing show an asymmetric co-ordination and they prefer a linear alignment (but a linear alignment is not an absolute prerequisite of a writing system). Sometimes they are positioned along different registers, in columns or in lines.
- Signs of writing can be combined by ligatures.
- An inscription assembles signs in a functional way (although signs of writing are sometimes positioned in an aesthetic way).
- The use of dots and vertical strokes in separating signs or groups of signs is a strong marker of the occurrence of an inscription.
- An inscription can mix both abstract and naturalistic signs.
- Signs of writing never saturate the entire available space, because they carry a specific message.

### Decorations
- If one sets apart for a moment the exceptional signs that can be involved in ornamental messages as well as in writing ones, artistic signs can be gathered in a specific corpus.
- When one deals with geometric, abstract, high schematic, linear and uncomplicated signs one is with less probability inside the decorative framework.
- The decorations are not subjected to the technique of the multiple variation. They can be varied only by duplicating-multiplying them or turning them round as in a mirror, turning them upside down, turning them round and upside down at the same time.
- Ornaments occur preferably in groups.
- An ornamental element is in general arranged with others in order to capture the symmetrical balance able to exalt the aesthetic value of the object. The rhythmic and symmetrical repetition of a geometrical motif is the principal feature of the decorative system.
- The combination of artistic signs can be subjected to slight variations in the framework of general homogeneity.
- In a decorative design dots and vertical strokes are in general not used to separate signs or groups of signs. If so, they are positioned in a symmetric way.
- In general, in an ornamentation there is no mix between abstract signs and naturalistic motifs.
- It is non infrequent that a decoration saturates the entire available space.

### Table 1. A matrix of markers and rules to distinguish between signs of writing and decorations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contraposition</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>The decorations are not subjected to the technique of the multiple variation. They can be varied only by duplicating-multiplying them or turning them round as in a mirror, turning them upside down, turning them round and upside down at the same time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance between isolation and grouping vs. inclination to grouping</strong></td>
<td>Signs of writing occur singly as well as in groups.</td>
<td>Ornaments occur preferably in groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space organizational principles</strong></td>
<td>When in groups, signs of writing show an asymmetric co-ordination and they prefer a linear alignment (but a linear alignment is not an absolute prerequisite of a writing system). Sometimes they are positioned along different registers, in columns or in lines.</td>
<td>An ornamental element is in general arranged with others in order to capture the symmetrical balance able to exalt the aesthetic value of the object. The rhythmic and symmetrical repetition of a geometrical motif is the principal feature of the decorative system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ligatures</strong></td>
<td>Signs of writing can be combined by ligatures.</td>
<td>Ligatures are absent in the field of decoration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functionality/aesthetics</strong></td>
<td>An inscription assembles signs in a functional way (although signs of writing are sometimes positioned in an aesthetic way).</td>
<td>The combination of artistic signs can be subjected to slight variations in the framework of general homogeneity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dots and vertical strokes</strong></td>
<td>The use of dots and vertical strokes in separating signs or groups of signs is a strong marker of the occurrence of an inscription.</td>
<td>In a decorative design dots and vertical strokes are in general not used to separate signs or groups of signs. If so, they are positioned in a symmetric way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract and naturalistic mix</strong></td>
<td>An inscription can mix both abstract and naturalistic signs.</td>
<td>In general, in an ornamentation there is no mix between abstract signs and naturalistic motifs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Horror vacui</strong></td>
<td>Signs of writing never saturate the entire available space, because they carry a specific message.</td>
<td>It is non infrequent that a decoration saturates the entire available space.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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a) its social character; b) cross-cultural generality of its significance (Hallpike 1979); and c) its mix between a fundamental essentiality and potentials for ambiguity in the possible changing of the meaning. In that situation symbols and language were two equal or complementary systems for communication (Nikolova on-line).

ii. Script signs and symbols share the same geometrical root inherited by the rich Mesolithic and Upper Palaeolithic visual magazine, that’s why they sometimes show the same outlines.

iii. Danube script is a very archaic systems of writing; therefore it consists probably of a mix of logograms, ideograms, pictograms and some limited phonetic elements occasionally and marginally marked. Logograms, ideograms, pictograms have been mainly derived from the language of abstract symbols.
iv. A considerable part of symbols and inscriptions were elements of the religious-mythical system. At the same time, the religion was a system of symbols and texts by which human beings communicated with their culturally defined universe characterized by super-human powers as well as human powers. Common models of ritual action, embedding symbols and texts, realized the extra-human and inter-human communication, mediating also between the individual’s conflicting needs for self-expression and self-containment. Going deeper in the relationship between writing and symbolic code, one can note that being the Danube script mainly a sacred archaic system of writing employed in liturgies and to express magic-religious beliefs, consequently its signs have often the same outlines of sacred symbols, in particular of the geometrical and abstract ones. This every so often originates confusion but witnesses at the same time the origin of many signs of writing from the sacred language of symbols.

v. Some signs can be, depending on the context, a writing unit and a symbol as well (Gimbutas 1991). There are three kind of ambivalent signs: abstract, simple-linear signs as V, M, X, +; some (numerical?) signs based on strokes or dots; and naturalistic motifs as sun, boat, animal head, hook, ring, star, roots of a tree, crescent, dancer, beheaded person, ladder (Merlini 2004a).

vi. Writing and symbolic language can both organize their proper signs in the same way. In fact in Danube civilization symbols sometimes were also placed following a linear, logical sequence, even if not phonetic in type. I.e. the symbols were disposed along a linear progression that goes from the seed to the bud and then to the developed plant or on a hierarchic basis such as Mesopotamia did with the distribution of the divinities in strata according to their importance.

vii. Script signs and symbols (in particular those of an abstract nature used in the religious field) can live together on the same object, because the two channels of communication were sometimes used together on the same votive vase, figurine, loom weight or spindle whorl.

