The Mesolithic at the Danube’s Iron Gates: new radiocarbon dates and old stratigraphies

Alexandru Dinu¹, Andrei Soficaru², Doru Miritoiu³
¹ University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, adinu@facstaff.wisc.edu
² The Center for Anthropological Research ‘Francisc Ⅰ. Rainer’, Bucharest, Romania, asoficaru@yahoo.com
³ The Center for Anthropological Research ‘Francisc Ⅰ. Rainer’, Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT - In this paper we present 31 new AMS radiocarbon dates from the Mesolithic Iron Gates sites. The new dates allowed for a total reconsideration of the chronological sequences, and offer new insights for a reinterpretation of both Upper Paleolithic-Mesolithic and Mesolithic-Neolithic developments in the region.

IZYLEČEK - V tem članku predstavljamo 31 novih AMS radiokarbonskih datumov iz meziolitskih najdišč na območju železnih vrat na romunski obali Donave. Novi datumi so omogočili v celoti ponovno pretehtati kronološke sekvence in ponujajo nove izpoglede za ponovno interpretacijo tako mlajše-paleolitsko-mezolitskega kot meziolitsko-neolitskega razvoja v regiji.

KEY WORDS - Tardigravettian; Mesolithic; Neolithic; site stratigraphy

Introduction*

The construction during the 1960’s of the Iron Gates dam across the Danube triggered an intense archaeological survey of the region, which resulted in the discovery of a number of archaeological sites on both sides of the river. The remains uncovered at some of these sites were later associated with a Mesolithic culture called Lepenski Vir in Serbia, and Schela Cladovei in Romania (Fig. 1). Presently all the sites are under water or destroyed by subsequent construction projects, except for the eponymous site of Schela Cladovei.

Although numerous radiocarbon dates are available for the sites on the southern shore of the Danube (Bonsall 1997; Bonsall, Boroneanţ and Srejović 1996; Bonsall et al. 2000; Bonsall et al. 2004; Bonsall et al. 2002/3; Borić 2001; 2002; 2005; Borić and Miracle 2004; Cook et al. 2002, Radovanović 1996a; Srejović 1965; 1990) the understanding of the evolutionary trajectory of Lepenski Vir-Schela Cladovei culture has been much restricted by an acute absence of dates from the sites uncovered on the northern shore, for which before 1990 only some 18 dates were available (Paunescu 2000; Radovanović 1996a; 1996b).

After 1990, archaeological excavation restarted at Schela Cladovei, and more dates were published for this site (Bonsall 1997; Bonsall, Boroneanţ and Srejović 1996; Bonsall et al. 2004; Bonsall et al. 2002/3; Cook et al. 2002).

In this paper we present 31 new AMS radiocarbon dates from the Schela Cladovei culture sites of Râzvata, Icoana, Ostrovul Banului, Ostrovul Mare, and Schela Cladovei (Tab. 1). The implication of these new dates will be discussed in reference to the published stratigraphic information, older dates availa-

* It has been acknowledged to us (A. Boroneanţ, pers. comm.) that additional stratigraphic profiles and a great volume of information about excavations at the sites presented here exist in an unpublished format. This work considers only the published material, and we only hope that in the near future the additional material will be made available in printed form.
Table 1. New AMS radiocarbon dates for Iron Gates Mesolithic, Schela Cladovei culture. All samples ran by the Accelerator Mass Spectrometry Laboratory, University of Arizona, Tucson. BC calibration using OxCal. The status of *S. scrofa* was established in conformity with the DNA analysis results (Dinu 2006; Larson et al. 2007) and compared metrics and morphology (Dinu 2006; Dinu et al. 2006).
General site characteristics

Except for Ostrovul Corbului and Schela Cladovei, all Mesolithic sites on the Romanian shore of the Danube were discovered and excavated by Boroneanț (Boroneanț 1970; 1973a; 1973b; 1973c; 1980; 1990a; 1990b; 2000a; 2000b: Boroneanț and Nicolaescu-Plopsor 1990). The Schela Cladovei site was excavated also by British archaeologists between 1990–1994 (Bartosiewicz et al. 1995; Bartosiewicz et al. 2001; Bonsall 1997; Bonsall, Boroneanț and Srejović 1996; Bonsall et al. 2000; Bonsall et al. 2004; Bonsall et al. 2002/3; Cook et al. 2002).

