

ONCE AGAIN ABOUT THE VENUS OF LIMBA AND THE STARČEVO-CRIȘ – VINČA SYNCHRONISMS IN THE MIDDLE MUREȘ VALLEY

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Abstract: *The authors try to make a contribution to the knowledge of the evolution of successive Early and Developed Neolithic communities belonging to Starčevo-Criș (IIIB) and Vinča (A) cultures, starting from the analysis of the anthropomorphic idol, "Venus type", discovered in the Vărărie sector of the Limba-Oarda de Jos archaeological site. In this manner are presented the context of the discovery, the characteristics of the artifact and the comparative-typological analysis. The complex stratigraphy, the planimetry and the materials revealed are very important in clarifying important aspects of the Early and Developed Neolithic phenomenon in the south-western Transylvanian area. The description of the type, the manufacturing technologies, the specific anatomical features, the specific characteristics are presented by the authors. Finally, are advanced, generically, some assumptions most frequent disseminated in the literature regarding the significance of these artifacts, respectively short interventions with similar findings analogies from Transylvania and Banat. Regarding the artistic aspect, we note different trends. The artist drew a particular attention to some parts. Anatomical elements are sometimes represented accurate, with an overflowing realism, while others are rendered sketchy, geometrical, leading to abstraction. In the case of Venus from Limba, we noticed a harmonious junction between Starčevo and early Vinča elements. In the recent light of the possible cohabitation, of this site, by the communities of Starčevo and Vinča cultures, the work hypothesis is strengthened by the symbiosis of the morphologic elements present on the same artifact: Venus from Limba.*

Fourteen years ago, a study was published in which I presented, for the first time, a remarkable artifact discovered at the archaeological site of Limba-Oarda de Jos¹. More precisely, the artifact in question, the Venus of Limba, was discovered in fragments during the 1997 excavation campaign, within a research unit conducted in the Vărăria sector. Specifically, it was found in the northwestern extremity of this sector, in an area where unspecified anthropic interventions had

¹ Ciută 2010, 13-22; Paul et alii 1998. Subsequently, the statuette was analysed in other specialized studies as well: Ciută 2010a; Ciută Florescu 2010.

led to the partial collapse of the terrace slope (LI-LII/1997 – **Fig. 1**). The situation was perceived by researchers as an opportunity to obtain, through the specific manual straightening of the slope (**Fig. 2**), a clearer understanding of the stratigraphic sequences in this previously unexplored sector. This was aimed at planning the strategy for positioning future research units within this area of the site.

In the aforementioned study, I noted that the statuette was discovered in fragments (**Fig. 3**), at a depth of approximately 1.80 meters, within the layer situated immediately above the archaeological sterile layer, composed of yellowish loess-like clay (**Fig. 2**). Based on the specific characteristics of the materials contained within this habitation level - essentially the earliest Neolithic habitation horizon in the Vărăria sector - it was attributed to the early phase of the Vinča culture (A). Subsequent research conducted in this sector (1998², 1999³, 2001⁴) confirmed the stratigraphic sequences - and their cultural content - revealed in LI-LII/1997.

