

“...There is a belief that the history of mankind is actually a history of waging war.

The voyage through history of our civilization’s soul leads us to Belgrade, one of the oldest and most often destroyed cities of the world.

When Le Corbusier, the famous architect, said that Belgrade was the ugliest city at the most beautiful place, he certainly had in mind the image of the results caused by the continual destruction of the city over many centuries, as well as its inadequate renewal and reconstruction.

It is for certain that the most beautiful Belgrade has disappeared without a trace, vanished and it is impossible to touch it.

History cherishes many stories about this city that are hard to be reconstructed exactly due to its continuous destruction, shifts and intertwining of a large number of cultures and prominent people whose life paths have passed through Belgrade, the eternal city...”

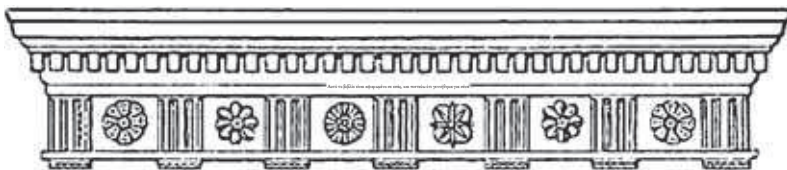




BELGRADE THE ETERNAL CITY

Argonauts





Chapter I

THE QUEST FOR THE LOST CITY

As Greek legend has it, the Argonauts, a team of mythical sailors under Jason's command, stole the Golden Fleece and, fleeing the Colchians, sailed into the river Ister, or Danube. As Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, had inflamed Medea the princess of Colchis with love for Jason, the smitten and vengeful enchantress joined forces with the Argonauts and helped them escape. Understandably enraged, Medea's father, Aeëtes king of Colchis, set off in pursuit, but the disobedient daughter helped her beloved Jason and the heroes by killing her half-brother Absyrtus. When Jason and Medea, sailing upstream with the brave Argo shipmates, reached the place where the large river forks, they decided to continue west, calling the river Sava the western Danube. To their left, the Argonauts spied the inhabited cliff off of Cauliacus, which, seemingly burrowed in the rivers, rose haughtily over their confluence. Here, the mythical sailors disembarked so that they might finally take respite, refresh their supplies, and offer sacrifices to the gods, and the Sindi tribe gave them a hospitable welcome.

This is a summary of a much longer myth about the Argonauts, but it is also the oldest description of Kalemegdan, the cliff-like ridge along which lays the Belgrade of today, notable for its remarkable history. Before sailing off for the Adriatic Sea, according to the same legend, Jason's heroes





Medea



spotted and explored the nearby Angurum (Avala) mountain, as well as the northern desert plain of Laurium, the large Pannonian Basin, behind which the blazing sun always vanishes at twilight, presenting a majestic, luminous sight.

The Greek heroes, released from the world of imagination into the world of Belgrade's history, live to the fullest in those bygone times. If we allow ourselves to see with our inner eyes the Argonauts at the foot of Kalemegdan, we will open a window onto the sentimental world and unlit corners of this city's history, intermingled with unusual people and events.

It is believed that when Apollonius of Rhodes¹ wrote his *Argonautica* around 300 BCE he was copying or paraphrasing a legend much older than himself, known from a time predating the Trojan War. The Greeks, therefore, even in the era prior to the infidelity of the beautiful Helen of Troy, described quite well the site of what is today Belgrade. The captivating story of an ancient adventure reaches back to long-gone times and immortalizes Jason's heroes, the Argonauts, and, with them, Belgrade itself.

In addition to the fifty or so Argonauts encamped somewhere along the bank by Lower Kalemegdan together with Jason and the beautiful but dangerous Medea were the musical Orpheus; the son of Zeus himself and half-god, Heracles; the killer of the dreadful Minotaur, Theseus; even Jason's uncle and father of the famous Trojan hero Achilles, Peleus. The fantastic heroes stimulate the imagination, but strangely, *Argonautica*, like so many obscure treasures, is not referred to much in historical volumes on Belgrade.

In the magnificent legend about the Argonauts, Apollonius tells us about the hospitality of the Sindi people who lived

¹Apollonius of Rhodes - one of the most famous librarians of the mystic Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Up to 246 BCE Rhodes was the biggest market of books. Most probably that Apollonius was born on Rhodes, but is very certain that some period of his life he lived there, so it is often called Apollonius of Rhodes. His most important work, *Argonautica* represents a giant cycle epic with continuing events, describing the era before the Trojan War. Apollonius died in Rhodes, or maybe in Alexandria.



The Danube River flow

at a place where the waters part. This locality was already heavily inhabited even then, and today it is the capital of the modern Serbian state. The passage of this group of immortal heroes of the ancient world along these banks will not be an isolated case, as the history of Belgrade is connected to numerous great men.

