Queering Serbian Archaeology: Androcentrism, Heteronormativity, Gender and the Writing of (Pre)history

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Abstract
In scholarly backroom discussions, archaeologies of the Balkans are often labelled as conservative and ignorant of gender studies, their impact on archaeology, and how it deals with gender in the past. Indeed, androcentrism and heteronormativity are commonly found in archaeological interpretations throughout the Balkans, but not there alone. In this paper I will analyse how gender and sexuality in the past have been approached by some archaeologists in Serbia, a west-central Balkan country, and argue that, although some positive changes can be detected more critical gender and queer archaeologies are direly needed for two reasons. First and foremost, theoretically informed approaches to gender, in contrast to approaches based on gender stereotypes and heteronormativity, can lead to better thought-through and more informed reconstructions of the past. I illustrate this with several examples from mortuary and settlement archaeology. Secondly, and no less importantly, self-reflexive and theoretically informed approaches to gender and sexuality should have an activist component, helping to build a more just and democratic society. Therefore, we are never really done with gender archaeology. The latter is particularly needed in the Balkans, including Serbia, where there is an ongoing struggle against patriarchal ideologies and homophobia. In this respect, a dialogue is needed between archaeologists and the marginalized and oppressed communities and organisations fighting for basic human rights in the region.

Keywords
Serbia, Balkans, (pre)history, archaeology, gender, heteronormativity, queer

Introduction

In autumn 2022, the Serbian Ministry of Culture accepted the decision of a working group formed by the Ministry to inspect the use of the terms 'sex' and 'gender' in biology handbooks for the eighth year of elementary school from seven different publishers (Danas 13 Oct 2022). The decision made was that the lessons dealing with sex and gender should be changed urgently, the result of a demand by the

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Serbian Orthodox Church, which claimed that the content of these lessons propagates gender ideology (on 'gender ideology' ideology see Zaharijević 2019). Supposedly, the statement in these lessons that there is a difference between sex and gender caused serious commotion, and even more problematic was the additional statement that sex and gender sometimes do not match. The Serbian extremist right wing party 'Dveri' ('Doors' in Serbian) even claimed that these lessons are scandalous homosexual and transgender propaganda aimed at children. Thankfully, the reaction from professional bodies in Serbia was immediate. Professor of the Faculty of Biology of the University of Belgrade, Biljana Stojković, claimed that the actions of the Ministry were a direct attack on education in Serbia and that the supposedly secular state was being dictated to by the Church (Danas 13 Oct 2022). In fact, Serbia is not alone in this, as anti-gender politics has recently been propagated by the governments of some neighbouring European Union countries, such as Hungary (Fodor 2022).

Although Serbian archaeologists did not directly address this issue, the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade, where the Department for Archaeology is situated, did participate in this discussion, sending a strong message against the actions of the Ministry (Medija Centar Beograd 24 Nov 2022) and even organized a public debate (Nije filozofski ćutati 16 Jan 2023). The ethical policy of the Department for Archaeology has a strong stance against various forms of violence and discrimination, including those based on sex, gender, and sexuality (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za arheologiju 31 March 2022). Therefore, one would think that Serbian archaeologists should not be concerned about lessons on sex and gender in biology handbooks for elementary schools, but the question of difference between sex and gender does concern them too (cf. Palavestra 2011: 252). Furthermore, nothing guaranties that the Church would not one day interfere in the history handbooks in Serbian schools, the study program, syllabi etc. and that the Ministry of Culture would not support it. Thus, the positive changes in Serbian archaeology concerning questions of past gender in the last few decades could prove to be crucial for the defence of education, free speech, and democratic values in Serbia.

Gender archaeology papers and handbooks in international settings nowadays usually start by acknowledging the five-decades-long history of what some consider to be a subfield of archaeology. Indeed, the first criticism of androcentrism in archaeology, the invisibility of women in archaeological interpretations of the past and within the archaeological profession, were made in Scandinavia (Díaz-Andreu 2005: 13; Sørensen 2000: 16–23) and the USA (Conkey & Spector 1984), the UK following up quickly (Gilchrist 1999: 1–30; Sørensen 2000: 16–23), but also Spain (Montón-Subías & Moral 2020) and Germany (Gutsmiedl-Schümann, Helmbrecht & Kranzbühler 2021). Slowly but surely, gender archaeology found its place in other archaeological communities (Dommasnes, Hjørungdal, Montón-Subías, Sánchez Romero & Wicker 2010) and nowadays we even have several international organisations uniting researchers, mostly from the global West. These are, among others, the Archaeology and Gender in Europe (AGE) community of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), the FemArc-Network of women working in

archaeology in Germany, the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) and Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East (GeMANE) group. One could maybe dare to say that slowly but surely there was a paradigm shift from androcentrism to feminism, but this is and never was the case (Engelstad 2007). Even after numerous conferences, talks and published volumes, gender topics in archaeology are rarely found in international high impact journals (Back-Danielsson 2012). They are also rarely the focus of large-scale projects with considerable funding, such as those supported by the European Research Council (ERC), although gender balance seems to have been achieved (EAA 2020 Statement on Archaeology and Gender 27-29 April 2021). Among these, stereotypes about gender and gender archaeology are still omnipresent (Coltofean-Arizancu, Gaydarska & Matić 2021).

