CHAPTER 2
NEOLITHIZATION PROCESS AND THE BEGINNING OF FARMING IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

2.1 The Neolithic: Concept and Theories

Approximately 150 years ago, the concept of the Neolithic became a cornerstone of prehistoric studies. Inspired by Christian J. Thomsen's Three-Age Model of prehistory (1836), John Lubbock (1865, 2) introduced the term Neolithic, alongside Palaeolithic, to distinguish the technological transition from human populations coexisting with mammoths and other extinct species to the advent of ground stone manufacturing for weapons and tools. However, this initial definition of the Neolithic did not endure for long, as prehistorians soon recognized a parallel between the emergence of new technologies—such as ground stone tools and novel architectural forms—and the advent of food production, whether through crop cultivation or animal husbandry. As early as the 19th century, Hodder Westropp (1872; 1866) expanded the Stone Age classification by introducing the concept of the Mesolithic as a transitional period between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic. He argued that the Neolithic phase should be defined by the introduction of "ground and polished stone implements which mark a more advance stage, and which are found associated with traces of a pastoral age" (Westropp 1872, 65).

Until V. Gordon Childe introduced his concept of the 'Neolithic Revolution,' the Neolithic was primarily understood as a technological transition reflecting the natural evolution of humankind. This technocentric perspective dominated research agendas for decades until scholarly focus shifted towards the actors themselves—that is, the people and societies of this period. Although Childe initially followed a similar path in his early work, *The Dawn of European Civilization*, he gradually acknowledged the profound social transformations accompanying the Neolithic. In 935, during his presidential address to the Prehistoric Society, Childe formally introduced the idea of a 'Neolithic Revolution'[16] as a major societal shift in human history, marking an irreversible transition to a farming economy. The notion of revolution was often linked to Marxist theories at the time. While Childe was known for his Marxist leanings, he only minimally integrated

16. It is important to acknowledge that Childe was not the first to associate the beginnings of farming with a revolutionary stage. As early as 1884, Arnold Toynbee had coined the terms 'Industrial Revolution' and 'agrarian revolution', though his usage referred to the socioeconomic transformations of the 18th and 19th centuries AD. These concepts, therefore, differ significantly from Childe's notion of a prehistoric 'Neolithic Revolution' rooted in fundamental changes to subsistence, settlement, and society.

Published in: Jonathan Ethier: Cooking Food—Creating Culture? Food Culture as a Concept for Archaeology. A Case Study from Early Neolithic Southeast Europe. Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2026.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.1694

Marxist theoretical frameworks into his archaeological interpretations beyond the terminology itself (McGuire 2006, 1992; McNairn 1980). Instead, his influences stemmed from diverse fields, including anthropology (Lewis Henry Morgan 1818–1881), geology (Raphael Pumpelly 1837–1923), archaeology (Harold John Edward Peake 1867–1946), and Zoology (Herbert John Fleure 1877–1969), leading him toward functional-economic and evolutionist theories.

Childe's 'Neolithic Revolution' embodied such a theoretical framework, and in his book *Man Makes Himself* (1936), he formulated ideas that would galvanize and feed Neolithic research programs and debates for decades. As discussed in Chapter 1.3, this 'Revolution' signified the transition from environmental dependence to a cooperative relationship with nature, enabling food production. Childe (1942, 58) argued that this transformation was prompted by radical environmental changes during the Holocene, with the earliest occurrences in the Near East. Identifying the geographical origins of the farming economy was crucial to his diffusionist narrative. While Childe proposed an 'Oriental Cradle,' other scholars[17] sought alternative founding locations. However, none managed to establish as enduring an influence on early farming studies as he did. Without talking about a "Neolithic package" per se, Childe (1936) introduced diagnostic elements to the "Neolithic Revolution" such as the development of village society, the domestication of plants and animals, and a variety of technological advancement including weaving techniques, polished axes, and pottery. This shopping list has since been formalized as the "Neolithic package" and became a heavily debated notion on what must be included in the ascription of Neolithic society (e.g. Çilingiroğlu 2005; Thomas 1991; Whittle et al. 1996; Zvelebil 1998).

With the rise of processual archaeology in the 1960s, research on neolithization gained momentum, focusing on demographic, environmental, and economic pressures at the core of sociocultural transformations associated with early farming communities (e.g. Braidwood 1960; Smolla 1960; Byers 1967; Binford and Binford 1968; Hole and Heizer 1969; Boserup 2014; Flannery 1969; Cohen 1977; Smith 1976; Reed 1977). The primary goal was to identify causal explanations for these drastic social changes, often framed as responses to adverse conditions that necessitated new subsistence strategies. For example, proponents of demographic pressure models argued that rising population and birth rates compelled societies to adopt more productive means of food acquisition, rendering a hunter-gatherer lifestyle untenable (e.g. Sauer 1952; Binford and Binford 1968;

17. Worthy of mention among these is Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov (1992), who identified seven or eight centers of domestication worldwide—most notably the region encompassing Afghanistan and northwestern China as a primary center for wheat and barley—and Gustaf Kossinna (1911), who located the origins of agriculture in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, reflecting a markedly different geographical and ideological perspective.

Boserup 2014; Abernethy 1979; Cohen 1977, 1975; Grigg 1976; Harner 1970; Hassan 1981; Smith 1972; Spooner 1972; Zubrow 1975). Although contemporary research nuances these interpretations, demographic, environmental, and economic pressures remain central to discussions on the transition to farming.

At the same time, scholars investigating population movement and sociocultural and technological transmission continued Childe's diffusionist approach, emphasizing the Near East as a core center of agricultural expansion and its westward expansion.[18] This approach, a legacy of the cultural history school, persisted in some circles, eventually giving rise to two contrasting models: demic (genetic) diffusion (e.g. Piggott 1965; Case 1969; Lichardus and Lichardus-Itten 1985; Vencl 1986; Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994; Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1971), and cultural diffusion (e.g. Dennell 1992, 1983; Barker et al. 1985; Tilley 1994; Thomas 1996, 1988; Whittle et al. 1996; Pluciennik 1998). The former introduced concepts such as the leapfrog colonization approach and the wave-of-advance hypothesis, whereas the latter primarily emphasized the diffusion of farming, along with its technological, sociocultural, political, and economic components, at the margins of hunter-gatherer and agrarian communities. The wave-of-advance model, first introduced by Albert J. Ammerman and Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza (1971), proposed that, through population growth and migration from the Near East, farmers gradually replaced hunter-gatherer groups in Europe. Conversely, the leapfrog hypothesis (e.g. Arnaud 1982; Zilhão 1993; Renfrew 2000, 1996) suggests that small groups colonized select areas favorable to farming, integrated with local populations, and gradually expanded across the European continent. Unlike the demographic replacement model, this perspective argues that ideas spread more rapidly than populations, implying that mere contact with farmers would have sufficed to transfer agricultural knowledge across Europe.

At the same time, these models sparked significant debate and criticism, which continue to shape research programs and interpretations today (e.g. Pereira et al. 2017; Dupanloup et al. 2004; Semino et al. 2004; Chikhi et al. 2002; Fort 2015). A few decades after their initial introduction, some scholars (e.g. Zvelebil 1996, 1995, 1989, 1986b, a; Chapman 1994; Thorpe 1996; Price 1991, 1987; Zilhão 1997; Zilhão 1993; Bernabeu-Auban 1997; Renfrew 1996) proposed an integrationist approach to demic diffusion. They argued that the spread of farming resulted from a combination of leapfrog colonization, frontier mobility, and contact. Frontier mobility framed diffusion as an outcome of social networks, trading partnerships, and sociocultural interactions between hunter-gatherers and farmers, ultimately

18. A recent study led by Joaquim Fort (2012, 18669) revealed that approximately 40 percent of research on the transition to farming in Europe supports the cultural diffusion model.

leading to gene replacement. Meanwhile, the contact hypothesis posited a cultural transmission model in which agricultural knowledge was exchanged while maintaining the genetic continuity of local populations.

From the 1980s onwards, post-processual critiques of New Archaeology fostered fresh perspectives on social development, agency, and symbolism. In 984, David Rindos, in what he termed an "equilibrium lost," highlighted fundamental issues within cultural ecology, environmental determinism, and demographic determinism, foreshadowing a persistent theoretical dilemma.

> The credibility of a materialistic argument suffers when emergent human properties must be invoked to make the system function. […] Most of these "new" models are retreats to a simple-minded determinism or to eclectic stews that throw together every variable thus far advanced to explain the origin of agriculture – as if a multiplication of causes might compensate for a lack of theory
>
> (Rindos 1984, 24-25)

Accordingly, the works of Ian Hodder (1990) and Jacques Cauvin (1994) became foundational in Neolithic studies, not only by addressing key issues raised by New Archaeology but also by paving the way for new theoretical approaches that continue to inspire subsequent generations. In *The Domestication of Europe*, Ian Hodder introduces the concept of *domus* and explores its symbolic and social significance in the transition from nature to culture. The *domus* represents the household and the activities within it—food preparation, nurturing, economic strategies, and political power—associated with the feminine and the realm of culture. In contrast, the *agrios* embodies the external world, the wild, the uncontrollable, and the masculine. To this framework, Hodder added the *foris*, which marks the frontier between nature and culture, represented by doorways or entrances that regulate movement between these realms. As part of his structural approach and interpretative anthropology, Hodder argued that the origins of farming lay in ideas and symbolism, reflecting cognitive transformations in the human mind. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss, he employed binary oppositions to conceptualize structures that may have influenced social and economic transitions. However, rather than endorsing structural determinism, Hodder sought to reintegrate symbolic structures—materialized in figurines, clay models, burials, houses, settlements, and decorated pottery—into the broader narrative of the neolithization process.

A few years later, Jacques Cauvin (1994) took this argument further, redefining Childe's concept of the Neolithic Revolution as a revolution of symbols in his book *Naissance des divinités, naissance de l'agriculture*. Inspired by social anthropologist Alain Testart (1982), sociologist Jean Baechler (1985), and his mentor André Leroi-Gourhan (1971, 1964b), Cauvin dismissed environmental constraints, demographic pressure, and food scarcity as primary causes of neolithization.

