

INTERIORS OF NEOLITHIC HOUSES AT DRENOVAC

Slaviša Perić^{1*} and Olga Bajčev²

¹ Institute of Archaeology, Serbia, slavisa.r.peric@gmail.com

² Institute of Archaeology, Serbia, arheolga@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

Abstract

This paper presents new results on the research of Late Neolithic houses at the site of Drenovac near Paraćin, central Serbia. We discuss remains of five houses with different degrees of preservation, which directly influenced obtained data and possibilities for interpretation. The extensive excavations enabled the investigation of two houses in their entirety that offered valuable information about the internal organization of space, installations and movable finds. One of the most important results was the identification of two-story structures.

Keywords: *Central Balkans – Late Neolithic – Drenovac – houses – internal organization – two-story houses.*

<https://doi.org/10.53250/stprae15.123-147>

Introduction

Although Late Neolithic settlement sites in the Central Balkans have been researched for more than a century, we are still far from understanding their layout, and especially the interiors of their houses. The available literature informs on the existence of about 700 Vinča settlements in Serbia. This includes some 200 sites in Mačva, where the number of actual settlements was probably overestimated (Trbuhović & Vasiljević 1983) but the total number still exceeds 500. An estimation of the settlement area is available only for 160 sites, which means that for two thirds of the sites there are not even approximate data about the extent of the settlement. The available data indicate that 160 settlements covered an area of approximately 1,200 ha (Chapman 1981; Srejskić 1988). However, only the area of about 27,000 m², *i.e.* 2.7 ha, have been excavated, which makes about 0.2% of the area covered by the settlements with the given approximate

size. And only 17 completely excavated houses with preserved inventory have been published in detail (Bogdanović 1988; Crnobrnja 2012; Glišić 1964; Jovanović & Glišić 1961; Petrović 1992; Petrović 1993; Spasić & Živanović 2015; Tringham et al. 1992; Todorović 1981).

The recent studies on the organization of households and demography of the Vinča settlements have pointed to a great potential of research into Neolithic houses (Tripković 2013). Through application of new theoretical approaches, their interpretive potential was significantly extended (Tripković 2007; Tripković 2013; Porčić 2010; Porčić 2011; Spasić & Živanović 2015). These studies also point to the poor state of research and the scarcity of data. When trying to investigate the interior of Late Neolithic houses two major problems arise: first, most previous excavations were small-scale trench excavations, so that most houses were only partially uncovered; and second, the settlements that were excavated more extensively were not published in detail.

Systematic research of Neolithic houses was one of the main goals of the recent excavation campaigns at Drenovac. In this paper, we are going to present the preliminary results of excavation of five roughly contemporaneous houses of the late Vinča phase. We shall consider their internal spatial organization in terms of division of space, spatial arrangement of internal features and distribution of small finds. Based on a spatial analysis, we shall point to specific activity areas and practices taking place inside the houses. The discussion is based on preliminary observations, while detailed spatial analysis is yet to be done.

The site and history of research

The Neolithic site which is known in the literature as Drenovac is situated at the location of Slatina-Turska česma, about 9 km south of Paraćin, and 5 km east of the right bank of the River Morava (fig. 1). Its larger part (central section and western half) lies in the plain, while the smaller part (northeast and southeast periphery) stretches over the mild slopes of the hills on both sides of the Drenovac Creek (Drenovački potok) and a knoll on its left bank (fig. 2). This is a stratified site where surface finds indicating a Neolithic occupation were registered across the whole area. In a somewhat wider zone of the central part of the site, surface finds and pits dated to the transitional period between the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age were also noted, but a clearly distinguishable cultural layer from this period was not detected. In the southwest part of the site, fragments of Roman bricks were recorded, presumably representing remains of Roman tombs.

The site was registered in 1966, four years after the systematic field reconnaissance during the construction of the Belgrade–Niš Highway. It seems odd that the site was not recorded during the construction of the highway, especially considering that surface finds are quite dense on both sides of the highway. The first large scale excavations were conducted between 1968 and 1971, when 14 trenches of different sizes with a total area of 290 m² were investigated (Vetnić 1974, 125, e.n. 13). In spite of the results of these

