Danube Culture

Advanced

What It's All About

- Most people / archaeologists / historians / religious believers / cultures / governments tend to see history a bit warped. Many Chinese, for example, are certain that everything of interest has been invented or discovered in China. Plenty others would debate if anything existed more than roughly 6000 years ago (when some God created the earth etc.). The consensus among Western people is that civilization in the form of big cities, writing, beer making etc. started in Mesopotamia (including a bit of Turkey and Egypt); a view that was influenced to some extent by Christian feelings - Jesus was born, raised an killed there, after all.
  - Fortunately, modern Western scientists were able to look at the matter objectively and without any cultural bias. They determined unambiguously that everything of interest has been invented or discovered in Suebia or at least nearby - somewhat down the river Danube that originates in Suebia.
- Seriously now: There is no doubt anymore that some "high cultures" existed from about 6000 BC to 4000 BC (and partially longer) in the general region west of the Black Sea (nowadays parts of Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine). There is some doubt, however, if we should see these people as *one* culture and how "high" it actually was. Did these "**Old Europeans**", as they are sometimes called, actually discover or invent advanced pottery, writing, city forming, metal smelting, wine making (I'm not sure about beer brewing) long before the usual suspects?
  The linguist **Harald Haarmann** thinks so. He presented his reasoning in a book, nicely written in the true language, that is all but ignored by true archaeologists but gathering an increasing number of disciples among normal people.
  - Harald Haarmann is not a crackpot but a real scientist who knows his stuff (linguistics). In his "Danube culture" hypothesis he goes beyond linguistics and not everything he states is an iron-clad scientific fact. He doesn't know the first thing about metal smelting, for example. Not only does he routinely mix up "smelting" with "schmelzen=melting but really believes that the copper is indeed melted out of the ore since it is contained in there as pure metal.
    We must therefore take his view with several grains of salt. Nevertheless, some part of the "Danube culture" may have invented smelting, one of the more momentous discoveries of humankind. It is fun to look at that a bit more closely, if only because theVarna culture" that definitely can boast the very first use of gold (so far), is part of the Danube Culture.

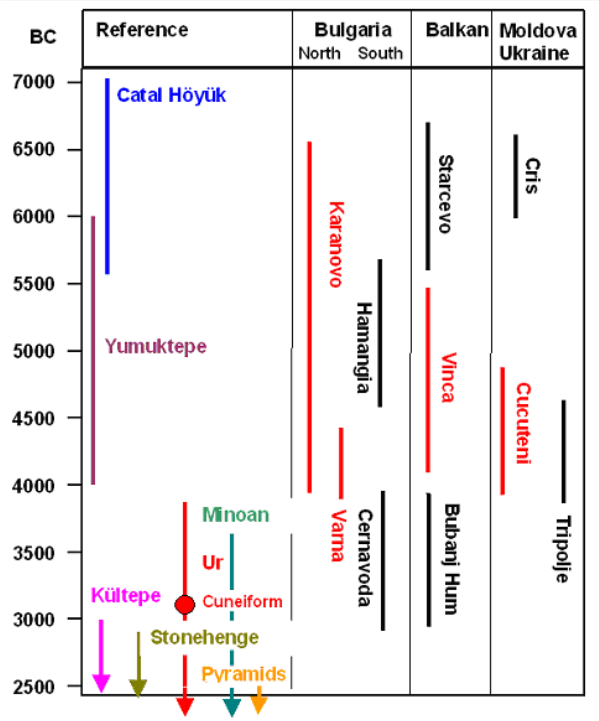
Some Hard Facts

- First let's look at places, times and names. The Danube culture thrived essentially to the West of the Black Sea in what is now Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and so on. Look at the map below to get an idea.

General area of the Danube Culture
Large version

Source: A somewhat modified version of the map that is given in the frontispiece of Harald Haarmann's book

- The different symbols in the map refer to the locations where artifacts of some particular culture (like Vinca or Cucuteni) were found. The Danube has been high-marked so you can see why it's called "Danube culture".
- There were several Danube Cultures with typically weird names, spanning the time range from about 6000 BC to 3000 BC. Here is a rough outline of who, when and where. The cultures outlined in the map above are shown in red.