Where Serbian and broader Balkan archaeologies are concerned, the situation is entirely different in numerous aspects (Babić 2018). However, it is first necessary to clarify how 'Balkans' will be used as a reference term in this paper. It is clear that what is geographically and culturally considered to be Balkans depends on the observer (Todorova 1997; Žižek 1999). The region was named after the Balkan Mountains, which stretch across the whole of modern Bulgaria. Whether or not the northern border is drawn so that it includes modern Slovenia or Croatia, or the southern border is drawn so that it includes modern Greece, is defined by different ideologies. Ultimately, these will define what we consider to be Balkan archaeologies, but these are in no sense unified scholarly traditions and communities. They have their own local developments, which are close to each other in some aspects, but also quite different to each other in others, questions of gender in the past being among these. In this paper I will use the term Balkan archaeologies to include the archaeologies on the territory of modern Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania, and Greece. The scope of the paper does not allow the topic to be covered in detail for all these countries and their different archaeological traditions. For this reason, most of my examples will come from Serbian archaeology, a community in which I started my studies. Other authors have dealt with the issues with gender in archaeologies of Slovenia (Merc 2010), Romania (Palincaş 2008; Palincaş 2010), Bulgaria (Chapman & Palincaş 2013) and Greece (Hitchcock and Nikolaidou 2013). Where Croatia is concerned, there has been an increase in publications dealing with women in (pre)history (see the recent contributions in Dizdar 2022; Tomorad 2018) but none of these works deal with (pre)historic gender systems. The same can be said for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Gender Bias in Serbian Archaeology

Currently slightly under 50% of the teaching staff at the Department for Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade are women (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za arheologiju, Zaposleni Accessed 25 May 2023). One could say that a gender balance has been achieved. This has changed considerably since the beginning of archaeology as a research subject in Serbia in the late nineteenth century. From the time of Mihailo Valtrović

(1839-1915), the first professor of archaeology in Serbia (from 1881) and Miloje Vasić (1869-1956, lecturer from 1901, full professor from 1922) to the time of Milutin Garašanin (1920-2002, lecturer from 1957), Dragoslav Srejović (1931-1996, lecturer from 1958) and Sava Tutundžić (1928-2020, lecturer from 1971), lecturers in archaeology at the University of Belgrade were predominantly men (Milinković 1998). The first women who lectured at the Department for Archaeology were classical archaeologist Aleksandrina Cermanović Kuzmanović (1928-2001, lecturer from the mid-1950s) and Near Eastern archaeologist Vidosava Nedomački (1924-2011, lecturer from 1971). They were soon followed by the short employment of Bojana Mojsov (195?-) from 1982 to 1984 and Vera Vasiljević (1954-, lecturer since 1984). Slowly but surely the number of women lecturing at the department increased to the current numbers. In regional comparison, Tatjana Bregant (1932-2002) was the first woman to be employed at the Department for Archaeology of the University of Ljubljana in the mid-1950s (Novaković 2021: 431). Therefore, we can observe that the path for women in archaeology departments in ex-Yugoslavia was not as smooth as for men, but one should be careful not to confuse the reasons for this with socialism, as similar situations can be seen at other, non-socialist archaeology departments of the time (Díaz-Andreu & Sørensen 1998).

Predrag Novaković (2021) was the first scholar to consider the role of women in western Balkan archaeologies. He stressed that Paola Korošec was the first female archaeologist to be employed as a museum curator (at the Provincial Museum of Sarajevo) in the whole of the former Yugoslavia in 1939 or 1940! (Novaković 2021: 431). This demonstrates that archaeology in the western Balkans was dominated by men for a more than half a century, something we find in other archaeological communities of the time too (Díaz-Andreu & Sørensen 1998). Changes to this dominance seem to have started after the Second World War in socialist Yugoslavia. In 1944, Irma Čremošnik (1916-1990) started working for the Municipal Institute for the Protection of Antiquities in Belgrade and as curator of classical antiquities at the Prince Paul Museum in Belgrade. In 1947 she was appointed as curator for Medieval archaeology at the Provincial Museum in Sarajevo. Ksenija Vinski-Gasparini (1919-1995) was appointed at the Archaeological Museum in Sarajevo, also in 1947 (Novaković 2021: 431). Dušanka Vučković Todorović (1912-1998) became a director of the Ancient Department at the National Museum in Belgrade and in 1949 director of the Archaeological Museum in Skopje. In the late 1940s, Draga Garašanin (1921-1997) was employed as director of the Municipal Museum in Belgrade. Blaga Alekseva became a curator at the Municipal Museum in Skopje in 1948. Nada Miletić (1925-2002) in 1950, and Ružica Drechsler Bižić (1921-2008) in 1952, became curators in the Provincial Museum in Sarajevo. Milica Kosorić (1928-1994) became a curator in the Museum of Požarevac in Serbia in 1955 and in 1962 she started working in the Museum of Eastern Bosnia in Tuzla, where she later worked as a director from 1967-1978. Kosorić worked for the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1979 to 1992. Novaković estimated that in the former Yugoslavia in the 1950s, at least 20% of some 60-80 archaeologists were women, and according to the exact figures published in Slovenian archaeological journal *Arheo* 1 from 1981, of 404 listed archaeologists, 165 (40%) were women. According

to the data from *Arheo* 8 from 1989, in the course of ten years the gender ratio became even more balanced, with 54% men and 46% women out of 535 archaeologists (Novaković 2021: 431).