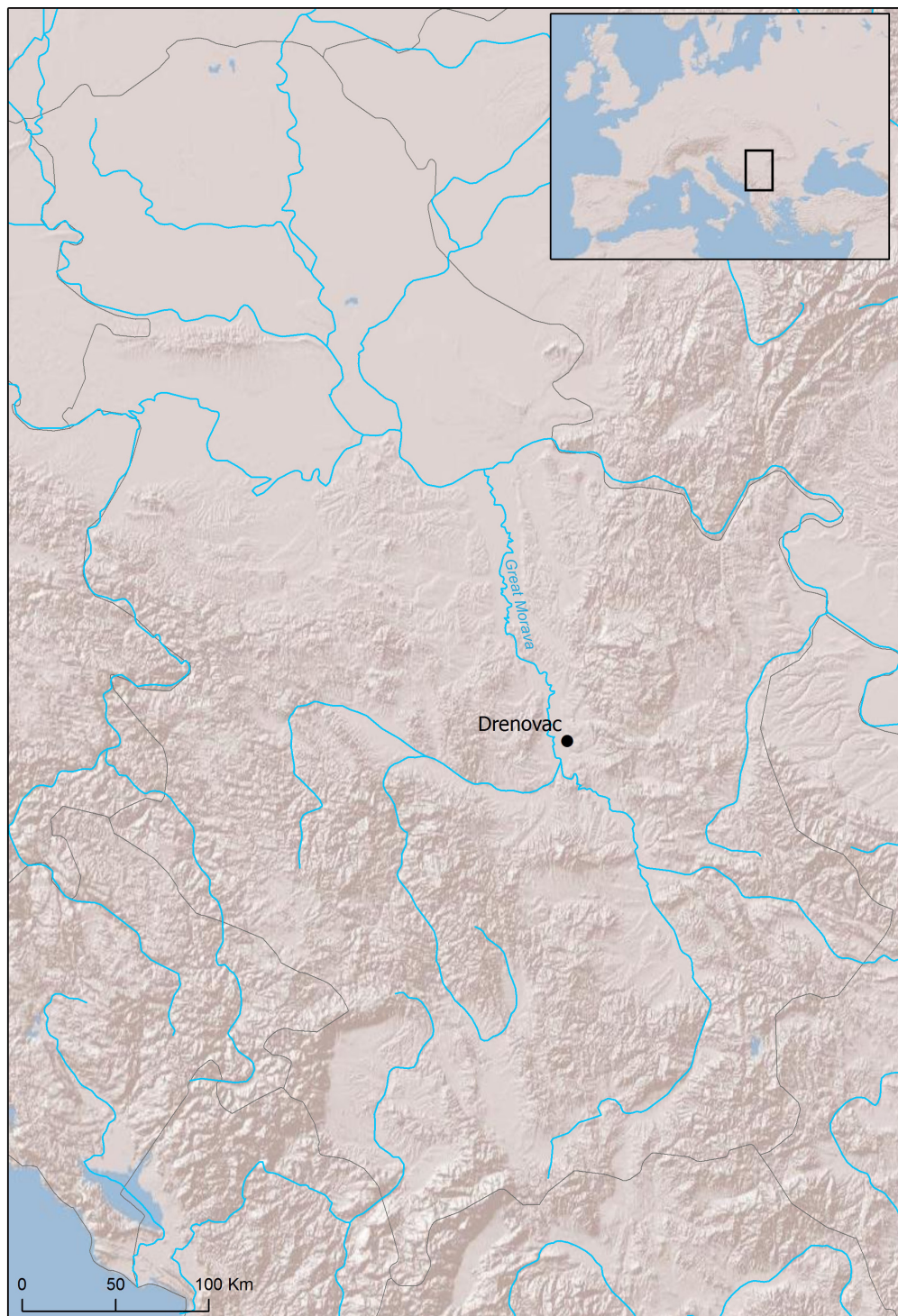


Figure 1. Map showing the location of the site of Slatina-Turska česma at Drenovac.



Figure 2. The site of Slatina-Turska česma at Drenovac, view from the northeast.

excavations and the confirmed significance of the site, another lane of the highway was constructed across Drenovac in the mid-1980s, without any prior rescue excavation.

In 2004, within the framework of the joint project of the Archaeological Institute in Belgrade and the Regional Museum in Paraćin (*Permanent Archaeological Workshop – Middle Morava Valley in Neolithization of Southeast Europe*), first test- and then systematic excavations began in order to enable studying and understanding of the site formation processes, settlement biography, everyday life, spatial and social organization of the settlement and the role it played in the neolithization of the Central Balkans.

The results of the excavations conducted so far have revealed that Drenovac is a stratified site, where, in the vertical stratigraphy of the Neolithic layer, two periods of occupation can be distinguished: an earlier period of the initial proto-Starčevo phase of neolithization of the Central Balkans, and a later period dated to the Late Neolithic – *i.e.* Vinča – culture (Perić 2009). The new excavations couldn't confirm previous beliefs about continuity between the two periods (Vetnić 1990; Perić 2004a) and based on the available absolute dates we assume the existence of an occupational hiatus of c. 700 years. During future research we need to further test assumptions about discontinuity of occupation.