Time line of Danube Cultures plus some other cultures for reference

Source: A somewhat modified and augmented version of the picture given in Harald Haarmann's book

- The relation of these cultures to present-day states is somewhat disputed, however. You might exchange Bulgaria for Romania in some cases, for example, or perceive the cuiltures Starcevo and Cris as just one Starcevo - Cris culture located in Romania. Present-day states with their presnet-dfay bouindaries ,. however, have nothingh whatsoever to do with these old cultures so it does not matter much. Years ago it would all have been in the Soviet Union or in the Osmanic empire, or....

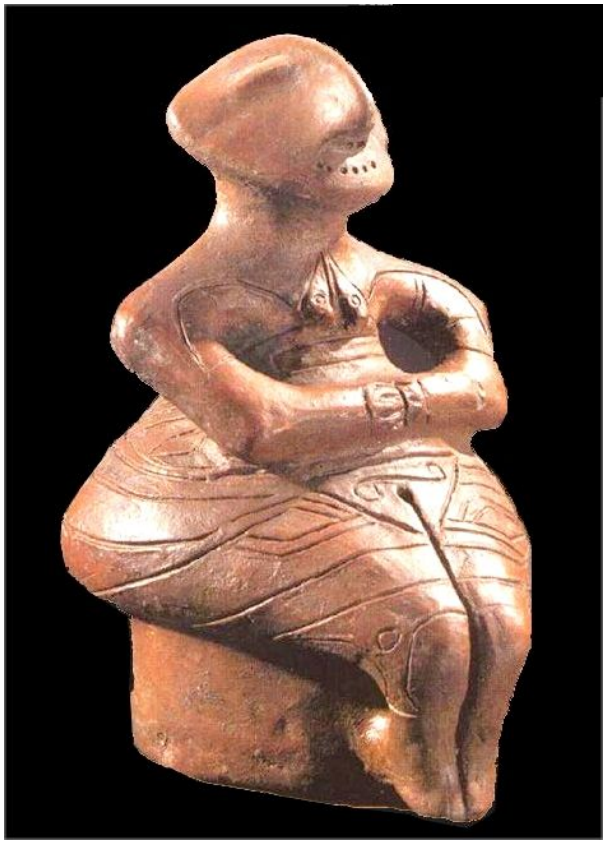
Highlights of the Danube Cultures: Ceramics

The most conspicuous remains are the thousands of ceramic figurines, mostly female and always rather abstract, that have been found all over the place. Their context must be some religious / ceremonial / ritual purpose we can only guess at. Here is an article with great pictures and one kind of guess. Some are rather spectacular and timeless pieces of art.

Figurines from Cernavodã; Hamangia Culture.
Large version
plus some more pictures not shown here.

Source: Internet at large

- Would you have guessed that the couple above is about 6700 years old? Here is another one:



Figurine from Karanova

Source: Internet at large

- You find those figurines and much mire in the local “Balkan Museums”. The kink leads to a short description of some of those museums and supplies many more pictures

There are wonderful ceramics from all Danube cultures, below is a small selection of Cucuteni stuff; some more can be seen here. This article has breathtaking pictures of more figurines; some are shown here in large format.

Ceramic artifacts form the Cucuteni culture
"The Cucuteni-Trypillian culture, also known as Cucuteni culture (Romania) or Trypillian culture (Ukraine), is a Neolithic archaeological culture which existed from approximately 4800 to 3000 BC, from the Carpathian Mountains to Moldova and Ukraine, encompassing an area of more than 35.000 square km", says the source

Source: From the Internet (https://romaniadacia.wordpress.com)