Here are some indications in order to help to distinguish between inscriptions and symbolic messages:

a) If one sets apart for a moment the ambivalent signs that can be involved in writing messages as well as in symbolic ones, one can observe signs which are only script units and signs which are only symbols. Therefore one can build an inventory of purely signs of writing and a repertoire of pure symbols. Let’s take an example with the multiple variations of the circle identified on many pots of Precucuteni and Cucuteni cultures. The signs and are units of the Danube writing system as well as symbols. On the other hand, solar marks, concentric circles, disks with different internal signs as follow only the symbolic code. Another example is constituted by the ellipse (the egg) and the double ellipse (the double egg) which are exclusively symbols (Merlini 2004d).

b) When signs of writing are associated with “ambivalent signs” (those which can be script units or symbols as well), one is dealing with an inscription and not with a symbolic message.

c) Only the signs of the script can be modified applying diacritical marks (such as small strokes, crosses, dots and arches) to them as well as duplicating-multiplying them or reversing them as in a mirror, inverting them, reversing and inverting them at the same time. Symbols don’t vary their basic outlines. They can’t be reversed, inverted or enriched by diacritical marks as the script units are. But sometimes they are duplicated-multiplicated to reinforce their meaning and power.

d) Abstract signs of writing are in greater numbers than abstract symbols. On the contrary, naturalistic symbols are much more than signs of writing depicting objects, vegetables, animals or phenomena of the real world. Synthesizing, one can note that symbol language has smaller inclination to abstractness than writing. When one observes a combination of abstract, linear, uncomplicated signs on an object, the probabilities are in favour of a written text.

e) It is important to highlight that pictograms and ideograms are not at all “schematic drawings”, but precise signs of writing. They are not draft images stylized by the arbitrary inventiveness of a scribe but signs that, even representing real objects, bear three kinds of features: i) show silhouettes in accordance with a standard; ii) are inserted in a precise inventory of signs of writing; and iii) have definite meanings. In conclusion, pictograms and ideograms are not simply “images” but those specific images which settle in the inventory of the writing characters: they are signs of writing with a naturalistic root. If we consider for example the Latin alphabet, the A reminds us easily of inverted horn is from the taurine pictogram from which it originated; the V owes its existence to the Egyptian hieroglyph of a praying man with raised arms. Even if A and V come from ancient drawings it is common to consider them as letters of our alphabet as well as it is expectable to consider the bull horns as an ancient pictogram and the orante as a hieroglyphic.

f) Signs of writing can be combined by ligatures; symbols cannot.

g) The use of dots and vertical strokes in separating signs or groups of signs is a strong marker of the occurrence of an inscription. On the other hand, symbolic code doesn’t employ dots and vertical strokes to separate signs or compound of signs (Table 2).

_How to distinguish signs of writing from divinity_ marks?

Divinity identifiers can be inserted into the general category of the identification marks (as for example ownership or manufacturer marks are), but they are very peculiar identification marks. In the Danube...
civilization every divinity revealed oneself by its distinctive mark enriched by local variants, to evidence the regionalism of the divine representations, as well as of rituals and liturgies, in the framework of unitary magic-religious beliefs. Moreover there were local divinity recognized by their typical mark known and worshipped only in a limited area.

According to the traditional explanation, a Neo-Eneolithic divinity mark might not be considered a sign of writing - although it identifies the essence of a divinity, synthesizes its attributes and possesses/expresses the magical power of the related divinity - because it doesn’t establish any link with verbal communication. Since it doesn’t carry the name of the divinity, it is judged to be not a true “God/Goddess signature” but just a “visual mark” which might be abstract, arbitrary and synthetic but which does not reflect the phonetic of its name and/or attributes. A divinity identifier is not “written” in a linguistic sense.

In the 2004 inventory, Winn placed the divinity marks among the signs of the Danube writing system (Winn on-line) (Table 3).

Personally I am very prudent to consider the divinity identifiers as a category of writing, but for completely different reasons from traditional ones. According to the traditional approach ars scribendi consists in the practice of memorizing and expressing ideas connected to language through graphical signs, but for a growing number of scholars the aim of this technique is different: storing and transferring information so that it can be reused. Therefore, in order to define what writing is, no connection with the spoken code of a language is necessary: associating it to the world of ideas and concepts is enough. Create a text means fixing concepts, a process that does not depend on how they may be expressed in spoken language and by its rules. What actually stimulates the use of writing is its relationship with culture: its mission to establish sequences of ideas, namely connections of concepts. This is a mental process that does not necessarily have to deal with the translation of sounds into visual marks, but with the cultural milieu of a society. The non-fatal chain from sounds to signs is not a theoretical but a historical observation. The first writing experiments and the increasing integration of sign in a system were not directed to reproduce the segmental structure of the spoken language (word, syllable or letter) or to express its grammatical structures. Our ancestors were rather anxious to fix in space the contents of their thoughts. Putting oral speech on to clay or paper was a secondary goal, which prevailed only successively. The Indus civilization and maybe the Danube civilization declined before their system of writing reaches this step of maturity.

My propensity to not consider the divinity identifiers as a category of signs of writing is based on the following reasons. Firstly, divinity identifiers are not common enough signs for a script in use at tens of sites for hundreds of years. In fact the choice to indicate a divinity through a distinct sign was a private decision which involved only a region and even a village, a sanctuary or at least a single shaman-priest; divinity marks were not codified through a general organized system of signs and, even if, we are not able to find one of them in other regions-villages of the same culture. This observation is indirectly confirmed by the Winn’s list which is polarized by so called “elementary signs out of time and space” easy to be encountered in any culture (i.e. triangle, square, and lozenge) and local, very atypical signs. As curiosity we can notice that Ds 55 (a flag hoisted on a pole), selected by Winn among the divinity identifiers, is the same sign that in Egyptian hieroglyphs stands for “God” (“Necer”, the carbonate hydrate of sodium employed to preserve the mummified corpuses, therefore to deify them).

Therefore, secondly, the Neo-Eneolithic divinity identifiers are in the same situation of the heraldic signs where their numbers and shapes are not predetermined, but depend on how many aristocrats there are and on the pedigree of their families.

