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INTERVIEW: **BORIS F. HLEBEC**

SECRET OF THE BALKAN DANUBE SCRIPT UNCOVERED

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Etymological Pairs; The Vinča Code (deciphering Balkan Neolithic symbols). Books translated into Serbian include Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (in verse), an anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry, poems by Thomas Hardy, Jonathan Culler's *Saussure*, Edmund Leach's *Culture and Communication*, David Crystal's *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (with Ivan Klajn). parts of David Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. His MA thesis was "A comparative semantic analysis of nouns and adjectives in Langland's text *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman* and its translations into Modern English" and the Ph.D. dissertation "A Semantic Analysis of One-Dimension Adjectives in English and Serbian". During forty years of academic profession he taught: English Phonetics, English Semantics, Theory of Translation, English Morphology and History of the English Language, and also lectured on the collocational method at doctoral studies and taught English phonetics in Universities of Kragujevac and Novi Sad. He was the Head of the English Department Belgrade. during 1997-98 and 2001-03.

B.B.: *How did it happen that you as anglicist, lexicographer and author of text-books undertook the task of breaking a prehistorical code?*

B.H.: During my career as a university professor of English I taught various subjects: phonetics, semantics, translatology, morphology, and also the history of the English language. As an MA student, I studied comparative linguistics. My MA thesis was in the domain of Middle English and I translated Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* into Serbian verse. All this helped me form a multifaceted view of language and directed my particular attention to the language of the past in both its phonetic and semantic aspects. My first book in this field was about the origin of Slavic words for 'apple' and 'pear'. It was followed by a dictionary of English – Serbian etymological pairs. In my papers I wrote about the sources of shared polysemy in English spatial adjectives, I presented my Thracian reading of the Lemnos Stele, traced the origin of the letter T, the origin of the Serbian word for 'danger', of the English words *boy*, *child*, and *girl*, and in the Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences I treated the origin of three words for 'copper'. The prominent British etymologist Anatoly Liberman attacked my explanation of the source for "boy" without providing a definite alternative explanation and did not say anything against those for "girl" and "child", while the leading Indo-European comparativist Thomas Gamkrelidze recommended for publishing my article on copper words. This experience encouraged me and set my mind on trying to solve the mystery of the Vinča script, especially because the centre of the Vinča civilization was quite near Belgrade, my home town.

B.B.: *To those who are not familiar with the Vinča script and the Vinča culture in general, what could you briefly say about the two?*

B.H.: Loosely speaking, the term "Vinča civilization" can be extended to cover the earlier cultures of Starčevo, Cruș, and Turdaș, and my study included them, too. The Vinča culture is a Neolithic and Eneolithic European culture that extended over the central part of the Balkan peninsula from the 6th till the 4th millennia B.C. Its center was on the Danube 14 km away from Belgrade and it covered present-day Serbia, eastern Romania, and eastern Bulgaria. Signs from this culture, inscribed mainly on artifacts, predate for two millennia the cuniform letters from Mesopotamia, generally believed to be the earliest script. Being enigmatic, they have caused serious controversy, ever since their discovery.

B.B.: *In your book The Vinča Code, recently published by Čigoja štampa, Belgrade, you claim to have deciphered this script. How did you manage to do this?*

B.H.: To put an end to the dispute about the function of the Vinča code I collected a large number of inscriptions, investigated what could have been their possible provenance and predecessors in the distant past, and traced their possible successors. The analysis of the Vinča glyphics is just the key part of the monograph, and the rest is dedicated to Paleolithic and Balkan Neolithic and Eneolithic signs in general. So, three inscriptions come from Lepenski Vir (including of a lunar calendar with its reading), twenty-nine from Starčevo, Turdaş (Tartaria Tablets) and Vinča sites, one is from the Sitovo cave, and five come from other locations or periods, including the Tserye seal, the Mauro Spelio signet-ring and the silver foil from Viminatium. All in all, this makes thirty-four inscriptions and they all open with the same key. My understanding of the Neolithic Balkans was heightened by reading Marija Gimbutas and Dragoslav Srejić. I also consulted the arguments of scholars like Marco Merlini and Toby Griffen.

