
The role of natural environment and resources in the longevity of the Neolithic Vinča tell, southeast Europe: an integrated perspective

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Abstract

The archaeological site of Vinča in southeast Europe (Serbia) was occupied for much of the regional Neolithic period – from c. 5600 to 4500 cal BC. From about 5200 cal BC, a settlement associated with the regional Vinča culture phenomenon was established here and its life continued uninterrupted for nearly a millennium. Since the beginning of the 20th century, several excavation campaigns took place at Vinča, revealing a long history of Early-Late Neolithic occupation of the settlement, as well as traces of intermittent activities/use of the site in later epochs, up to the Late Middle Ages. A number of successive occupation levels were identified, composed of large, dense agglomerations of buildings that formed a c. 10 m-high artificial mound of more than 10 ha in extent. What are the factors that may have contributed to, or challenged, the longevity of the Neolithic settlement? There may have been many, and this paper proposes the geographic location, environmental setting and likely profusion of natural resources as some of the major prerequisites for the survival and continuity of the Neolithic community that resided at Vinča. The Neolithic environment of Vinča and its affordances have been largely overlooked in previous research on the site. We combine several forms of evidence (artefactual, geological, hydrological, palaeobotanical, faunal) and use them to identify natural resources available in the settlement's surroundings, as well as those found in more distant areas. By using the on-and off-site data, we evaluate the economic potential of the different environmental zones around Neolithic Vinča, especially the surrounding landscapes created by the Danube and its tributaries. We also consider the position of Vinča within the network of short- and long-distance trade/exchange connections, attested by finds of raw materials and finished products from as far as the Carpathians (e.g. obsidian) and the Mediterranean (e.g. spondylus and glycymeris shells). We conclude that the environment would have played a key role in the settlement's continuity and stability.

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