According to other legends, the Danube is one of the four rivers originating in Paradise, so that Belgrade is located on an ancient site, its ramparts washed by the heavenly river. A person besotted with fantasy, and there are plenty of such types here, said that a walnut launched into the Danube from Belgrade would take nine days to drift to Constantinople. Whether this is the case or not, the truth is that these two cities are in a sentimental centuries-old relationship that can't be terminated.

Belgrade's exceptional location and natural resources would make it the most preferred prey in this part of the Danube region for numerous empires and conquerors.

Belgrade's oldest incarnation, possibly dating from the time of Troy, is for us, today, nameless, but we know that it was built at the site of the long-vanished Neolithic Vinča² culture.



² *Local toponyms in this book will remain written in original – ed.*





The Vinča pottery: Sacrificial Stone



The site of the city of Belgrade and its broader surroundings is considered to be among the oldest settlements in the world, having been inhabited continuously for around 7,000 years. What we know with certainty is that the Danube Basin has always stood as a significant resource and an important part of the European continent. The Danube, the ancient and powerful aquatic giant and child of the extinct seas of yesteryear, has determined the destiny of many European cities, though perhaps Belgrade's most of all.

The Danube River, with its flow of 2,857 kilometers, navigable course of 2,580 kilometers, mean flow of around 6,500 cubic meters per second, and 300 tributaries, covers a basin of 817,000 square kilometers. This gorgeous and lofty river has historically formed one of the most common natural borders to a large number of empires and states, and Belgrade has been a logical site of strategic importance for both the outbreak and end of war.

Today, the Danube flows through ten countries: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Ukraine, and often forms a natural border. This region is one of the most important zones in Europe in terms of politics, economics, and culture, and history shows that such a role was never any different.

It may be concluded that the Danube basin since ancient times has been inhabited and has exhibited a developed economy and culture; as such, the constant migrations and continuous military campaigns are understandable.

The Danube and the fertile soil alongside it permitted the production of sufficient quantities of food, and the great distances between archeological sites shows that communication among settlements has existed since ancient times, along with active cultural interpenetration.

Just a few kilometers downstream from the Belgrade city nucleus, in the picturesque landscape formed by the sky, water, groves, and slopes which ultimately plunge into the immense Danube, a settlement of ancient peasants existed. However, they had been more than just that. The Vinča man and his civilization appear to be a yet-undiscovered treasure within such a short distance of Belgrade.



The “Vinča script”



Visible on the countless ceramic samples of the Vinča culture are incised symbols that appear to be letters. This “script” is argued over by academics with a sizeable following who take a sentimental approach to history. Although many would like for it to be otherwise, there are still no well-founded arguments that attribute to the symbols the characteristics of a script. Nevertheless, if the sensational and unscientific theories of today are proved in the future, this “Vinča script” will be the oldest known script in the world.

While archeologists and paleolinguists assume that these characters are the markings of ownership, bail, pictograms, pictorial, or even phonetic scripts, artists seek the spiritual character of these mystic symbols.

Apart from the question of whether the ethnicity of the bearers of this culture will ever be discovered, even more difficult to determine is the language they spoke, which is a necessary prerequisite for decoding any phonetic script.

Intriguing conjectural theories, excepting those with patriotic agendas, are fuelled by the fact that most of the lettered markings of ancient Vinča art appear in later Mediterranean cultures and their scripts: in Etrurian, Lydian, Lycian, Carian, and even Ancient Hebrew.





The Vinča pottery: terracotta figures



Traces of ore mining and metal processing as well as remains of irrigation systems, like those on sites in Mesopotamia, have been found in Belgrade and its immediate vicinity.

The prehistoric settlement, after which that entire civilization was named, was located in Vinča, on the right bank of the Danube and downstream from Belgrade, enthusiastically and pleasantly described as being, “on a smooth river curve that lends a sensation of endless width”.

The Vinča man deserves that his culture, which emerged within reach of the Belgrade metropolis of today, be treated with respect. The site itself tells us a lot about the extraordinary intellectual gifts of this man.

The Danube, that aquatic giant of the plains, has in its flow up to here engulfed boundless expanses and reached impressive dimensions having taken in the rivers Sió, Tisa, Sava, and Tamiš, as well as countless smaller and larger tributaries. From here, and downstream from Vinča, the river Morava, which has always signified the direction of movement from south to north, meets the Danube, and in this way the conflux of the rivers, with their center at Belgrade’s Vinča, guaranteed easy communication to all the directions of the world.