Ostrovul Corbului at Botul Cluciulului was surveyed in 1933 by a team led by Dumitru Berciu; the actual site was discovered by Marin Nica in 1970, and excavated between 1970–1984 by Petre Roman, Alexandru Paunescu and Florea Mogoseanu (Mogosea-

![Fig. 1. Iron Gates sites associated with Mesolithic remains. Red: Schela Cladovei culture. Yellow: Levenski Vir culture. Blue: other sites on the Romanian shore not associated with the Mesolithic Iron Gates, but mentioned in this paper.](image)

| Site                  | Old Dates | Depth | AA#     | $^{14}$C Age BP | Cal. BC range (d) | Sample |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------|---------|-----------------|-------------------|--------|
| Alibeg                | NA        | NA    | Bln-1193| 7195±100        | 6120-5980 (46.7%) | charcoal |
| Alibeg                | 0.5       | Bln-1078 | 8605±250  | 8200-7350 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Icoana                | 2.1       | Bln-1077 | 8265±100  | 7460-7170 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Icoana                | NA        | Bonn 2 | 8070±130  | 7190-6770 (66.7%) | charcoal |
| Icoana                | NA        | Bonn 3 | 8010±120  | 7070-6740 (64.4%) | charcoal |
| Icoana                | NA        | Bonn 4 | 7660±110  | 6610-6420 (65.9%) | charcoal |
| Icoana                | NA        | Bln-1056 | 7445±80  | 6400-6230 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Icoana                | NA        | Bonn 1 | 5803±120  | 4840-4540 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Banului      | NA        | Bln-1080 | 8040±160  | 7180-6690 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Banului      | NA        | Bln-1079 | 7565±100  | 6510-6340 (56.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Corbului     | 4.50-4.53 | SMU-587 | 8035±237  | 7350-6650 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Corbului     | 4.02-4.12 | SMU-588 | 7827±237  | 7050-6450 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Corbului     | 4.20-4.38 | Bln-2135 | 7710±280  | 6610-6460 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Corbului     | 4.20-4.39 | Bln-2153A | 7695±80  | 6600-6460 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Ostrovul Corbului     | 4.23      | GrN-12675 | 7640±80  | 6570-6430 (65.3%) | charcoal |
| Razvreta              | NA        | Bln-1057 | 7690±70   | 6590-6460 (68.2%) | charcoal |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4384 | 8570±105  | 7691-7496 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4379 | 8550±105  | 7588-7490 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4385 | 8510±105  | 7577-7443 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4386 | 8490±110  | 7573-7434 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4380 | 8460±110  | 7547-7425 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4378 | 8415±100  | 7535-7319 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4381 | 8400±115  | 7535-7303 NA     | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | Poz-5206 | 8300±50   | 7480-7300 (68.2%) | Human   |
| Schela Cladovei       | NA        | OxA-4383 | 8290±105  | 7479-7093 NA     | Human   |
| Cuina Turcului        | NA        | Bln-802 | 8175±200 BC | Human   |
| Cuina Turcului        | NA        | Bln-803 | 10650±120 BC | Human   |
| Cuina Turcului        | NA        | Bln-804 | 10100±120 BC | Human   |

Tab. 2. Old radiocarbon dates for Iron Gates Mesolithic, Schela Cladovei culture. BC calibration using OxCal (The date was offered in this form by V. Boroneanț (Boroneanț 2000b.86).
Schela Cladovei was discovered by Misu Davidescu, who excavated a portion of the Neolithic Starčevo area of the site (Davidescu 1965).