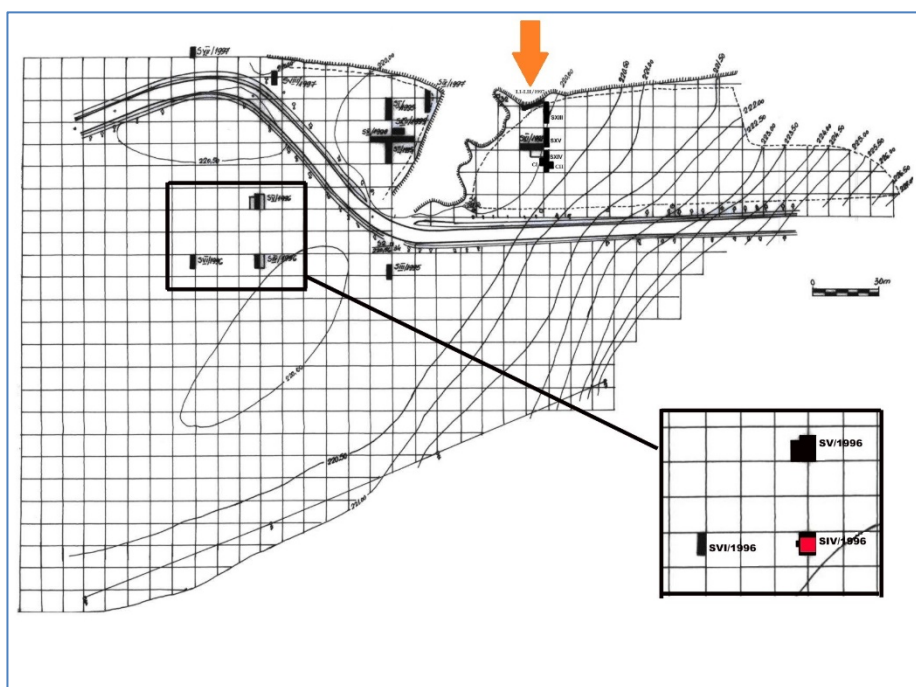


Fig. 1. The topographic survey of the sectors investigated between 1995 and 2001, indicating the location of research unit LI-LII/1997 (orange arrow).

² Paul et alii 1998.

³ Paul Ciută 1999.

⁴ Paul et alii 2002.



Fig. 2. General view of the research unit LI-LII/1997 at the end of the excavation.

After presenting the context of the discovery, and after providing a detailed description of the female anthropomorphic figurine⁵, from technological aspects (paste, temper, firing, surface treatment) to morphological and typological aspects (head shape, facial features, anatomical elements of the arms, pelvis, and legs), we observed that this remarkable artifact, striking from the first glance, combines specific elements of the late Starčevo-Criș tradition with those characteristic of the anthropomorphic representations of the early phases of the Vinča culture⁶.



Fig. 3. The *Venus* figurine, fragmented, at the time of its discovery.

⁵ Since the detailed description of the piece was provided in the referenced work (Ciută 2010, 13-22), we will not dwell on these elements here.

⁶ Ciută 2010, 13-22.



Fig. 4. The *Venus of Limba* in different postures (after Ciută 2010a).

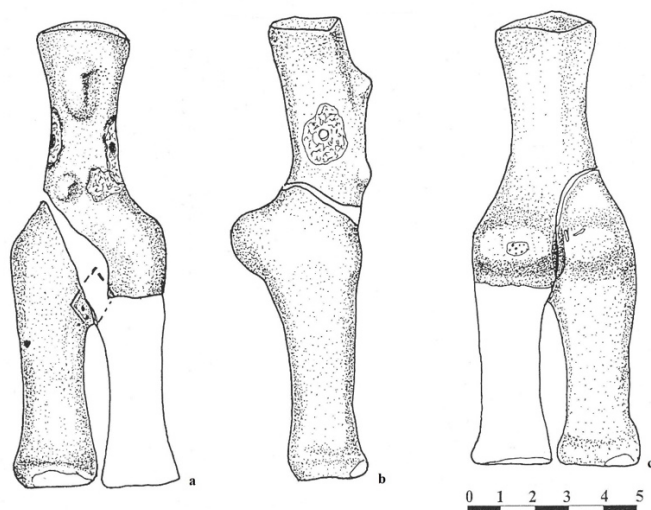


Fig. 5. *Venus of Limba* (after Ciută 2010).



Fig. 6. The *Venus of Limba* and the Vinča A and ceramic materials associated with it.

The latest findings revealed through the processing and analysis of Neolithic complexes uncovered during the preventive archaeological excavations prompted by the crossing of the Sebeș-Turda Highway (2016-2017)⁷, have led to a re-examination of previously formulated hypotheses and working assumptions. In many cases, these have served to confirm some of the ideas advanced during the interpretation of results from earlier systematic excavations (1995-2001). Thus, in a series of recent studies, we noted the presence of several material and technological elements that confirmed the fact that within the early Neolithic

⁷ Ciută, Tudorie 2021; Ciută Tudorie 2022; Ciută, Tudorie 2024; Ciută, Ciută 2018.

habitation complexes, the ceramic materials exhibited a series of characteristics that indicated a very strong connection with materials discovered in Vinča settlements. These material clues led us to propose the hypothesis of a direct adoption of superior Vinča technological elements by the Starčevo-Criș habitants present at the Limba-Oarda de Jos site.

Moreover, the aforementioned preventive excavation led to the discovery of earlier Vinča settlements (A2) in the *Bordane* and *Vărăria* sectors, which were previously considered the earliest in this site (Vinča A3). This situation called into question the existence of a stratigraphic and chronological hiatus between the Starčevo-Criș IIIB level and the first Vinča habitation complexes in this site⁸.

In this new situation, we find ourselves in the position of reevaluating certain previously published artifacts, such as the *Venus of Limba*, and interpreting them from the perspective that the Starčevo-Criș communities and the early Vinča groups at Limba-Oarda de Jos may have established direct contact, even within this very site.