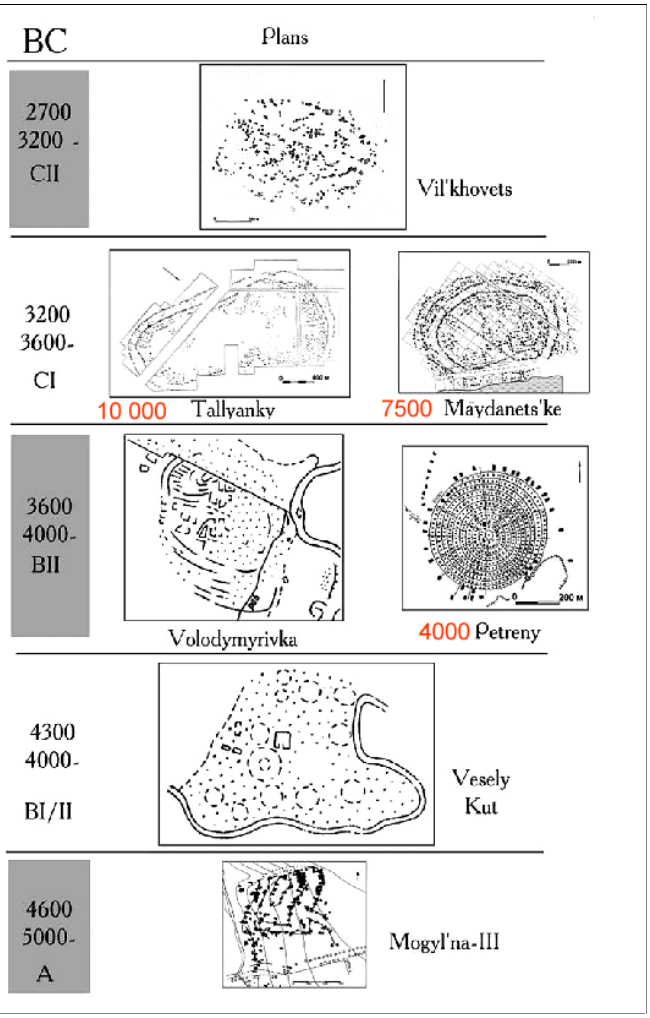
- Note that there are also models of things like ovens. The Cucuteni (and others) also made rather spectacular pottery often decorated with intricate geometric designs:

Cucuteni pottery

Source: From the Internet (https://romaniadacia.wordpress.com/2014/05/08/neolithic-wonders-cucuteni-hamangia-gumelnita/")

Highlights of the Danube Cultures: City dwellers without an upper class

- The Danube Cultures did not produce large stone buildings or other long-lasting big stone monuments like pyramids or menhirs. Nor did they produce large stone sculptures. Maybe they were simply unable to master the technical and logistic difficulties, or maybe they just didn't feel like it. A normal, hard-working family / clan did not need a stone palace, and Gods and Goddesses close to nature did not need large stone temples either. In other words: monumental stone buildings are more or less a sign of a stratified society with a non-working upper class that ruled and robbed the lower classes as kings and high priests of some sort.
  There are indications that Danube Culture societies may have been rather egalitarian, granting equal rights even to women for example.
  - What we know is that rather large settlements existed:



Trypillian city plans
Red numbers give estimated population
Large picture of Maidanetskegeomagnetoc survey

Source: Trypillian Civilization Journal, 2011-2. Archaeology. TRYPILLIA CULTURE PROTO-CITIES: AFTER 40 YEARS OF INVESTIGATIONS

- While a population of 5000 or so doesn't seem to be all that spectacular from todays point of view, these towns were probably the largest cities in the world in their own time. That is quite remarkable - but even more noteworthy might be that all the buildings people used for living (as opposed to religious or cultural purposes) were "equal". No big houses or palaces were found, or houses with more "pots and pans" than what was the general standard.
  There is, however, a well-known clay model of a large three story building:

Model of a three story temple (?) building
About 4500 BC

The model was discovered near Cascioarele , Calarasi county, Romania

Source: Internet at large and private communication

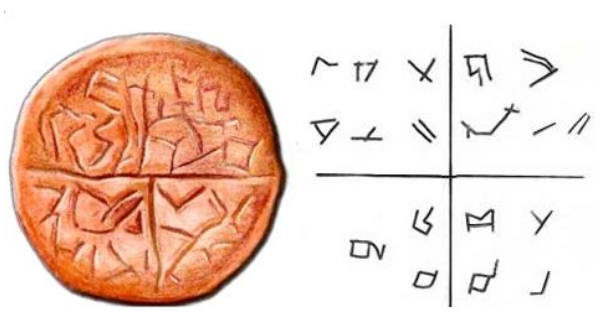
- And now we also have an "original". In 2014 a team of archaeologists (led by Dr Mykhailo Videiko of the Kyiv Institute of Archaeology) has discovered the remains of a 6,000-year-old temple at a Trypillian culture village near modern-day Nebelivka, Ukraine. Here is a picture

So up to 10 000 people lived in a city without kings or high priests that enjoyed various privileges. They made lots of female figurines using advanced ceramic technologies. Not much warfare or violence seem to have taken place. Sounds almost to good to be true.

Highlights of the Danube Cultures: Writing?

One might argue that the Danube culture was ahead of others in ceramics - technologically and artwise - but I can't tell. Contrariwise, if they would have had a system of writing well before the first proto cuneiform emerged in Ur, sometime around 3000 BC, there would be no doubt about their superior status as "high culture". There are a few (ceramic) finds that show symbols that might indicate a writing system - but there is not enough to be sure. It goes without saying that anything written on something less durable than ceramics - pretty much everything else people used to write on - would not have survived 5000 years or so.

- What do we have? Stuff like this:



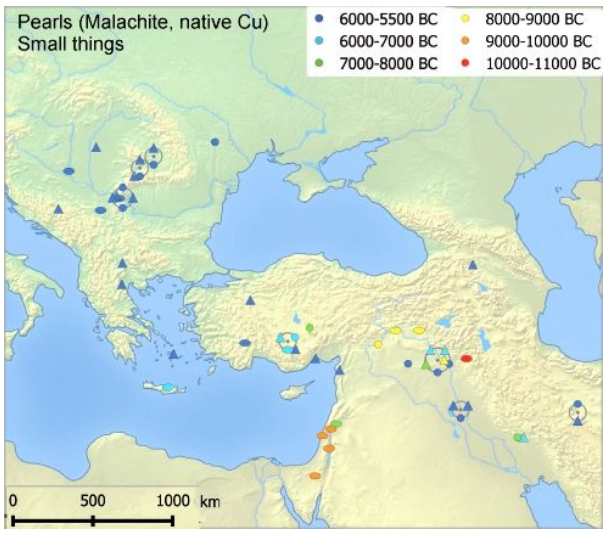
Top: Tartaria tablets, discovered in 1961 and dated to around 5300 BC
Bottom: Stamp seal found in Karanovo, dated to around 4,800 BC

