ON VĂDASTRA HABITATION IN SOUTHERN ROMANIA: CONTEXT AND RESULTS FROM THE TELEORMAN VALLEY

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Cuvinte cheie: neolitic, Vădastra, Valea Teleormanului, gropi, ceramică.

Abstract: This study presents recent data regarding the presence of the Vădastra culture east of the Olt, in an area where few discoveries of this kind were known. The researches carried out on the Teleorman Valley, at Mâgura Buduiasca, were first taken into account. As a result of the archaeological excavations that were accomplished between 2001 and 2005, as well as the analysis performed on the archaeological complexes and the inventory, there could be noticed some characteristics specific to the Vădastra habitation and the paleoeconomy of these communities.

Rezumat: Acest studiu îşi propune să prezinte date recente legate de prezenţa culturii Vădastra la est de Olt, într-o zonă în care erau cunoscute puţine descoperiri de acest fel. Au fost avute în vedere, în primul rând, cercetările efectuate pe Valea Teleormanului, la Mâgura Buduiasca. În urma descoperirilor de aici, din perioada anilor 2001-2005, dar şi a analizelor efectuate asupra complexelor arheologice şi a inventarului acestora, au putut fi observate unele caracteristici specifice locuirii Vădastra şi paleoeconomiei acelor comunităţi.

The purpose of this study is to unfold recent data regarding the presence of the Vădastra culture east of Olt, taking into account the archaeological research on the Teleorman River’s Valley, carried out as part of a Romanian-British project, entitled SRAP1. The “Vădastra culture” appellative, typical to the eastern Oltenia, was first mentioned in the literature in 1932 (NESTOR 1932, 56-57), based on the discoveries from the Vădastra settlement situated west of Olt. There, at Mâgura Fetelor, the first Vădastra discoveries were made by Cezar Bolliac, between 1871 and 1873. The archaeological excavations continued in 1926 under the supervision of Vasile Christescu (CHRISTESCU 1933, 167-225) and later, in 1934, of Dumitru Berciu (BERCIU 1937, 2). Most of the Vădastra settlements were known in the south-eastern Oltenia (Fig. 1). Some of them were archaeologically researched: Vădastra (MATEESCU 1959, 61-73; 1959a, 107-115; 1961, 57-62; 1962, 187-191; 1970, 67-75; 1971, 19-23), Cruşovu (MATEESCU 1957, 103-113), Hotărani (BERCIU 1966, 93-98; NICA 1971, 5-33), Fârcaşu de Sus (NICA 1970, 31-52), Vlădila and Piatra Sat (NICA, CIUCĂ 1989, 29-41) and continued the list of those discovered in the inter-war period: Orlea, Frăsinetul de Pădure, Reşca, Corabia, Celei, Ţimnic, Bratoveşti (BERCIU 1939, 34).

The discoveries east of the Olt River have convinced some researchers to consider that the Vădastra culture’s area of spread is wider than the territory between the Jiu River and the Lower Olt and covers a zone that stretches from the Călmăţui Valley to the Vedea Valley (BERCIU 1961, 53; FLORESCU, DAICOVICIU, ROŞU 1980, 12;
Fig. 1. Vădastra discoveries in the Danubian basin.


The presence of the Vădastra culture was postulated at least for the western Muntenia, even though the researches had no revealed significant artifacts that could be connected to this culture nearer than the eastern bank of the Olt, first at Slatina (Berciu, Butoi 1961, 139-142; Butoi 1973, 139) and Ipotești (Comșa 1962, 217; 1973, 35-36) and later at Beciu (Mirea 2005, 78, 92).