We reiterate, without doubt or room for interpretation, that the archaeological layer in which the figurine was discovered belonged to the Vinča settlement, most likely the earliest habitation horizon in this sector. The piece was found about 5-8 cm above the lower boundary of the archaeological layer, immediately above the loess-like archaeological sterile layer. Furthermore, in *Vărăria* sector there are no traces of Starčevo-Criș settlement, according to the current research! The ceramic materials discovered in its vicinity, of certain Vinča origin, further reinforce the assertion that the figurine belonged to the bearers of the Vinča culture, who occupied the terrace in the *Vărăria* sector (**Fig. 6**).

The technological aspects revealed through direct observation of the artifact also support the acceptance of its Vinča cultural affiliation: the homogeneous paste with fine sand as temper; the absence of chaff in the paste composition; the construction of the artifact by separately attaching its component parts (the legs, separately, and the body, distinct) before drying/firing; excellent quality reducing firing, at temperatures that ensured penetration to the core of the piece; the dark gray-black color, and the overall appearance given by the smoothing/polishing of the exterior surfaces.

The morphological and typological analysis of the figurine also reveals elements of originality. The general type of figurine is an early Neolithic one, with the archetype being older, specific to the Upper Paleolithic, when various forms of Venus figurines appeared. Such female representations, standing with evident steatopygia, in a special posture (with hands on the abdomen or in the air), became widespread from the earliest phases of the early Danube Neolithic. We are referring here to the famous *Red-Haired Goddess* from Donja Branjevina⁹ (Fig. 7), as well as to the frequent versions of the '*Venus*' from the Körös culture.

⁸ Ciută 2002, 3-33.

⁹ Karmanski 1975. Sl. 33.



Fig. 7. *Red-Haired Goddess* from Donja Branjevina.

(source: a. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2659934814318261>

b.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2899333060378434&set=a.1674107459567673>.

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<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=290580353975568&set=a.137203619313243>).

The closest analogy to our piece, both typologically, stylistically, culturally, and chronologically, remains the Venus of Zăuan (Fig. 8), discovered in 1975 at the eponymous site¹⁰. Since it is contemporary with the one from Limba, belonging to phase IIIB of the 'Starčevo-Criș culture' evolution, it is the artifact to which we will most frequently refer in our attempt to compare the similar piece.

¹⁰ Lako 1977, 41-51.

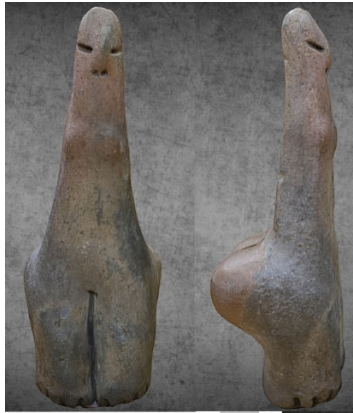


Fig. 8. *Venus from Zăuan* (source: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/venus-de-zauan-jud-salaj-14d02a69c0dc47779e9d5beeebe77c65>).

We will note from the outset that, although, as mentioned, it is overall a type of figurine (idol) specific to the early Neolithic, the upper part of the figurine from Limba is different. The manner in which the head is depicted, with a triangular, flattened crown and a triangular face, lacking the distinctive facial features (eyes, mouth, nose), which are abstractly represented by a simple oval prominence, pointed in the central area and with a vertical axis, unmistakably points to the Vinča model for creating female figurines. At the Limba site, the majority of idols from the Vinča habitation levels are depicted in this manner¹¹. We do not exclude the possibility that in this case, the face may have been covered by a mask, with all the implications of its presence¹². There is no indication suggesting the existence of a neck or torso.

Furthermore, the entire upper part of the figurine's body is represented as a simple cylinder¹³, terminating flat at the crown of the head (Fig. 5).

The arms are missing, but in the lateral area corresponding to their point of origin, two oval spots remain, indicating the place where they were attached, with a deep hole in the centre of each, revealing the presence of small wooden fragments that supported the arms at the time the piece was modelled (Fig. 2-5). The absence of elements proving the detachment of the palms from the abdomen or the upper part of the legs leads us to believe that the figurine's hands were oriented upward, in the specific position of the orants (as in the Körös culture¹⁴),

¹¹ Ciută 2010a; Ciută, Florescu 2010.

¹² The mask, in mentality of Neolithic human, was played probably the role of intermediary in the relationship with the divinity³⁸. On a general view we could see general similarities, especially common for distinctive elements from early Vinča (phase A2 and A3), but also the individualization of certain elements which appear only in Transylvania (during on the phases B1 and B1-B2) and which not appear in Banat or in Vinča site, like the case of lid vessels (Ciută, Florescu 2010, 93; Ciută 2010a).