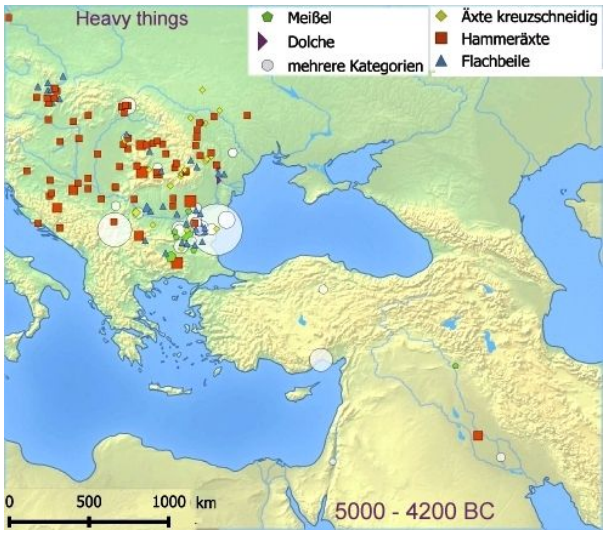
Source: Internet at large

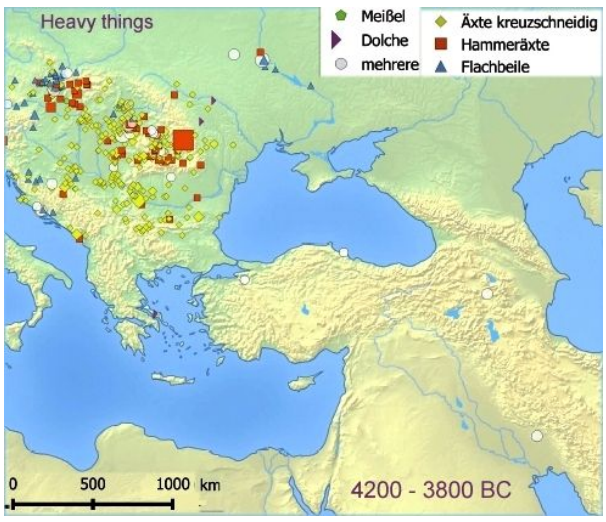
- There are a few more "inscriptions" like that on other objects but not a lot more. Is this an early set of symbols used for communicating via what one could call writing? Maybe - what else could it be? On a stamp seal? But we simply don't know for sure.

Highlights of the Danube Cultures: Copper Smelting

There are very well-known and serious archeometallurgists who believe that copper smelting was discovered by the "Danube Culture" and not by Anatolians, Iranians, Mesopotamians and so on. I've covered that. If you look at the self-explaining maps below that show were copper things have been found for three different time horizons, you see that there are very good reasons to subscribe to that point of view.



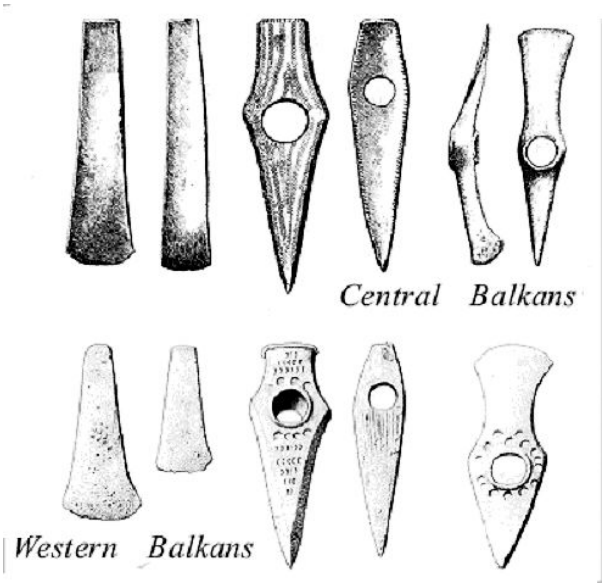




Distribution of Cu things for three different time horizons

Source: The very long, very learned and very German article of **Eva Rosenstock, Silviane Scharl and Wolfram Schier**: "Ex oriente lux? – Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zur Stellung der frühen Kupfermetallurgie Südosteuropas", publihed in: VON BADEN BIS TROIA RESSOURCENNUTZUNG, METALLURGIE UND WISSENSTRANSFER, Oriental and European Archaeology, Volume 3, Series Editor: Barbara Horejs, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH . Rahden/Westf. 2016, pp. 59 - 122

- Small things are for example beads as shown here and here. They could all have been made from native copper, not requiring smelting (and / or casting).
  The German names above for "heavy things" indicate all kinds of axes, adzes, chisels and daggers like these:



Axe types of the Danube Culture Large picture of more axes
Source: Internet at large

To summarize: if the old Europeans of the Danube Culture did not invent the smelting of metals but the "Anatolians", they were at least not far behind and apparently used it on a far large scale that the others after the technology was established.

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1) Harald Haarmann: Das Rätsel der Donauzivilisation - Die Entdeckung der ältesten Hochkulturen Europas, Verlag C.H. Beck, 2011.