Thirdly, the divinity marks go beyond some important conventions which rule the outline and the organization of signs of writing. Even if they can be modified applying to them diacritical marks as small strokes, crosses, dots and arches in order to express some pa-
ticular attributes/powers or local hypostasis, they can’t be reversed or inverted as the script units are.

In conclusion, a divinity identifier announces the presence and the powers of a divinity worshipped in a region-village or governing a specific cultic place. The idols marked by this kind of signs did not simply represent the image of a divinity, but they became the divinity itself through a ritual in which they have had imbued of the godly essence. The action of tracing divinity marks in an appropriate way on figurines transformed them from every day objects into concentrations of supernatural energies. For this reason one can infer that the most powerful statuettes, those worshipped outside the domestic sphere, were manipulated and inscribed only by initiates.

Which semiotic criteria can one use in order to distinguish between divinity identifiers and script units? Here are some instructions on the side of the divinity marks vs. the writing system:

a) A divinity mark is a local sign. It is very difficult to find it in other regions and sometimes even in the neighbouring villages. Therefore having found the single sign in prominent positions on Jela female figurines, Winn deduced it was the mark of a local Goddess (Winn 1981). Contrariwise the signs of the Danube script were in use from the sixth millennium BCE to the middle of the fourth millennium in tens of sites over a wide area positioned between and including southern Hungary, Macedonia, Transylvania and northern Greece (Merlini 2003a).

b) A divinity identifier is placed mostly on objects which represent the divinity such as figurines, vases or seals, whereas an inscription is hosted by every kind of objects.

c) A divinity mark is positioned prominently. When for example it occurs on a figurine, it is located outstandingly and/or on strategic parts of the anatomy (particularly on the top head, forehead, neck, breasts, stomach, belly, vulva, back, or the buttocks). A written text is not necessarily incised in a notably position, although some kinds of inscriptions are restricted to some specific areas of the objects.

d) At times a sacred mark, representing the essence of a divinity in the abstract sphere, is so strictly connected to some of its key organs to replace them: meanders in place of the vulva, spirals instead of buttocks, and so on. A written text never replace a part of the hosting object.

e) The scribes were careful and precise in making the divinity identifiers. On the contrary in many cases an inscription has been engraved imprecisely due to inexperience of the scribe or has been incised poorly because of its shaky hands. In others it has been corrected while the text was in progress (for example the P or D in the upper left quadrant of the discoidal tablet from Tărtăria).

f) A divinity identifier was habitually made before firing and very
deeply incised. An inscription could be made before as well as after firing (in general it was made before firing) and with a variable grade of pressure.

g) A divinity identifier consists in general of a mono-sign, very specific in design and distinct in shape. Although script is mainly made up of one or two signs, one can also find long inscriptions.

h) A divinity marker often has a pictographic root. The script is made up of abstract signs rather than naturalistic motifs. Abstract signs and pictorial expressions are two independent components in the formation of the Danube Script: the former played a more important role than the latter (Haarmann 1995).

i) A divinity identifier frequently has the shape of a cartouche (a number of different hieroglyphic symbols enclosed in a loop) and it is inscribed within an appropriate and reserved space organized according to a typical layout for reading a cartridge. The inscriptions show the most varied patterns, in horizontal, vertical or circular rows but despite this variety signs are arranged along specific sequences (not necessary linear ones).

j) A divinity mark is preserved from superimposed scratches made during the rituals or by accident. Contrariwise was not infrequent for the scribe to leave some imprints on a written text (for example on the tree of the other rectangular one from Tartaria) and make scratches everywhere.

k) There are signs which are used only as divinity marks. Therefore we can create a list of them. There are signs which are used only in writing messages. Therefore we can build an inventory of exclusively writing units.

In conclusion, observing a mono-sign of pictographic root that was very well and deeply traced before firing on a prominent position and/or on strategic parts of a figurine, a seal or a vase, one has high probabilities of dealing with a divinity identifier and not with an inscription (Table 4).

**Does the Gradešnica Platter Bear Written Texts or Just Decorative Motifs, Symbols and Divinity Identifiers?**

A key step in searching for clues of a script in Neo-Eneolithic cultures of south-eastern Europe is to implement and test the matrix of markers and rules (aimed to distinguish the poli-signs inscriptions from compounds of signs associated to other communication channels) on the corpus of Danube inscribed objects. This exercise is finalized for the detecting the internal structuring of the Danube sign system on the basis of the above mentioned typological and semiotic criteria and for the evaluating the possibility of the presence of elements of literacy in these cultures.

A crucial piece of advise when applying this matrix of markers and rules in the field is that the falling of a sign or a combination of signs under just one category of indicators is not a circumstantial evidence capable of positioning them inside the script framework rather then inside the decorative, symbolic and identifiable ones. The probability of hitting the bulls-eye is higher if a sign or a grouping of signs is simultaneously verified by as many as possible markers. Just take an example. If its true that geometric, abstract, high schematic, linear and not very complex signs are in general under the script framework, on can be sure of the script option only after this marker of the signs outlines is confirmed by others (e.g. a linear sequential position of the signs, the multiple variation of some root-signs by applying strokes to them...).

In this article I select and analyze a very well known artifact (the Gradešnica platter) to demonstrate that the celebrities under the spotlights for decades still have hidden unexpected features. The Gradešnica shallow vase is topical evidence of the possibility that Neo-Eneolithic communities of the Danube basin developed a system of writing. But does it actually bear signs of literacy or just decorations, symbols, or even simple scratchings?