¹³ The net domination of cylindrical idols is an additional argument of the early placement of Vinča plastic within general evolution of this cultural phenomenon (Ciută, Florescu 2010, 90, note 17)

¹⁴ As would be the case with the *Venus of Mehtelek* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%B6r%C3%B6s_culture) or *Venus of Ludvar* (<https://nepi.kultura.hu/helyszin/szeged-gyalaret>), booth from Körös culture area.

and not resting on the abdomen, hips, or legs. The breasts, also depicted schematically, are small sized, lacking elements of steatopygia or naturalism.

The lower part of the figurine, made from two separate pieces joined during the modeling process at the hip level¹⁵, is less carefully crafted. The posterior is prominently emphasized but in a similarly schematic manner, lacking the rounded, naturalistic, voluptuous elements typical of early Neolithic figurines. The smoothing of this posterior anatomical part even resulted in the formation of angles, which further suggest the same idea of schematization. There is a clear separation of the buttocks, achieved through the creation of a central vertical groove (Fig. 5).

An element of originality would be the naturalistic depiction of the pubic triangle (in this case, a rhombus!). Similarities can be observed with the *Red-Haired Goddess* from Donja Branjevina (Fig. 7), which is somewhat older than the *Venus of Limba*.

Finally, the figurine's legs, massive, cylindrical, and tall, are not fused together¹⁶ like those of the *Venus of Zăuan* or the figurines from the Körös culture, but are instead separated, adhering more closely to the tradition of the *Red-Haired Goddess* from Donja Branjevina. At the lower end, they are slightly thickened, suggesting the idea of feet, allowing the figurine to stand upright on its own (Fig. 5).

The *Venus of Limba* is not the only Vinča figurine that exhibits strong figurative elements rooted in Starčevo cultural traditions. For instance, in the case of another fragmentary figurine discovered in a Vinča complex, we observe the same steatopygia, complemented by the presence of a belt (girdle) above the hips. This belt features certain protomes suggesting the existence of buckles or decorative elements with aesthetic value, both elements being of definite Starčevo tradition.¹⁷ (Fig. 9-10).



¹⁵ Similar to the figurine *Venus from Zăuan* (Lako 1977, 42).

¹⁶ At Limba-Oarda de Jos, within the context of Vinča habitation levels, cases of figurine legs fused together along their entire length have also been discovered.

¹⁷ Ciută, Florescu 2010, 90.



Fig. 9. Steatopygous figurine with a belt and protomes from Limba-Oarda de Jos (after Ciută, Florescu 2010, fig. 17).

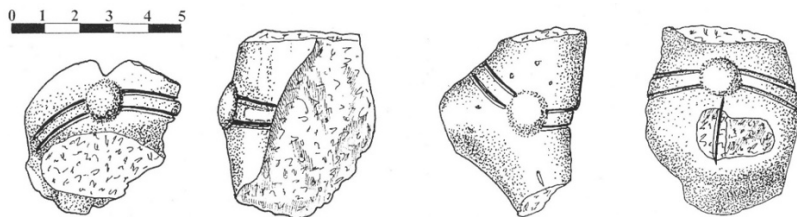


Fig. 10. Steatopygous figurine with a belt and protomes from Limba-Oarda de Jos (after Ciută, Florescu 2010, fig. 17).

At the same time, we note that in the case of plastics it is recorded the loss of the Starčevo elegant or natural forms in the benefit of Vinča brutal forms, more massive, more schematic, respectively by typical Vinča ceramic clay.

The aspects presented above demonstrate that, in the case of early Vinča anthropomorphic figurines from Limba-Oarda de Jos, we observe an original symbiosis of Starčevo-Criș tradition elements, which are integrated into the existing models of the Vinča community. This community reached the area of the Limba-Oarda de Jos site as part of a migration process along the Middle Mureș Valley.

As we have shown on another occasions, this phenomenon gives to anthropomorphic plastic from northeast area of Vinča culture, respectively of Transylvanian version, its archaic character supplemented by certain Starčevo traditions that transcend in some plastics archetypes. It could be discerned the basic elements of microasian origin spirituality grafted on the original elements, indigenous, which gave the appearance of Intracarpathian customization features of Transylvanian culture. In this way plastic figurine acquiring forms of expression and features distinctive from the south area, where it is originating¹⁸.

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¹⁸ Ciută, Florescu 2010, 93-94.

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