



## THE INTERPRETATION OF THE KARANOVO STAMP FROM BULGARIA AND META-NARRATIVES OF MODERNITY

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**Abstract** - The Interpretation of the Karanovo Stamp from Bulgaria and Meta-narratives of Modernity

This paper shows how an underlying meta-narrative of the first writing system in Europe preempts scientific argument by making shifts in the authenticity of past human behaviour (global and regional significance transgresses and overwhelms local particularities) look natural, as in the necessity to situate the particular in wider (European) contexts. This interpretational scheme undermines what is unique in archeology, its reflexivity, which gives archeologists and their public sufficient authority for determining in their own way the contexts of their knowledge production. The presentation ends by reflecting on the limits of meta-narratives in returning relevance to archeological interpretations of the first writing system that render them plausible.

**Riassunto** - L'interpretazione del sigillo di Karanovo (Bulgaria) e la meta-narrativa delle modernità

L'articolo mostra come una precisazione meta-narrativa del primo sistema di scrittura in Europa anticipi l'argomento scientifico creando uno spostamento nell'autenticità del comportamento umano del passato (significati globali e regionali trasgrediscono e travolgono le particolarità locali) che appare naturale, come nella necessità di situare il particolare in un più ampi contesti (Europeo). Questo schema interpretativo mina ciò che è unico in archeologia, la propria riflessività, la quale da agli archeologi e al loro pubblico sufficiente autorità per determinare nei propri modi il contesto per la loro produzione di conoscenza. La presentazione finisce per riflettere sui limiti della meta-narrativa che ritorna rilevante per le interpretazioni archeologiche del primo sistema di scrittura e che li rende plausibili.

**Résumé** - L'interprétation du sceau de Karanovo, en Bulgarie, et les méta-narrations de la Modernité.

Cette intervention montre comment une méta-narrations sous-jacente du « premier système d'écriture en Europe » anticipe le débat scientifique en changeant l'authenticité du comportement humain passé (le sens global et régional dépasse et franchit les limites des particularités locales), qui devient naturel dans la nécessité de placer le particulier dans des contextes plus vastes (l'Europe). Ce type d'interprétation sape le caractère unique de l'archéologie : sa réflexivité, qui donne aux archéologues et à leur public une autorité suffisante pour déterminer en autonomie les contextes de la connaissance qu'ils produisent. L'intervention se termine avec une réflexion sur les limites des méta-narrations en rendant pertinence aux interprétations archéologiques du « premier système d'écriture » qui les rend plausibles.

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### INTRODUCTION

The interpretative potential of prehistoric stamps or seals appears to be high enough to presuppose a straightforward explanation of their individual and social functions. Such an interpretation, however, only inhibits a number of questions concerning the cognitive, contemplative and self-actualising behaviour of scholars and their public. These abstract – but relevant to the historical explanatory schemata – issues establish a theoretical discourse in which the most important question is how to break the vicious circle of constant attempts by the authoritative and scientific communities to translate the meanings of the past into modern terms. For this reason the analysis of the meta-narratives of modernity related to explanations of the past reveals the underlying faults of such an approach. It is important to ask how people conceptualise the modern world and how they use these concepts to explain past human behaviour. At a higher level of generalisation the search for universal validity of explanations concerns issues such as identity, culture vs. locality, shifts in understand-

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ding authenticity of historical monuments and artefacts and the conceptualisation of personhood. At a cognitive level, the ways people produce historical knowledge have to be examined, involving taking into account their cognitive biases, the relation between the authors of knowledge and their public as well as how the popular quest for knowledge modifies the dominant explanations of historical events. This wider theoretical background makes it possible to present in greater detail the problematic interpretation of prehistoric notation systems as the first writing system in Europe.

#### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The question of how modern is modern world provokes a range of reflections on the origins of modern society. These reflections, in turn, constitute historical knowledge as a meta-explanatory cognitive mechanism with two particularities. The first one relates popular ways of conceptualisation and response to general issues of the modern world. The second one concerns issues of identification of historical knowledge with public communicative conventions. The first of these particularities has the property to provoke ready-made explanations suitable for any situation. For example, popular understandings envisage technologies to come to the rescue of large populations and draw them out of poverty and out of permanent political, economic, educational and cultural crises. As a consequence the individual and collective identities react to this conceptual framework in two opposing manners: either they melt down in order to smooth differences and make an appearance of a global problem of poverty, education, etc, or they adopt a high profile and thus leave space for local violent social actions. Quite the opposite, the modern scientific discourse characterises modernity with increasing deindustrialisation and intensifying identity politics (Giddens 1990: 55; Appadurai 1996). Among these general theoretical premises the epistemological issues concerning the disconnection between culture and locality are of particular interest to archeological interpretations because they make any archeological claim of discovering the authentic origins of particular human behaviour from the past suspect. While analyses in this theoretical direction seem both contestable and fruitful, the analytical use of cultures as mere strategies of exclusion and empowerment is an oversimplification that raises suspicions of scholars and the public (Sahlins 1993). In each case, however, where the theoretical approach involves ascribing without analysis modern features of a culture to past societies makes any public reaction to a given archeological issue automatic, because the public responds by the production of conflict-ridden concepts inspired by what people know better, that is, the meta-narratives of modernity. But the factor that provides the major contribution to this automatic public response to problematic historical interpretations lies in the ways modern media affect personal and public opinions. They create a meeting ground where specialists and the wider audience make publicly visible the otherwise intimate act of discovering authentic signs of modernity in the remote past. This act of revealing deep and strong emotions intertwined with rational arguments underpins the easy way with which specialists and the public make one-to-one mapping of modern concepts on to past symbols. The process is facilitated by the cognitive bias known as the historical fallacy: 'one assumes that decision makers of the past viewed events from the same perspective and having the same information as those subsequently analysing the decision' (Wikipedia). To this disadvantage can be added another that pertains to the second particularity (mentioned above) of the meta-explanatory cognitive mechanism. Historical knowledge as it is formed by state institutions identifies itself in a different manner in public communication conventions. Unlike other knowledge domains it stays at a distance from literature, religion and art, that are based on mutual knowledge and experience. These domains form a separate field of mutual knowledge where the author's relation to the public is defined by terms of negotiation. Thus these knowledge domains create numerous and lasting images and notions about humans as persons and collectivities that reveal various aspects of their lives. Contrary to this historical knowledge confines itself to the intimacy of a personal experience and the constant pressure from outside (authoritative explanatory projections) makes it difficult to grasp and memorise. For these reasons historical knowledge remains superficial in its experiential and logical grounds. This situation suits authoritative interpretations that are publicly imposed, but leaves an unbalanced state of individual and collective drive to know more about the past, which may be defined by Foucault's notion of freedom from the authorities 'will to know' (Foucault 1976). It is exactly this lack of balance between the personal quest for knowledge and the authoritative production of knowledge where the dominant views of modernity strongly influence and create the possibility that popular interpretations of contested histories may swing from one extreme to the other. In this situation the pyramid of production of historical knowledge is turned



upside down and naturalises the approaches of subjects' quest for knowledge that only seem to come from 'the movement of signification that adds something ... but this addition is floating' (Derrida 1978: 365). In fact, it constitutes a permanent drive of scholars and public towards truth, presence and origin that measure up all aspects of modern life as well-known examples taken from the past. What is important in this type of assessment of the past through the present is not history, nor reality (the referent), but the system of differential relations among signs (the difference of one sign from all the other signs). However, the importance of historical reasoning through contextualising the signs always remains blurred by the conventional ways of production of historical knowledge. As the latter is a powerful sign-producing knowledge domain, it possesses the quality of a constant renewal of ambiguity in popular understanding of history, by reinforcing the failure of scholars and their public to achieve a sufficient measure of authority in outlining conceptual frameworks of the proper contexts necessary for understanding past human behaviour.