Unearthed in 1969 in the Chalcolithic layer – the B level of a settlement next to the village of Gradešnica (close to Vraca in north-west Bulgaria), its discoverers have attributed it to the first half of the Chalcolithic in the period corresponding to the cultures of Karanovo V (Marica culture), the late Vinča-Turdaş and Boian-Vidra (Nikolov, 1970; Nikolov 1974), or perhaps to the early Vinča-C phase (Makkay 1990.78). The date has been substantially confirmed by Todorovic who believes that the Gradešnica evidence cannot be synchronized with Vinča B framework because of the higher level of development of its script compared to that of Turdaş (Todorovic 1970.82). It means that the inscribed object’s date may be around 4000 BCE at the latest or possibly a little earlier. On the basis of uncalibrated 14C results, the linguist V. I. Georgiev placed the Gradešnica shallow receptacle in a later period; i.e. in the second half of the fourth millennium (Georgiev 1970.8). At the opposite chronological pole, Gimbutas (1991.313) ascribed it to the early 5th millennium BCE and to the Vinča B culture. Even if one accepts the date of the Bulgarian excavators B. Nikolov, V. Mikov and G. Georgiev, the platter is chronologically positioned before another Bulgarian icon of the Neo-Eneolithic script: the Karanovo seal (Nikolov & Georgiev 1970.1 sq.).

Most of the authors, dazzled by the shape of the object and its aligned signs along reading rows, consider it a tablet or a plaque (Winn 1981.210, Masson 1984.108), but in fact it reminds one of a little, rounded shallow tray 12.5 cm. long by 10.5 cm. wide and 2 cm. high (Gimbutas 1991.313 figs. 8-12). Only a protein residue analysis would tell us what the little tray was used for (to display/offner sacred liquid or oil, for example?). It was discovered, together with a well-preserved figurine and two clay vases, in a cultic place according to the archaeologists in charge (Nikolov 1970). The bottom of one vase is inscribed with an anthropomorphic figure, while on the bottom of the other script-like signs occur. Therefore the context of the Gradešnica evidence of a script is religious although there is not an adequate amount of information to discuss if the mentioned occurrences (the place, the location, the assemblage, the signs) formulate a symbolic system.

The platter was made of clay, inscriptions occur on both sides, signs are sometimes crudely marked and superimposed by scratches and fortuitous lines made after firing but in general they are distinctive in shape. A number of badly taken, developed and reproduced photos of the inscribed artifact have been published. The situation is made more complex by the fact that the signs are sometimes not very clear because of indecisions on the part of the scribe (Fig. 8). The platter is covered by scratches (Fig. 9) and some areas are completely covered by abrasions. Some drawings have also been published sometimes presenting divergent signs (Nikolov 1970,1974,1986; Masson 1984). Unfortunately most of the sketches in circulation out of the Bulgarian...
### Table 4. A matrix of markers and rules to distinguish between signs of writing and divinity identifiers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contrapositions</th>
<th>Signs of writing</th>
<th>Divinity identifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Global vs. local</strong></td>
<td>Script was in use in tens of sites over a wide area.</td>
<td>Divinity marks are local signs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taking place on all kind of objects vs. on some selected types of objects</strong></td>
<td>An inscription can be hosted by all kinds of objects.</td>
<td>A divinity identifier is prevalently placed on representational objects of the divinity such as figurines, vases or seals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occurring on many parts of an object vs. on restricted areas of it</strong></td>
<td>An inscription can be disposed on any part of the objects, although some kinds of inscriptions are restricted to some specific areas of them.</td>
<td>A divinity mark is positioned prominently. When it occurs on a figurine, it is located outstandingly and/or on strategic parts of the anatomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impossibility vs. possibility to replace a key part of the object</strong></td>
<td>A written text never substitute a part of the hosted object.</td>
<td>Sometimes a sacred monogram, representing the essence of the divinity in the abstract field, is so strictly connected to its key organs to replace them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poorly marked vs. clear-cut</strong></td>
<td>An inscription might be imprecise in signs and carelessly made.</td>
<td>The scribe is careful and precise in making a divinity identifier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent of firing vs. before firing</strong></td>
<td>A text is often made before firing, but it might also be made after firing. It could be incised with a variable grade of pressure.</td>
<td>In general a divinity identifier is made before firing and very deeply incised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Different number of units in play</strong></td>
<td>Although script is mainly made up of one or two signs, one can also find three- and more-signs inscriptions.</td>
<td>A divinity identifier is in general a monogram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract roots vs. pictographic roots</strong></td>
<td>The script is made up of abstract signs rather than naturalistic motifs.</td>
<td>A divinity identifier often has a pictographic root.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patterns and layout</strong></td>
<td>The inscriptions show the most varied patterns, in horizontal, vertical or circular rows. Despite this variety, signs are arranged along specific sequences (not necessary linear ones).</td>
<td>A divinity identifier often has the shape of a cartouche and it is inscribed inside a reserved space organized according to a typical layout for reading a cartouche.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superimposed scratches vs. preservation of the signs</strong></td>
<td>Inscriptions are sometimes superimposed by scratches or scribe’s imprints.</td>
<td>A divinity mark is preserved from superimposed scratches made during the rituals or by accident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inventory vs. catalogue</strong></td>
<td>There are signs which are used only in writing messages. Therefore we can build an inventory of exclusively writing units.</td>
<td>There are signs which are employed only as divinity marks. Therefore we can create a precise and systematic catalogue of them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
scholarship are based on these photos, while that one published by Nikolov in 1986 is quite correct. During the spring of 2005 I had the opportunity of checking the object personally at the National Museum of History of Sofia. In the first part of this paragraph I will present some epigraphic observations and then in the second I will apply the matrix of markers and rules on the Gradeńska little tray.

The signs on the outside of the platter

Regarding the outside of the artifact, I present a montage with also the lips (Fig. 10). One can recognize at one look a human-like stylised figure fixed in a ritual posture with arms raised, surrounded by numbers of triangular, V-shaped and meandering motifs. This make one concentrate instinctively. In fact, as we will discuss below, the starting sign for interpreting the message is the focus of the anthropomorphic: i.e. the deep dot inserted inside the central lozenge which depicts the torso (Merlini 2004.87).

