

# **T**heoretical aspects about prehistoric habitat in Oltenia

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## **Abstract**

Even though we can only imagine the entire mythical structure which could have represented the basis of the human settlement that, through the archeologically observed traces, could offer information related to the social and economical structure of communities. Achieving a symbiosis between the climatic conditions, the specific of rural economy, intercommunity or distant changes, the necessity of creating some fortification systems and the existence of some power centers, some religious practices thus it is defined the character of the habitat of the discussed period. The Neolithic settlements can be found in different places but in most of the cases on rivers courses near springs with drinking water especially on lower or middle terraces. Both the demographic development and the sedentary character of the communities, first of all in places adjusted to human life and then in placements permitting the co-inhabitation of many coherent groups. To the end of the Neolithic, these villages are fortified, they get sometimes big sizes and an important territorial systematization.

In the Late Bronze Age and especially in the First Iron Age it seems that we assist at the disappearing of vast settlements, with several levels of habitation. This fact could be explained although the climatic changes happened on the whole continent. There are few known examples of settlements in Oltenia, that have more levels of habitation and these are usually in the areas privileged with access at natural resources like the

Danube's river meadow. In the same period, we find fortresses strengthened with a defence vallum.

**Key words:** settlements, Neolithic, the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Oltenia, power centers.

### **Preliminary Data**

Even from its beginnings, social anthropology gave a special attention to the "inhabited place". Analyzing the spatial disposal of the dwellings, the public places and the cult zones from the interior of a dwelling, anthropologists like Malinowski, Paul Radin or C. Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss, 1978: 158-196) tried to explain the propinquity, the formation and the exertion of power, or of social hierarchy in the interior of traditional societies.

Interesting is the opposition observed, at all the ethnographic analyzed societies, between the inhabited space and the surrounding area, perceived like a hostile, impure environment (Levi-Strauss, 1978: 163-164, 169-170; Eliade, 2000: 25). Referring to this aspect M. Eliade highlighted "Setting into a territory means actually consecrating it. When the settlement is no longer temporary, such as the nomads, but permanent, such as the sedentary people, it involves a vital decision, which regards the existence of the whole community. Setting down in a certain place, organizing it, living in it are actions that involve a vital decision: choosing a Universe that will be assimilated through creation...this way it becomes the sacred work of the gods... After we have comprehended the cosmogonical value of the Centre, we will understand better why any human settlement repeats The Creation of the World, starting from a central point" (Eliade, 2000: 29).

The fact that in the structure of the house (regarded as a part of the living area) it is included the whole cosmic symbolism, from axis mundi, to the first brick of the foundation (when sacrifices were made), gives us the right to presume as possible the ethnographic parallels (Ceașescu, 2011: 259; Grozoiu, 2015) proposed for the prehistorically populations. Even though we can only imagine the entire mythical structure which could have represented the basis of the human settlement that, through the archeologically observed traces, could offer information related to the social and economical structure of communities. "Les configurations spatiales de sites constituent les principales sources de l'archéologie pour appréhender l'organisation des sociétés disparues" Patrice Brun highlights, which suggests a model

of representing the social relations in traditional societies (Brun, 1999: 32).

Sedentarisation prehistoric communities was accompanied and reducing forested areas for agricultural crops, a phenomenon reflected in the charts pollen, pollen increased frequency of herbaceous plants (Boşcaiu, 2010: 34). Recent theory states that changes have occurred first on a mental (spiritual), there would have been a "revolution of symbols"(Cauvin, 1994). Such beliefs imposing new fecundity and fertility cult centered, as changes in people's behavior. The Neolithic Age (or Neo-Eneolithic as was recently named because from the time it was known copper processing) analysis is dated by C14 in the range 6600-3800 / 3700. Chr. (Istoria Românilor, 2010, I: 106-107).

Achieving a symbiosis between the climatic conditions, the specific of rural economy, intercommunity or distant changes, the necessity of creating some fortification systems and the existence of some power centers, some religious practices thus it is defined the character of the habitat of the discussed period.

The Neolithic settings can be found in different places but in most of the cases on rivers courses near springs with drinking water especially on lower or middle terraces. These dwellings offered drinking water and another important food source, fish, but also a great opportunity of communication that does not have to be neglected. In most of the cases the main occupations of the group and even of the individuals determined the selection of a certain dwelling where lived only one family or a small group.

Where the growth of animals (horned cattle) is possible, the Neolithic settings are also situated. The existence of prime materials, as the clay and the salt, are the main source of existence of the Neolithic settings. The height of territorial surface is a condition of Neolithic locations necessary to supervise the surroundings in case of danger (Nichita, Lazăr, 2009: 7-15).