To make sure that I was not on the wrong path, I tried all possible kinds of interpretation, checking whether by any chance they had been mathematical, astronomical, trade or property marks, pictographic, ideographic, syllabic or alphabetic writing. As I said, I made use of all available data that I had of the signs accompanying cave paintings, anthropological, mythological and archeological data, and took into consideration the Vinča material culture and its natural environment. Then I interconnected all this information into a coherent whole and managed to produce a glossary of the Vinča culture signs, covering both their forms and meanings.

B.B.: *Were any attempts made to decipher this code before your book?*

B.H.: The most that researchers have done was to make various classifications of signs into groups according to their forms and suggest their religious function, but the meanings escaped them. The classifications of the signs were proposed and developed by Marija Gimbutas, Milton Shan Winn, Harald Haarmann, Marco Merlini and Dragoljub Antić. Radivoje Pešić, who was the pioneer of the idea that the Old Balkan signs have meaning, classified them into vowels and consonants, induced by their similarity with the Roman and Cyrillic letters. But alphabetical reading does not work simply because there are too many Vinča signs that do not have their alphabetical match. Moreover, the inscriptions are usually too short to be able to convey a sentence in letters. I know of only one Pešić's interpretation, and it is that of the Vatin amulet from the 2nd millennium B.C. The lettering is Vinča-type and by applying the universal Vinča code, it can be read in the usual right-to-left direction as: 'Fertility of women, a male and the reproductive might of the Bear Goddess [as well as that] of a mother make the mother give birth, and they protect the child'. Pešić claimed that the meaning was 'Life is love', which is a beautiful slogan but was not supported by any explanation of how this reading was reached. Admittedly, to discover an alphabetic script in the sixth millennium would be highly sensational, but even a limited mythographic and ideographic system that Vinča produced witnesses of a progressive civilization, greatest at its time.

B.B.: *Is there any connection between the Vinča code and modern phonetic writing systems after all?*

B.H.: No doubt. But to follow the chain of links leading to alphabets is a rather complicated task. And the connection can be established only if the Vinča code had survived into historic times, which, strangely enough, did happen, as I discover in an article published in the *Prevodilac* journal, number 3-4, 2018, Belgrade. So, in a way Prof. Pešić was right; the

Vinča script did influence the shape and the function of quite a lot of alphabetic letters, but this occurred in the Iron Age or even later, rather than in the Neolithic. The advantage of Vinča signs that enabled them to persist after the fall of the Vinča civilization, was that they were not language-bound and that they referred to the universal most important human activity – procreation, to family and home.

B.B.: What makes you sure that you have a real understanding of this script?

B.H.: I cannot have hundred-percent confidence in all my readings, but most of them must be correct because their application always leads to meaningful messages. The same simple or compound signs occurring across various analyzed inscriptions manifest constant meanings that fit all interpretations.

B.B.: *What kind of writing was the Vinča script?*

B.H.: The Vinča palaeoscript consists of ideograms similar to the early Chinese ideograms from the 5th and 4th millennia BC. However, whereas Chinese Neolithic signs occur singly, those of Vinča have been found both in isolated use and in sequences, as the proof that the development of script began. To be precise, the Vinča signs can be termed “eidograms”, highly simplified sketches of objects that motivated them. They are neither pictograms (manifest drawings) nor pure ideograms (signs without noticeable motivation). The purpose of this script was the so-called “vertical” communication, dedicated to goddesses, just as the participants of the scholarly conference “Signs of Civilization” held in Novi Sad under auspices of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, concluded in 2004. These mythograms reveal the religious beliefs of the Vinča people and their relationship to animals and trees, fertility and human reproduction considered to be a supernatural blessing.