The symbolic figure is quite correctly rendered in the published drawings, although with some discrepancies also in the discoverers’ presentations (see for example Nikolov 1970 vs. Nikolov 1974 and Nikolov 1986). The stylised figure is positioned prominently on the platter. It is also in high-relief and shows the outline to be much more deeply incised compared with the surrounding signs. It is standing, with arms raised in ritual adoration (Winn 1981.212) or possibly in a dancing pose as suggested by the high curved arms and hands, and the posture modelled in dynamic balance on a little triangle. It is composed of five triangle-like forms each with a dot incised in the barycentre. The dots show two typologies: the one in the central lozenge is much more deeply carved than the others which form an ideal cross. A sixth dot is less profoundly incised than the others and is placed at the end of a V motif located in the lower register. The outline of the orante/dancer is stressed by the use of signs which have been doubled: a) the head is composed of a twofold triangle with a dot inside; b) two arcuate arms create triangles with a dot inside; c) a double lozenge with a deep dot stands for the torso. Only one single-lined triangle with a dot in the centre constitutes the base of the stylized anthropomorph.

Similarly to the Ocna Sibiului “non phallus”, the back of the Gradeńska flat platter seems contemporaneously to employ two communication channels: iconic symbolism and an inscription. The starting sign for interpreting the message is also the focus of the anthropomorphic: the deep dot inserted inside the central lozenge which depicts the torso (Merlini 2004.87).

Consequently, if the rhombus encloses a point, like in the Gradeńska shallow vase, it evidently marks the uterus containing the foetus. Does the Gradeńska image tell us about pregnancy and birth? (of a definite woman, a mythical ancestor, or a divinity?)

The anthropomorphic figure is not just a “schematic drawing”, but it follows a precise fourfold pattern with a strong rhomboid centre and arms directed to the four corners. The hooks or branching lines attached to the arms (actually the arms of the cross) reinforce its dynamic expression. This vital sign was employed widespread by the communities of the Danube civilization and was recurrently incised or painted on vessels, dishes, figurines, and stamp seals. According to Gimbutas this pattern is a consistent symbol of life as a continuum based on the belief that the year is a journey embracing the four cardinal points. Its purpose is to promote good-luck assuring: a) the continuance of the cosmic cycle; b) the assistance to the world through all phases of renewal of the moon and sun; and c) the coming of seasonal changes. In conclusion, the fourfold motif is an ideogram “necessary to promote the recurrent birth and growth of plant, animal and human life” (Gimbutas 1974.89-91) (Table 5A-B).

Ten signs-grouping of signs are inscribed surrounding the humanoid, (not six as described in literature because of the bad photos. See for example Winn 1981.213, Masson 1984.109). Underscoring the circular layout, they are disposed in a round row sub-divided in four quadrants. Moving clockwise from the upper right, one can see at first sight a large area without any sign because of an abrasion, then a triangle which starts from the back of the hand, breaks through the edge and is positioned under the suspension hole. On the lower right there are numbers of scratches. Very clear there is a double V and a V. In this area there are many graffiti made after firing. Mainly they are little V motifs.

On the lower left of the figure there are a > empathized by a dot at one edge, a very closely juxtaposed meander, and a meander in opposition with the previous one as in a mirror. On the lower left is an open inverted b-shape motif much more adjacent to the arm of the figure than in published drawings. On the upper left there are three signs: a compounded sign, a line and a sign a triangular open shape. If one has the inclination to proceed with the nativity-symbolism of the anthropomorphic figure and follows Gimbutas’ approach, one can notice all around the human-like figure a series of signs suggesting the aquatic element and expressing the water of life that emerges during the moment of birth. In this case the risk is to succumb to one of the most common errors in attempts at decipherment: the “pictographic fallacy” (Robinson 2002). In fact if one believes that the Danube script is mainly pictographic and, having searched for pictographic elements in the signs, one naturally finds them and then - under the influence of the determinatives found in Egyptian hieroglyphs (such as the shepherd’s crook meaning ‘ruler’ in the cartouche of Tutankhamen) - one proceeds to treat the supposed pictograms as referring only to the objects they depict, resulting in interpreting iconic representations and failing to read abstract signs. The pictographic fallacy is generally coupled with another misconception which considers the first phase in the development of literacy as a pictographic or ideographic one (Merlini 2004c). V. I. Georgiev applied both of these false opinions to the Gradeńska inscriptions (V. I. Georgiev 1970.3).

When one applies the matrix of markers and rules to the ten signs

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14 Masson, for example had only the opportunity to work on the image of the inside of the platter published on the cover of a book.
15 It is contrary to the published drawings.
16 The published drawings catch only its segment on the left.
17 Not a very close as in the published drawings.
18 Masson, for example had only the opportunity to work on the image of the inside of the platter published on the cover of a book.
surrounding the stylized figure one is more confident of signalling geometric, abstract, high schematic, linear and not very complex signs typical of a script framework. The schematization of some signs (V-shape, b-shape, meanders) could be originated by a long process of stylization, simplification, geometrization and abstraction by which some naturalistic symbols have, step by step, lost the “formal” connection with the old prototype in the natural or artificial world. Anyway such a naturalistic basis is no longer recognizable on the back of the Gradešnica platter where the scribe used signs that she/he considered mainly abstract with a linear shape.

Although the signs sometimes seem to be imprecise and carelessly made, they have not been inscribed haphazardly but with standardized knowledge and nine out of ten of them can be definitely included in Winn’s (1981, on-line)\(^9\) and Haarmann’s (on-line)\(^20\) signs of writing catalogues.

With regards to the techniques and restrictions in modifications of the outlines of the signs, the back of the Gradešnica platter presents convergence and divergence with other Danube inscriptions. Like other Danube texts, some signs have been rotated as if in mirror-fashion, other signs have been placed in opposition, and furthermore two probably compounded occur (one is positioned in the lower register immediately on the left of the triangular base of the figure and is formed by putting two simple signs side by side; the other is the eighth in my sequence and may be formed by a ligature). However contrary to the general rule, the signs on the back of the Gradešnica platter do not seem to have been modified by the application of diacritical marks such as small strokes, crosses and arches (only in one case a > has been modified by a dot).

Concerning the space organizational principles of the inscription, the ten signs surrounding the figure show an asymmetric co-ordination along a circular row (none of which are located inside the anthropomorph) and they do not saturate the entire available space. They are obviously positioned in a functional way for the purpose to carrying a specific message and not as decorative framework.