The pottery uncovered in the settlement of Radovanu II, along the Argeș River, which was attributed by the author of the researches to a local „facies“, named Radovanu II, chronologically situated between the end of the Boian-Bolintineanu phase and the beginning of the Boian-Giulești phase (Comșa 1977, 327), could belong, stylistically speaking, to the Vădastra style. Moreover, the discoveries at Chitila-Femâ were attributed to the same culture, whose spread could be much wider, on a territory south of Carpathians, from the Jiu to the eastern Romanian Plain, in the hilly area and the Buzău Plain (Boroneant 2005, 49-50, 60-61). From this point of view, we mention the discoveries of some Vădastra pottery fragments with excised decoration at Boldești-Grădiște, Ghinoaica and Sudiți. If we are to consider the first one as an isolated discovery, the two later ones revealed Vădastra materials mixed with Dudești and Boian-Bolintineanu pottery. Victor Teodorescu noticed the presence of several ceramic fragments with a typical Vădastra I / Dudești decoration of some Bolintineanu archaeological complexes (Franculeasa 2007, 30).

The Vădastra settlement at Măgura Buduiasca was first attested in 2001 when the diggings revealed pottery fragments with excised decoration at an archaeological level seriously disturbed by post-Neolithic interventions. The archaeological excavations carried out in the following years (2002-2005)

On the origins of the Vădastra culture several theories, rather contradictory, have been expressed in course of time. On the one hand, Dumitru Berciu considered that it arose on an ancient Vinča foundation and some LBK influences (BERCIU 1961, 56-57). Later, he emphasized the idea that it was the Dudești culture that established its basis (BERCIU 1966, 93-98). On the other hand, unlike Dumitru Berciu, Corneliu Mateescu considered that the origins of the Vădastra culture should be sought within the Starčevo-Criș culture.

Marin Nica expressed an other theory on the origins of the Vădastra culture. Based on typological observations on the pottery and stratigraphical facts of the new sites, he showed that the Vădastra culture was created on the basis of the Dudești culture, with LBK influences, and that certain Starčevo-Criș elements were transferred to the Vădastra culture by the Dudești cultural background (NICA 1970, 50; 1997, 107). Vladimir Dumitrescu also showed that Vădastra culture has in its origins characteristics of the Dudești culture of Oltenia and Western Muntenia and belongs to the cultural group with black pottery (DUMITRESCU, VULPE 1988, 34).

In a first attempt to divide Vădastra culture into periods, based on the observations on the site from Mâgura Fetelor, it has been concluded that the Vădastra II layer overlaps the Vădastra I layer (BERCIU 1937, 1-7; 1961, 51). At that point in the research there was a strong conviction that those two layers consisted of materials from two different cultures. It was Dumitru Berciu who proposed a different division into periods, based on the new discoveries from Vădastra. He stated that Vădastra I and Vădastra II shouldn’t be regarded as two different cultures but a single one whose evolution emphasizes at least four main phases (Vădastra I, II, III, and IV), that haven’t been yet stratigraphically proved (BERCIU 1961, 51-53; 1966, 96-97).

Sebastian Morintz divided Vădastra culture into two phases, the second one being subdivided into two stages (MORINTZ, CANTACUZINO 1963, 53). Later, Corneliu Mateescu came to a similar conclusion, based on the stratigraphical information from the Vădastra and Crușovu sites (MATEESCU 1961, 58; 1970, 70).

As a result of the diggings from Fărcașele, Hotărani, Piatra Sat and Vlădila,
Marin Nica reconsidered the theory of the division of Vădastra culture into four phases, each one having two stages, considering excised decoration of the pottery rather than the stratigraphic meaning of the archaeological complexes (NICA 1971, 5-33; 1997, 106-116; NICA, CIUCĂ 1989, 17-41).

In commenting on the evolution of Vădastra culture, Eugen Comșa believed that it was a complicated issue and covered a long period, corresponding to the entire progression of the Boian culture. He agrees with the existence of several phases, without mentioning their number and characteristics (COMȘA 1987, 48-49). Regarding the Vădastra I, he expresses the idea that it belongs to a late phase of the Dudești culture, partly synchronous with the Bolintineanu phase of the Boian culture. In fact, the beginning of the Vădastra culture coincides with the Vădastra II phase and it is connected to the adoption of the excised decorated ware (COMȘA 2000, 300). The author puts forward the hypothesis that the Vădastra II phase represents a regional version of the Boian culture, synchronous with the Boian-Giulești phase and partly with the Boian-Vidra phase (COMȘA 1955, 427). The idea developed, showing that the Boian-Giulești elements (“characterized by the excision technique used at the decoration of the pottery”) in combination with the Bolintineanu typical elements and the local Dudești background, led to the creation, on a small area, of a local version of the Boian culture, the Vădastra culture (COMȘA 2000, 302-303).