The Late Neolithic settlement

The period of the Late Neolithic features a Vinča culture settlement and a cultural layer of 1 to 4.5 m thickness, in which at least four levels of Vinča houses were uncovered in the central part of the settlement. The results of the recent geomagnetic surveys show

Interiors of Neolithic houses at Drenovac

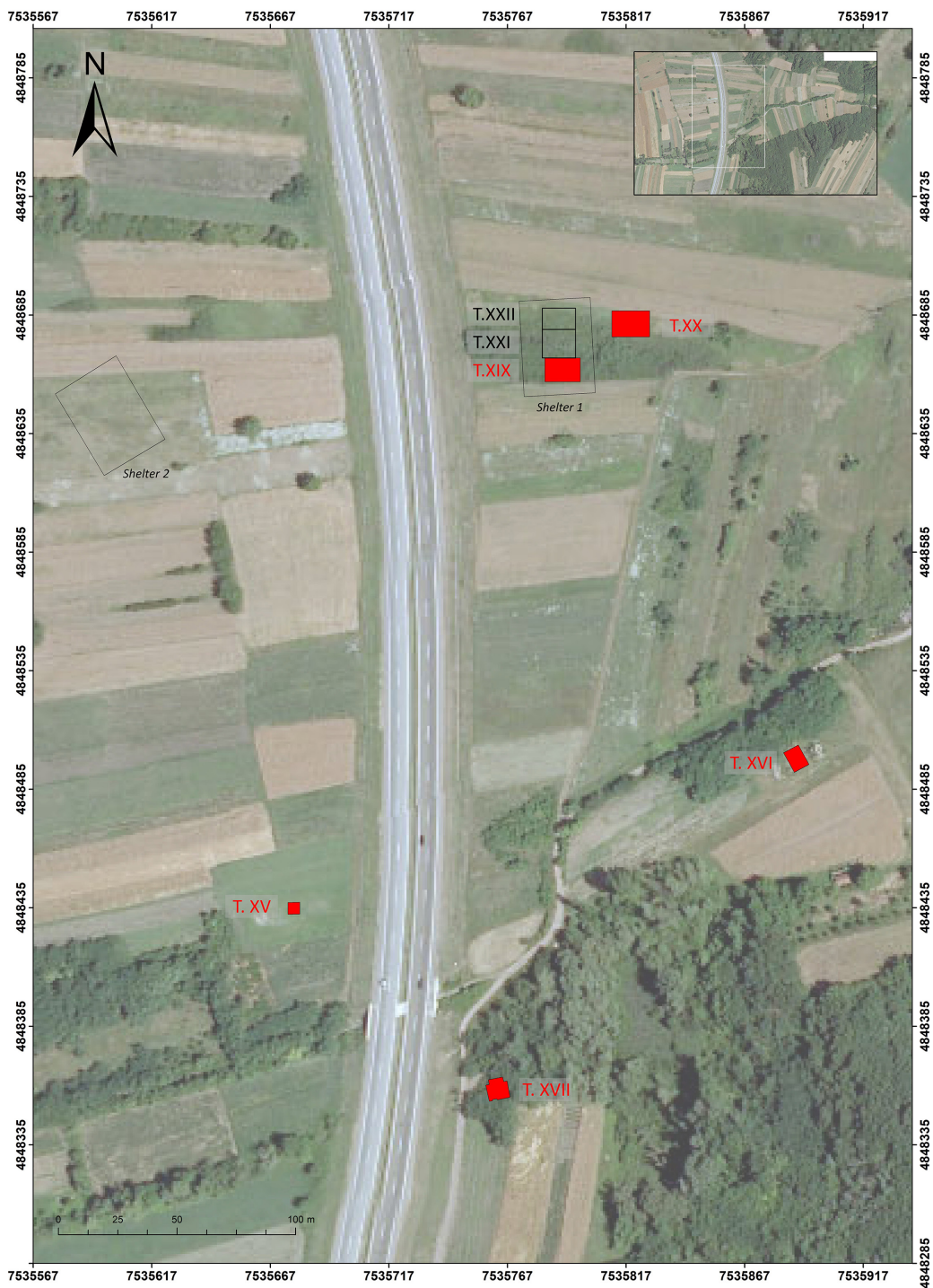


Figure 3. Satellite image showing the location of the trenches mentioned in the text.

that the remains of a Neolithic settlement at Drenovac extend across an area of 40 ha (Perić et al. 2016; Perić 2017; Perić & Miletić 2019), which puts it into the group of large Neolithic settlements in Serbia such as Pločnik, Divostin, Selevac, Medvednjak, Motel Slatina, etc. (Srejšović 1988, 55, 61, 63; Perić 2004; Tringham & Krstić 1990). In the geomagnetic map showing about two thirds of the occupation area, some 600 anomalies can be identified indicating intensive construction activities in the settlement.