There are a number of characteristics common to all Mesolithic Schela Cladovei sites. As a general pattern, Schela Cladovei sites can be divided into two categories: those located within the Gorge: Alibeg-Pescari, Veterani Terasa, Razvrata, and Icoana; and a second group located downstream from the Gorges: Ostrovul Banului-Gura Vaii, Schela Cladovei, Ostrovul Corbului, and Ostrovul Mare.

All of the excavated Schela Cladovei culture sites located in the canyon were found in places where the limestone mountain wall sandwiches through basalt directly into the Danube’s waters, forming extensive karstic phenomena. There are a good number of grottos and cave formations right on the Danube shore or no farther than 10–60 m from the water: Gaura Livaditei, Pazariste, Liubova, Gaura Chindei I, Gaura Chindei II, Proluca lui Climente, Gaura cu Musca, Ponicoa, Cuina Turcului, Pestera Fluturilor, Pestera lui Caramil, and Pestera Veterani. None of the Mesolithic sites, however, were located in caves (Boroneanț 2000a). Without exception, the sites were found only in the open air, on the Danube shore, next to the water, in most cases below the modern flood level on very low land, sandy and humid, even swampy. According to geological and hydrological studies of the region, it appears that flooding of the Danube shore was equally frequent by the time of the Mesolithic occupation (C.S.A. 1967; Grupul de Cercetari Complexe 1976; I.G.G.A.R.S.R. 1969).

The sites belonging to the second group outside the Gorge are located on islands, with the exception of Schela Cladovei itself. Before the formation of the lake, however, these islands had always been divided by the Danube’s northern shore by a very narrow secondary river branch. These branches were rather easy to cross, and the fishing was exceptionally good. Generally, the channels were not very deep, the water flowed slowly, and during some less rainy years the water drained off almost entirely.

One other characteristic of all the sites is that their location was such as to permit easy access to the nearest best fishing and hunting sites regardless the nature of the terrain surrounding the site within a radius of a 30–190 minute walk. This would allow the inhabitants immediate and easy access to terrestrial resources, raw material and, in all cases, better defence.

**Sites, stratigraphies, and problems**

Regrettably, Boroneanț did not publish excavation maps for any of the sites except Schela Cladovei (Boroneanț 2000b,277). As a consequence, at present it is impossible to determine the relationship between artefacts uncovered in different excavation sections, other than considering the depth inscribed on them. Because the stratigraphic information is also scant and a datum was never used except at Ostrovul Corbului (Paunescu 1990), presently, comparing artefacts from the same site and excavation depth, but different excavation sections becomes nonsense, a problem signalled also by others (Paunescu 2000). The new radiocarbon dates presented here were selected and therefore considered only according to the depth inscribed on them.

Due to the inconsistent terminology used for stratigraphic description and analysis, the overall picture of cultural sequences at all sites is confusing. Some authors (Prinz 1987; Radovanović 1996a; Tringham 2000) advanced periodization models of the northern Danube shore sites relying mostly on information offered by Boroneanț, who appears to have been strongly influenced by the periodization of the site at Lepenski Vir, and attempted to apply it indiscriminately to the Romanian sites (Boroneanț 1973c; 1990b). Others (Tringham 2000), including some
Romanian authors (Lazarovici 1979), mainly specialized in the Neolithic period.

Some (Paunescu 2000) based their hypothesis on their own lithic analysis, almost excluding any other available material. Finally, some archaeologists presented models based on their own excavations and a synthesis of the previously published material (Lazarovici 1979; Mogoseanu 1978).