Instead, he proposed that the emergence of farming resulted from a flourishing of symbolism, embedded in cognitive shifts occurring during this period. This perspective had already occupied Cauvin's thinking for several decades. In 1978, he asserted:

> Un réordonnancement du matériel symbolique, commençant au Khiamien, lors du 10e millénaire, précède stratigraphiquement l'émergence d'une économie agricole au Proche-Orient. Ceci nous conduit automatiquement à postuler un changement cognitif qui précède le changement économique et devient manifeste avec lui.
>
> (Cauvin 1978, 103)

Cauvin's approach is deeply rooted in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and the Annales school, as he strongly opposed interpretations stemming from materialism and positivism, which he viewed as inherently deterministic and reductive, stripping complex historical processes down to mere external factors. However, unlike Hodder and his focus on the shifting symbolism and nature of the domus, Cauvin argued that the fundamental change occurred when prehistoric people transitioned from a devotion centered on spirits and ancestors to a belief system incorporating the concept of above and below. By acknowledging the presence of an almighty force residing above, humans not only perceived but also granted themselves the authority to dominate those below them. He did not entirely dismiss the role of spirit worlds or ancestral reverence in existing belief systems, but rather proposed that a shift in perspective took place, one that became materialized through Neolithic art and figurines. While not without its critics, Cauvin's contributions remain influential, and a special edition of *Paléorient* (Coqueugniot and Farrand 2011) reaffirmed the significance of his work, advocating for the reintegration of idealist reasoning into archaeological discourse.

More recently, Hodder (2017) took a different direction, advocating for a slow Neolithic and emphasizing human dependency on objects. He argued that research on the origins of domestication and sedentary life would benefit from considering the intricate relationships between humans and material culture, along with their broader consequences. For instance, considerable evidence suggests that human tooth size reduction is a by-product of changes in tool use and diet during the Upper Palaeolithic (e.g. Boix and Rosenbluth 2014; Frayer 1980; Formicola and Giannecchini 1999; Hermanussen 2003; Ruff 2002; Smith and Horwitz 2007).

Based on this, Hodder established a link between the emergence of new tools—such as grinding stones, which allowed harder food products to be processed into softer, more malleable substances—and subsequent dietary changes, which ultimately contributed to biological transformations. However, he

positioned these new tools within a broader, evolving network of innovations and practices that led to a fundamental redefinition of sociocultural conventions.

> The dialectical tensions between human-thing dependence and dependency generated the movement towards Neolithization. […] In order to provide that labour or in other ways to deal with the demands of things and their entanglements with other humans and things, humans made further use of the affordances of things. There was thus a generative spiral leading to sedentism and domestication.
>
> (Hodder 2017, 155)

On a more controversial note, Brian Hayden (2014, 2009a, b) proposed an alternative perspective, linking human behavioral ecology and symbolism through what he terms "paleopolitical ecology." According to him, the neolithization process was rooted in the organization of feasts, which played a crucial role in managing distribution, trade, warfare, kinship relations—including marriage—and overall survival. While feasting may have existed as early as the Upper Palaeolithic, Hayden argued that technological advancements during the Mesolithic facilitated greater food accumulation, making surplus an essential political tool within risk-reduction strategies. As egalitarian hunter-gatherers began to generate surpluses, disparities in acquisition and distribution emerged among individuals and groups, fostering socioeconomic inequalities and economic competition. According to Hayden, these disparities were widely expressed through feasting, which, in turn, incentivized the development of new production modes—namely, domestication—as individuals sought to consolidate power and maintain social standing.

Although Hayden's model draws parallels with the potlatch ceremonies practiced by Indigenous groups of the Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States, applying this framework universally risks oversimplifying the complexities of early Neolithic societies. While feasting may have contributed to the broader neolithization process, it remains, in my view, only one component of a much larger picture. As Claude Meillassoux (1973) noted, forager risk-reduction strategies, in their political form, could have only plausibly driven a transition to farming in contexts where private or semi-private ownership and storage systems were already firmly established prior to agricultural development. In essence, the communal obligations of hunter-gatherer groups—where resource-sharing was deeply embedded—conflict with the modern notion of ownership. In this regard, archaeological evidence for private or semi-private property, such as storage facilities, remains largely absent for the Mesolithic period. Nonetheless, Hayden's contribution is commendable, as it highlights aspects of food culture that are often overlooked in discussions of the Neolithic transition.

Just as food studies have increasingly gained recognition in prehistoric archaeology, Neolithic research—particularly through the contributions of scholars like Hodder and Cauvin—has paved the way for a wide range of new interpretations, from agency theories to gender studies. As the field continues to explore these new perspectives, it remains confronted by fundamental challenges that persist over time. The term Neolithic and the concept of neolithization have long been contentious, with ongoing debates surrounding their definition, origins, causes, periodization, and the conceptualization of a so-called Neolithic package. As we have seen, some scholars trace the Neolithic's origins to the Near East, while others have sought to identify multiple core centers, and some argue for a diverse range of independent innovations. Meanwhile, another perspective shifts focus toward defining the essential components of the Neolithic itself: Is the emergence of pottery sufficient to justify the label,[19] or is the adoption of a farming economy a necessary criterion? Must the entire Neolithic package be present, or only certain elements—and if so, how many?

Defining the Neolithic is no simple task. While the term itself may provoke discomfort, its complexity stems from a long and evolving research history. Notably, despite more than a century of scholarship on the causes and consequences of the Neolithic, food culture has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves, despite being central to the transition. This book does not seek to redefine the Neolithic or its underlying causes; rather, it aims to integrate food culture into the broader narrative. Nonetheless, a clear definition of the term and its intended scope remains necessary. In this study, the neolithization process refers to the transition, during the Mesolithic, from a hunting, gathering, and fishing lifestyle to a farming economy, shaping the sociocultural, political, biological, and economic framework of agrarian societies. Meanwhile, the Neolithic will be used as a conventional label to define this period of development, which ultimately culminates in the emergence of complex societies and urbanization at the onset of the Bronze Age. However, this definition is context-specific and does not imply a single global process leading to the universal establishment of agrarian societies, as neolithization followed multiple distinct pathways across different regions. In this sense, the term Neolithic should not be perceived as a fixed

19. For instance, some Russian scholars have regarded pottery as the primary diagnostic marker of the Neolithic transition, occasionally referring to potsherds with Near Eastern traits—though these are often left undefined (e.g. Oshibkina 1996). Conversely, domestication alone may be insufficient, or too ambiguous a criterion, for defining the Neolithic. In many cases, evidence of domesticated species also appears in Mesolithic contexts (e.g. Cristiani et al. 2016). As Robin Dennell (1992, 92) aptly observed: "The concept of the Neolithic as signifying the appearance of agriculture probable has done more to obscure than to illuminate the nature of the process involved."

phenomenon in time and space that gradually expanded worldwide—such an interpretation would oversimplify the complexities of the transition. With so many potential explanations for the neolithization process, the question then arises: how does this translate to Southeast Europe, the cradle of European agricultural expansion?

2.2 Early Neolithic and the Starčevo-Körös Complex in Southeast Europe

As the initial entry point for early farmers into Europe, Southeast Europe played a pivotal role in the adoption and expansion of agrarian and pastoralist economies. This region straddles the transition between the Mediterranean climatic and environmental zone—encompassing Greece, Macedonia, and Bulgaria—and the temperate continental landscapes of Serbia, Romania, and the Carpathian Basin to the north. This diverse ecological setting provided a range of exploitable landscapes, facilitating the shift to a farming-based subsistence strategy. However, the precise timing and mechanisms of this transition remain a topic of scholarly debate. For a long time, the dominant theory centered on a migrationist model, positing two waves of colonization: the first associated with Anatolian settlers introducing white or red-painted pottery into the territories of modern Serbia, Romania, and the Carpathian Basin; and the second linked to the spread of Cardial ware along the eastern Adriatic and Ionian coastal regions (e.g. Bogucki and Crabtree 2004; Zvelebil 2001; Whittle 1994). However, more recent models have challenged this narrative, offering new insights into the complexity of the neolithization process in Southeast Europe (Borić 2011, 2005b; Tringham 2000; Budja 2001).

Since this study focuses on archaeological groups from the Balkans—specifically the Starčevo and Körös complexes—this chapter provides an introduction to these groups during the earliest phases of the Neolithic. Situated in Serbia and the Carpathian Basin, respectively, the Starčevo and Körös communities occupied a frontier zone between the European wilderness, still home to hunter-gatherer societies, and the transformative forces of agricultural innovation. They belonged to a period of transition, straddling the line between a well-established traditional lifestyle and the introduction of new subsistence strategies that reshaped their social and economic foundations (Figure 8). While often categorized under the broader Starčevo-Körös-Criş complex, this nomenclature, frequently employed in archaeological discourse, may misleadingly imply a monolithic cultural entity. However, as this chapter will illustrate, significant heterogeneity existed both within and beyond these groups.

To understand the dynamics at play in this region and the potential drivers of change, it is essential to first examine their southern neighbors and the neolithization process in the northern Aegean and southern Bulgaria. For a long time, this region was considered the primary point of departure for Neolithic groups moving into the northern territories.[20] Analyzing these interactions provides critical context for understanding the emergence and development of early farming communities in Southeast Europe.

2.2.1 Environmental Background

Traveling from Greece to Hungary, one immediately encounters a strikingly diverse and ever-changing landscape—an environmental setting that is both transitional and heterogeneous in its climatic and vegetational characteristics. Moving inland from the Mediterranean coast, the terrain shifts from coastal ecosystems to dense forests interwoven with networks of rivers and lakes, punctuated by mountain barriers and vast alluvial plains. Given this ecological complexity, it is unsurprising that the Balkans has been designated a "European biodiversity hotspot" (Petit et al. 2003). While these varied landscapes have historically provided ample opportunities for sustaining local economies, numerous studies suggest that the environmental conditions encountered by the first farmers in the region have remained relatively stable, shaped by Late Holocene aridification and human activity (e.g. Davis et al. 2003; Huntley 1988; Burroughs 2005; Fouache and Ghilardi 2011).