According with the materials discovered at Chitila-Fermă, near București, Vasile Boroneanț, who carries out the research, considers that the Bolintineanu stage is non-existent and the finds should be connected to a regional easterly feature of the Vădastra culture (BORONEANȚ 2005, 60-61).

As a result of the archaeological diggings at Vădastra and other settlements in Oltenia, several scholars have established an approximate chronology of the Vădastra culture, by using a complicated system of similarities established between the nearer or remote cultural regions and based on the analysis of shape and decoration of pottery fragments rather than stratigraphical facts (MATEESCU 1959, 66; 1959a, 112; MORINTZ, CANTACUZINO 1963, 51, Tab.16; NICA 1971, 32; 1997, 107; COMȘA 1977, 327; NEAGU 2003, 147).

Some opinions suggest the idea that there is an indisputable presence of Vădastra south of the Danube, in the central-northern Bulgaria (Fig. 1). From the stratigraphical point of view, the four phases of the Vădastra culture, as were defined by Dumitru Berciu and Marin Nica, haven’t been proven. Considering the present state of the research, the Vădastra typical materials discovered here have been divided into two chronological groups, based on formal analysis. The first one, an early stage, shows similarities to the Vădastra I and Vădastra II materials from Oltenia. The pottery from the second one, a late stage, resembles Vădastra III and Vădastra IV ware (NAIDENOVA 2005, 43). The discoveries from the Brenitsa settlement (TODOROVA, VAJSOV 1993, 111), have been attributed by Bogdan Nikolov to an “original culture”, making connections with the Vădastra II and Boian-Giulești materials from the North of the Danube (NIKOLOV 1986, 17). Venceslav Gergov also considers that the settlements from these areas are part of a local cultural phenomenon of the late Neolithic, naming it “the Brenitsa culture” which is related to the Vădastra and Boian cultures (GERGOV 2000, 397-400; 2001, 30).

Regarding the chronological division of the Vădastra discoveries in the Teleorman Valley, based especially on formal analogies, they date back to an early stage\(^2\), corresponding to Vădastra I attested west of the Olt (ANDREESCU, BAILEY 2002, 195-199, 2003, 189, 190). Even though the archaeological research has revealed an horizontal stratigraphy at Măgura Buduiasca, there are some cases where it has been found that Vădastra complexes overlay early-stage Dudești ones.

Concerning the geographical position of the Vădastra settlements in the western Muntenia one can only make general assessments.

\(^2\) Several \(^{14}\)C samples taken from in the Vădastra contexts at Măgura Buduiasca are now being analyzed at the Oxford University.
The investigated settlements at east of the Olt (Slatina, Ipoteşti and Beciu) are situated on high terraces. At Măgura Buduiasca the only site that was systematically researched, the settlement seemed to be situated on the low terrace of the Teleorman River and the archaeological complexes stretched on a surface of about 600 m on the east-west axis and 300 m on the north-south axis (Fig. 2).

The complexes attributed to the Vădastra culture are usually represented by pits of different shapes and sizes. Those elements that could define best their functions (pit-houses, refuse-pits etc.) are missing in most of the cases. Some of them consist in simple shapes, almost circular or oval, with diameters and depths of no more than 2.80 m and 0.40 m, respectively. Others are oval or almost circular, with a maximum diameter of 2.00 m and depths between 0.60 and 1.00 m.