Besides the conditions offered by the environment the location of Neolithic settings influenced by psychological factors bound to family and community. Depending on the above mentioned conditions, there can be structured the categories of region in which they identified the settings: in river meadow, but in zones with no floods, on the edges of terraces (M. Nica, 1980: 29-36.), on low terraces in the island of Danube, on brims of lakes, in caves, or in shelters below rock (Ceauşescu, Lazăr, 2013: 44-50).

Both the demographic development and the sedentary character of the communities caused the focus of living, first of all in places

adjusted to human life and then in placements permitting the co-inhabitation of many coherent groups.

The Neolithic knows as form of inhabitation the agricultural placement, or simpler the village. To the end of the Neolithic, these villages are fortified, they get sometimes big sizes and an important territorial systematization, representing in fact passing forms from village to town and behaving the incipient form of political organization of a community type of society on ranks and rightful of cutumiar type.

As for the house in itself, in the developed Neolithic appeared more constructive techniques using the wood and the clay in rising houses, of surface and with geometric forms, sometimes of relative big sizes.

In the Late Bronze period and especially in the First Iron Age it seems that we assist at the disappearing of vast settlements, with several levels of habitation. This fact could be explained although the climatic changes happened on the whole continent. Based on the palinological, pedological and archeozoological researches, made especially in the areas close to the carpatho-danubian zone, has been observed the installation of a period of cold and gradually dryer climate. A. Vulpe presumed that this climate conditions favoured the growth of the pastoral activities, phenomenon with direct implications on the type of the habitat (Vulpe, 2003: 123-124.).

The most settlements from the end of the Bronze Age have, as we said before, only one cultural layer, showing us that they were habited for a short time. We find this situation in the Danube area and around the sloughs or in the islands close to the river, where settlements of Gârla Mare and Bistreț Ișalnița type are present, but also in the hilly and pre mountain area, where we find few traces of habitation of Govora type.

At Ghidici, on a surface of approximate 150 x 60 m, between the sand dunes and the Danube, were dogged several dwellings, from which six belong to the Gârla Mare settlement, two of Bistreț Ișalnița type and four from the First Iron Age (Nica, Lazăr, 1997: 87-112; Lazăr, 1999: 19-37; Lazăr, 2011: 225-228).

During the Iron Age is observed, as a habitat's characteristic, the existence of some small and short period habitations. Most of the sites mentioned as settlements, are presented actually under the form of familiar establishment groups situated at considerable distances one from another. There are few known examples of settlements in Oltenia, from the Early Bronze or the Late Hallstatt period, that have more

levels of habitation and these are usually in the areas privileged with access at natural resources like the Danube's river meadow.

The other Hallstattiene fortresses mentioned in the archaeological literature a long time ago, were not dogged or researched previously, and the few information initially known, having the character of some shallow researches, does not give us sufficient data to analyze.

In the same period, we find fortresses strengthened with a defence vallum as those in Transylvania or that from Popești, jud. Giurgiu (Vulpe, 2004-2005: 19). In Oltenia such fortresses were researched at Portărești, Dolj district (Tătulea, 1982: 126 and the next.), Grădiștea, Vâlcea district and Măru, Gorj district. They are all situated on a higher relief, on circular surfaces with the diameter between 80 and 170 m and are defended with an earth vallum, that from Portărești also having a ditch. Excepting that from Măru, which had two levels of dwelling (Verbicioara și Vârtop), the other two have only one level, from the Early Hallstatt period. About the Portărești settlement, (better researched), we know that it had a layer of culture thick of 0, 30 - 0, 40m, fact that doesn't necessarily stands for an intense dwelling.

The other Hallstattiene fortresses mentioned in the archaeological literature a long time ago (Galicea Mare, Galiciuica, Dobridor, Ghercești from Dolj district and Gemeni, Mehedinți district), weren't dogged or researched previously, and the few information initially known, having the character of some shallow researches, doesn't give us sufficient data to analyze (Lazăr, 2011: 128).