The Mediterranean ecosystem dominates the Aegean and Adriatic coastal zones, as well as parts of southern Bulgaria, gradually transitioning into temperate continental ecosystems in northern Bulgaria, the lower Danube, and the Pannonian Basin. Mediterranean-type ecosystems (MTEs) are characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Even within the study area (Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary), the contrast in landscapes is already apparent, ranging from the MTEs of mainland and coastal Greece to the Stara Planina mountain range in Bulgaria.[21]

20. For future reference and to facilitate regional comprehension, a clear distinction will be maintained between the Carpathian Basin, the North Balkans—encompassing modern-day Serbia and Romania—and the South Balkans, defined here as Bulgaria and the Thracian region. As various authors employ differing nomenclature, such as Central Balkans or Western and Eastern Balkans, these terms may appear throughout the text but will be explicitly defined where applicable.

21. This subchapter gives an overview of climatic and landscapes conditions in the studied countries. A greater focus on specificity of certain regions will be given in the sections included in Chapter 3.1.1 "Case Studies".

Figure 8. Starčevo-Körös-Criş complex zone and related sites. These sites, located in modern Serbia, Romania, and Hungary, were part of the present residue analysis study. (Regional outlines based on Astalos, Sommer, and Virag 2013, fig. 1; map based on Google Earth.

The numerous mountain ranges scattered throughout these regions create microclimatic variations, influencing local ecosystems. In western Greece, for instance, mountain barriers regulate precipitation patterns, keeping high annual rainfall on the western slopes while leaving the eastern side significantly drier (e.g. Perlès 2001). As a result, the earliest farmers in Greece faced diverse environmental conditions, requiring them to adapt their subsistence strategies accordingly. Although these environmental contrasts persist today, it is important to note that the mid-Holocene period, which marks the first visible traces of agricultural activity, was slightly cooler and wetter than present conditions. This climatic trend was evident not only in Mediterranean ecosystems but also in the temperate continental zones (Huntley and Prentice 1988; Burroughs 2005).

In Bulgaria, two contrasting environmental settings are evident (Velikov and Stoyanova 2007). South of the Stara Planina, the landscape is predominantly mountainous, exerting both horizontal and vertical influences on the local ecosystem. Horizontally, the region retains the final remnants of a MTE, with the Pirin Mountains in southwestern Bulgaria acting as a transitional zone between the Mediterranean and temperate climatic regions (Grunewald et al. 2009). Vertically, environmental changes become increasingly pronounced above 500 m due to a gradual decline in temperature.

While the southern region is characterized by numerous elevated areas, it also contains valleys that are well-suited for human settlement and agricultural activities. In mountainous terrains, altitude is a critical factor, as higher elevations bring more dramatic ecological shifts. Today, during the coldest months (January), temperatures in mountain ranges between 1200 and 1600 m typically range from −3°C to −4°C, dropping below −5°C above this altitude, and reaching as low as −10.9°C at Musala Peak (2925 m) (Velikov and Stoyanova 2007). In contrast, lower-lying areas experience milder temperatures, making them more conducive to farming. The mountains also receive the heaviest precipitation in Bulgaria, with annual averages ranging from 1700 to 2200 mm. Due to the significant altitude variations, snowfall patterns vary accordingly, with only mountains above 1100–1400 m maintaining stable snow cover. Depending on elevation, snow may persist for anywhere between two to seven months (Velikov and Stoyanova 2007).

North of the Stara Planina, the landscape shifts to predominantly plain-steppe terrain with a temperate-continental climate, characterized by cold, relatively dry winters and warm, humid summers. Compared to the mountainous south, winter temperatures here average between −1.5°C and 3°C. Precipitation varies seasonally, peaking in May and June. The temperate-continental climate posed new challenges for early farmers, as its colder winters and greater snowfall presented conditions significantly different from those of the Mediterranean. In

northern Bulgaria, snowfall accounts for 10–12 percent of annual precipitation (Velikov and Stoyanova 2007). This climatic reality played a crucial role in shaping the development of early farming, requiring adaptations distinct from those seen in Anatolia, the Levant, or Greece.

A fundamental factor in the establishment of farming communities was access to water. In this regard, Bulgaria boasts a vast network of over 1200 rivers, most originating in the Stara Planina. The Danube River, which now serves as the modern border with Romania, plays a particularly significant role, linking twenty major tributaries that trace their origins to the Stara Planina and Pred-balkan regions. The importance of the Danube in the formation of Neolithic communities cannot be overstated, as it became one of the primary conduits facilitating the spread of agriculture into continental Europe.[22]

As the Danube flows further into continental Europe, Serbia presents a diverse array of landscapes, ranging from the fertile plains of the Vojvodina province to the mountainous regions of its western and southern territories, as well as the dense forests of Šumadija. Amid this varied topography, an extensive network of rivers, creeks, and lakes traverses the country. At the heart of Serbia's hydrological system lies the River Morava, a major tributary of the Danube, which plays a crucial role in shaping the country's water network and settlement patterns. Notably, the Morava River valley hosts the highest demographic density in Serbia.

As one moves deeper into Serbia, the climate transitions further into the temperate-continental zone, though mild Mediterranean influences remain perceptible (Kulkarni et al. 2016). Similar to Bulgaria, the highest annual precipitation in Serbia occurs at higher elevations, averaging around 1000 mm (e.g. Zlatibor station 972.5 mm and Kopaonik station 977.1 mm) (Stanojević 2012). In contrast, precipitation levels drop significantly in lower-lying areas, such as Palić (560.3 mm), Sombor (607.2 mm), and Vršac (659.6 mm). Aside from the climatic variations in mountainous regions, Serbia's overall climate follows the expected patterns of a continental system, with hot, humid summers and cold, dry winters. In the province of Vojvodina, for instance, July temperatures average 22°C, while January temperatures remain relatively mild at −1°C. Serbia experiences its peak rainfall during the summer months, particularly in June, which accounts for 12–13 percent of the total annual precipitation (Kulkarni et al. 2016; RHMSS 2020). Snow cover varies across the country, primarily depending on elevation, with January generally experiencing the highest number of snow days.

In contrast to the diverse landscapes of Bulgaria and Serbia, Hungary is predominantly flat, occupying much of the Carpathian Basin. Although the country's average elevation is approximately 300 m, it does feature some mountainous

22. See Chapter 3.1.1.3, "Iron Gates in Serbia and Romania", for examples.

regions, including the Transdanubian Mountains and the North Hungarian Mountains. However, the majority of known Neolithic settlements in the region were concentrated in the Great Hungarian Plain, also known as the Alföld, which serves as the primary focus of this study. The Alföld, the largest section of the Pannonian Plain, spans approximately 52,000 km² of Hungarian territory and is interlaced with a vast network of meandering rivers. Among them, the River Tisza is particularly significant, ranking as one of Europe's major tributaries. It flows through Ukraine, Hungary, Serbia, and Romania, playing a crucial role in shaping the Great Hungarian Plain. As it traverses this low-lying landscape, the Tisza's slow-moving current has contributed to the formation of extensive meanders and frequent flooding events. While these floods have posed challenges for archaeologists by destroying numerous sites, they were likely an integral part of early agricultural strategies (Gyucha, Duffy, and Parkinson 2013). Today, Hungary remains highly reliant on agriculture, with approximately 86.4 percent of its land classified as productive, including 66.5 percent dedicated to agriculture and 19.1 percent to forestry (Nagy 2006).

Located further inland than Bulgaria and Serbia, Hungary experiences a temperate continental climate characterized by significant seasonal variability. As in Serbia, January is the coldest month, with average temperatures around 0°C, while July is the warmest, averaging 22°C with generally low precipitation levels (ranging from 0 to 150 mm). Rainfall in Hungary exhibits considerable annual and seasonal fluctuations. While the average annual precipitation stands at 600 mm, a study by Nagy (2006, 9) demonstrated that between 1900 and 1950, annual precipitation levels fluctuated between a minimum of 342 mm and a maximum of 874 mm. When seasonal changes are examined in closer detail, it becomes evident that July rainfall can be nearly absent in some years while reaching approximately 150 mm in others. Such climatic unpredictability continues to influence agricultural practices today, presenting challenges that early Neolithic farmers would have also faced (Nagy 2006).

2.2.2 Relative and Absolute Chronology

Establishing a reliable chronological framework for the prehistory of Southeast Europe has been a central focus of archaeological research in the region. This endeavor remains an ongoing process, continuously refined as new methods and techniques enhance our understanding (e.g. Borić et al. 2018; Borić and Dimitrijevic 2007; Whittle et al. 2002; Casanova et al. 2020; Biagi and Spataro 2005). In this study, particular attention is given to the emergence of a farming economy, which marks the onset of the Neolithic. However, identifying a singular historical moment when societies transitioned from hunting and gathering to agriculture

and herding is a complex and often contested issue. Rather than seeking a fixed date of origin, this transition should be understood as a gradual and multifaceted process.23 Nevertheless, archaeological investigations in Greece and the Balkans suggest that the transformation leading to the adoption of farming occurred between 6500 and 5500 calBC (Table 1) (e.g. Douka et al. 2017; Reingruber and Thissen 2009; Whittle et al. 2002; Borić et al. 2018; Borić and Dimitrijevic 2007; Biagi and Spataro 2005; Bronk Ramsey et al. 2007).[24]

Table 1. Chronological table of Early Neolithic in the Levant, Anatolia, the Aegean, and the Balkans.