There is only one case where the archaeological remains can indicate a approximate 5 m² wide agglomeration of daub and pottery fragments. No remarks were possible, the dwelling being seriously disturbed by a post-Neolithic habitation. The inventory of the researched complexes is similar. Among them, we mention ceramic fragments, animal bones, pieces of tools or the entire objects (of flint, stone or bone), fired daub and hearth fragments, in different quantities (ANDREESCU, BAILEY 2003, 190; 2004, 185-186; 2005, 225-226). Neither the micro-survey, nor the examination of the distribution of the archaeological materials from the researched complexes that were considered to be domestic pits, can confirm this fact. Certain social customs should be taken into account, which contributed to this creation of „store places” (CHAPMAN 2000). The massive daub fragments, some of them carrying wooden prints, but also the large hearth
fragments discovered in the filling of the pits, therefore situated in a secondary position, would imply the existence of surface dwellings, probably in the wide area.

Among other materials, two fragments of human bones were discovered in two complexes. Their presence in no funeral contexts, noticed in several complexes at Mâgura, Vâdastra types as well as Starčev-Criş and Dudeşt, raised a series of controversies concerning certain social customs (LAZĂR, SOFICARU 2005, 231).

The absence of surface dwellings and the aggregation of some domestic complexes could suggest the existence of such areas, if not at the periphery of the settlement, probably at certain distances from the dwelling areas (ANDREESCU, BAILEY 2005, 224). This seems to characterize the early and developed Neolithic stages in the western areas of the Balkans and the region of the Lower Danube where this settlement type, wide in surface, with oval or circular half-sunken structures and sometimes even with surface constructions resembling temporary dwellings, are typical (BAILEY 2000, 62). It is most likely that many of the social and economic activities developed outside the settlement, their archaeological traces being difficult to track (BAILEY 2000, 265).

Understanding the paleoeconomy of the Vâdastra communities in this part of Muntenia depends on the extent of the researches. Most of the animal bones assemblages are now being analyzed. That is why all the information concerning the animal breeding can only create a general view on the issue. We mention that for the moment *Bos taurus* prevails (BĂLĂŞESCU, RADU, MOISE 2005, 185).

The palaeobotanical Vâdastra samples are now being analyzed and, for that reason, they are no references to the nature of the crops that were grown. Parts of some compound tools, such as sickles (flint blade fragments with a specific gloss on certain parts), grinders, and sandstone crushers (that were probably used also for crushing the cereal grains) and fragments of horn tools (mattocks and dibbles) represent indirect evidence.

Various flint tools have been discovered at Mâgura Buduiasca, in Vâdastra contexts (Fig. 4). The typological analysis of the items discovered in a complex, illustrates the fact that the finished products exist in a proportion of almost 40% and most of them are blades, in fragments of blades and scrapers. Other kinds of tools represent isolated cases, such as a reworked flake, an awl and a sickle blade. The presence of the flakes in a proportion of over 50%, the percussors and the cores in large number (almost 8%), suggest the possibility that they were manufactured on the spot. The items are made especially of flint stone with nuances that range from grey and yellowish-grey to brown and black-grey (73%). In lower proportions, there are yellowish-cream and yellowish-brown colored pieces. Three tools of polished stone made, three flat, trapezoidal small chisels have also been discovered in the same complex (Fig. 5).
The only piece that has remained from one of them is its proximate segment. Three sandstone grinder fragments and a weight made of the same mineral represent the lithic inventory. Grinder fragments and a cylindrical sandstone rubber have been identified in some other complexes. The items have oval or rectangular shapes, their useful part being flat or slightly widened. One of the pieces of this kind has a circular dimple on one side. Another complex contained three grinder fragments, three fragmented sandstone rubbers and a stone weight (Fig. 6).

Among the finds at Măgura Buduiasca, there are bone and horn tools, almost fragmented. From the first category we may mention the spatulas, the lutes and the awls (Fig. 7). It wasn’t possible to reconstruct the chaînes opératoires, but it has been noticed that the majority of the pieces are made of half rib fragments and cattle and sheep/goat metapodes. As a polisher, a Bos taurus astragal was probably used, the traces on one side indicating this function.