#### CONCEPTUALISING THE PAST: MODERN CONSTITUTION OF PERSONHOOD

The meta-narratives of modernity define conditions that turn self-identity into a central object in personal understanding and practice. The individual is not a consequence of modernity but an analytical construct of timeless validity (Giddens 1991). In other words all the identification practices and analyses of the modern world start and end with the concepts defining the individual. On these premises the search for the signs of modernity in the remote past adopts the same understanding as that for analysing modern life, commercial markets, etc. Individuals from the past and the objects associated with them have to possess the same meanings and values as those of modern individuals. This naturalises any interpretation that directly maps on to past societies the modern identification practices that are mostly confined to individual responses to global processes: commercialisation, globalisation, and the exclusion and empowerment of nations, ethnicities, religious groups, etc. Additionally, these practices of self-identification have their own particularities of categorisation and conceptualisation based on various technological artefacts and communicative tools (Enfield 2005). The list of these particularities includes autonomy (humans possess self-generating identity), sense-making (generating identity through interactions with the environment), emergence (new identity emerges out of an autonomous and unmediated dynamical process that enables a person to detect, identify and act upon the environment), embodiment (all actions are temporally and spatially embedded), experience (developing various skills, knowledge, etc). On the other hand, these communicative tools help us to better understand the anthropological understanding of individual persons (Strathern 1988). Apart from autonomy, the other tools, generating or emergence of identity through embodiment and experience, constitute a person as both dividual and individual. This notion remains central to modernity conceptually and as the locus of the forms of desire that define the modern. Of particular interest to archeological interpretations is that such a division of individuality internalises social relationships by their embodiment in the person. The person becomes a composite locus of others' contributions. A natural corollary is that human beings are not only loci of relationships. Material objects may be similarly personified. Thus the notion of the individual becomes important for detecting the signs of modernity in the remote past (e.g. the signs of self-identity are left on a clay stamp by a first farmer using the first writing system). The question that this kind of logical reasoning raises is how to distinguish technological innovations and disadvantages that, in turn, predefine specialists' judgements for classifying into separate groups the technologically advanced and backward societies in the past. In most archeological interpretations where social relationships are imagined as external to the person the distinction presented above and the distinctions between nature and culture face a perplexing collapse. For example, the technological innovations have the self-understanding quality of breaking through the constraints imposed by nature. This judgement is based on the triangular relationship established between natural constraints, technological innovation and the improvement of social practices. Thus the visible intensification of subsistence practices from the Copper Age, including the widespread distribution of *Triticum aestivum/durum* (bread and hard wheat) in the Balkans, is taken as a sign of modernity (criticism of finding this type of wheat is provided by Popova 2009: 93). This sign has to be coupled with other signs that together form the first European civilisation, which as a popular notion compensates for the otherwise disadvantaged modern nations from southeastern Europe. In this way the remote past becomes part of the legitimate constitution of an imagined modernity. The attractiveness of interpreting any signs from the past from the standpoint of this imagined modernity is so great

that it triggers automatic interpretations that go far beyond any plausible meaning of the symbolic behaviour of the past. The motifs on the *pintadera* from the Karanovo tell, Bulgaria provide fertile ground for this kind of understanding the past (Figures 1 and 2). A leading role has been ascribed to these motifs and they are considered to represent the first writing system of the 'first European civilization' (Mikov et al. 1969). This modern interpretation of prehistoric signs automatically draws a dividing line between civilised and primitive populations, between technologically advanced and disadvantaged societies, and between culturally (politically) superior communities and subjugated (marginalised) groups. These oppositions do not bear that much value and meaning for past societies but represent a way of conceptualising the modern world.

Rather different is the interpretation (decoding) of the meaning of decorations made on prehistoric figurines from the Copper Age in Bulgaria by P. Biehl (1996). His approach recognises the rule-based creativity of prehistoric agents that realise their communication strategies of identification with greater prestige and power through decoration, gender relations, gesture, masks, breaking patterns. In his analysis, however, he leaves a neutral social space in which particular aggrandisers left the traces of their decisions on an empty slate: cultures remain relatively closed time-space formations with firm boundaries established between them. This understanding of the past also reflects the rationality of modern thinking, where societies, markets and producers are segmented. It is exactly this fragmentation of society that permits corporate agents to adopt strategies of maximising their profits from segments of otherwise global markets.