The picture of the Neolithic man becomes more solemn, and the intervening data seem at last to tear apart the curtains that have been dropped between us. The Vinča culture in around 4,000 BCE spread along the vast expanse from Transylvania to the Skopje valley and occupied a territory larger than any other Neolithic culture in Europe. Settlements, such as that at Vinča, surpassed in terms of their size and number of inhabitants even the first cities which appeared much later in Mesopotamia, the Aegean, and Egypt.

The settlement, which today falls under the administration of Belgrade, claims hardly more than 5,000 inhabitants according to the current census, while it is certain that the Vinča of Neolithic times had the features of a metropolis.

The dwellers of that time practiced agriculture, extensive cattle-breeding, pottery, weaving, and trade. The Vinčans had salt mines and obsidian deposits, and exploited the first copper mine in the world³, as well as the cinnabar mine in

Šuplja Stena beneath the Avala Mountain, in the immediate vicinity of Vinča and Belgrade.

We are right to wonder who these people were. We will not come to know them through the prism of our own experience because it is necessary for this undertaking to stray into the mysterious world of the vanished Vinča.

Art, that immortal medium through which people communicate, has a salutary effect on our encounter with Vinča. Already at first glance, the fascinating Vinča figurines point to a mystical creator, unambiguous, intelligent, devoted to nature and, if it may be said, not particularly religious in the current meaning of the word. The latter conclusion is reached because the thousands of figures that have been found demonstrate a want of specific form, lacking the kind of uniformity that any divine entity would demand.

The pottery is of astonishingly high quality and indicates the existence of the exceptionally refined production skills of specialized craftsmen. The ceramic craftsmanship of the Vinča culture represents the apex of such manufacture in prehistory, unparalleled in the whole of Europe.

Several thousands of years had to elapse before ceramics of similar quality were to appear again.

The Vinča man manufactured fishhooks, harpoons, coils, needles for weaving and fixing fishnets, fishing line. This people reared various domestic animals in large numbers, although bones from hunted animals like deer, buck, boars, and turtles, have also been found.

We observe the traces of that past life with melancholy and impatience, waiting for new research and conclusions.

The search for the lost city of the Vinča culture is hindered by the years that have lapsed, chronic negligence, and poverty, as well as numerous examples of historical adversity: countless battles, wars, and instances of destruction. The average history buff is left to his own resources to gaze in rapture at the mystical Vinča figures, and to somehow attempt to connect



Vinča: hooks made from bones and terracotta figure

³*Copper area near modern city of Majdanpek.*





Celts



with the artistic need of the man of that time who skillfully accentuated details using only his tools and fingers.

It is the entirely subjective view of this book's author that we have yet to grasp the greatest achievements of this culture. The path to new knowledge about the Vinča man and his extraordinary heritage leads, most certainly, through the spiritual experience of his art.



If we were to search for the name of the Neolithic city on the site of the present-day capital of Serbia, we would only be filled with the bitterness of failure and historical oblivion. For that name is unknown, and we will probably never learn it. Singidun (Singidunum), Belgrade's first name to be entered into the annals of history, is significantly younger than the Vinča culture and is ascribed to the Celtic tribe of Scordisci⁴ that ruled this land around 300 BCE. The fearless Celtic tribes that descended from the northwest of Europe to the delta of the Sava in the Danube in the latter decades of the fourth century completely transformed the culture they encountered in the central Danube Basin as well as its ethnic relations.

Worthy of note is the Celts' encounter with Alexander the Great, which took place somewhere on the Danube in 335 BCE, an event which symbolically marks the last era of prehistoric culture on the territory of Serbia.

There is more information about this period, however, in historical sources than in archeological findings and records. Soon after Alexander's death (323 BCE), the Celts invaded

⁴*There are different approaches to the ethnical origin of Scordisci. The most acceptable one among the scientists is that they belong to Celtic tribes, but some consider they are of Thracians, Illyrians or a sort of mixture of those mentioned. Between 56 BCE and 50 BCE Scordisci were defeated by Burebista, the King of Dacia. Tiberius of Rome completely destroyed them in 15 BCE and since then, most probably, they fell under the Roman rule, becoming their soldiers hired for killing.*



Celtic Europe

and conquered the territory of the Podunavlje, and already in 310 BCE clashed with Alexander's general Cassander. The battle took place in the hinterland of the Balkan Peninsula, somewhere on the Haemus Mountain⁵.

In the decades to follow, these cruel and rapacious warriors, probably in several alliances and in tribes now multiethnic, deserted Dardania and Macedonia, only to be defeated and stopped once and for all in central Greece, in the region of Delphi.

As losing a war is often more consequential than victory, this development determined the further fate of the belligerent tribes who would no longer charge the Hellenic south. The absence of central rule was conclusive as the defeated Celtic troops returned along various routes to

⁵*Haemus is the latin name for modern Stara Planina Mt.*