Within the settlement as a whole, there is no uniform pattern of distribution, size or orientation of the anomalies, but certain regularities can be observed in specific sections. In these sections, houses have rectangular ground plans, they are densely distributed and organized in rows. The majority of houses follow a southwest–northeast orientation, and some deviate from this pattern and have east-west or north-south orientation. Most structures measure 10-12 by 5 m, although there are both smaller and much larger structures. Three structures stand out as the largest, measuring 16 by 5.5 m. They are situated at different locations, while their orientation follows the prevailing pattern of other structures: southwest – northeast.

Investigated houses

In this paper, we analyze the houses excavated until 2014, which means five houses at different locations in trenches XV, XVI, XVII, XIX and XX (fig. 3). All the houses were burnt and their whole inventories display traces of fire. The intensity of fires varied between houses or different parts of the same house, which affected their preservation. The degree of preservation of the architectural elements and inventories had a bearing on conclusions and assumptions regarding various aspects of social organization.

House 1 is the first Neolithic house investigated during our renewed excavations at Drenovac. Trench XV encompassed its southwest part, which can be clearly seen on the geomagnetic map (Perić et al. 2016, fig. 5). A part of the house interior with destruction layer and ceramic vessels was investigated (fig. 4).



Figure 4. The excavated part of house 1, trench XV.



Figure 5. The excavated part of house 2, trench XVI.

House 2 was investigated in trench XVI. Its eastern half was excavated, with a partly preserved long southeast wall, but the major portion of the house had been destroyed by later pits. Interestingly, this house partly lay above a ditch from an earlier period. Ground subsidence of the ditch backfilling caused the eastern section of the house to sink, which can be clearly seen on the north profile of the trench (fig. 5).

House 3 was investigated in trench XVII. The house destruction layer and the floor edges were damaged to the extent that prevents us from determining reliably the outlines of the structures. The preserved part of the floor measures approximately 7 by 5 m (fig. 6).

House 4, investigated in trench XIX, is the best-preserved house, probably due to a thick colluvium that covered it. The house was a two-story building measuring 12 by 5 m (fig. 7) with exceptionally well-preserved interior that offered unique insights into the Neolithic way of life.

House 5, investigated in trench XX, about 20 m northeast of trench XIX, was much worse preserved, obviously due to the fact that it had not been covered with a colluvium layer and was found at considerably lower depth than house 4 (fig. 8). The house dimensions were determined based on the destruction layer and the outline of the surface where the traces of burning were recorded. The house was also a two-story building, with the ground floor measuring 12 by 5 m.

Division of space

The reliability and quantity of the data regarding the internal space organization in the houses of the latest phase of the Vinča settlement at Drenovac depend directly on the excavated area and the depth at which the house remains were found. The division of space inside the house can be observed vertically, if houses had more than one floor, or horizontally, depending on whether they consisted of one, two, three or more rooms.

Two out of the five mentioned houses were two-story buildings, with the upper floor most probably formed as a gallery with an entrance from, most likely, the western room. Although the detailed delimitation separating the finds from the collapsed ceiling and the finds from the house floor has not been completely performed yet, given the existence of the domed ovens and grinding stones on the upper floors, and the number of ceramic vessels found in each of these houses, we may assume that similar activities were taking place both on the gallery and the ground floor.

Horizontal division of space could only be clearly determined in house 4. The ground floor was divided into three rooms separated by partition walls. The eastern and central rooms had nearly identical dimensions, while the western room was a bit smaller (figs. 7, 9-11). What the organization of space on the upper floor looked like is still beyond our grasp.

In house 5, there was no direct evidence of an internal partition wall, but the existence of two partition walls is assumed based on the arrangement of ovens. Division of space in three rooms is assumed to be similar to that of house 4, having in mind similarities



Figure 6. House 3, trench XVII.