The inconsistency in using the same archaeological terms by all the Romanian authors is extremely confusing and it has deep theoretical roots (Boroneanţ and Dinu 2007), but it was accentuated by a paper published in the mid 1960’s by the one of the most influential Romanian archaeologists (Nicolaescu-Plopşor 1965). Following the opinions expressed in this publication, Boroneanţ uses indiscriminately the term ‘Epipaleolithic’ in reference to both the actual Epipaleolithic and the Mesolithic periods at Iron Gates. Fortunately, some authors attempted to rectify this problem (Mogoseanu 1978; Paunescu 1990; 2000). The most notable attempt in this direction comes from Paunescu:

“Faza evoluata a culturii gravetienne aparitind epiapaleoliticului, cunoscuta sub denumirea de tardigravettian de tip mediteranean, este reprezentata prin cele 9 puncte descoperite numai in zona Portilor de Fier.

Mezoliticul din teritoriu cuprins intre Carpatii si Dunare este cunoscut prin cele doua culturi care au evoluat parallel sau partial parallel, in doua zone diferite. Prima – cea tardenoasiana – este atestata in nord-estul si nordul Munteniei ... Cea de-a doua cultura mezolitica – cultura Schela Cladovei – este reprezentata de cele 8 puncte descoperite prin sapaturi sistematice in zona Portilor de Fier ...” (Paunescu 2000.40)

(The evolved phase of the Gravettian culture belonging to the Epipaleolithic, and known as Tardigravettian of Mediterranean type is represented by the 9 sites discovered only in the Iron Gates area.

The Mesolithic of the territory enclosed by the Carpathian Mountains and the Danube River is known by the cultures that evolved in parallel or partly in parallel, in two different areas. The first – the Tardenoisian – is attested in the northern and north-eastern Muntenia ... The second Mesolithic culture – Schela Cladovei culture – is represented by the 8 sites uncovered by systematic excavations in the Iron Gates region...) (Our translation)

Therefore, Paunescu makes a clear distinction between the Epipaleolithic as the final stage of the Upper Palaeolithic, and the Mesolithic period at Iron Gates, but mostly as terminology, and less as a concept (Boroneanţ and Dinu 2007). The general image is further complicated by the use of alternative names for the cultural sequences at Iron Gates (Boroneanţ 1999):

- Final Epi-Gravettian – or Proto-Clisurean, or Proto-Romanellian at site Climente I Cave.
- Late Epi-Gravettian – Clisurean or Romanellian, or Tardigravettian (Paunescu 1970; Paunescu 1987) Romanello- Azilian at Climente II, Cuina Turcului I and II, Ostrovul Banului I–IIIa, comprising four stages of development.
- Mesolithic Schela Cladovei, comprising four stages of development (Boroneanţ 1973c).

In relation to the above classification, it is interesting to notice that logically, the late phase of Epi-Gravettian would sequentially occur before, not after the final phase of the same period, as the Proto-Clisurean occurs before the Clisurean. No further details were published by Boroneanţ, so it is not possible to know if the stratigraphies published by him follow the same rational. For instance, the first phase of his periodization of Schela Cladovei culture is characterized as the oldest phase at both Veteranii Terrace and Veteranii Cave, and associated with “la phase finale du romanellien” (Boroneanţ 1973c:15). On the other hand, no remains associated with Schela Cladovei culture were uncovered at Cave Veteranii (Boroneanţ 2000a; 2000b; Paunescu 2000), although Boroneanţ lists the stratigraphic sequence of the cave as Palaeolithic, Epipaleolithic (Clisurean), Mesolithic, Neolithic (Boroneanţ 2000a:90) with no further explanations.

For a better understanding of the problems related to site stratigraphy, terminology, as well as to the implications of the new radiocarbon dates presented in this paper it is therefore necessary to offer a brief presentation of the sites and their stratigraphies.

**Pescari-Alibeg**

This is the most western Schela Cladovei culture site on the northern shore of the Danube. According to Paunescu (Boroneanţ 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2001) the site was located on the south-eastern end of the village of Pescari (Coronini), at the base of Redut Hill, on Alibeg Creek. Paunescu also states that it was located on a portion subject to Danube flooding, and that a good part of the site was destroyed
by the river prior to and during excavations. There was a small alluvial peninsula at the mouth of Alibeg Creek, where this site was located (Boroneanţ 2000b).