#### COPPER AGE PINTADERAS: BETWEEN COMMODIFICATION AND RITUAL

In some areas prehistoric stamps received the name *pintaderas*, which suggests a modern understanding of the function of these artefacts. They are imagined to act as seals that mark individual commercial relationships in prehistory. These considerations, however, do not match archeological evidence. If they were true the working hypothesis that may be formulated out of them is that in the Copper Age certain agents would have been able to accumulate the most precious artefacts as signs of personal wealth and social status. At first glance, these considerations seem true, because in the richest graves in the Varna I and Varna II necropolises on the Black Sea coast of northern Bulgaria rare, exotic, and hard to obtain materials are associated with finely made objects crafted out of them. For example, recent investigations of the distribution of Copper Age axeheads from Europe made of jadeitite with a single provenance of the Ligurian Alps, Italy showed the presence of such axes in the richest graves in Varna I and II necropolises. The richest grave 43 from Varna I has two such axes, grave 4 (Varna I; very rich) has one, and the oldest and one of the richest graves – grave 3 from Varna II – has two axes. Two other graves from Varna I, 51 and 153, have one axe each, while grave 1 from Varna II has two axes. These last graves are of medium richness (Pétrequin et al. in press). The artefacts associated with these axeheads are also created by exotic and hard-to-work materials from far away. These are axes, awls, bracelets, and rings made of copper and spondylus. They are accompanied by long blades and super-blades made out of high-quality flints and richly decorated ceramic vessels. All these mean that the rare, exotic and distant started to define social relationships in the Copper Age societies. The process of achieving greater prestige, power and personal wealth goes through the personal exhibition of signs that mark aspirations for establishing greater control over manufacturing tools through high temperatures, or such items that symbolise warfare and the exchange of exotic materials and special artefacts over long distances. However, the number of these artefacts relative to the number of the other artefacts in the archeological record is small. They only mark the beginning of a long process of transformation of basic egalitarian values of these communities that were deeply rooted in home-based ritual practices. Such rare and exotic artefacts do not provide sufficient ground to consider the exchange patterns in the Copper Age to be comparable with the firmly established and formalised commercial relations known from the first urbanised centres with a well-defined social hierarchy and writing systems.

#### PINTADERA MOTIFS

The motifs incised on the stamp from Karanovo are typical of most of the *pintaderas* from the Neolithic and Copper Ages in the Balkans. These are straight lines that often meet each other at varying angles and form different geometrical shapes. On the Karanovo stamp, there are two major straight lines: the one divides the entire space into two equal parts while the other consists only of the radius that divides the right half into two almost equal sections. Each of these divisions is full of separate mo-



tifs that may be interpreted as zigzags, meanders, trapezes, triangles, parallel lines, etc. (Figure 1). On the other *pintaderas* found in the Balkans some additional motifs can be added, such as spirals, spirals-meanders and crosses (Todorova and Vajsov 1993: 234). The same or similar signs have been identified on other artefacts, such as figurines (Biehl 1996), clay plates and altars. From the interpretational point of view these signs constitute a finite notation system of about 30 signs typical of the early farming societies in the Balkans. If this notation system had been founded on strict formal rules that govern descriptions of meanings and values, then in the course of its long evolution of more than 2,000 years, it would have shown a clear diachronic evolution. This means that some of the signs would have been gradually replaced by new signs. Similar studies have been carried out, but they have not found any seriation sequence among these signs (Todorova and Vajsov 1993: 232, fig. 228).