In conclusion, one can infer from the above observations that the outside of the Gradešnica platter shows a pregnant human-like being surrounded by an inscription dealing with and specifying the same theme by means of a narrative text. The two levels of communication (symbolic iconography and signs of writing) have been used together on the same votive object by these ancient populations. However they have not been confused with each other.

The magic-religious function of the fourfold anthropomorphic figure and the surrounding signs is outlined by their location on the non-visible part of the ritual vessel. The magic-religious marks are visible only when the platter is moved, stored, or transported, but not when in use. During the rituals, they faced the ground possibly for the giving and the taking of earth-forces. Was the non-visibility not only a supplementary symbolic meaning but also an integral part of the symbolic message and a necessary condition for setting symbols and inscription into motion?

The question of the non-visibility of some texts is very significant and is indicative of magical associations and sacral meaning of the Danube script connected with initiation processes. It is also noteworthy to consider the possibility of placing one of the rectangular Tartaria tablet on top of the circular tablets with holes in perfect alignment. The hole of the rectangular tablet fits precisely that of the circular one and the former tablet covers the upper register of the latter perfectly. This means that they have been worn one over the other and the resulting compound had overt and esoteric signs on the rectangular tablet and the lower register of the circular one, and hidden and

\(^9\) Winn’s inventory (on-line) indexes the signs with the abbreviation DS: Danube script. One can identify in it nine on the ten signs which occur on the back of the platter. Following my sequence, they are DS 51, DS 15, DS 1, a rotated DS 1, a rotated DS 235, DS 235, a rotated DS 168, a variant of a rotated DS 139, a rotated DS 87.

\(^20\) Haarmann’s inventory (on-line) rubricates the signs with the abbreviation OE: Old European. Nine on the ten signs which occur on the back of the platter are recognizable in. Following my sequence, they are OE 159, OE 108, OE 76, a rotated OE 76, a rotated OE 63, a OE 63, a rotated OE 220, a rotated OE 217, a rotated OE 144.
esoteric signs on the upper register of the circular tablet. Was the sacred assemblage used particularly during initiation ceremonies? (Merlini on-line, Lazarovici-Merlini 2004). Also the cultic, discoid medallion recently found at Turdas and belonging to the early phase of the Turdas culture had been used with its inscription facing the ground. In this case the inscribed artifact laid in the middle stratum of a pit among the ashes of a deep step dwelling, maybe a granary or a shaman’s habitation, and accompanying six vessels containing cereals (Luca 1993; Merlini 2004a). The Neo-Eneolithic communities of the Danube basin were just at the beginning of the development of a script with a mainly cultic, initiation-ritual character; therefore many meanings were esoteric and revealed only on the occasion of specific initiations (Lazarovici-Merlini 2004). This does not facilitate any attempts to decipher it since one is dealing with texts which challenge the un-expressible, which not only reveal but also conceal and divert, and finally which indicate something to actually mean something else.

The signs on the inside of the Gradešnica platter

The inside of the Gradešnica flat vessel bears a long inscription which, according to the majority of scholars, is divided into four horizontal registers (Fig. 9). In fact all the researchers are working from the drawings published by Nikolov (1974), Masson (1984) and Gimbutas (1991). But if one looks at the humanoid stylised on the outside and turns the vessel, one can see that the signs on the inside are actually aligned vertically. The scholars who have the script choice in mind are inclined to perceive the characteristic layout of complex writing messages, whereas the scholars who have the decorative option in mind tend to force the symmetry of the original patterns.

The difference between the horizontal and the vertical layout is not unimportant. We can mention three lines of thinking induced by the wrong perspective. One of the markers used by Masson in order to document that the Gradešnica platter carried a written message (“comme il arrive généralement sur les inscriptions véritables rédigées en toutes sortes d’écriture”) is the decrease of the space employed by the registers and the diminishing size of the characters when one goes from the top to the bottom (Masson 1984.108). According to V. I. Georgiev, the sequences of supposed vertical segments are possibly number notations (Georgiev 1970.8). This may be, but the linguist’s observation is induced by the erroneous observation that the lower register bears a single sign of writing surrounded by eight little vertical strokes (three on the left and five on the right). In fact the view of a forest of sticks is based on the incorrect layout showing vertical segments and on the missing distinction between the lines which are signs of writing and the lines which are elements of the reading frame. Due to this distorted perspective, Masson believed to have distinguished a sign which evoke the letter M (Masson 1984.110).

The interior face of the platter is divided by five vertical lines into four registers of slightly unequal width, narrowing from left to right. There are three or more signs in each column. According to the matrix of markers and rules, the asymmetric co-ordination of the signs along a linear alignment is one of the main space organizational principles of a system of writing.

Contrasting the vertical development of the layout, some of the more isolated horizontal segments intersect the upright lines giving the sensation that the signs have been inscribed inside metopes. Each metope may represent an idea (or a word?) as on Lepenski Vir stone sphere or on the circular Tartaria tablet (Merlini 2004a.89). With the reference of the Gradešnica shallow vase, this hypothesis has been postulated by V.I. Georgiev (1970.8). The Gradešnica platter custom of incising texts inside a reserved space is not an once-off case in the region. In the early Chalcolithic, at the neighbour settlement of Brénitza, according to Nikolov B. (1986.167) the external surface of containers employed for the maintenance of food presents rectangular spaces designed as if they were metopes in order to bear sign groups which give recommendations about the conservation of the alimenty. The Brenica’s signs are symbols and ideograms, specifies Nikolov. The use of a layout in rows and in metopes evidences that the scribe had to trace a defined number of signs of a standard outline for shape and size. In addition, the utilization of strokes in separating signs or groups of signs is another strong marker of the occurrence of an inscription. In conclusion, on the inside of the Gradešnica little tray signs are assembled in a functional way and they definitely do not follow an aesthetic design.