B.B.: *Could you give an example of a Vinča eidogram, its motif and function?*

B.H.: Let me illustrate how my explorations work by analyzing the sign that can be described as “three V’s one below another cut by a vertical line across their middle”. By a lucky chance, it appears on the cover of my book, encircled by the letter O. This was the choice of the computer operator who was not aware that this sign symbolized the supreme being in the faith of our early predecessors. This is how I was thinking: The clue to its shape must be in some semblance with a thing in the environment of the Vinča people. This might be a corn ear, a fish’s headless skeleton, a

fir-tree or a pine twig. A fish would be drawn with its head included, while I didn’t know of corn to have been worshipped in that region at that time. The belief of the Vinčans was known to be animistic and, to associate the motif with the ideas that it brought about in later times, a fir-tree is known to be one of the miraculous trees of the ancient Slavs. With the Balkan Slavs, the fir-tree was a creature from the underworld or it represented the axis of the world, and in some epic and ballad poems, it is a fairy tree. So all this suggested the idea of a “fir-tree” sign. This symbol is graphically more conspicuous than the similar symbols V and Y. The further supposition is that the “fir-tree” symbol stands for the high goddess (i.e. the Great Mother Goddess), while the other two ought to represent something of a lower order, probably 'a deified woman' and 'the bird goddess' respectively. What is also important is that the supposed meaning ‘the Great Mother Earth’ fits into all interpretations of the texts.

B.B.: *How do you interpret the famous Tartaria tablets?*

B.H.: One of these three clay tablets, the disc, contains signs that comply with the Vinča script. But the other two, rectangular tablets were engraved showing pictograms in the Sumerian manner and cannot be genuine. Starting from the upper right quarter and going in the left direction, the disc reads: 'The goddess of regeneration are Moon's phases (first quarter crescent, full moon, third-quarter crescent and crescent able to be reborn) | and new Moon in the sky | when transformed into pregnant Luna [brings about] rebirth | of many children [thanks to] the Great Mother Goddess and the act of love'.

B.B.: *You deal with some seventy basic mythograms, while the others are said to be their variants. As you say, most of them symbolize ideas in the world of divine birth-giving. Perhaps allotting meanings different from yours to the same mythograms could also be meaningful, which would disprove your interpretation.*

B.H. This is what occurred to me as well. Therefore I tried substituting the meanings for the same eidograms in various texts, but the output was either nonsense or did not comply with the facts about the Danube culture.

B.B.: What language did the Vinčans speak?

B.H.: This would be much easier to say if their script was phonetic, and even then not without difficulty. But, considering the eidographic character of this script this is a complex issue and the only thing one can do is make use of linguistic data indirectly with the help of other, non-linguistic means. At the very beginning, a question arises: Was the language of the Vinčans Indo-European or non-Indo-European? This must be connected with their ethnic and anthropological origin, and the data of this kind should be sought in palaeoarchaeology. If the Vinčans had buried bodies of their dead, a bone analysis would tell what they were. But they incinerated the deceased, so this source of information is not available. Data on the anthropological type of the Lepenski Vir people reveal that around the middle of the 6th-millennium tribes migrated from Anatolia and mixed with the natives of Lepenski Vir. So they cannot be Indo-Europeans.

B.B.: *What do linguistic cues lead to?*

B.H.: Tens of words that appear in Petar Skok's *Etymological Dictionary of Croat or Serbian* were labeled as "pre-Indo-European". Some of these substratum words were explicitly designated as "proto-Mediterranean". There is a strong probability that they belonged to the vocabulary of the Vinčans, if not even to a wider population of Old Europe. At the same time, these pre-Indo-European words occur in the present-day Basque, of unknown descent. For instance, Romanian *gună*, Bulgarian *guna*, Serbian "*gunj*" have a cognate in Basque "*gon*" and Basque "*izaba*" 'room' echoes Romanian *izbă* 'stove' and Serbian and Slovenian *izba*, which mean 'small room'. In this manner, a sizeable stock of reconstructed words can be built to have a glimpse of the Vinčan language. By the way, petroglyphs from a place called Alvao in Portugal from the 3rd millennium were written in the Vinča script. Spanish scholars tried without success to read them as alphabetic letters, but when read as mythograms the message becomes clear: 'Children are given life through Mother, Father and the Goddess of New Life. The Goddess of Growth protects Mother as a deified woman...'. This is only the beginning of the translation that I am quoting here but proves sufficiently that the Vinča code reached the Iberian Peninsula very early and was possibly brought by the people from the Balkans.