The nested appearance of this notation system on various archeological objects contradicts the rather positivist vision of an ever increasing social complexity based on the technological improvement of agriculture, metallurgy, flint-knapping technologies and pottery production. Also this seems not a result of a rule-based creativity governed by fixed grammar-based sequences of signs. A question arises as to what else these notations might mean. One of the possible approaches may be to look for the cognitive resources behind notations within a ritualised social environment of enchantment and the embodiment of various practices that are increasingly penetrated by the rationales of the enchainment of social actors through the exchange of exotic valuables and through aspirations for imposing control over knowledge-based production practices. These changes are associated with the radical transformation of learning practices. Simple mimicking of skills and ritualised knowledge are not enough for practising metallurgy and learning about various qualities of rocks and ore or understanding the movement of celestial bodies. An increasing participation of memory and the rationalisation of information penetrated the social realm through the making visible marks on surfaces that hold that information for a long time. Clay is an excellent material which as a soft and smooth slate provides a ground for notations. When processed in a proper manner it preserves the marks through and beyond the lifecycles of the owners of these artefacts. Thus the marked clay objects as well as the metal and hard stone ones became the most valuable objects, because, as mnemonic devices, they help people to remember and pass on information. Moreover, these objects possess the quality of linearising and liberating time that cuts through the cyclical concept of time in prehistoric societies. This otherwise unnoticed transformation of learning practices seems to be the most powerful tool for social change in prehistoric communities. Notational marks come to hand for the fulfilment of this desire for change in personal status. They mark the notation of knowledge and quality in space in terms of the topography of traces (Derrida 1978: 251–8).

These underlying changes become visible in the available archeological record. The most noticeable one is the remarkable typological diversity of artefacts and various objects. All of them were made by an increasing range of raw materials. This process shows the growing knowledge about vast geographic regions, about the qualities of various rocks, flints, ore and the production of metals. But despite the appearance of new metals the great majority of artefacts continue to be made of traditional materials. Although the new metals and the new secondary animal products promoted to a greater extent the public definition of prestige, the accumulation of valuables and the outlining of gender identities, these practices remained vague possibilities for acquiring higher social status. In this context the Karanovo stamp fails to represent the new type of relationship between persons and objects that became established as social practice much later. The prehistoric stamps represent an almost invisible alteration in the archeological record of the way a person was conceptualised by transforming the dividual (enchained relationships among persons and objects) into the individual personality (some objects became devoid of their intimate relations with their owner). While in traditional, enchained relationships the objects remain inalienable, the new relations visible in the existing notation system leave room for making objects alienable. The data from this study, however, do not provide sufficient evidence for an emerging market system under the control of a fixed social hierarchy. There is little evidence for breaking down the village- and home-based ritual practices that continued to maintain community values and meanings. The existing notation system served and maintained these relationships. Objects like the stamp from Karanovo and the other *pintaderas* remained the precursor of a market system within an urbanised and socially stratified society that did not happen until the late Bronze Age.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present paper addresses the way in which a particular theoretical orientation – the meta-narratives of modernity and the concepts associated with it – is tending to replace genuine theoretical enquiry grounded in archeological research. Thus archeological interpretations take up the guise of self-understanding, natural conclusions drawn from empirical examples that provide signs of modernity, such as commodification, individualisation and technological advantages, related to the first writing system. In these interpretations the meta-narratives take over the work of theorising. They act as an explanatory gloss that is placed on archeological observations rather than as a theoretical construct grounded in them.

Another aspect of the consequences from these meta-narratives is the employment in archeological interpretations of the popular spatial imagery in which the local culture is part of a larger complex that encompasses it. Furthermore, this concept represents a series of concentric circles in which the local culture is the innermost circle, surrounded by circles representing the regional and even the supra-regional complexes, with arrows pointing to lines of influence, crossing boundaries, etc. This constitutes the theoretical premises that explain the diachronic evolution of past cultures from primitive states to a civilised level. Within this general scheme local variation takes an important place, showing seriation sequences of the gradual replacement of the oldest elements (anachronisms in the system) with new progressive forms. In fact, the nested appearance of the signs of this notation system, as well as their similar appearance to other artefacts, belies such a conceptual framework. In my critical examination of one of the popular images from the past, the stamp from Karanovo, I present an alternative approach to the process of analysing the complex trajectories of the evolution of prehistoric societies. First, it is necessary to define the contexts: the social relations that are visible in the archeological record. Second, there is a need for a critical approach to basic analytical notions such as the concepts of personhood, commodification and technological advancement, and how they relate to the complex process of an evolving (increasing/decreasing) social complexity. Thus stated, this approach renews the broadly humanitarian, historical tradition of treating with suspicion the source information coming from texts and from the material record, as well as the ideas and practices of the modern world that have the potential to influence archeological interpretations.