Tools like mattocks and dibbles were manufactured of deer horn. The bone and horn made tools were used during certain occupations and domestic activities: processing and assembling leather and textile materials, knitting vegetal and animal fibers processing wood, cooking meals, but also works like cultivating plants. The category of bone items also includes certain adorning objects, like a bracelet fragment of Spondylus and two perforated astragals3.

The Vădastra pottery is recognized especially by its specific ware category decorated by the excision technique; that is considered the „guiding fossil”. The pots, decorated with spirals, meanders, triangles series of rhombuses arranged in various types of combinations, and with white filling are real masterpieces (Fig. 8). It has been considered, with good reason, that beside the painted pottery of the Cucuteni culture, the Vădastra pottery represents perhaps the highest expression of pottery art of all the European Neolithic period (DUMITRESCU 1968, 20-21).

3 Dr. Adrian Bălășescu and Dr. Valentin Radu, from the „Alexandra Bolomey” National Centre of Pluridisciplinary Researches of the National History Museum, to whom we express our gratitude, have accomplished the lab determinations.
Fig. 8. Vădastra excised decorated pottery.

Published articles have regularly presented this category of special ceramics, references to the other types being indirect, or even ignored (MATEESCU 1957, 103-113; 1959, 61-71; 1959a, 107-114; 1961, 57-60; 1962, 187-190; 1970, 67-75; 1971, 19-23; NICA 1970, 31-51; 1971, 5-32; NICA, CIUCĂ 1989, 17-41). The study performed on an assemblage of pottery from Măgura Buduisca revealed interesting data. From the amount of 2536 ceramic fragments only 113 can be attributed to that special category decorated by the excision technique (4.4%). Only 25% of all the ceramic fragments are decorated by different techniques (incision, flute, clay slip, impressions and painting after firing). Regarding the method of surface treatment, it can be noted that the coarse ceramics with rough surface prevail (76%), and it is followed by the fine, burnished ones (13%), and by the ceramics with smooth surfaces (11%).

The Vădastra pottery was handmade, by using the coiling technique. As a result of the preliminary analysis, it has been presumed that the clay contained sand and organic material (chaff), separately or in differently mixed proportions, used as a degreasing substance. The microscope detailed study was performed on a total of 800 ceramic fragments, from three pits. The clay contained mineral inclusions (quartz, iron oxides and limestone silt) as well as organic fibers. The color of the pottery fragments on the outside (ranging from light brown and reddish brown to different shades of grey) and in the middle suggests that the pots had been fired at a temperature of about 750° C. In order to identify possible sources of clay, several samples of clay were taken from the surrounding area of the settlement in the Teleorman Valley and the Clănița Valley (a tributary of the Teleorman River). The samples have been tested to establish their plasticity and firing degree. The conclusion was that the pottery was most likely produced by using local clay. The samples displayed the same kind of mineral inclusions and colour shades after firing (VAN AS, JACOBS, THISSEN 2005, 63-67).
The Vădastra pottery forms were divided into open and closed forms and in special shapes (Fig. 9). The closed types are represented by vessels with curved walls and rounded rims, amphora-shaped vessels with cylindrical neck, biconical-shaped ones. From the open shaped category we may mention the cups, the bowls and the dishes. The cups had, in some cases, a rectangular leg, empty on the inside, with rectangular fenestration. The bowls can be conical or carinated. The special shapes comprise a varied range of lids, cylindrical with a flat calotte, with or without margins, with slightly curved walls and a semispherical calotte. The rectangular vessels, having disc-shape knobs at corners and four legged vessels of Karanovo III tradition⁴, complete the list of the special shapes. Regarding the decoration, it should be outlined that the coarse pottery has a clay slip decoration (patterned barbotine) associated with finger-impressions, alveolar bands and buttons. The clay slip forms vertical lines and waves. The decoration produced with the „small broom”, has a similar disposition. This kind of decoration can often be found with the vessels with curved walls and rounded rim. The excised decoration is illustrated by zigzag girdle, limited by hatched strips, broken lines, and double-opposed spirals, rhombus and rectangles, all creating vertical rows that define the decoration register. The white filling and the red painting created a special colour effect, increased by the contrast between the paste and the vessel’s surface which is dark shaded in most of the cases.

