SECTION 3. ARCHEOLOGY

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HOMER AND THE TRYPILLIA CULTURE

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The Trypillia culture, also known as Cucuteni – Trypillia culture, flourishing between 5500 and 2750 BCE, was one of the most advanced Neolithic societies in Europe, spanning present-day Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova [2, see the most recent bibliography there]. The foundation of the Trypillian culture was agriculture, which included both crop farming and animal husbandry. The Trypillians were among the earliest Europeans to experiment with copper metallurgy, marking a transition toward more complex technologies. Another area in which the Trypillians excelled was ceramics. They produced both painted vessels and figurines in the form of female figures, as well as clay models of their own buildings.

The archaeologists note that the majority of Trypillia settlements were of small size, high density (spaced 3 to 4 kilometres apart) [12]. During its middle phase (c. 4100 to 3500 BC), populations belonging to the Trypillia culture built some of the largest settlements in Eurasia, some of which contained as many as three thousand structures and were possibly inhabited by 20,000 to 46,000 people [6; 13, p. 347]. The “mega-settlements” of the culture, which have been claimed to be early forms of cities, were the largest settlements in Eurasia, and possibly the world, dating to the 5th millennium BC [5; 8; 10]. The culture was wealthy and influential in Eneolithic Europe [4] and during the Copper Age [14, pp. 43–46]. It has been proposed that it was initially egalitarian and that the rise of inequality contributed to its downfall [9].

The Trypillian settlements followed a distinctive circular layout, and intriguingly, they appear to have been deliberately burned and rebuilt every 60 to 80 years – a practice whose purpose remains debated.

Around 2750 BCE, this flourishing civilization mysteriously declined, possibly due to climate change, soil exhaustion, or incursions by migrating Indo-European groups. There is no consensus among the scholars as to the

cause of the decline, however, some conclude that the Trypillia culture ended not violently, but as a matter of survival, converting their economy from agriculture to pastoralism, and becoming integrated into the Yamnaya culture [1; 17, pp. 79–98]. In 2019 an article was published in Cell stating as following: "We identified a remarkable overlap between the estimated radiation times of early lineages of Y[ersinia] pestis, toward Europe and the Eurasian Steppe, and the collapse of Trypillia mega-settlements in the Balkans/Eastern Europe" [15, p. 301].

There is no doubt that epidemics have a significant influence on history. We can reminisce the Plague of Athens (430 BCE), or the Plague of Justinian (541–549 CE), as well as the city sieges which failed as a result of an epidemic mentioned in the Bible (701 BCE). The Bull of Heaven [7], the major force of destruction in the epos of Gilgamesh, is associated not only with famine and earthquake, but also with epidemics. The Sumerians were familiar with various deceases, but an epidemic of somewhat cosmic scale might reminisce the memorable plague which took place in another region and several hundreds of years earlier.

Our analysis of another foundational text, Homer's "Iliad", suggests that the similar theory could exist regarding the end of the Bronze Age.

Homer, at the beginning of the *Iliad*, describes an epidemic that struck the Greek camp. One of the means recommended to stop this epidemic by the local priest Chryses was the burning of the dead on pyres – despite the fact that the Mycenaeans traditionally buried their dead in the ground, and cremation only began to spread in Greece after the end of the Bronze Age [16]. Elsewhere [11], I suggest that the tradition passed down to us by Homer [3] considered an epidemic to be the cause of the catastrophe that marked the end of the Bronze Age – a consequence of "Apollo's" wrath against the impious war waged by the Greeks against Troy, the birthplace of his cult.

Of course, we cannot assert that there is any direct connection between the decline of the Trypillia's culture and the Homeric epic, except perhaps for faint echoes that may have been preserved by the Indo-Europeans, the descendants of the Yamnaya culture. However, it seems to me that we can at least hypothesize that the periodic burning of settlements by the Trypillians was intended to prevent epidemics or to combat outbreaks that had already begun – one of which, particularly severe, may have ultimately led to the decline of their culture.

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