Geographical region	**Archaeological groups/periods**	**Dating calBC**
Northern Levant	Pre-Pottery Neolithic A	10250–8850
	Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	8850–8250
	Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	8250–7650
	Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	7650–6950
	Late Neolithic	6950–6450
Southern Levant	Pre-Pottery Neolithic A	10050–9000
	Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	9000–8400
	Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	8400–7550
	Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	7550–6950
	Early Late Neolithic	6950–6400
	Late Neolithic	6400–5450
Anatolia	Early Aceramic Neolithic	8500–7000
	Late Aceramic Neolithic	7000–600
	Ceramic Neolithic	6000–5000
Thessaly	Aceramic, Early Ceramic, Proto-Sesklo	6500–6000
Aegean Macedonia	Early Neolithic	6500–6000
Vardar valley	Anzabegovo-Vršnik I	6000–5800
	Anzabegovo-Vršnik II–III	5800–5500
Struma and Mesta valleys	Early Neolithic I	6100/6000–5700
	Early Neolithic II	5700–5500
Northern Thrace, Sofia and Pirdop basins	Karanovo I	6000–5700
	Karanovo II	5700–5500
Northeast Bulgaria	Group Koprivets	6000–5700
	Group Samovodene	5700–5500

23. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, the definitions of 'Neolithic' or 'neolithization' remain blurry, unsettled, or overly disparate among scholars, often resulting in similar challenges when attempting to establish a reliable chronology. Consequently, researchers find themselves navigating a dilemma between imposing order and confronting interpretive chaos.

24. For more information on the transformation, see chapter 2.2.3.

Morava valley, Vojvodina, Iron Gates	Proto-Starčevo	6100/6000–5800
	Starčevo	5800–5500
Sava and Drava valleys, Transdanubia	Starčevo	5800–5500
Banat, Tisza, and Körös	Körös	5800–5500
Lower Danube	Criș I	6000–5700
	Criș II–III	5700–5500

While advancements in absolute dating techniques (e.g. radiocarbon methods, dendrochronology, thermoluminescence) have generated a wealth of new data, relative chronology—based on stratigraphy and typology—remains the foundation of the chrono-cultural framework still in use today. Despite its continued relevance, this approach has also been the subject of significant debate and critique (e.g. Biagi and Spataro 2005; Reingruber and Thissen 2009; Roberts and Vander Linden 2011; Krauß et al. 2014; Maran 2017; Binford 1972; Maran 2012; Gori and Ivanova 2017; Furholt 2014).

Like much of the prehistorical nomenclature used to define cultural groupings, the term Starčevo-Körös-Criș originates from relative chronology, primarily based on pottery assemblages and stratigraphic layers. This classification system emerged during the formative years of archaeology, when cultural history (e.g. Childe 1929; Kossinna 1911) dominated research agendas, and objects—especially pottery—were directly linked to specific cultural or ethnic identities, equating material remains with social or ethnic groups.

For this reason, such nomenclature has often faced criticism or, at the very least, serves as a cautionary example that cultural or ethnic identity cannot be reduced to a single material or stylistic component but must instead be understood as a broader combination of both material and abstract traits (e.g. Binford 1972; Ucko 1969; Shennan 1989; Maran 2017; Gori and Ivanova 2017; Tsirtsoni 2017; Furholt 2014; Roberts and Vander Linden 2011). Without delving into the broader debate over the validity and necessity of archaeological cultures, it is important to acknowledge that, despite attempts to refine or replace the concept with new terminology (e.g. Osborne 2008, "traditions"; Bar-Yosef and Zilhão 2006, "techno-complexes"; Willey and Phillips 1958, "groups, horizonz"), archaeological cultures remain widely used in scholarly discourse (Pluciennik 1999). As Roberts and Vander Linden note:

> This implies that for many archaeologists, the "culture" concept retains a validity that is independent of the extensive critiques albeit only as an unwelcome but necessary methodological tool.
>
> (Roberts and Vander Linden 2011, 2)

Without a reconsideration of archaeological nomenclature, the concept of archaeological cultures has long been shaped by cultural-historical and diffusionist frameworks, which categorized societies based on perceived technological complexity, often using hierarchies of "simple" versus "complex" or "higher" versus "lower" material development (Maran 2017). In Southeast Europe, this issue remains prevalent in archaeological discourse, where cultural groups such as Starčevo, Körös, or Vinča are frequently associated with modern political boundaries, nationalist narratives, and narrowly defined material traits (Gori and Ivanova 2017, 5–8; Tsirtsoni 2017). As such, the archaeological concept of culture diverges from the anthropological understanding of culture, as outlined in Chapter 1.1, and should not be considered an extension of the latter. Instead, archaeological culture is a more constrained and functional categorization that must be employed cautiously as a chronological marker rather than a definitive cultural or ethnic identifier.[25]

Nonetheless, a comprehensive interpretation of both absolute and relative chronology remains essential for constructing a temporal and spatial framework for archaeological evidence. Recognizing that chronological models are modern constructs allows scholars to use them as intended: as tools to structure and guide research. From a chronological perspective, it is particularly insightful to examine how long-term social changes have influenced food habits.[26]

With this in mind, the present study does not aim to redefine established nomenclature, as that is beyond its scope. However, given that the focus is on food culture, it is crucial to distinguish between culture as understood in an anthropological sense and archaeological culture. While the two may appear interchangeable, their meanings and applications differ significantly. In fact, this study advocates for an expanded perspective on past human societies—one that moves beyond material remains alone to explore sociocultural behaviors, particularly through the lens of food practices.

25. With this in mind, the present study will continue to use the established terminology of the Starčevo and Körös cultures for the sake of clarity and consistency. This terminology refers to communities inhabiting settlements and sharing certain characteristics—such as specific pottery styles, burial practices, and other cultural traits. However, it must be emphasized that these shared attributes do not imply a unified or singular identity. While food culture may offer a further step toward recognizing distinct identities, the current nomenclature is based on a limited set of criteria—often just one, two, or three features—used to generalize complex human groups.

26. For example, in 1952, Nicolino di Camillo opened the first pizzeria in Germany. In the years that followed, with the arrival of Italian guest workers (Gastarbeiter) to help address a labor shortage, pizza gradually assumed a central role in German dining culture (Capuana 2005).

2.2.3 Origins of Farming and Cultural Areas

2.2.3.1 Early and Middle Neolithic in the Aegean

The transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic in Southeast Europe is a complex and multifaceted process that continues to be a subject of debate. Understanding the role of Mesolithic societies in this transformation is crucial, yet the available evidence remains limited. No exception to this research context, information regarding Mesolithic societies in Southeast Europe is sparse. Apart from the Iron Gates, straddling the border between Romania and Serbia, and a few sites in the Aegean and Adriatic regions, little is known about early Holocene hunter-gatherer groups. In the Aegean, the Mesolithic period is estimated to have begun in the 9th millennium BC and concluded in the 7th millennium BC (e.g. Perlès 2001; Sampson 2006, 2018). The limited presence of Mesolithic groups—at least in the archaeological record—is central to understanding Neolithic development and continues to shape scholarly discourse. Some researchers (e.g. Hansen 1992; Lewthwaite 1987; Perlès 2005, 2001, 1989; Runnels and van Andel 1988; Bintliff 2012) argue that the scarcity of Mesolithic remains reflects a low demographic presence in the Aegean, challenging the notion of a solely indigenous contribution to farming and instead favoring a model of demic diffusion.

Conversely, John Chapman (1991, 126) suggested that the perceived lack of Mesolithic sites results from biases in research agendas, leading some scholars to argue that direct comparisons between the Neolithic and Mesolithic are problematic (Andreou, Fotiadis, and Kotsakis 1996). While this critique holds some validity, Catherine Perlès (2001, 22–23) has demonstrated that several factors may account for the scarcity of Mesolithic sites, including natural site destruction due to coastal erosion, the burial of inland settlements beneath alluvial sediments, or a historical lack of scholarly interest in the period. However, since the 1990s, extensive surveys have been conducted, making it increasingly difficult to attribute the scarcity of Mesolithic sites solely to a lack of research—though these sites remain rare.

The few known Mesolithic sites, such as Franchthi Cave, Theopetra, Maroulas, and Yioura, have yielded a rich assemblage of archaeological finds that shed light on the subsistence strategies of these early communities. Their diet primarily consisted of wild animals, including red deer, wild boars, and ibex, as well as aquatic resources such as tuna, groupers, scorpionfish, wrasses, and John Dory (e.g. Mylona 2014, 2003; Payne 1982, 1975; Rose 1995; Shackleton and Van Andel 1986; Powell 2011, 2003). Fishing appears to have played a significant role in their diet, with large fish species like tuna capable of sustaining entire communities. Small game, including hares, badgers, pigeons, and reptiles, also contributed to local subsistence strategies, alongside both marine and terrestrial

mollusks. This is exemplified by the excavations at Maroulas, where Trenches Two, Three, and Four contained "enormous quantities" of mollusks from a variety of species, with *Helix figulina*, a snail native to Greece and Anatolia, being especially prevalent (Sampson et al. 2002, 61).

To adapt to their environment and procure essential commodities, Mesolithic groups developed an extensive toolkit, including bone and stone implements such as blades, points, and fishing hooks. Notably, microliths—often considered a hallmark of Mesolithic groups—were initially rare in the Aegean. Instead, early toolkits consisted primarily of end scrapers, notches, and retouched tools made from stone flakes (Perlès et al. 1990). However, microliths regained prominence during the Upper Mesolithic, coinciding with intensified tuna fishing activities. The known Mesolithic settlements in the Aegean were predominantly located in coastal or near-coastal environments, necessitating the construction of boats and the development of basketry and fishing nets made from fibrous materials (Vaughan 1990; Tzalas 1995).

The transition from a hunter-gatherer economy to an agrarian one in the Aegean represents a pivotal moment in the region's prehistory. Understanding the mechanisms behind this transformation has been the subject of ongoing debate, with scholars exploring various models to explain the shift. Thus, a visible transition to a farming economy in the Aegean started at around 6600 calBC and slowly reached areas such as alluvial plains ignored by Mesolithic groups (e.g. Reingruber and Thissen 2009; Weninger et al. 2014; Douka et al. 2017). The dawn of the Neolithic in the Aegean is still controversial, but most scholars today reject Eric S. Higgs and Michael R. Jarman's (1972; 1969) radical opinion of a complete indigenous contribution. We still do not have any clear answer, but the middle ground with a mix of a local population having pre-knowledge of existing innovations (e.g. clay working) and group mobility originating from the Near East may form a more coherent picture. As Perlès (2005, 2001) pointed out, a certain homogeneity surrounds Neolithic sites and contrasts the Aegean Mesolithic assemblage. This homogeneity is found in what we often call the 'Neolithic package'[27], a set of skills and innovations centered around farming activities, architectural patterns, an agricultural toolkit of ground and polished stones, sickles, spinning techniques, or the introduction of domesticated species of plants, such as einkorn, emmer, lentils, barley, vetch, wheat, and peas, and animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs.