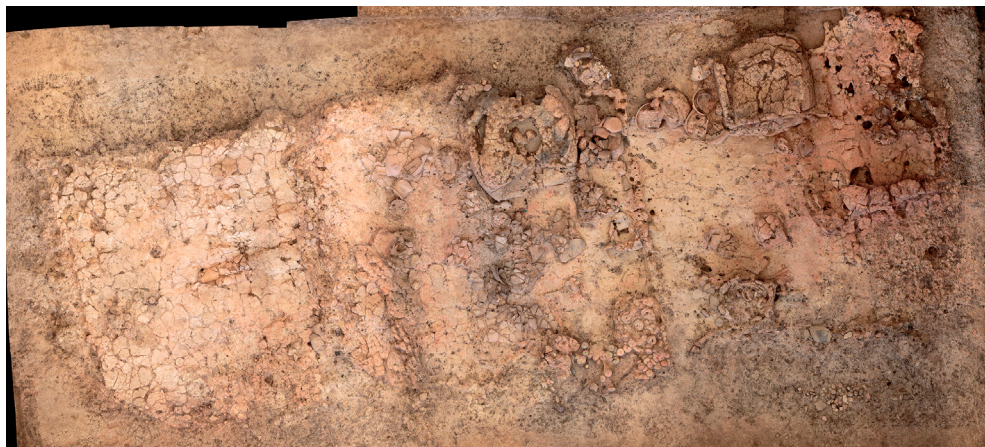


Figure 7. House 4, trench XIX.



Figure 8. House 5, trench XX.

in house sizes and position of ovens (fig. 8).

In house 2, there are clear indications of a partition wall that may have separated the northeast part from the southwest part of the house, *i.e.* the space with grindstones from the space on its southwest side, which, perhaps due to later pits, was almost void of any small finds (fig. 12).

In house 3, no remains of partition walls were noted. Based on the appearance of the interior and distribution of small finds and their relation to the oven, as the only internal structure in the house, one gets the impression of a small house consisting of a single room (fig. 6).

Since only a small section of house 1 was investigated, it is impossible to infer its internal organization.

Internal installations

In the investigated houses at Drenovac, three types of internal installations were recorded: ovens, clay containers and fixed grinding stones.

As the best-preserved structure, house 4 offers the greatest number of preserved internal features. Three ovens were noted here: two along the northern wall of the eastern and central rooms and the third on the upper floor (figs. 13–15a-b). There were no internal installations in the western room. Two domed ovens on the ground floor were approximately the same size. They differed from each other as the oven in the eastern room had two fixed clay receptacles: one of irregular circular shape was attached to its southwest corner, and the other was narrow and shallow, placed along the eastern edge of the oven. On the western side of the oven, a grinding stone with a clay receptacle was found. The grinding stone was inside the receptacle but turned upside down. A hand stone was found next to the grinding stone (fig. 13).

The third oven was on the upper floor above the eastern room and since it had collapsed and consequently suffered extensive damage, its shape or dimensions could hardly be reliably determined. Nevertheless, judging from the preserved parts, it probably had approximately the same dimensions as the ovens on the ground floor (fig. 15a-b).

Along the south wall of the eastern room, there was a clay container with two ceramic vessels stacked in one another. It may have been used for storing pottery designed for specific content or purpose (fig. 16).

House 5 was considerably less preserved than house 4. With no direct evidence of the partition walls it is difficult to define the spatial affiliation of internal structures. The remains of four ovens were noted in the house – three on the ground floor and one on the upper floor (fig. 17). Judging by the arrangement of ovens on the ground floor, we assume that this house had three rooms with one oven in each room. The ovens in the western and central room were found along the northern wall (figs. 18 and 19). In the eastern part, the remains of two ovens were noted, one of them along the southern wall (fig. 20), and the other one almost in the central part of the room (fig. 21). As at least four fragmented



Figure 9. House 4, eastern room. View from the south.



Figure 10. House 4, central room. View from the south.



Figure 11. House 4, western room. View from the south.

pithoi (fig. 22a-b) were noted below the remains of the oven in the central part (fig. 21), it was concluded that this oven must have stood on the upper floor but collapsed on the pithoi when the house was burnt.

In house 2, the remains of only one oven were found. Since they were displaced by later digging to a considerable extent, it was not possible to determine its shape or dimensions. The remains of the oven were located in the northwest half of the room (fig. 23).

Near the oven, in the area close to the southeast wall of the house, there were two fixed grinding stones. One of them was rectangular in shape and lay inside the clay receptacle (fig. 24) and was probably used for grinding cereals. The other one, which was also fixed in a specially-prepared foundation, was trapezoid in shape, with shallow depressions in the middle, so it seems to have been used as a mortar (fig. 25). It lay in the corner between the southeast wall and a partition wall. A little bit further from the southeast wall of the house, approximately at the equal distance from both grinding stones, was the third grinding stone. It was fragmented, due to the fire in which the house was burnt, and it was impossible to determine whether it was fixed or freestanding on the house floor (fig. 26). As we can see, at least two types of grinding stones, probably used for different activities, were grouped within the small area around the oven. When the area around the oven was excavated, a number of circular surfaces were noted, in which no



Figure 12. House 2, with remains of a partition wall and an oven. View from the northwest.