Gender bias is also visible in some seminal publications in Yugoslavian archaeology. For example, a bibliometric analysis of the five volumes of the seminal *Prehistory of Yugoslavian Countries*, conducted by Vesna Merc, showed that male authors are significantly more cited than female authors. This is followed by a higher number of male than female authors within the volumes themselves (Merc 2005: 27–33; Merc 2010: 127–129). Novaković (2021: 431) highlights the effects of the emancipatory social environment for the gradual achievement of higher gender balance in Yugoslavian archaeology, but he nevertheless stresses that this does not concern leading positions (cf. Curta & Stamati 2021). Therefore, a critical gendered history of west Balkan or Yugoslavian and post-Yugoslavian archaeology is still to be written. Even the recent critical histories of archaeology in Serbia mostly focus on the life and works of men (Janković 2018; Mihajlović 2017; Mihajlović 2020; Palavestra 2020; exceptions are Milosavljević 2017; Palavestra 2015). This is in strong contrast with archaeological communities centred on gender outside Serbia, where the lives and works of women in archaeology have been recognized as marginal voices in dire need of visibility (Díaz-Andreu & Sørensen 1998; cf. Novaković 2021: 431–432). Therefore, critical research histories should also focus on women in Yugoslavian and Serbian archaeology, among them prehistorians Draga Garašanin and Zagorka Letica, and classical archaeologist Aleksandrina Cermanović-Kuzmanović, or other women in Yugoslavian archaeology, such as prehistorians Ružica Drechsler-Bižić and Ksenija Vinski-Gasparini. Additionally, the critical research history of Serbian archaeology should finally come out of the closet and tackle the life and work of Dragoslav Srejović, whose sexuality remains the topic of backroom discussion (AngraMaina 7 Sep 2023).

Last but not least, gender bias is observable in an asymmetrical exposure to violence, since it should be stressed that women in archaeology in Serbia are more exposed to violence and various forms of harassment (including sexual) than men (Coltofean-Arizancu, Gaydarska & Plutniak 2020). This does not differ from the general higher exposure of women to violence in Serbia in general, including violence resulting in femicide (see Izveštaji o femicidu u Srbiji 7 Sep 2023 for reports from 2010 to 2022). Also, this is not to be confused with the lack of action by professional bodies, since the Department of Archaeology in Belgrade does not only have an ethical policy (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za arheologiju 31 March 2022) but also a mechanism to counter gender violence (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Sigurno mesto 7 Sep 2023). These followed relatively fast after the 2020 Gender Statement of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA 2020 Statement on Archaeology and Gender 27-29 April 2022). This demonstrates that the Department for Archaeology in Belgrade is in tune with the European archaeological community concerning issues of gender.

Furthermore, it should also be stressed that members of the LGBTQAI+ community in Serbia are frequently victims of violence (Coltofean-Arizancu, Gaydarska & Plutniak 2020), among them being students of archaeology and

archaeologists. I am aware of at least one incident of physical violence which involved a student of archaeology in Belgrade, and similar stories are abundant from other countries world-wide (Dowson 2006: 99–100). Again, as in the case of asymmetrical exposure to violence on the lines of gender, the cases of violence against LGBTQAI+ students of archaeology are only a drop in the sea of violence against this community in Serbia in general. Also, it must be stressed that this should not be considered the result of a lack of mechanisms from the professional bodies, especially not those at university departments. The Department for Archaeology at the University of Belgrade remains a safe space, with institutional solutions and allies present, and the problems it faces are the problems many societies in the world face.

Teaching Gender in Serbian Archaeology

I previously argued that the number of women employed at the Department for Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, gradually increased after the establishment of archaeology as a university subject in Serbia. However, the gradual rise in the number of employed women and the current gender balance at the Department for Archaeology in Belgrade has by no means led to more gender awareness in archaeological teaching and research (cf. Novaković 2021: 432). It is clear that gender archaeology was and still is a term used only by some lecturers at the department, but there are clear and positive signs of change.

Within the course Introduction to Archaeology, taught by Aleksandar Palavestra at the Department for Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade, gender and feminist archaeology are introduced to the students within the general topic of interpretative or postprocessual archaeology (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za arheologiju, Silabusi 7 Sep 2023). Palavestra is one of the few in the department to teach about feminist and gender archaeologies. Just like in his book *Cultural contexts of archaeology* (2011), in his lectures I had the opportunity to attend (2006-2011), he recognized the importance of feminist criticism of androcentrism in archaeology and the need to seriously consider past gender systems and their differences to modern ones. He also highlighted less considered cases of narratives in archaeology, argued to be based in feminism, such as that of Ruth Tringham (1994) told from a perspective of a Neolithic widow burning her house (Palavestra 2011: 255–256).

Gender archaeology in its bright spectrum was taught by Staša Babić at the Department for Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade as part of the doctoral studies plan from 2007 (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za arheologiju, Silabusi 7 Sep 2023). The recommended literature for this course included standard works in gender archaeology (Díaz-Andreu 2005; Sørensen 2000; Gilchrist 1999). It can even be said that Babić (2004: 118) initiated a critical approach towards "sexing graves" based on modern assumptions about the gender associations of material culture such as jewellery and weapons. Babić regularly includes gender themes in her courses and encourages students interested in gender archaeology. I was introduced to gender archaeology by Babić myself when, in my first year of BA studies in 2006-2007, she

lent to me the *Reader in Gender Archaeology* (Hays-Gilpin & Whitley 1997). Babić continued considering gender and sexuality themes in her other works too, devoting an entire chapter to eroticism in the discipline of Greek archaeology (Babić 2008: 103–117).

Gradual changes at the department introduced new courses, which have also included perspectives on sex, gender and sexuality in archaeology, like Monika Milosavljević's course 'Archaeology between nature and culture' that includes the works of Roberta Gilchrist and my own (Matić 2021) in the course literature (Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za arheologiju, Silabusi 7 Sep 2023).