On this last trait, genetic research has found links between many European domesticates and a point of origin in the Near East (e.g. Bollongino et al. 2008; Edwards et al. 2007; Bollongino et al. 2006; Frantz et al. 2019; Tresset and

27. See chapter 2.1 for more information on the term, its meaning, and its applicability.

Vigne 2007; Larson et al. 2007). This new evidence reinforces, at least, the idea of a Near Eastern influence but does not prove any mass migration. Unfortunately, with only scarce research on human genetics (e.g. Hofmanová et al. 2016; Mathieson et al. 2017; Mathieson et al. 2015; Lazaridis et al. 2014; Lipson et al. 2017), answering questions related to population movement can prove highly speculative, especially given the lack of data about the Mesolithic period. A new study by Kılınç et al. (2017) expresses similar concerns and agrees that, to further our comprehension of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, more data from Mesolithic populations must be gathered. Nevertheless, their study yielded two interesting observations. Firstly, it seems that the Early Neolithic population in central Anatolia was composed of local foragers with little intervention from Levantine or Iranian immigrants. Secondly, the authors share some doubts about a central Anatolian origin for the Early Neolithic Aegean population but propose two alternative models: a) multiple migrations from southern Anatolia; or b) local hunter-gatherers who adopted farming through contact.

Following similar ideas, Agathe Reingruber (2018) suggests reconsidering our recent approach towards migration and population movement by seeking new avenues through sociological discourse. In considering individual mobility and the concept of social motility (i.e. the capacity to be mobile and to transmit), she formulates her thoughts around the notion that people were always and are still mobile in different ways. By accepting the fact that Aegean Mesolithic people were in continuous contact with each other and with farming communities, or at least possessed knowledge of such technological capabilities, such transformations may have started (Reingruber 2018). This exchange of knowledge must have resulted from contacts, whether through trade, intermarriages, or social gatherings, occurring between the coastal zones of the Aegean and Anatolia. Consequently, she rejects the concept of a 'Neolithic Package' as a unit carried from one group to another, instead favoring a slow transition wherein "single items during several centuries" are gradually integrated into society (Reingruber 2018, 19). The merits of this approach lie in giving more credit to local populations without completely discarding Near Eastern influences; nonetheless, the opposite is also true. With this in mind, the establishment of sedentism and a farming economy should not equate to a lack of mobility. The Aegean regions must have been known to the Anatolian populations, which may have inspired individuals or small groups to exploit this resource-rich environment.

Following Reingruber's line of thought, there is a possibility that, through a slow progression, a small group from Anatolia moved into the Aegean with the help of local hunter-gatherers. This group remained in contact with their homeland and gradually developed farming in the region, inspiring locals and possibly other Anatolian peoples to join them. A weakness in Reingruber's argument, however, is that the local development of farming through shared knowledge

depends on the limits of exchange. As we have seen, genetic evidence indicates that the domesticates found in the Aegean may have a Near Eastern origin, but there is a significant step between acquiring and maintaining such livestock. As João Zilhão (1993) pointed out, the practice of herding implies not only technological knowledge but also the sociocultural systems required to support it. Likewise, food culture plays a central role in such transformations, and concepts like the omnivore paradox and food selection should not be overlooked. As Fischler (1980) explained, the acceptance of novelty is often met with resistance. Adopting a new mode of production, such as farming, necessitates not only the acceptance of new food habits but, more fundamentally, a transformation in lifestyle. Ultimately, further genetic and archaeological research into the Mesolithic and Neolithic communities of the coastal zones of the Aegean and Anatolia is required to substantiate this intriguing hypothesis.

Yet, a Near Eastern influence in the Aegean cannot be denied, as animal husbandry is not the only indicator of such contributions; archaeological remains provide additional evidence. The location of Neolithic settlements, for instance, presents similarities with the Near East, favoring semi-arid and open woodland environments. Although caves and rock shelters were common in Mesolithic communities, they fell out of use—aside from a few exceptions like Franchthi and Alepotrypa—and were replaced by alluvial settings, plains, and valleys (Nanoglou 2008; Perlès 2001). These geographical choices allowed farmers to apply their knowledge within a familiar ecological context and facilitated the emulation of behaviors from the Near East. However, the tell-village settlement pattern, often associated with the Near East, is now being reevaluated due to the increasing discovery of flat sites (Kotsakis 1999; Bintliff 2012; Souvatzi 2013). Bintliff (2012) attributes this shift in observations to the relative ease of identifying tell-type sites and the renewed interest in Neolithic studies, which has led to new surveys and excavations. Nonetheless, tell sites remain a defining feature of the Neolithization process in the area, reflecting intentional settlement behaviors and serving as focal points for sociocultural and political development (Chapman 1994; Nanoglou 2008). Within these settlements, typical houses had a rectangular form constructed from mud brick, pisé, or post-holes (e.g. Souvatzi 2013). Pit-dwellings or semi-subterranean structures, particularly from the aceramic period, have also been identified at numerous sites, such as Dendra and Sesklo (Perlès 2001).

Beyond settlement locations and patterns, ceramics provide another crucial line of archaeological evidence. Early Neolithic ceramic production in the Aegean was limited and relatively restricted (e.g. Vitelli 1995; Bintliff 2012). Assemblages generally consist of monochrome, impressed, and painted pottery, including 'proto-Sesklo' and Middle Neolithic wares. More or less contemporaneous with the Starčevo-Körös-Criş complex, the region also exhibits red-on-white

'Sesklo' type pottery, white-on-red painted ceramics, scraped ware, and grey-on-grey pottery (Bintliff 2012, 68). Even though the Middle Neolithic witnessed an expansion of trade networks and inter-site communication, ceramic production appears to have remained largely a local endeavor, created and used within individual communities.

Ultimately, the introduction of farming in the Aegean had a profound impact on the Neolithization process in the southern Balkans. Many of the characteristics outlined above would later persist in Bulgaria. The region, however, appears to have been largely vacant during the Mesolithic, leaving the landscape open for farming communities (Todorova 1995a, 82). The lack of Mesolithic settlements has been interpreted by Bailey as a consequence of:

> […] early Holocene research on local agendas and the loss of sites due to a sea-level change, it is equally important to recognize that the Balkan upper Palaeolithic was a long period containing little significant internal change. The 'Mesolithic' may not have existed in the Balkans for the same reasons that cave and mobiliary art never appeared: the changes in climate and flora were gradual and not dramatic.
>
> (Bailey 2000, 36)

According to Gurova and Bonsall (2014), the missing link between the Palaeolithic and the arrival of the first farmers has significant ramifications, shaping our interpretations of the period. To address this gap, they propose conducting surface surveys and excavations along the coastal areas of the Black Sea, Aegean, and Adriatic, as these locations correspond to environmental settings favored by Mesolithic populations.

2.2.3.2 Early Neolithic Groups in the South Balkans

Some 500 years after its initial introduction into the Aegean, the farming lifestyle spread into the southern Balkans and gradually expanded across the region. Like their southern neighbors, settlements in Bulgaria tend to favor alluvial plains, often situated in valleys, due to the vast mountain chains that characterize the Bulgarian landscape. From an archaeological perspective, the development of agrarian communities exhibits regional diversity, with Karanovo (I–II) groups emerging in Upper Thrace and southwestern Bulgaria, Vaxevo (I–III) in Upper Struma, Bălgarčevo (Ia) in the northern part of the Middle Struma, Kovačevo (I–IV) in its southern part, and finally Koprivets and Samovodene groups in northeastern Bulgaria (e.g. Todorova 1995b; Perničeva 2007). Generally speaking, sites in Bulgaria display settlement patterns similar to those in Greece, with permanent villages forming clusters of small rectangular houses constructed from timber, mud, and clay but lacking stone foundations and mudbricks (Bailey 2000). As in the

Aegean, and likely indicative of an Anatolian origin, many houses have one or two rooms and undergo cycles of destruction, repair, and rebuilding, occasionally leading to the formation of tell-like sites (e.g. Sherratt 1982; Chapman 1990, 1997; Bailey 2000, 1999; Brami 2014).

In the early stages of archaeological research in Bulgaria, tells played a central role in the local narrative, to the extent that they became the foundation of an entire cultural model, known as the 'mound culture' (Gaul 1948). Today, tell-like settlements are primarily associated with the Karanovo groups, while examples in other Bulgarian regions are limited (Demoule and Lichardus-Itten 1994; Bailey 2000). For instance, in the Struma Valley, such sites are absent from the archaeological record, with flat settlements instead being predominant. In these sites, floors are made of stamped earth rather than mud and clay, as demonstrated by findings at Kovačevo and Slatina (Lichardus-Itten et al. 2002; Demoule and Lichardus-Itten 1994; Nikolov 1989). Excavations at Slatina have also revealed a distinct architectural type that might be termed "large houses" or "big houses," which appear to be a recurring feature in Neolithic Thrace (Nikolov 1989; Brami 2014).

The present example from Slatina was discovered in the northeastern corner of the site during archaeological investigations in 1985 and is dated to the sixth millennium BC (Nikolov 1989). Its dimensions are quite impressive, measuring 12.44 meters on its longer side and 12.34 meters on its shorter side. Its walls were constructed using posts with diameters of 10–15 cm, reinforced with twigs and branches, and finally filled with mud and clay. At the center of the structure, three posts were found, most likely serving as support for the roof. Interestingly, the structure appears to have been divided into two sections. In its lower part, archaeologists discovered two features, each approximately 2x4 meters, which they interpreted as a wooden 'bed' (Holzliegen) and a fireplace (Nikolov 1989). In the upper part, various elements related to cooking activities—storage units, ovens, grinding stones, etc.—suggest that the structure functioned as a gathering place assigned to food preparation. Among the storage units, fourteen clay containers with preserved botanical remains were found, six of which contained more than 200 kg of carbonized wheat, barley, and beans (Docheva 1990).