Figure 13.
House 4: an oven
in the eastern
room.



Figure 14.
House 4: an oven
in the central
room.

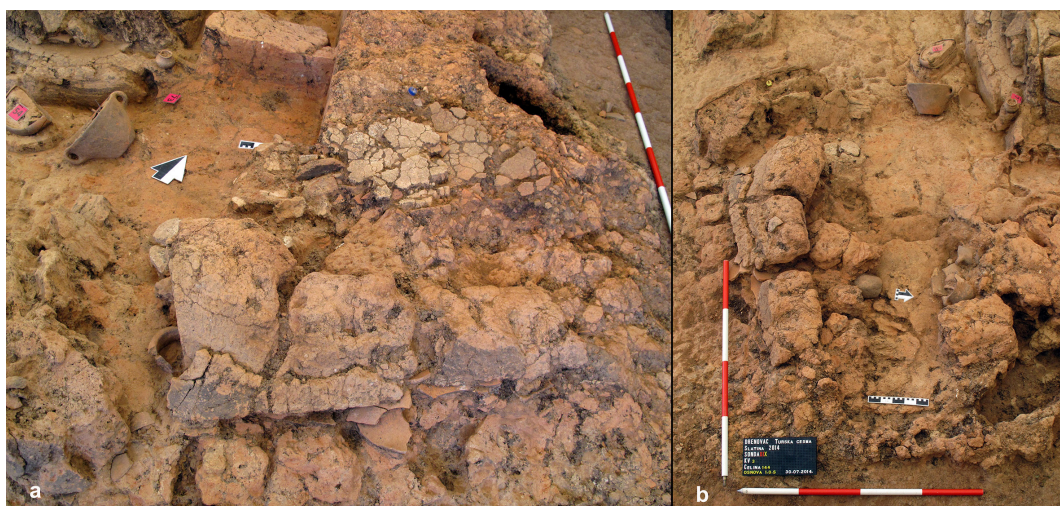


Figure 15a-b. *House 4: remains of the oven in the eastern room that collapsed from the upper floor.*



Figure 16. House 4: clay bin with pottery vessels in the central room.

fragments of daub were found. Thus, it appears that larger ceramic vessels may have stood there, perhaps being used for storing grains. In any case, these three grinding stones and the oven, all in one room, indicate that there was a room in this house with a complex of different features for food preparation – most probably for drying and grinding of cereals.

In house 3, one fairly badly damaged oven was found, with only external walls preserved, but without floor or dome (figs. 6 and 27). The preserved parts of the oven display a remarkable similarity to the remains of the ovens in the eastern room of house 4, which we have already noted stood on the upper floor (fig. 15a-b). As the remains of the oven were located in the northern section of the structure, it is likely that the oven had leaned against the northern wall of the house (fig. 6). With this part of the house badly damaged, it is difficult to presume specific activities taking place around the oven. However, as this was most probably a single-room house, and taking into consideration the small finds, this oven seems to have served both for heating and food preparation.

There were no immovable features in the uncovered part of house 1.

Small finds

(a) Pottery

As for the spatial distribution of the small finds inside houses, it should be noted that the pottery was the most frequent and most indicative (fig. 28). The first and major impression one gets is that all the pottery from the houses, whole or fragmented vessels, were secondarily burnt. Most vessels were broken with the fragments found in articulated or slightly disturbed positions, so most of them can be reliably reconstructed. Various types of vessels were found in each house - miniature and small vessels, vessels for preparation,



*Figure 17. House 5:
position of ovens.*



Figure 18. House 5: oven 3.



Figure 19. House 5: oven 2.



Figure 20. House 5: oven 4.



Figure 21. House 5: oven 1.

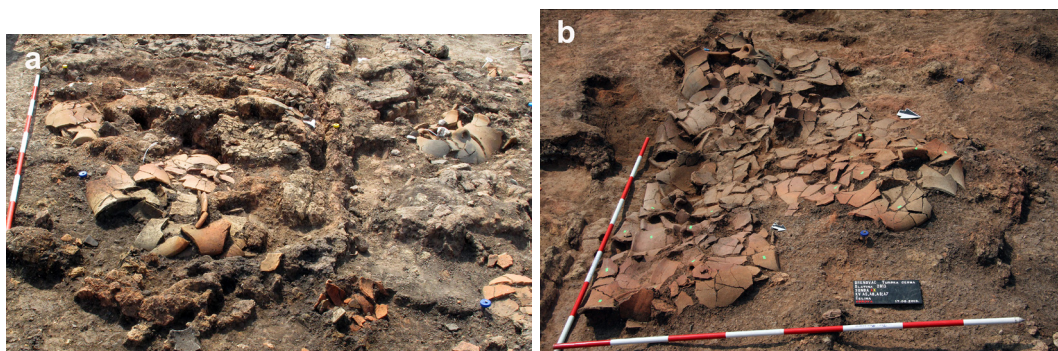


Figure 22a-b. House 5: pithoi under oven 1.