As far as I know, gender archaeology is a non-existent subject in the archaeology programs at other Balkan universities, but this does not differ from many international archaeology departments (Gaydarska & Gutsmiedl-Schümann 2024). During my BA and MA studies (2006-2011) at the Department of Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, I was one of a few male students interested in gender archaeology, and female students showing similar interest were also only a few. Back then, the reluctance to deal with themes concerning women and gender among my colleagues was primarily based on fear of being labelled or outed as gay, something already noticed in other university environments of the global West (Dowson 2000: 162). Nevertheless, I have to stress that, alongside Palavestra and Babić, some professors of prehistoric archaeology, such as Dušan Mihailović, encouraged my women and gender-focused choices of seminar themes on their courses. As I already stressed above, there are clear signs that the situation has changed towards the better.

Although gender archaeology is not omnipresent in the study programs of archaeology departments across the Balkans, and elsewhere for that matter, the region has a much stronger tradition of feminist, women, gender, and queer studies outside of archaeology (Merc 2010: 117–120; Zaharijević 2008). One only has to think about influential figures such as Slovenian anthropologist, classical philologist and historian Svetlana Slapšak or Serbian social anthropologist and feminist theorist Žarana Papić (1949-2002), some of whose works being of much use to archaeologists (Papić & Sklevicky 2003; Slapšak 2013). Also worth mentioning is *Genero. Journal of Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies*, the only journal in Serbia explicitly tackling themes in women and gender studies, feminist, and queer theory. It publishes papers in both the Balkan languages and English, and thus presents a platform for scholarly exchange in the region and beyond.

Where archaeological publishing is concerned, Predrag Novaković stressed that the *Arheo* journal was the first archaeological journal in ex-Yugoslavia to publish texts on gender archaeology (Novaković 2021: 59). This is indeed true. As early as *Arheo* 7 from 1988 a paper on Antigone was written by Iztok Saksida, and a paper on Artemis and Greek women by Helen King was translated into Slovenian. In *Arheo* 15, Saksida (1995) wrote his critical treaty on the gender revolution and the paper of Salvatore Cucchiari (1981) on the origins of gender hierarchy. Tatjana Greif (2000) wrote a review of the *Reader in Gender Archaeology* (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 1997) soon after its publication, and Vesna Merc (2005) conducted the gender bibliometric

analysis of *Prehistory of Yugoslavian Countries* I referred to previously. Although sex-based differences concerning physical activities and social status in, for example, Early Bronze Age Mokrin have been considered by Serbian archaeologists (Porčić & Stefanović 2009), in Serbia, the first papers on gender archaeology have been published in non-archaeological journals *Genero* (Matić 2010; Matić 2011), mentioned previously, and *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology*. Being an author of two of these, I have to stress that the reasons behind my choice of *Genero* journal over 10 years ago were twofold. Firstly, back in 2010-2011, I enrolled on the *Women´s and Gender Studies* program at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade, and I was introduced to the journal *Genero* through my studies there. Secondly, I was aware that most archaeological journals in Serbia and their editorial boards would probably not be so keen to publish archaeological studies of gender, especially not from a final year undergraduate student. In fact, the only other paper in this direction was published in an anthropological journal, *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* (Porčić 2010), a journal that provided an intellectual safe-house for archaeologists writing with a theoretical and methodological background other than descriptive accounts of excavation results or culture-historical synthesis of cultures, diffusions and migrations (Babić 2018). A decade later, papers dealing with archaeological studies of prehistoric women appeared in *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* (Vuković 2021a). Other Serbian archaeologists have started including gender as an important factor in their studies, ranging from Middle Bronze Age burials in tumuli in Western Serbia (Ljuština & Dmitrović 2013) to cosmetic objects in provincial burials of Roman Moesia (Mihajlović 2011; Mihajlović 2022). It also took a decade after the first papers on gender archaeology appeared in Serbia for a doctoral dissertation written at the Department of Archaeology in Belgrade to focus on gendering of the burial record of Viminacium from the first to fourth century CE (Danković 2020). Prehistorians and bioarchaeologists in Serbia have also investigated differences in physiological stress for different sexes in Mesolithic and Neolithic communities (Penezić et al. 2020). Therefore, there are clear signs that much has changed towards the better in the last decade, not only in archaeological education but also within research. Some of my colleagues from Serbia have informed me that despite being very much aware of gender archaeology, the archaeological record they study limits them in their capacity to pose and answer questions concerning gender. This critical reluctance is certainly a better archaeological practice then the one based on assumptions.

I would like to stress that although gender archaeology may not be the scholarly focus of Serbian archaeology, it cannot be claimed that no Serbian archaeologist has seriously dealt with issues of gender in (pre)history. It is therefore somewhat surprising that their works (published both in Serbian and in English in international journals) are often not acknowledged by colleagues from other archaeological communities (for example most recently Robb & Harris 2018; but see their revised view in Gaydarska et al. 2023). A fun fact is also that, although often assumed otherwise, not all Serbian archaeologists interpret Neolithic figurines as evidence for the existence of a Mother Goddess cult. As early as the late 1970s, some chapters of

Prehistory of Yugoslavian Countries demonstrate that archaeologists in Serbia had also considered other interpretations (Garašanin 1979: 195).

It is also worth mentioning that a number of key publications in gender studies and feminist theory have been translated into Serbian and Croatian (Centar za ženske studije ZAGREB Knjige 7 Sep 2023), including the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler (for the latter see a recent seminal study by Zaharijević 2020). Even a paper by Spanish archaeologist Margarita Díaz-Andreu, who extensively dealt with gender in her earlier works, has been translated into Serbian (Dijas-Andreu 2003).