Maxime Brami (2014, 178–180) identified parallels between Slatina's large house and dwellings from Hacılar. His first argument pertains to spatial organization: at both sites, a rectangular oven is positioned at the rear section of the structure, facing a doorway on the opposite wall and concealed from the entrance by large central posts. The distribution of storage units along the western and eastern walls, away from what he terms the "sleeping platforms," is another shared feature. Finally, the presence of a long, narrow room in the northern part

reinforced, according to Brami (2014) and Vassil Nikolov (2007), the notion of an Anatolian influence. While no clear evidence of an upper floor was found at Slatina's large house, a similar structure at Kapitan Dimitrijevo, where an oven was discovered atop another example, supports the idea of a two-storied building (Nikolov 2007, 2000).

In northeastern Bulgaria, where plains dominate the landscape, flat sites are the predominant settlement pattern, with surface structures or pit huts scattered over large areas, as seen at Koprivets and Ovcharovo-zemnika I (Popov 1993; Stefanova 1996; Todorova et al. 1983). At Ovcharovo-Gorata, an early form of verticality can be observed: small pits or pit-huts were initially occupied by the first generations, and new structures were subsequently built over them, following the same orientation (Nobis 1986). Hearths were frequently found inside these structures. However, the presence of ovens or hearths within houses was not exceptional, as similar features appear throughout Bulgaria.[28] Hearths were not restricted to interior spaces; examples have also been found outside structures. The site of Samovodyane represents a rare instance of a tell settlement in northern Bulgaria (Todorova and Vajsov 1993; Ninov and Stanev 1991). While parts of the Early Neolithic settlement correspond to the earliest phase of the site, contemporaneous with Karanovo II in Thrace (5700–5400 cal BC) (Stanev 2002), Samovodyane remained occupied for an extended period, resulting in a sequence of construction and reconstruction. The shared similarities in settlement and dwelling patterns with their Aegean counterparts extend to many other aspects of the archaeological record. Food preferences related to animal consumption further illustrate these affinities, as recurring patterns in faunal remains reveal mixed herds of local and external species, with sheep and goats predominating, followed by cattle and pigs.[29]

The ceramic assemblage also exhibits southern influences, featuring a variety of white-on-red painted pottery (e.g. Vitelli 1993; Todorova and Vajsov 1993; Tringham 1971). By contrast, white-on-red decorations are not characteristic of the entire region but are primarily associated with the Karanovo I and Thessalian Sesklo groups, as well as Nea Nikomedia (Tringham 1971, 79). In the Struma Valley, the site of Kovačevo has yielded additional examples of white-on-red decorations, though they constitute only about 3 percent of its assemblage (Lichardus-Itten et al. 2002). According to Raiko Krauß (2011), the white-on-red spiral and linear motifs found at Kovačevo, previously attributed by excavators to Karanovo II, should, in fact, be recognized as a Karanovo I trait. In north-

28. The extension of an enclosed environment—originally intended primarily for protection during sleep—to encompass food practices represents a significant cultural development. This topic will be further explored in Chapter 4.

29. See Chapters 3.2 and 4 for more information.

central Bulgaria, similar wares have been identified at Džuljunica, though with dot patterns. Krauß thus proposes associating the earliest phase of the Neolithic in Bulgaria and other parts of the Balkans with an Anatolian influence.

At the site of Bălgarčevo, located in the Struma Valley, another type of painted pottery dominates the assemblage, featuring brown- or black-on-red or beige decorations (Perničeva 2007). Similar to white-on-red ceramics, these decorations consist of curvilinear bands, spiral motifs, and geometric patterns. Among the wares, darker ceramics, including grey or black varieties, appear to have been particularly popular, predominantly represented by carinated vessels (Perničeva 2002). According to Liljana Perničeva (2007), despite regional variations, the Bălgarčevo I assemblage exhibits strong similarities with northern sites. This type of darker decoration is also present at Vaxevo III and Sapareva Banja I, suggesting a closer connection to the later phases of the Starčevo culture and, more directly, to Zelenikovo I.

Beyond decorated pottery, monochrome wares have also been identified in some excavations. At Koprivets, a distinct red monochrome assemblage was documented in four successive layers (Popov 1993). Notably, no painted pottery was found within these layers. The forms and decorative elements of this type of ware, observed not only at Koprivets but also at Poljanica-Platoto, have been interpreted as part of the Proto-Starčevo horizon, comparable to Divostin I and Grivac I (Todorova 1990; Vajsov 1998; Bogdanovic 2007). However, the significance of Proto-Starčevo pottery in northern Bulgaria and its relationship to southern sites remains uncertain, necessitating further evidence to bridge existing gaps in our understanding.

As with most Neolithic sites, ceramic production in Early Neolithic Bulgaria extended beyond utilitarian wares. A diverse array of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines, as well as clay models of buildings and furniture, has been uncovered at numerous sites. Douglass W. Bailey (2005) suggested that figurines played a role in the sociopolitical sphere, serving as rhetorical objects in the construction, preservation, and maintenance of social space. They functioned as referents to the organization of space, delineating institutional, social, and individual spheres. Through the dual properties of malleability and permanence inherent in clay, Bailey interprets these artifacts as extensions of personhood and sociability:

> While there was nothing specific to the Neolithic in the human need to understand social relationships, there were specific material and political conditions that made the Neolithic manifestations of human identities distinct. Specifically, new conceptualizations of society were created in new media, including the built environment and the formal deposition of the deceased; however, Neolithic perspectives

> on society found equally powerful manifestations in the repeated, daily, visual experience of people seeing representations of the human body in miniature, durable, three-dimensional form.
>
> (Bailey 2005, 198)

The toolkit of South Balkan groups saw the introduction of a range of stone artifacts, including axes, scrapers, blades, and ground stones, as well as bone tools such as spoons, hammers, pounders, awls, digging sticks made from horns, shaft-hole axes, and adzes. Two new features of the stone tool assemblage became emblematic of the period: the Karanovo blade and the renowned 'Balkan flint' (e.g. Gurova 2008, 2012; Karul 2017). The 'Balkan flint' is distinguished by its yellow-honey-waxy coloration with white spots, earning it the French designation 'silex blond.' While its origins are presumed to be in northern Bulgaria, archaeological investigations, according to Gurova (2012, 15), have yet to provide definitive evidence for this claim. Nonetheless, it was one of the few elements that crossed the Balkan mountain range, reaching sites along the Lower Danube, the Starčevo-Körös-Criş complex, and Turkish Thrace (Gurova and Bonsall 2014). This tool appeared only after 6000 cal BC and is entirely absent at sites such as Kovačevo (ca. 6050 cal BC) (Gurova 2008).

Remains of funerary practices are scarce, with most known burials found beneath house floors or in close proximity to buildings. Although no clear pattern can be definitively established, burials frequently contain ceramic, bone, and flint tools, as well as ornaments (Bogucki and Crabtree 2004). This inconsistency is well described by Krum Băčvarov (2000, 137) in his comparative study of burials at Tell Karanovo, where bodies were positioned without a standardized arrangement, appearing in a variety of postures, including "contracted on their left side, on the abdomen and on the back, and in an extended position on the abdomen." Ultimately, while the Bulgarian Early Neolithic was largely influenced by Anatolian and Aegean traditions, its development also displays distinct local characteristics.

2.2.3.3 Early Neolithic in North Balkans

As we move into the northern Balkan regions beyond the Balkan mountain range, the situation gradually changes. With dense forests, low mountain ranges, wide valleys, and a continental climate, farming groups of foreign origins had to adapt to these new environmental settings, markedly different from the semi-arid alluvial plains of their homeland. Previously defined as encompassing modern Serbia and Romania, this study focuses primarily on two distinct regions: Šumadija and the Iron Gates, along with their associated cultural entities, namely the Starčevo and Criş cultures, often grouped under the broader designation of the Starčevo-

Körös-Criş complex.[30] As discussed earlier, like many prehistoric cultural classifications, the name Starčevo-Körös-Criş originates from relative chronology based on pottery assemblages and stratigraphy. This study retains this nomenclature for clarity and categorization, though it is essential to recognize that shared material features do not necessarily equate to shared identities. Additionally, as this chapter examines the corridor between Serbia and the Carpathian Basin, both the Starčevo and Körös cultures will be introduced.

The Starčevo culture extends from southern Serbia to Transdanubia in Hungary, reaching the fringes of modern Romania at the Iron Gates. Unlike its southern neighbors, it coexisted with a strong Mesolithic community at the Iron Gates, which provided one of the rare instances of an uninterrupted Mesolithic-to-Neolithic transition, particularly at Lepenski Vir (Srejović 1972). Prior to the construction of two dams, the Iron Gates was already well known among archaeologists for its political and economic significance as a transit hub, both during the Roman period and later historical phases (Bonsall, Boroneant, and Radovanović 2008). As archaeologists rushed to investigate the area before the flooding caused by the dams, they uncovered a wealth of Mesolithic and Neolithic sites, with more than fifty cave and open-air settlements spanning from 12,700 to 5,600 cal BC (e.g. Bonsall and Boroneanţ 2018). While many of these sites are now submerged, research in the region continues to yield new insights.