consumption and storage of food. The number of vessels in individual houses differs: the largest number was found in house 4 – 84, in house 5 – 54, in house 2 – 56, in house 1 – 27, in house 2 – only 2. Clearly, the number of vessels varies from one house to another, but it is obvious that the houses had large pottery assemblages – a phenomenon also noted in some other Vinča settlements such as Divostin (McPherron & Srejović 1988), Banjica (Todorović & Cermanović 1961), etc. (Porčić 2012). Nevertheless, the number of ceramic vessels, three ovens and other inventory of house 4, for the time being, present a unique find among the Vinča houses in Serbia. This large quantity of pottery could be related to the fact that the houses had two floors, and perhaps was a more complex household.

The situation in house 2 does not follow the stated pattern. In this house, fragments of only two ceramic vessels were found lying in the close proximity to a trapezoid mortar. These vessels displayed traces of intensive secondary burning and deformation. In the rest of the house only a few ceramic weights were found. Given the striking difference in content and quantity of the inventory, the assumption is that either the houses were abandoned under different circumstances or the inventory of house 3 was damaged due to subsequent digging.



Figure 23. House 2: remains of an oven.



Figure 24. House 2: grindstone with remains of a receptacle.



Figure 25. House 2: mortar.



Figure 26. House 2: central grindstone that cracked due to the high temperature.

Distribution of pottery across the house floors indicates some activity areas. In house 4, pottery was present in all three rooms, although much less in the western room without an oven. Among the represented types of vessels in this room, only an elongated cylindrical ceramic form open at both ends, found in the central part of the room, stands apart (fig. 11). For the time being, its purpose and function in this room remain unclear. We didn't observe any clustering of the vessels of the same type, but the vessels of various types and dimensions were concentrated around both ovens (figs. 13, 14, 29, and 30). This situation implies that the rooms with ovens, and especially the space directly surrounding the ovens, were designed and used for intensive activities of preparing and storing food.

In house 5, the vessels were uniformly distributed across the entire house area. Only around oven 2 was a higher concentration of vessels of different types registered (fig. 31). In this house, grouping of the same type of vessels was noted. In the western part of the house, 14 shallow bowls with inverted rims were found (fig. 32). Given their shape and dimensions, this area could be defined as the place for storing vessels for food consumption. In the presumed eastern room at least four pithoi were detected (fig. 22a-b) indicating specialized area for storing food supplies.

In house 3, grouping of shallow bowls with inverted rims around the oven was noted (fig. 33). Other vessels were equally distributed across the whole house. In this



Figure 27. House 3: remains of an oven.



Figure 28. House 3: ceramic vessels found in the house.



Figure 29. House 4: ceramic vessels next to the oven in the eastern room.



Figure 30. House 4: ceramic vessels next to the oven in the central room.

house, an unusual vessel was found, with three spouts shaped as smaller versions of the basic – big vessel (fig. 34). Although there are no analogies within the Vinča culture or the neighboring later Neolithic cultures, it is absolutely clear that some kind of liquid must have been kept in it. Most probably, the vessel was used in a specific ritual involving pouring, serving or sharing the liquid. It was found in the central part next to the other close-shaped vessels, which can also indicate storing and serving of liquid (fig. 35).

In house 1, 27 vessels were found in a small excavated section of the house, but it was impossible to discern any pattern of spatial distribution (fig. 4).

(b) Other small finds

In house 4, two groups of loom weights were registered in different rooms – one in the central room and the other one in the western room (figs. 36 and 37). Both groups lay close to the south wall. These two groups of weights indicate the possible existence of



Figure 31. House 5: ceramic vessels around oven 2.



Figure 32. House 5: concentration of ceramic vessels in the western section of the house.

two looms for weaving, although the weights in the central room are likely to have fallen from the first floor. In the central room, a small clay table (fig. 38) was found along with the weights. This spatial connection between the small tables and weights was identified at Divostin (Bogdanović 1988), which may indicate a certain connection between these artefacts within a specific activity. Another three small tables were found in the central room. Two of them lay in the close proximity of the oven, so they can be associated with the food preparation activities or food consumption (fig. 38). The possibility that one of these three tables had come from the upper floor, especially the one behind the oven, cannot be ruled out. One table was found in house 3, but not near the oven (fig. 39). Among the inventory of house 4 one structure attracts special attention because of its unusual form. It is located in the central room, along the eastern partition wall, and it is badly damaged. It may represent model of the house or oven (fig. 40).