Therefore, literature from the fields of gender studies, feminist and queer theories, including anthropological, sociological, and philosophical studies of gender, have been available to archaeologists in the Balkans for decades (see also Merc 2010 specifically for Slovenia). The choice not to consult them is therefore deliberate, and not a consequence of unavailability or language barriers. This deliberate choice has consequences on how past gender and sexuality are represented in some archaeological research and writing in Serbia, to which I turn next.

How Queer are the Neolithic Vinča Culture Figurines?

In 2006, during excavation of Feature 03/03, archaeologists working on the site of Vinča-Belo Brdo near Belgrade, Serbia, found a pottery assemblage of the late Vinča culture (Pločnik phase), consisting of a conical drinking bowl decorated with eight modelled protomes, a carinated jug, and three amphorae. According to Nenad Tasić, the site director, the bowl with the protomes was the "*centrepiece of this set*" and was associated with "*a ritual which involves the male-female relationship*" (Tasić 2007: 203). This interpretation by Tasić is based on the shape of the protomes on the bowl. The vessel was made in a fine fabric of reddish-brown colour and had a flat base (diameter: 3.8cm), a simple rim (inner diameter: 10.3cm) and had a maximum height of 7cm. Its capacity was calculated to have been 0.2 litres (Tasić 2007: 204).

The protomes resemble the heads of contemporary Vinča culture figurines and include both those with horns and those without. These protomes are arranged in pairs on the bowl and placed on the rim symmetrically. To the exterior of the vessel there are two small plastic lugs placed ergonomically so that if the bowl is lifted with both hands, the lugs will be placed between the index finger and the middle fingers, allowing for an easy hold of the vessel. When the bowl is held in this manner, according to Tasić, it is directed towards the person holding it exactly to the point where the protomes are positioned more widely apart (Tasić 2007: 205). Therefore, pairs of identical heads are positioned left and right from the point of view of the vessel holder. The places for drinking are identical on both sides and have heads with horns on the left and those without on the right. According to Tasić "*the shape of the rim of the bowl and the disposition of the protomes, suggests that it could be used as part of a ritual involving two people*" (Tasić 2007: 206). He then argues that "*horns are almost exclusively associated with male individuals*" referring to a vast region extending from Anatolia to the Pannonian Plain. Tasić suggests that the bowl with protomes from Feature 03/03 at Vinča-Belo Brdo represents "*a male-female union, and that the ritual described above maybe some sort of a wedding ceremony*" (Tasić 2007: 208).

There are several issues with this interpretation, the first being the interpretation of horned protomes as male and those without horns as female, the second is the neglect of other Vinča culture bowls with protomes that have different iconographies, and the third issue is the assumed binary of the supposed ritual, a binary not convincingly argued. Where the first issue is concerned, according to the largest analysed sample of Vinča culture figurines (419 from 34 sites) of the late Vinča culture (Gradac and Pločnik phases) there is no statistically significant association between horns and the representation of primary sexual characteristics such breasts and vagina in the case of females, or penis in the case of males. This is because most of the figurines with horned heads do not have primary sexual characteristics depicted, and when they do, both male and female sexual characteristics can be depicted on figurines with horned heads (Milenković & Arsenijević 2009: 336-338). Therefore, there is no reason to accept the assumed binary gender interpretation of protomes as suggested by Tasić. Regarding the second issue, other Vinča culture bowls with protomes studied by Miloš Spasić and Adam Crnobrnja clearly demonstrate that in many cases the protomes are so stylized that they cannot be recognized as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. They also stress that horned protomes do not necessarily have to be representations of cattle horns, and that some zoomorphic protomes can be identified as birds or reptiles (Spasić & Crnobrnja 2014: 187).

Where the third issue is concerned, it is clear based on the evidence from Vinča culture figurines and other bowls with protomes, that there is no good reason to associate horned protomes with the 'male'. Consequently, there is no reason to accept that the presumed ceremony only involved male-female couples, as implied by Tasić. Since horned protomes could have belonged to male or female humans or animals, and protomes without horns could have also belonged to male or female humans or animals, other interpretations should be considered. Alternative interpretations could go in directions far beyond modern monogamous heteropatriarchal unions and wedding ceremonies. Maybe whatever these bowls were used for did not just concern relations among humans, but also with animals. Indeed, queer archaeology has criticised heteronormative assumptions behind archaeological interpretations for several decades (Dowson 2000). By making assumptions about gender and sexuality in their interpretations of the archaeological record, many scholars avoid other possible interpretations and provide their own assumptions with the aura of scientism. In the words of Thomas A. Dowson: "*Archaeologists excavate living spaces, huts and houses, among other things, and impose on those units families. They talk of 'owners' and their 'wives'. There is often no evidence produced or discussed that suggest that a male and a female, conjoined in some form of ritual matrimony, and their legitimate children lived in those structures. These 'families' are drawn from our own modern, Western notions of what a family should be*" (Dowson 2000: 162). It is striking just how many of these same assumptions criticized by Dowson more than two decades ago are found in the interpretation of the bowl with protomes from Vinča. Consequently, the modern heterosexual matrix is provided with a deep past, ranging back into the Neolithic, and comes forth as an ahistorical natural state of gender