The Iron Gates provided an ideal environment for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, offering a diverse range of aquatic resources, from smaller fish such as breams and cyprinids to the massive beluga and Russian sturgeons, carp, and pike. The region also supported an abundance of wild game, including red and roe deer, aurochs, and wild boar, among others (e.g. Bartosiewicz, Bonsall, and Şişu 2008; Dinu 2010; Živaljević 2012; Orton, Gaastra, and Vander Linden 2016; Cramp et al. 2019). The earliest settlements, dating up to approximately 7,200 cal BC, were established in caves and rock shelters along the Danube's banks. Sites from this period, such as Cuina Turcului, exhibit an assemblage of stone blades, bladelets, and end scrapers, characteristic of the European Mesolithic (Cârciumaru and Nitu 2019). Shortly thereafter, the region's inhabitants began to establish open-air settlements, forming long-lasting generational communities along the riverbanks. These new settlements, marking the shift toward a more sedentary lifestyle, were composed of small clusters of trapezoidal semi-subterranean dwellings (pit houses) and featured rectangular stone-lined hearths, with some stoneless examples, positioned either within the houses or in open spaces (e.g. Bonsall et al. 2008; Srejović and Letica 1978; Srejović 1972). In several cases, the layout also included activity zones such as storage and refuse pits, indicating planned use of space and routine maintenance.

30. See Chapter 3.1.1 for more details.

On a sociocultural level, funerary practices involved the deposition of bodies in burials, typically with a single individual lying on their back, although burials with bodies placed on their side, with straight or flexed legs and arms, were also common (Bonsall 2008, 256). This practice was later identified as primary inhumation, implying the existence of a second form of inhumation, including both burials and cremations, whether collective or individual, in which bodies were disarticulated or body parts were intentionally removed (Bonsall and Boroneanţ 2018, 5). While primary inhumations reflect special care for the deceased, secondary inhumations suggest a prolonged and ritualistic process, where the body underwent additional treatments, sometimes at a later period, allowing for natural excarnation. Offerings for the dead were rare, but when present, they included ornaments, animal and human skulls, and tools fashioned from bone or antler (Bonsall and Boroneanţ 2018, 6). If these offerings also served practical purposes, identifying Mesolithic technological innovations becomes challenging, as they appear in both earlier and later contexts (Bonsall 2008, 263). However, bone tools made from red deer and wild boar remain strong candidates for Mesolithic contributions in the form of hoes, mattocks, scrapers, awls, and arrowheads.

A unique cultural marker of the Iron Gates region is its boulder artworks. These pieces, most prominently found at Lepenski Vir, are often associated with rectangular hearths and trapezoidal dwellings (Srejović 1972).[31] The precise dating of these boulders remains uncertain, though they appear to have roots in Palaeolithic artistic traditions, taking definitive form during the Mesolithic and ultimately persisting into the Neolithic period. Their size and weight vary considerably, ranging from approximately 1 kg to as much as 50 kg (Borić 2005a). The artistic representations on these boulders remain enigmatic, with ongoing debates regarding both their function and interpretation. Their stylistic ambiguity, oscillating between zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms, further complicates analysis.

The function of these boulders has long fueled archaeological discourse, inspiring a range of interpretations, including their role as markers of the first steps toward civilization (Srejović 1969), depictions of a Mother Goddess (Gimbutas 1991, 1982), symbols of hunter-gatherer empowerment and resistance against farming economies (Radovanovic 1997), or representations of the divide between fish-eaters and meat-eaters (Chapman 2000). However, such hypotheses remain speculative, and I align with Dusan Borić in his critique that these explanations tend to portray:

[31] For an exhaustive catalogue of the Lepenski Vir assemblage see Srejović and Babović 1983.

> The essentialist separation of foragers and farmers as a way of simplifying the construction of Mesolithic vs. Early Neolithic identities primarily on the basis of subsistence resources.
>
> (Borić 2005b, 46)

For Borić, these boulders represent an extension of beliefs in metamorphosis, bridging the animal and human worlds as part of the domestication process. Rather than being solely a Neolithic phenomenon, they reflect a long-term development that began in the Palaeolithic and culminated in the Neolithic (Borić 2005a). In contrast, Mihael Budja (2004b) interprets them as a form of institutionalization and an artifact of worship, symbolizing the house of the ancestors. While both interpretations offer valuable insights, it is evident that these symbolic objects gained enough significance to persist beyond the arrival of a new ideological system introduced by foreign farmers.

The transition to the Neolithic in the Iron Gates was a complex process, making the traditional notion of population replacement increasingly untenable. Recent strontium isotope and genetic research suggests that incoming farmers, likely from Anatolia or the Aegean, entered the region and extensively intermingled with the local population (e.g. Borić and Price 2013; Mathieson et al. 2017; Hofmanová et al. 2016; Fernández et al. 2014). The arrival of these farmers influenced the sociocultural landscape of the Iron Gates; however, Mesolithic traditions persisted for a considerable period. The dichotomy between Mesolithic and Neolithic communities has often been framed as a strict separation, reinforcing an *ex Oriente lux* interpretation, yet such a model is hardly applicable to the Iron Gates. Borić (2005b) emphasized the complexity of the development of a farming economy in Southeast Europe and the challenges of addressing identity questions. What has been perceived as an opposition may, in fact, have been a cultural fusion in which both groups adapted through cooperation and shared values. In light of this perspective, the simplistic notion of an empty landscape being overtaken by foreign farmers must be replaced with a recognition of gradual transformations and long, intricate processes of interaction, exchange, and adaptation. These themes will be revisited when discussing food culture in Southeast Europe and the ways in which food habits, beyond mere material changes, can shape our understanding of past identities. The archaeological remains left by the Starčevo groups indicate the introduction of new domesticated species, while in the Iron Gates, many wild species continued to be heavily exploited.[32] Although fishing resources generally played a lesser role, sites along the Danube did not abandon this subsistence strategy, and in the Iron Gates, fishing remained an essential part of the local economy.

32. See Chapter 4.2 for more details

In terms of settlement patterns, tell-like deposits characteristic of the South Balkans, the Aegean, and Anatolia are absent from the archaeological record. Instead, flat sites are the predominant settlement type. As the inhabitants of the Iron Gates established sedentary or semi-sedentary communities, the permanence of Starčevo settlements remains a subject of debate. Many sites exhibit characteristics indicative of periodic occupation within a broader mobile lifestyle (e.g. Greenfield and Jongsma-Greenfield 2014; Greenfield and Jongsma 2008; Forenbaher and Miracle 2005; Vuković 2017). According to Haskel J. Greenfield and Tina Jongsma (2005, 70), evidence supporting this conclusion includes the presence of pit houses, a strong reliance on domesticated animals, a limited presence of domesticated plants, and a deficiency in storage facilities. While this interpretation likely reflects aspects of reality, it should not be considered a universal trait of all Starčevo sites.

Since most sites have been heavily disturbed, assessing the full dimensions of these settlements remains challenging. However, it is plausible that they were small farming or fishing villages. Pit-house-style architecture continued to be employed, though rectangular shapes largely replaced the earlier trapezoidal plans.[33] The houses were small, typically around 16 m^2 or 25 m^2, and often constructed with a light timber framework, wattle-and-daub walls, and a pitched roof (Bánffy 2013c). The site of Divostin, however, presents a deviation from this pattern, as most of its houses were even smaller, ranging between 10–12 m^2, with elliptical shapes often designated as 'huts' (McPherron and Srejović 1988; Bogdanovic 1988; Bailey 1999). A similar elliptical plan was also observed by Srejović (1972, 139) in Phase III at Lepenski Vir. Larger houses have been identified at sites such as Blagotin, Foeni-Salač, and Vinča-Belo Brdo, where they occupied a central place in settlement layouts. At Blagotin, two 30 cm idols were discovered on the floor of one of these structures, suggesting a communal function (Greenfield and Jongsma 2005).

In terms of funerary practices, extended supine inhumations persisted until approximately 6000 cal BC. The following stage saw the emergence of burials in a crouched or fetal position, mostly found within settlements (e.g. Kalicz 1990, 40–47). These burials were often circular in shape and occasionally covered with stone slabs. They were generally intended for a single individual, with only a few instances of collective graves. Grave goods were not always present, though vessels, tools, and jewelry were occasionally included.

33. Although Srejović (1972, 139) suggested that the trapezoidal house plan at Lepenski Vir disappeared during Phase III, subsequent reanalyses have indicated that such dwellings persisted into the Starčevo period at sites like Lepenski Vir, Padina, and Vlasac (e.g. Jovanović 1969; Milisauskas 1978; Tringham 2000; Bonsall et al. 2008; Bonsall 2008).

Starčevo pottery exhibits a range of coarse red or black monochrome wares, alongside more refined, polished ceramics. According to Vuković (2014, 11), Early Neolithic pottery production was nonstandardized, likely the result of household-based activities. Despite variations in raw materials due to local environmental conditions, pottery techniques remained relatively consistent across the Starčevo complex (Spataro 2019). Vessel shapes included rounded pots, deep conical bowls, plates, altars, and jars. While undecorated pottery was common, many vessels featured barbotine and impressed decorations (Manson 1995). Painted pottery, incorporating white and darker lines, was less prevalent but has been found at sites such as Grivac and Divostin. Some patterns share similarities with white-line decorations from the South Balkans, although these gradually disappeared from the Starčevo repertoire, to the extent that white-painted wares are absent in later phases (Manson 1995). However, the darker variant persisted throughout the entire period.

Another defining feature of the Early Neolithic is the presence of stone and clay figurines in both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms, which have been extensively studied (e.g. Srejović 1966; Höckmann 1968; Letica 1988). Various anthropomorphic types have been identified, though Srejović (1966, 29–30) categorized them broadly into two major groups: cylindrical and geometric, with further subdivisions possible.[34] Modern research suggests a general consensus on at least two principal types (Figure 9) (Becker 2007, 123). The first type has a columnar or cylindrical body with a flat base, often bell- or pear-shaped, lacking legs or feet. The second type is characterized by prominent buttocks, broad hips, and the presence of arms, legs, and more clearly defined anatomical features. Although local variations exist beyond these two types, their widespread occurrence has made them a distinctive trait of the Starčevo complex (Becker 2007). Beyond figurines, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms extended to other mediums, including vessels and amulets. Regarding the former, Kornelija Minichreiter (2000) suggests that the limited examples available predominantly depict female figures. She further argues that the creation of female representations in various forms often indicates the ritualization of objects associated with the "force of nature" or reproduction, whether symbolizing childbirth or a successful harvest (Minichreiter 2000, 12).