At Portărești, Dolj district, was dogged a settlement containing pottery very similar with the Vârtop type. The settlement occupies an approximate round shape plateau with the diameter of almost 170 m. It is defended by an earth made vallum wide of 7,50 - 8 m and a ditch. Although in the moment of the diggings the earth vallum was flat, the archaeologist estimates that his height was 2,50 m up to the ancient stepping level and 4,50 m up to the bottom of the ditch. The vallum was made from a basis of calcareous earth, well rammed, having above, along it, three rows of stones and grit stones pieces, covered with clay containing calcareous fragments. In the exterior part, the vallum descends towards the funnel shaped ditch, wide of 17 m and deep of 1,93 m up to the ancient yard. The dwellings were found in the north part of the plateau. Besides the pottery, there have been discovered a fragment of a bronze bracelet and two needles, one fragmentary and the other with the head rolled (the Rollennadel type). The last one determined the authors of the digging to date the settlement in the Hallstatt A period.

About the role of the fortified settlements some specification must be made. In the past was accentuated their defensive role and was neglected another function – that representing the social prestige. Such a function was presumed to have the fortification from Popești, Giurgiu district, as A. Vulpe said (Vulpe, 2004-2005: 19). The apparition of the defended fortresses at the end of the 2nd millennium, wide across the Central and South-West Europe, was interpreted as a tendency of emphasising for the chief of the community. “Les produits en bronze étaient devenus abondants, fonctionnellement et stylistiquement très varié. Il n’est pas indifférent de souligner que les outils métallique, qui avaient alors pris une place importante dans tous les secteurs de la productions, ne pouvaient être fabriqués sans le concours des élites; ce qui pourrait induire un début de contrôle partiel sur l’économie de subsistance de la part d’une instance supra-locale. Au début de l’Age du fer, la forme de pouvoir politique ne change pas très sensiblement...Des armes et des parures en fer, du sel en grosses quantités, des salaisons et des textiles de luxe font maintenant partie de biens de prestige en circulation” (Burn, 1999: 35).

The fact that they don’t have only a defensive role against the invaders is suggested also by the anthropological studies. M. Eliade emphasised that “the defensive systems of the settlements and the fortresses had a magic character at first: these systems made of ditches, labyrinths, defensive vallum, were conceived to stop rather the entrance of the demons and of the death’s souls than the human invasions ... the walls of the fortresses were assigned through rituals to serve as a bound against the demon, disease or death. As a matter of fact, in the symbolic thought, the human-enemy is naturally compared with the Demon and with Death. Because the result of any kind of attack, either demonic or military is the same: the destruction, the annihilation, the death” (Eliade, 2000: 40).

The settlements from the end of the Bronze Age have, most of them, as we have already mentioned, a single layer of culture that apparently leads to the assumption that they had been dwelled for a short period of time. This situation is met at the Danube and around the ponds or small-islands near the river, where are Gârla Mare and Bistreț Ișalnița type settlements and in the hilly and piedmont area where is a level of dwelling is again “thin” from the stratigraphic point of view, of Govora type.

But, it is actually hard to say the period of dwelling from a settlement, especially in our studied period. Unlike the houses made of unburned bricks from the Neolithic tells that most of the times had

been rebuilt during a generation, the houses with the oak girder walls can last for many generations. The thick well-preserved oak or beech tree girders were frequently reused as a building material for a new house, fact noticed from the ethnographic point of view in the areas where the wood was the only or the main building material, including in the Carpathian-Danube area. It is very probable that the situation to be the same for the dwellings in the hill and mountain zones from the Verbicioara IV (Govora group) area and, of course, in the case of the habitat from the Vârtop type grooved pottery (Lazăr, 2005: 112-115).

The archaeological documents from the present stage of the researches, with all the lacks, allow us to observe that, in the same time with the existence of a “spreading” habitat, similar to that of the communities that have as the main mean of existence the grazing, are now present the reinforced fortresses that, along with the proliferation of some fatuous habits (the tumuli from Susani and Lăpuș), denote the existence of some leaders, interested in the affirmation and the maintaining of the social prestige (Vulpe, 2010: 366; Lazăr, 2011: 129).

Is evident that analysis of habitat must be closely correlated with the space funeral, taking into consideration all economic practices that take not only the exploitation of natural resources and adaptation to the environment, but also valuing certain symbolic practices. .

It is obvious that the decoding of the material culture meaning is a laborious process, because the objects haven't got a meaning of their own, but a multitude of meanings depending on the context, on the purport, on the bearer and on who makes the interpretation. C Tilley says the article *Interpreting material culture*: “a consideration of economic practices must go far beyond simplistic accounts of how food resources might be obtained efficiently or inefficiently. The economy has a style, is part of a cultural practice. It involves a way of thinking and provides a medium for thought. This symbolic dimension is part of that which is to be explained. It might be said that the primary significance of material culture is not its pragmatic use-value, but its significative exchange” (Tilley, 1989: 188).

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