A direct check of the distinct signs inside the Gradešnica platter evidences that some of them look rather different from the previous published drawings. On the right row there are visible from top to bottom: a very open V motif which expands itself in the next column, three horizontal segments, a horizontal stroke very near to an unclosed triangular meander, and another three-lines. The upper part of the second column starting from the right is not very clear because of many superimposing scratches. From top to bottom one can catch a glimpse of a V motif so open as to become a almost horizontal stroke, another horizontal segment very close to the sign which has a dot inside and looks like the rotation of the Hittite hieroglyph which resembles a chain of mountains or towers and stands for "country", a meander, and a horizontal segment. The signs of the third vertical row are very complex: a lightly curved hook (or a > motif) opposed to a quite close meander; a compounded sign formed by joining some basic signs (among which one can distinguish with some difficulty a J, a meander and a V); and then a very open V. On the left column there is a meander, a line and a multiple check this fundamental point. The V-shape geometries are equivalent to sign DS 1 in the last Winn’s inventory (on-line) and to OE 76 in Haarmann’s (on-line). The horizontal strokes which do not have the purpose of dividing the space for reading are one-line and three-lines. They correspond to, in the respective inventories, DS 87 and DS 85, and OE 144 and OE 149. The unclosed triangle is

21 The identification made by Winn (1981.212) of a “a typical three-toothed comb frequently found at Vinča but also at other later sites and in many scripts” is inconsistent.
23 Not two separated signs - a meander with four segments and an horizontal line - as in Nikolov 1974.
24 Nikolov 1970 distinguishes only an open meander contained within a J-shape geometry; Masson 1984 inserts some sketch lines in order to save the script-like form of this compounded sign but in fact they are not less deep incised then the outlines of the supposed sign.
25 Neither so open as in Nikolov 1970; 1974, not so close P-like as in Masson 1984.
not clearly paralleled in the aforementioned lists.

In the second row, the sawing sign is comparable (but not equivalent) to DS 22 and OE 91b; it has parallels on the Karanovo seal. The top sign in the third column corresponds to DS 138 or to a partially rotated DS 13 in Winn’s inventory and to OE 211b or to a partially rotated OE 103 in Haarmann's. The components of the subsequent compounded sign could be partially paralleled to DS 321, DS 235, and DS1 according to Winn’s inventory and to OE 51, OE 63, and OE 76 according to Haarmann’s. Finally the sign on the top of the left vertical row matches an inverted DS 233 and OE 52; the multiple ? corresponds to DS 15 and OE 108. In conclusion the large majority of the signs incised on the front of the Gradešnica platter are included in the considered inventory of the Danube Neo-Eneolithic script. Of the 10 signs which are not horizontal segments and grouping of signs, five could be categorized as various types of meanders and three as V-forms.

With regards to the techniques and restrictions in modifications of the outlines of the signs, the signs on the front part of the Gradešnica platter contrary to other Danube inscriptions do not seem to have been modified by the application of diacritical marks such as small strokes, crosses, dots and arches. However like in other Danube inscriptions some signs (meandering and V shapes) have been rotated. One sign is clearly combined by ligatures: the middle one in the third column.

A number of signs occur on the internal and external lips of the little Gradešnica tray. Unfortunately they have not been fully published up to now, but their identification is part and parcel of the inscriptions. It is not a fortuitous case that some signs start and develop on the back or on the front surface of the object ending on a lip. I present a montage of the both the outside and the inside with also the lips (Fig. 10; Fig. 11).

The lip above the head of the humanoid is quite disfigured, but it is possible to detect some signs among them a trapezium inserted by a line, a meandering figure, two rectangular shapes, and a line. Some of these signs seem to be pictograms/ideograms depicting structures with different functions.

The lip under the base of the orante-dancer is structured in three aligned spaces. Of course the observer of the actual object has a reversed view then in the Fig. 11. In the centre, a rectangular three-stratified structure is positioned. On the right one can notice two very deep incised parallel lines placed below evident hooks upstanding at a corner in specular opposition. On the left is visible a meander surrounded by a V, a diagonal line, a long line connecting with the multiple ∆ located on the right bottom of the figure (in this case the sign could be a compounded one formed by a surrounding a meander). Many signs of this lip also seem to be pictograms/ideograms depicting structures with different functions.

The lips on the right and on the left of the figurine bear much fewer signs then the other two. Although the lip on the right is the most ruined because of large abrasions and breakings and bears mainly post-firing scratches, one can catch a glimpse of a triangle which is starting from the back surface of the platter (from the humanoid’s arm) and is completed by a stroke. A similar development has a little y. Also the lip on the left is very damaged and the only interesting signs that it bears (mainly little v shapes) have been made post-firing. It is characterized by some not very clear lines and hooks.

The internal lips are much less inscribed than the external ones. The lip on the left shows a parallel and a line placed above an evident V. On the lip on the right an X occurs.

In conclusion we can confirm that the Gradešnica platter is one of the key inscribed objects for an analysis of the development of a system of writing in the Danube basin. On the topic of the layout of its inscriptions, in spite of some indecisions on the part of the scribe it expresses a systematic organization typical of a system of writing starting from: a) the disposition of the signs on a flat surface; b) the repartition of the reading space in linear rows through aligned metopes (the inside) or in a circular row sub-divided in four quadrants (the outside); and c) the use of segments to separate the concepts (or the words).

Concerning the Gradešnica signs and their nature as units of a script, the main observation is that most of them can be included in the available inventories of the Neo-Eneolithic South-Eastern European writing, therefore they do not just appear “script-like” at a glimpse because of their linear, simple and abstract shape. If we consider that both Winn and Haarmann have based their inventories solely on the core area of Vinča culture, very distant from Gradešnica, the correspondence is striking. This annotation leads one to contemplate a widespread similar kind of writing both north and south of the Danube. The Gradešnica inscriptions possibly having a liturgical purpose, this graphic convergence could also bring unexpected lines of thinking with regards to common religious ideas and beliefs in the entire Danube area. If the Gradešnica evidence is considered to be in itself a culture developed in the Northern and North-Western Bulgaria at the periphery of the core Vinca area (Bojadziev, Dimov, Todorova 1993.62, 74, 75), the strong graphical parallels underline that these communities maintained contact with each other and were also strictly related.