34. For instance, the typological classification of Starčevo figurines was refined by Höckmann (1968), who distinguished between 'fat', broad-buttocked, short-legged, long-necked figurines and more cylindrical forms. Letica(1988) further developed this typology by subdividing Höckmann's cylindrical group into seated and asexual variants.

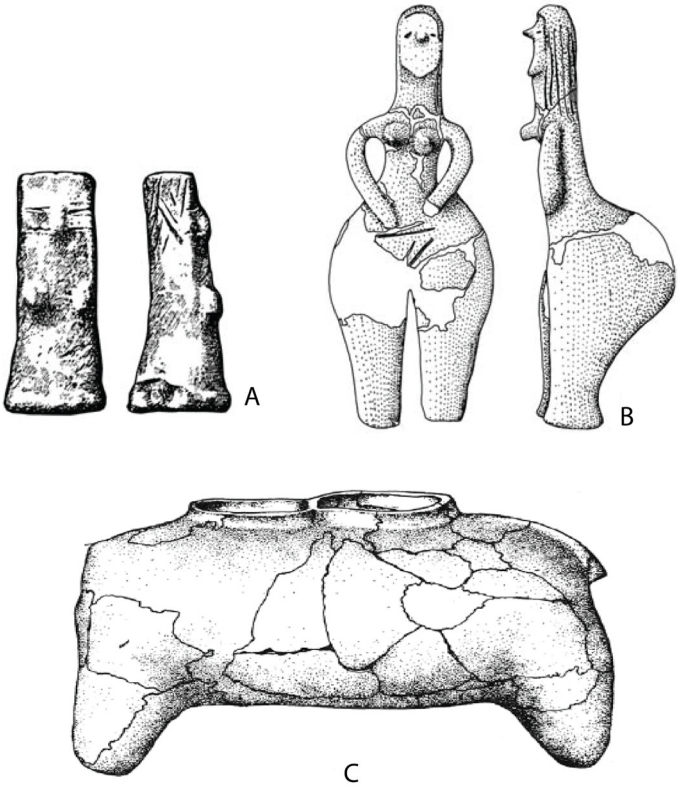

Figure 9. Starčevo anthropomorphic (A–B) figurines and zoomorphic vessels (C). A) figurines from Vinkovci (after Becker 2007, fig. 6); B) figurine from Donja Branjevina (after Becker 2007, fig. 6); C) vessel from Donja Branjevina (after Karmanski 1987, fig. a).

Small find assemblages consisted of a diverse array of ornaments and tools made from bone, teeth, and shells. While bone tools were already present in the Mesolithic, their variety expanded significantly during the Neolithic. Boar tusks were commonly used for scrapers, Bos bones for spoon-spatulae, and mollusc shells, such as spondylus and dentalium, for beads and bracelets. Additionally, bone remains and teeth were crafted into rings, discs, pendants, and buckles (Vitezović 2017, 2012). With the increasing need for farming equipment, antlers gained popularity as raw material for hoes, axes, hammer-axes, picks, and ploughs (Mihailović 2012).

Despite these new applications, their Mesolithic use for fishing hooks persisted, particularly at riverine sites like Lepenski Vir (Srejović 1972). While bones provided a wide range of objects, many tools had stone counterparts. The

production of stone tools within Starčevo communities appears to have been largely local, utilizing pebbles collected from surrounding areas (Tringham et al. 1988; Antonović 2012). A central component of the 'Neolithic package', ground stone tools also made their first appearance during this period.

As part of the broader Starčevo-Körös-Criş complex, the Körös groups share similarities with the Starčevo culture while also exhibiting distinct characteristics. Their settlement patterns already set them apart, as the Körös groups occupied a region enclosed between the Danube-Tisza interfluve and the Hungarian Plain, favoring floodplains and marshlands, always in close proximity to river streams. In contrast, the Transdanubian region of Hungary remained occupied by Starčevo groups (e.g. Bánffy 2013a, c; Whittle 1987; Sherratt 1983a, 1982). Although the Körös cultural region was smaller and more concentrated than the Starčevo expansion, it has yielded more than fifty known sites, a number that continues to grow (Bánffy 2013a, 13). Along the Danube, the Körös culture consistently settled on the left bank, while Starčevo materials are found on the right bank. The reason for this distinction remains debated; according to Eszter Bánffy (2013a, b), it may reflect cultural identity and the establishment of a symbolic boundary demarcating 'us' and 'them.'

Regarding settlement patterns, slightly elevated terrain at the border of flood levels was typically preferred for obvious practical reasons (Whittle 2010a, b). In general, settlement sizes varied, though many have been poorly preserved due to erosion (Bánffy 2013a). The duration of occupation also differed widely: some sites adjacent to rivers appear to have been used only sporadically, while others exhibit evidence of intensive, long-term habitation—for instance, Ecsegfalva was occupied for approximately a century (Bronk Ramsey et al. 2007). Furthermore, seasonal mobility was likely, much as it was for the Starčevo culture, suggesting a mixed strategy of mobility and permanent residency. Structurally similar to those of the Starčevo culture, the dwellings were primarily rectangular pit houses with a hearth. However, they were generally smaller and relied more on wattle-and-daub with twig impressions than on wooden frameworks (e.g. Bánffy 2013c, 124). Although poor preservation limits our understanding, clay house models, such as those from Röszke (Trogmayer 1966), provide valuable insights into architectural practices of the time.

Due to poor preservation, the treatment of the dead within the Körös culture remains largely unknown (Paluch 2007). However, more than 100 burials associated with Körös groups have been discovered (Oravecz 2003). The limited information available indicates that, as in most Early Neolithic sites in the northern Balkans, bodies were typically placed in a crouched position, with grave goods being rare and usually consisting of vessels and stone tools. In general, burials were located inside or adjacent to houses, reflecting a connection between the

deceased and the permanence of a sedentary lifestyle (Oravecz 2003). In his study, Tibor Paluch (2012, 2007) observed that Körös graves were generally sparse and that many bodies were found in refuse pits, a characteristic that may be considered a distinctive trait of the Körös culture. Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, some scholars propose that burial pits may have been used (Paluch 2007).

Material remains from Körös sites exhibit typical Early Neolithic traits, reflecting responses to new economic demands. These include stone and bone tools such as axes, scrapers, grinding stones, adzes, and blades. To acquire the necessary materials, the Körös and Starčevo groups either imported resources and finished products from the south—such as "Banat" flint—or produced them locally (Biagi, Gratuze, and Boucetta 2007; Mester and Rácz 2010). From the Neolithic onward, a growing interest in high-quality materials such as obsidian, basalt, and green schist led to a decline in general mining activities in favor of more specialized resource exploitation (Bácskay and Bíró 2003). Among these materials, obsidian was particularly valued in the region, having been exploited since the Middle Palaeolithic (Cărciumaru et al. 1985). Given that sources of obsidian were rare in Europe—and with Aegean obsidian already circulating in the Early Neolithic—Carpathian obsidian was strategically positioned for trade. Its use extended far beyond the local sphere, integrating into a vast trading network that included Thessaly, Italy, and even Denmark (e.g. Kilikoglou et al. 1996; Thorpe, Warren, and Nandris 1984; Perlès 1990).

In contrast to the widespread trade in obsidian, Körös ceramic assemblages, like those at most Early Neolithic sites, were locally produced for local use. These assemblages are characterized primarily by red monochrome wares, red-painted dots on white, and white-on-red pottery. Common forms include carinated vessels, altars, pedestals, cups/mugs, and various jars and bowls (e.g. Oross 2007; Makkay 1965, 1982, 1969). The presence of storage jars suggests a degree of permanence at certain sites. Both undecorated and decorated pottery are represented in the assemblage, with decorative techniques ranging from impressions (finger, nail, and mussel) to the widely used pinched technique. Additional motifs include spike patterns, incisions, and appliqué elements such as ribs, knobs, and barbotine (Oross 2007).

Körös contexts also feature a minor presence of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic clay figurines, as well as a few examples of anthropomorphic vessels (e.g. Banner 1937; Kalicz 1970; Starnini 2014). According to Starnini (2014, 14-15), Körös clay figurines can be classified into four types: S (steatopygous), B (barrel-shaped), P (pear-shaped), and C (cylindrical-conical). The S-type figurines, characterized by large buttocks and a thin upper body, not only resemble those of the Starčevo tradition but are also interpreted as cult objects. The B-type is the rarest, with only one complete example found at Dévaványa 3/33 (Ecsedy

et al. 1982; Starnini 2014). In contrast to the steatopygous figurines, the C-type is often considered male, though this distinction is less clear than in the S-type. Finally, the P-type figurines lack legs, resulting in a pear-shaped form. Notably, no seated figurines have been found within Körös contexts, except for a single stray find from Endröd.

In the northern Balkans and the Carpathian Basin, the arrival of the first farmers may not have been a straightforward process of direct implementation. Unlike the Aegean and southern Balkans, where environmental conditions were more familiar to incoming agriculturalists, the new landscapes of the northern Balkans required a period of adaptation and familiarization. This necessity for adjustment may have influenced the construction of less permanent settlements and fostered the development of strong social networks with local populations. While this process appears most evident in the Starčevo culture, whose settlement gradually expanded from the Lower Danube to Transdanubia, the Körös group also took time to acclimate to their environment and establish knowledge of the territory (Bánffy 2013a, 155). Nevertheless, the advent of farming in the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin marked the beginning of the expansion of a new way of life into Europe. While the Balkans was once perceived as a monolithic entity, with terminologies such as the Karanovo-Starčevo-Körös-Criş culture broadly applied, it is now evident that the reality was far more intricate. This complexity arose not only from ecological adaptation and socioeconomic subsistence strategies but also from the development of a sociocultural network that encompassed both local populations and incoming groups. These communities were physically shaped by the landscape and culturally defined by their interactions, illustrating the multifaceted nature of early farming societies in the region.