B.B.: *It seems that you make a strict distinction between ordered symbols in a chain and single signs that can also be found inscribed on numerous objects of the same provenance. What you have been explaining here refers to linear texts. What about the individual signs?*

B.H.: I have investigated linear texts rather than single signs. This means that further research into other Vinča symbols is still awaiting, reinforced by more texts to be found, through the assistance of Romanian, Bulgarian and Serbian archaeologists and palaeolinguists, hopefully with *The Vinča Code* as a reliable guide.

B.B.: *Can we learn something about the religious belief of these Old Europeans?*

B.H.: Certainly. But the main tenet had already been known, especially thanks to the work of Marija Gimbutas, so that the messages that now can be read furnish a few more details, like, for example, the existence of a belief that in order to achieve happiness in a home full of children, woman and man should not only make love but also forge a connection with goddesses. It seems that the people of this culture did not think of death as an end, as the only symbol that suggested 'death' was a double-cross, which denoted a period between two births. This is obvious because a single cross meant 'birth'.

B.B.: *What reaction do you expect from palaeolinguists and archaeologists in Romania and Bulgaria, the two countries that share the Vinča civilization heritage with Serbia?*

B.H.: I hope that Romanian and Bulgarian scholars possess some Vinča inscriptions of which I was not aware so that they would check if the code could be applied to them as well. The problem is that my book was published in Serbian, which considerably reduces the number of readers abroad. This drawback would be overcome by publishing its English translation.

B.B.: *Have you made any recent discoveries about the Vinča mythograms after the book was brought out?*

B.H.: Yes, certainly. Scientific research is a never-ending job. To take an example, a long upright line in the Vinča code was interpreted by the American philologist Tobby Griffen as a simplified double-line sign depicting a vulva, to stand for a birth goddess. But since single and double vertical lines occur together in a dozen inscriptions, they cannot both mean the same thing. I found out that the small vertical line refers to a child, so its bigger version should denote the child's originatrix, i.e. mother. Since motherhood was thought of as a godlike state, Griffen was nearly right in his interpretation of the meaning. His understanding of the motif for the big vertical line, which I took over from him in my book, remained doubtful. Only after later research, I came upon the motif that had inspired the Vinča scribe to allot a needle-like symbol to the meaning '(godlike) mother'. This was the hedgehog's spike used by the metonymic *pars-pro-toto* principle to stand for the whole female hedgehog. Some of the hedgehog's characteristics may have motivated the Vinčans to view this animal as an emanation of motherhood. Hedgehogs gather a lot of fruits on their protective spikes to provide food for themselves and their four to six offspring before sleeping through the winter months. Besides, their skill in killing snakes may have also influenced the idea of hedgehogs as model mothers, doing their utmost to protect the young, while hibernation, which they share with the bear, another deific animal, reminds of life-and-death cycles, which were the fascination of the Vinča people. Their spring-time waking was experienced as rebirth. This conclusion is grounded in the work of Marija Gimbutas, who claimed that figurines representing hedgehogs represented

one of the manifestations of the Great Mother Goddess. The Egyptian goddess Isis, a deity of reincarnation, was believed to possess an antidote to snake's venom, which brings her close to the idea of a sacred hedgehog. There is even more proof that the single vertical line referred to the hedgehog's spike. Namely, the Roman letter I copies the Vinčan I, and in the early Cyrillic script, where its phonetic value was just as in Roman [i], its name was *izhe* (later transferred to the modern Cyrillic И). This name is almost identical with the hedgehog's name in Slavic languages, which is Bulgarian *ež*, Serbian and Slovene *jež*, ikavian Croatian *jež*. Even Isis' name reminds of *jež* the word for the hedgehog, which suggests an early contact with the Indo-Europeans and the ancient Egyptians.

B.B.: *Professor Hlebec, it has been a pleasure to speak with you. Thank you very much.*