relations and human sexuality. Numerous examples from the ethnographic, archaeological, and historical record demonstrate the contrary (Díaz-Andreu 2005). It is important to come back to Vinča figurines for a brief moment. Regarding late Vinča culture figurines, Milenković and Arsenijević have argued that figurines on which sexual attributes are not present are most frequent (214), and that those which have female sex representations, such as a vulva and breasts, are more numerous (193) than those with male genitals (8). Figurines with both breasts and male genitals are occasionally found (4) (Milenković & Arsenijević 2009: 344). However, whereas these two authors do not make judgements on the latter, others do. For Miroslav Lazić, "*hermaphrodites*" and "*so-called Siamese twins*" are classified as "*bizarre mythological figures*" (Lazić 2015: 104). Clearly, these are not emic categories of the Late Neolithic in the western Balkans, and as terms they are laden with meaning and prejudice. Furthermore, in the sample of Milenković and Arsenijević (2009: 344), 60% of the figurines are clothed and 40% are naked. Their results were confirmed by later analyses of figurines from five sites conducted by Jasna Vuković (2021a: 754), who also argued that figurines without primary sexual characteristics depicted are considerable in number, quantitatively sometimes even being the most dominant. However, whereas Milenković, Arsenijević and Vuković are careful in interpreting clothed figurines without clear depictions of primary sexual characteristics, Lazić groups the asexual figurines in the classification of Milenković and Arsenijević into male figurines (Lazić 2015: 100). Clearly, there is no obvious reason why this should be done.

Similarly, when another artefact category is concerned, Vuković writes that beads that may have been used for hair (Tasić 2008: 158–159) were used by women (Vuković 2021b: 28). But of course, men could have had longer hair and decorated it with beads too, since gendered patterns of beauty are cross-culturally diverse and what seems feminine to one society can be less feminine or even masculine in another (Matić 2022 with contributions). Similarly, in his paper on women in Roman provinces on the territory of Serbia, Miroslav Vujović points to finds such as jewellery (bracelets of bronze, bone or glass), hairpins made of bone, or glass beads in military forts along the Danube in Đerdap, eastern Serbia. According to him, these could with great probability be interpreted as the property of women, possibly reflecting the presence of wives of the high officers, servants or slaves (Vujović 2021: 41). Indeed, nothing excludes these possibilities, but one should also bear in mind that other possibilities are not excluded, since exactly the material culture mentioned here could be used by men who wanted to appear feminine and could have also visited the military forts, either providing sexual services or as entertainers (Sapsford 2022: 25–47). When the possibilities are many, archaeologists should try to consider them all equally seriously.

Gendered Spaces and Activities in (Pre)History of Serbia

Gender-based assumptions and stereotypes have a long tradition in western Balkan archaeology, just like in other archaeologies (Coltofean-Arizancu, Gaydarska & Matić 2021). In fact, the seminal *Prehistory of Yugoslavian Countries* is full of such

assumptions. For example, Dragoslav Srejović (1979: 67) assumed that mobile groups of Early Neolithic Lepenski Vir communities probably consisted of adult males, without explaining why. He also added that since some graves at Lepenski Vir demonstrated special respect towards elderly women, experience gathered over years was especially valued, leading him to conclude that in the older phases of Lepenski Vir some type of gerontocracy had been established (Srejović 1979: 67; for similar arguments see Vuković 2021b: 28). Similarly, Alojz Benac makes the assumption that a double pit-dwelling at the Neolithic site of Nebo, assigned to the Butmir culture, was a "*men's house*" in which unmarried young men spent part of their lives (Benac 1979: 446). Šime Batović (1979: 515) assumed that social relations in the Neolithic were based on "woman-mother" as the carrier of social and ruling relations, which he terms a matriarchy and to which he relates the Neolithic female figurines (Batović 1979: 663–664; for criticism of assumptions about a Neolithic matriarchy in recent Serbian archaeology see Vuković 2021b: 14–15). However, recent studies of 159 Early Neolithic Starčevo figurines have shown that pregnancy was not unambiguously depicted (Tripković, Porčić & Stefanović 2017), although studies of tooth cementum indicate that Neolithic women experienced a higher number of stressful life episodes than Mesolithic women, possibly including more pregnancies during their lifetimes (Penezić et al. 2020).

One of the commonly found gender stereotypes in archaeology is that of gendered labour division. For example, in their text for the catalogue *Vinča. The Prehistoric Metropolis*, Jasna Vuković, Milorad Ignjatović and Duško Šljivar (2008: 122) describe as "*certain*" the picture of an early evening at Neolithic Vinča-Belo Brdo "*when housewives prepared food, fishermen, satisfied with their catch repaired their nets, children set around the fire and listened to the stories of the elderly, and young female strutters enjoyed luxurious jewellery made out of shells, brought by traders from far away*". Unfortunately, there is hardly any way we can be "*certain*" about the gendered division of labour behind this picture. Since there is no cemetery associated to the settlement of Vinča-Belo Brdo, we cannot even use the burial record to strengthen the idea that "*young female strutters*" wore the shell-jewellery rather than male strutters or both. Even if we had a cemetery and a clear sex/gender division between those buried with or without jewellery, nothing can guarantee that this same division existed among the living. There is also no reason to assume that only men went fishing. The authors claim that knowledge from related archaeologies, primarily ethnoarchaeology, allow an assumption to be made that in the Neolithic female "*mistresses of the house fire*" produced pottery in single households (Vuković, Ignjatović & Šljivar 2008: 126). This is also hard to prove. There are certainly studies based on pre-firing fingerprints from other archaeological contexts, that pottery could have been produced by individuals of different ages and genders (Sanders et al. 2023; for forensic analyses of fingerprints on clay Neolithic Vinča culture artefacts see Balj 2017). The ethnographic record is equally diverse (Bolger 2013: 162–165) and actually cannot not support anything relating to past gendered labour divisions. Recently, Vuković (2021b: 18) has suggested that sex-based division of labour can be recognised with "*great certainty*" as early as the Neolithic. Supposedly, women did not move much, in comparison to men, so that "*their activities were probably tied to the house and its immediate vicinity*". Next to agricultural