The fine burnished pottery is usually decorated with vertical, horizontal, oblique or spiral plissé patterns on the shoulder and on the superior half of the pot’s body, sometimes in combination with circular or triangular impressions and flutes, forming horizontal or oblique angles on its neck.

As a result of the fabric analysis performed on certain pottery assemblages discovered at Măgura Budiașca that belonging to the entire Neolithic sequence in the area (Starčevo-Criș, Dudești and Vădastra), it has been found that there was technological continuity. In time, only the pottery shape and decoration changed (VAN AS, JACOBS, THISSEN 2004, 126; 2005, 67). Furthermore, the technology of the Boian and Gumelnita pottery, discovered in settlements of the surrounding area, resembles the techniques used during the preceding periods (VAN AS, JACOBS, THISSEN 2006, 143-146).

Various fragments of anthropomorphic figurines and a piece of an anthropomorphic lid have been discovered in Vădastra contexts (ANDREESCU 2007, 56-57) (Fig. 10). One figurine head is oval and thinned out and has a schematic face, red painted. Other two fragments, busts of figurines are similar from the morphological point of view but have different sizes. Their bodies are oblates, the arms out-stretched and breasts represented by two little conical prominences, one of them having a vertical perforation. A fourth fragment has the sexual triangle represented by an incised line, red filled. A leg fragment is decorated with different geometrical patterns, widely incised. The anthropomorphic lid

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⁴ The massive presence of the traditional elements of Karanovo III: vessels with four or five legs, handles with cylindrical or disc-shape knobs and triangular and rectangular “cult tables” (ANDREESCU, BAILEY 2003, 189-190; 2004, 184-189) in the previous Neolithic sequence („early Dudești”) revealing the relations with the area south of the Danube.
fragment had a cylindrical shape, perhaps with a semispherical calotte (Fig. 11). Vădastra zoomorphic figurines have not yet been discovered at Măgura Buduiasca.

From another complex comes a cylindrical object, slightly prolonged, clay made, with an incised decoration that depicts two human figures (ANDREESCU 2007, 57) (Fig. 12).

One fragment of a clay object, of a disc shape, is decorated on one side with irregular circular pricks (Fig. 13).

Several fragments specific to the so-called „small cult altars” or „cult tables”, that are typical of the entire early and developed Neolithic in the Balkan area, have been discovered at Măgura Buduiasca (Fig. 14). Of different shapes and sizes, clay made, burnished, with excised or incised decoration, white filled sometimes, the „small cult altars” have long disputed functions: clay lamps, miniature representations, small cult tables, vessels for burning substances on ritual occasions, bowls, recipients used for ritual
or profane purposes (SCHWARZBERG 2003, 79).

The discoveries at Măgura Buduiasca confirm the presence of the Vădastra culture along the Telorman Valley. Even though it is a singular reality for the moment, it raises important questions about its origin and its connection to the neighboring territories: South-Eastern Oltenia, Central and Southern Muntenia and Northern Bulgaria.

The various theoretical aspects that were emphasized in what concerns the starting point and the evolution of the Vădastra culture have often been contradictory. The traditional type analysis overvalues the cultural-historical approach specific to the Romanian archaeology (ANGHELINU 2003; DRAGOMAN 2006, 131-148).

A real synchronism between the cultural phenomena in the second half of the fifth millennium B.C. has been difficult to establish. It is most likely that we are dealing with local evolution and influences among the neighboring cultural areas as well as with chronological differences among the various regions where Vădastra materials have been researched. In the absence of certain $^{14}$C test results, this chronological image can be considered as incomplete.

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