The observation that some signs are recurrent in the same inscription and both on the inside and the outside of the tray is particularly significant because the scholars who challenge the script option maintain the inexistence or very low rates of sign repetition in single inscriptions: not one sign is considered to be used twice in an inscription (Farmer 2003). It is also significant that the recounted signs are not the so-called “signs out of time and space” or “elementary geometries found in every culture”, but precise and complex signs. When inspecting the internal structuring of the “Gradešnica sign system” clear evidence of the presence of a writing system becomes noticeable; although very archaic and in statu nascenti.

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The artist and anthropologist Daniela Bulgarelli is the author of the painting appearing on this study. Marco Merlini is the author of the photos. Copyright© 2005 The Global Prehistory Consortium at EURO INNOVANET srl. All rights reserved Word wide. May not

26In the area included between Turdas in the North-West, Jela in the East, and Anza in the South.
Figure 1. Some Vinča inscriptions at Jela from Trbuhovich and Vasiljevich 1983, tab VIII

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Figure 2. The region where the Danube Civilization and the Danube Script flourished seven millennia ago. It should be considered that the Danube Script (framed in green) was used only in the core area of the Danube Civilization (framed in red).

Figure 4. “A”, “I”, “M”, “H”, “Y” motifs are evidently positioned on a large triangle incised on the chest found at Supska (next to Cuprite, Republic of Serbia and Montenegro).

Figure 3. The group of the three inscribed Tartaria tablets.

Figure 5. The inscribed “non phallus” from Ocna Sibiului (Romania).
Figure 6. Cosmic symbolism on the inscribed "non-phallus" from Ocna Sibiului (Romania).

Figure 7. The inscription on the base of the inscribed "non phallas" from Ocna Sibiului (Romania).

Figure 8. Indecisions on the part of the scribe of the Gradeșnica platter: an example.

Figure 9. The Gradeșnica platter is covered by scratches: an example.
Figure 10. The signs on the inside of the Gradešnica platter: a montage with the lips.

Figure 11. The signs on the outside of the Gradešnica platter: a montage with the lips.
THE MYTH OF UNIVERSAL PATRIARCHY
A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO CYNTHIA ELLER’S “MYTH OF MATRIARCHAL PREHISTORY”

Joan Marler (Sebastopol, California, USA)1

In 1993, Cynthia Eller published Living in the Lap of the Goddess (1993) hailed by leading spiritual feminists as an illuminating study of the feminist spirituality movement in America. Her more recent book, The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future (2000) published by Beacon Press, seeks to eviscerate this same movement. The key arguments in this book are not original and were presented three decades ago in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere’s anthology Women, Culture, and Society (1974). The main thesis of The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory is stated in the concluding sentence of Joan Bamberger’s article, “The Myth of Matriarchy,” from the same 1974 volume: “The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. To free her, we need to destroy the myth” (Bamberger 1974, 280).

The political nature of Eller’s book is revealed in the opening quotation by Kwame Anthony Appiah: “The real political question. . . as old as political philosophy. . . [is] when we should endorse the ennobling lie.” Such “falsehoods,” he writes, are not only “useless,” but “dangerous.”

The dangerous, “ennobling lie” that Eller attempts to debunk is the recognition that human societies have not always supported male domination in social structure and religious practice. In contrast to Western myth of universal patriarchy and the hegemony of a transcendent male monotheistic God believed to exist from the beginning of time, the so-called myth of matriarchal prehistory posits, in its simplest terms, that women were honored at the center of early non-patriarchal, non-warlike, egalitarian societies and the powers of nature were originally venerated primarily in female forms. Male domination, therefore, is not an inevitable, universal human condition and it is possible to create viable, balanced societies in the future.

Eller tells a revealing story about visiting the archaeological site of Knossos on Crete as a student and hearing from her professor that the Minoans were matriarchal. The derisive laughter that followed from the other students left her with the attitude that pervades this book: “Matriarchal? So what? If a lot of snickering was all that prehistoric matriarchies could get me, who needed them?” (Eller 2000, 4) Sometime later, she became intrigued with the idea of female-oriented social forms (Sanday 1998, 2002, xi) and in which the culture and none of the women who champion this version of Western history call themselves ‘feminist matriarchalists,’ and none refer to the story they tell as ‘the myth of matriarchal prehistory’ (Eller 2000, 12), yet Eller utilizes this term throughout her book to cast suspicion on anything that “feminist matriarchalists say . . .”. Although German researchers, such as Heide Göttnner-Abendroth do use the term matriarchy (without confusing it with gynocracy), the Lithuanian/American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas and most American scholars reject its use as a description of patriarchal societies and the powers of nature.2

Eller admits that “none of the women who champion this version of Western history call themselves ‘feminist matriarchalists,’ and none refer to the story they tell as ‘the myth of matriarchal prehistory’ (Eller 2000, 12), yet Eller utilizes this term throughout her book to cast suspicion on anything that “feminist matriarchalists say . . .”. Although German researchers, such as Heide Göttnner-Abendroth do use the term matriarchy (without confusing it with gynocracy), the Lithuanian/American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas and most American scholars reject its use as a description of patriarchal societies and the powers of nature.3 Therefore, the honesty of Eller’s use of “feminist matriarchalists” as a name-calling device must seriously be questioned.

Although contemporary Western feminism is far from monolithic, with three distinct and nuanced “waves” of theoretical development,4 it is characterized by a critique of systems of domination for the purpose of promoting equality between the sexes while respecting the

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2The first writer to use the term was E.B. Tylor in his article “The Matriarchal Family System” (1896).

3See Bamberger (1974, 263-4) who accepts “matriarchy” to mean domination of the mother over family and society. Interestingly, Bamberger’s article is not included in Eller’s list of references.

4Göttnner-Abendroth 1999 defines matriarchy as “in the beginning, the mothers.” See discussion with Heide Göttnner-Abendroth in Marler 1998,45.


6For a perceptive overview of the development of feminist thought and gender studies see Gilchrist 1999, 1-16.