work, women supposedly took care of the household, prepared food and took care of the offspring and the elderly. Vuković even assumes that at least two women processed grain using two stone querns found in a house in Vinča-Belo Brdo. Men supposedly did "*more physically demanding work*" such as production of stone tools or woodcutting work (Vuković 2021b: 18). However, we do not have written records nor iconography which could indicate some clear-cut labour division. Even if we did, we would still have to be source critical. The ethnographic record indicates that the degree of labour division concerning food preparation (Mauriello & Cottino 2022) and taking care of offspring and the elderly along gender lines differs from culture to culture. In fact, a new study of Neolithic bone spoons from the site of Grad-Starčevo indicates that new types of weaning food were followed by new types of motherhood, which could now involve other members of the community (Stefanović et. al. 2019).

It is also unclear why only men would conduct more physically demanding work. Yes, evolutionarily and historically speaking men are on average more strongly built than women, but this does not mean that all men and all women are physically built the same and that girls have been allowed to roam free and train their bodies only in some societies (Fausto-Sterling 1992: 214–215). It goes without saying that not all men are equally strong and able, just as all women are not. Another assumption Vuković seems to be certain of, is that pottery production was in the hands of women "*bearing in mind that work in relation to the preparation and keeping of food is traditionally female, it does not come as strange that pottery too belongs to the female sphere*" (Vuković 2021b: 19). Just as the ethnographic and historical record are diverse concerning the gendered division of labour concerning food, so are they concerning pottery production. For example, according to the written evidence (titles) and iconography, pottery production in Middle Kingdom Egypt (ca. 2040-1650 BCE) was predominantly in the hands of men (Stefanović 2013).

The catalogue for the recent exhibition *First Kings of Europe* even boldly claims that Neolithic communities of south-eastern Europe are "*commonly assumed*" to have been egalitarian and that social status was based on age and gender or was achieved through personal skills and actions, rather than being passed on automatically to the next generation (Gyucha & Parkinson 2023: 7). However, neither is this commonly assumed (Vuković 2022 with further references), nor is it clear what the authors assume here with status based on gender division, since we do not know much about gender systems in Neolithic societies in the first place (Robb & Harris 2018).

Other authors have been more careful in making assumptions on gender in the Neolithic of the western Balkans. In his study of Neolithic households of Banjica in Belgrade, Boban Tripković (2007: 13, 27) uses the words man and woman once each, and not in relation to the primary research theme of his book. The author is indeed careful in avoiding gendering of the archaeological record based on assumptions, which is observable in his comment on the inductive nature of other author's interpretations of ovens as the zones of women who prepared food in them (Tripković 2007: 27). The author is equally careful not to make assumptions on the gender of family members and their relations in his more generalist study of late Neolithic households in the central Balkans (Tripković 2013: 247, 252).

Nevertheless, the choice of the image for the front cover of the book titled Household and Community. *House and Dwelling Histories in Late Neolithic of Central Balkans* (Tripković 2013) is revealing. A Serbian couple, a man and a woman, who worked on excavations at the site of Vinča Belo Brdo, can be seen seated on the remains of a Neolithic house. Was this really the natural state of things in deep history?

Towards an Activist Gender Archaeology in the Balkans

That the past serves as an identity anchor for various social groups and that archaeology has a strong role in construction of nationalist identities in Serbia has long been recognized (Milosavljević 2022 with further references). However, the past in the service of constructions of modern gender identities and ideals of beauty has only recently been explored in Serbia (Teodorski 2022).

Individual archaeological studies of gender in prehistory on the territory of Serbia (Matić 2010; Matić 2012b) attracted the attention of some members of the public in Serbia, for better or worse. As is to be expected, there were those who were negatively critical, on social media such as Facebook, but never in a scholarly journal subjected to peer review. Nevertheless, the criticism was without serious arguments and based on the interpretation of one of the paper's titles (Matić 2010) and not its content, and it was wholeheartedly defended online by one Serbian archaeologist, Jasna Vuković, to whom I am grateful.

However, what seems to have been a positive reception came from organisations fighting for the rights of the LGBTQAI+ community in Serbia, where on the website of Geten organisation, a link to my paper on the Dupljaja cart (Matić 2010) was posted (MJ Geten 17 Feb 2020). This is of course not coincidental, since the paper argues that the Middle Bronze Age communities of the Danube Valley in the region of modern Serbia had a non-binary understanding of sex/gender (Matić 2010). In this sense, I understand the reference by Geten to this paper as more than just informative for the local LGBTQAI+ community, but also as a form of legitimisation and empowerment. In fact, this is in my opinion one of the most important roles of archaeology for marginalized groups. Indeed, I support this move in the current climate of heteropatriarchal attacks on all forms of non-heteronormative identities in Serbia and the western Balkans in general. As I stated in the introduction, gender studies and feminist and queer theory are under attack by certain organisations and politicians in Serbia. They, just like those like-minded individuals in other countries, such as Hungary, claim that the West is introducing a sort of a 'gender ideology'. However, such claims neglect or deny decades of research in biology, anthropology, sociology, history and archaeology. Furthermore, the way these attacks are formulated is a form of heteropatriarchal ideology.