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Fig. 1. Photo of the stamp of Karanovo, made by N. Genov

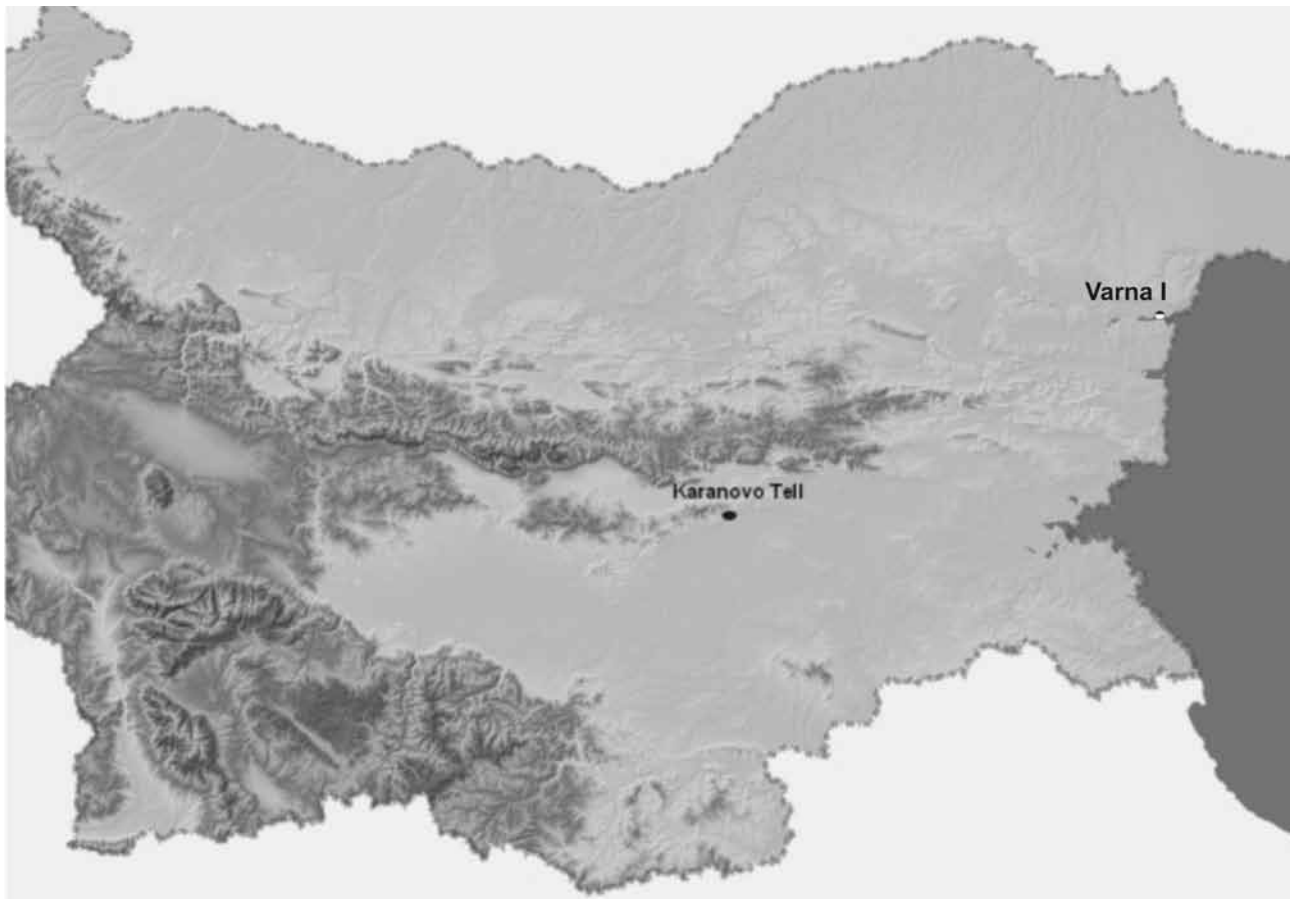


Fig. 2. Location of Karanovo tell and Varna necropolises