The precise location of other small finds (stone and bone tools) was recorded, but a detailed spatial analysis to determine patterns indicating specific activity areas has not been performed yet. We did observe one situation which may indicate the pattern to be followed. In house 4 a group of caprine astragali and metapodials was found near oven 2 (fig. 41). Some bones had perforated and burnished surfaces, and some did not have any traces of processing or use. A similar situation was noted in a house excavated after 2013, when the same types of bones were also found near the oven. At the moment, we do not have relevant data which may enable us to make specific assumptions, but, as already said, these finds do attract attention and should not be neglected in the future research.

An absence of figurines and altars in the houses was noticed even during the excavation as compared to other zones of the site and other contexts, such as ditch backfill, where a great number of fragments of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines and various altars were found. Only in house 3, one whole anthropomorphic figurine (fig. 42) and one altar with zoomorphic protomes, which appears as if it had never been used



Figure 33. House 3: reconstructed ceramic vessels that were found next to the oven.



Figure 34. House 3: ceramic vessels in the central part of the house.



Figure 35. House 3: ceramic vessel with three poring parts.



Figure 36. House 4: ceramic weights in the central room.



Figure 37. House 4: ceramic weights from the western room.



Figure 38. House 4: small clay tables in the central room.

(fig. 43), was found. Since figurines and altars were extremely rare in these houses, the issue of the house abandonment arises as to whether all objects of special purposes had been taken out and those for everyday use left inside when the house was abandoned.

Final considerations

One aim of this paper was to illustrate how different degrees of preservation, and especially the different extent of excavation, may lead to different possibilities for analyses and interpretation. In other words, we aimed to answer what kind of data can be obtained when a small part of a house is excavated, as is the case of house 1, and what amount and quality of data can be obtained with large scale excavations, especially when excavations are planned in accordance with geophysical survey and the whole structures are excavated.

The other aim was to examine the internal structure of Neolithic dwellings in terms of organization and use of domestic space. One of the main findings is direct evidence of two-story houses. Existence of two-story houses in Vinča settlements has been proposed for a few other sites such as Opovo, Stubline and Vinča. The presence of two-storey



Figure 39. House 3: small clay table in the southeast section of the house.



Figure 40. House 4: broken model of a house or oven.



Figure 41. House 4: group of astragali in the central room



*Figure 42. House 3:
anthropomorphic figurine.*



*Figure 43. House 3:
ceramic altar with
zoomorphic protomes.*

houses, in which upper floors with oven were probably used for similar activities as the ground floor, and not just for storage, raises additional questions about the use of space and household size and organization.

The interior arrangement of houses shows some degree of similarity, such as the position of the oven along the northern wall. Repeated in three houses, this pattern may indicate the existence of specific rules for the internal space design. The existence of elaborated zones for preparation and storage of food is hypothesized on the basis of the ovens surrounded by associated structures for food processing and cooking: grinding stones and vessels of various types and sizes. The ovens themselves were sometimes

elaborated by additional elements, which can be associated with preparation of food. The specialized area for food storage is identified in one house based on the group of pithoi in the eastern room. The group of shallow bowls in house 5 can indicate the zone of food consumption or vessel storage.

The repetition of the same activity in different rooms was observed in house 4. Food preparation areas were recognized in the eastern and central room (and presumably on the upper floor) and weaving in the western room and probably on the upper floor. A similar situation with one oven in each room and on the upper floor is hypothesized for house 5. These patterns may be indicative of division of work and social organization of the household and should receive more consideration.

Another finding adds new perspective to organization of household and domestic activities. In trench XX, in the vicinity of house 5, a part of a smaller structure was excavated (Perić & Perić 2014). With its circular shape and small size, it deviates from the pattern of the standard houses. Judging from the presence of grinding stones and ceramic vessels, this structure can be interpreted as an auxiliary structure, probably used for food preparation.

This brief and generally preliminary insight into the internal organization of the Neolithic houses at Drenovac opens the possibilities for new interpretations regarding the Neolithic communities in the settlements of Vinča culture, their way of life and their perception and use of domestic space. These preliminary results indicate a great potential for more meticulous research into the household organization and everyday practices. A detailed analysis of the artefacts and their spatial distribution will contribute to further understanding of these issues, but they will also raise a number of new questions. Additional thorough study of the outside space surrounding these houses can significantly add to our interpretation of the organization of life in a household, and especially in a settlement as a whole.

Acknowledgements: This paper is a result of the project “Archaeology in Serbia: cultural identity, integration factors, technological processes and the role of the Central Balkans in the development of European prehistory” (OI 177020) funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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