Studies of homophobia among high school students in Serbia from 2019 have shown that it is conspicuous but less present than in 2011. Only 24% of high school students support LGBTQAI+ rights, 31% is moderately homophobic, whereas 44% is homophobic. Girls have more tolerant attitudes than boys. However, 50% of the Serbian public is of the opinion that homosexuality is a disease, and this has not

changed between 2011 and 2019, and almost every third high school student is of the opinion that LGBTQAI+ individuals should be beaten up (Radoman 2020: 70–74). According to the same study, Muslim students in some cities, such as Novi Pazar, are more homophobic than students of other Serbian cities (Radoman 2020: 71). The same study has shown that attitudes towards trans people are even worse: 60% of high school students to not support sex change, 50% deny the statement that trans people are equally valuable and stable as parents as everyone else. All in all, the results show that even after more than three decades of movement for the improvement of the rights of sexual minorities, there is no significant improvement and social attitudes are changing slowly (Radoman 2020: 74). Therefore, biology and history teachers in Serbian high schools have a crucial role in forming the opinion of future generations. However, high school history handbooks do not deal with the prehistory and history of gender.

Furthermore, it is widely known that nationalist, homophobic and clero-fascist ideologies in Serbia rely heavily on an imagined Medieval Serbia which is understood as an ideal from which modern Serbian society has distanced itself under the pressure of Western ideologies. Bearing this in mind, the Serbian public and future generations such as high-school students should be educated on actual evidence for same-sex activities in the Medieval period (Bojanin 2014) and Ottoman and liberated Serbia of the nineteenth century (Jovanović 2014). Written evidence from Medieval Serbia suggest that same-sex practices were not singled out from other sexual practices that were considered sinful. Not all same-sex activities were judged the same way by Church authorities, so that passive participation in same-sex activities between men was considered to be a lesser sin (Bojanin 2014: 36). The fact that in other past and contemporary cultures one finds exactly the opposite, namely, a judgemental attitude towards the passive rather than the actively penetrating participant (Matić 2021: 113–123; Matić 2024), demonstrates that attitudes towards same-sex intercourse and the role one takes in it are not natural but socio-culturally negotiated and therefore subject to change.

The impact of imperial-colonial Ottoman rule in Serbia on formations of attitudes towards same-sex relations, especially among men, was of great importance. The conquering culture tolerated desire of men towards adolescent boys and younger men and practiced this desire to feminize the conquered side. Consequently, same-sex desire, which was already stigmatized by the Church, acquired the additional label of a condemned practice associated with the oriental Other (Jovanović 2014: 45–47). These complex queer histories could play a crucial role in destabilising homophobia among both Christian and Muslim communities in Serbia. Regarding this, archaeologists in Serbia also have to consider spaces in which non-normative sexual practices (male-male; female-female) could be carried out in secrecy, the Ottoman bathhouse being one of them (as evidenced in Ottoman sources for other parts of the Empire and in sources written by outsiders, Murray 1997a: 24, 46; Murray 1997b: 99–100; Semerdijan 2015: 259).

Therefore, archaeological and historical interventions in the content of high school handbooks are direly needed if Serbian high school students are to be confronted with a cultural diversity of gender systems with the goal of de-naturalizing the norms

that they take for granted in forming their homo- and transphobic attitudes. For this to happen, we first need change within the profession of archaeology in Serbia.

Conclusion

Archaeology in Serbia and Balkan archaeologies in general have made some important steps in the direction of epistemological maturity, critical awareness of different theoretical and methodological stands in archaeology, international co-operation and interdisciplinary research. This also includes changes to courses at the Department of Archaeology in Belgrade, which are increasingly acknowledging the importance of gender and sexuality in the past, feminist and queer theory, and gender studies. Alongside an ethics policy and clear institutional measures against gendered violence, the changes at the department in the last few decades have indeed brought improvement.

Still, much like many other archaeological communities, those in the Balkans struggle with heteronormativity in interpretations of the past. This is especially observable in prehistoric archaeology, where there is a lack of written sources that could provide insights into gender systems. Consequently, and this is the major issue, heteronormative pasts and modern Western heteropatriarchy are simply assumed as a logical and natural state. They are thus provided with deep history and legitimation, which can then be easily used by some groups with dangerous intensions. The case of a bowl with protomes from Vinča-Belo Brdo and its interpretation as a vessel used in matrimonial ritual for male-female couples, which relies on other equally problematic assumptions, is exemplary. It is ultimately a consequence of gendering horned protomes as male and those without horns as female, something not corroborated by the archaeological evidence. The underlying heteronormativity is also observable in the language some authors used to describe figurines with depictions of both breasts and male genitals as "hermaphrodites" and "bizarre." Not far removed are interpretations of prehistoric gendered division of space and activities that rely on assumptions or poorly supported arguments.

Numerous examples that illustrate different understandings of gender and sexuality to those rooted in heteropatriarchy are attested in the prehistoric societies who lived on the territory of modern Serbia. Nevertheless, they are not used to their full potential for activist purposes in combating homo- and transphobia. Bearing in mind that these examples are well known to professionals in archaeology, the first step towards unlocking their full educational potential is introducing these examples in history handbooks for high school students. Furthermore, bearing in mind that the LGBTQAI+ community follows the works of Serbian archaeologists on questions of gender (pre)history, archaeologists in Serbia should enter into a more socially responsible dialogue with them.

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