Boroneanţ discovered the site in 1968, but excavations did not start until 1971 when the water level was already covering part of it. There are no published general maps of the area or site distribution maps. Excavation information is scant, and very little material was recovered. Excavations comprised eight sections of an unspecified area. The results of excavation were briefly mentioned over the years by Boroneanţ (Boroneanţ 1973a; 1973c; 1980), and to a larger degree at a more recent date (Boroneanţ 2000b; Paunescu 2000).

Boroneanţ suggests that there was one level of habitation, belonging to a late phase of Schela Clădoaiei culture varying between 0.60 m to 1.00 m in thickness (Boroneanţ 2000b; Paunescu 2001). He associates the Mesolithic at Alibeg with:

“... une phase finale d’Icoana, horizon I, qui poursuit son évolution jusqu’au commencement de l’habitat d’Alibeg.” (Boroneanţ 1973a, 22)

Paunescu (Paunescu 2001) advanced the hypothesis that this level had to be associated with two cultural layers: one belonging to late Mesolithic Schela Clădoaiei, and an Early Neolithic Starčevo-Criş just above it, with no archaeological sterile in between. Paunescu was, however, very cautious in advancing this hypothesis, due to the fact that Boroneanţ did not separate the findings for each cultural layer.

Veterani Terasa

The problems posed by this site are presently extremely difficult to address. It was located precisely in front of Veterani Cave, at the base of Clucaurul Mare Mountain. There was a small alluvial deposit, suggesting that at one time a small stream probably flowed from the cave (Paunescu 2000). Boroneanţ discovered the site in 1968, but excavations started only in 1969. Although earlier and later cultural layers were uncovered in the cave, Mesolithic material was not found; moreover, all the cultural strata were extremely disturbed and mixed up.

According to some accounts (Paunescu 2000, 376) excavations of the Veterani Cave yielded remains associated with the Medieval period, the Roman period, Neolithic Cotofeni and Starčevo-Criş, and Tardigrevetian (Boroneanţ 2000a; Paunescu 2000); no Mesolithic remains were found, and the stratigraphy appears to have been extremely disturbed.

A contrasting image is offered elsewhere; the cultural sequences identified in the cave are listed as Palaeolithic, Epipalaeolithic (Clisuraean), Mesolithic, Neolithic Starčevo-Criş, Neolithic Cotofeni, Hallstatt (Basarabii), Dacian, Daco-Roman, Byzantine and Medieval, modern (Boroneanţ 2000a, 90). The stratigraphy is also presented as extremely disturbed.

Logically it is impossible to understand why a group of people would chose to face meteorological discom-
Fig. 5. North profile, Section IV, Veterani Terasa (Boroneanţ 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000). Paunescu (2000, 376–377) identifies the following strata: 1. debris of about 0.05–0.40m; 2. ashes of about 0.05–0.12m; 3. sandy yellow soil of about 0.03–0.05m; 4. ashy yellow soil of about 0.20–0.30m; 5. black soil of about 0.05–1.00m; 6. yellow-grey soil of about 0.05–0.90m; 7. yellow soil of about 0.45–0.65m; 8. yellow soil, Salcuta culture of about 0.25–0.35m; 9. dark brown soil of about 0.30–0.65m – archaeologically sterile; 10. light brown soil of about 0.40–0.65m – Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture; 11. gravel and sand of about 0.15–0.60m – Level II of Tardigrevetian of Mediterranean type; 12. sand lens of about 0.03–0.05m – Level I Tardigrevetian of Mediterranean type; 13. limestone bed. Paunescu offers no information for layers 14 and 15; however, level 15 is defined as bedrock, levels 13 and 14 as archaeologically sterile, and levels 1–8 as post – Paleolithic deposition (Paunescu 2000, 377). Scale was offered by V. Boroneanţ (1973c).

Fig. 6. Photo of Mraconia River alluvial deposits in the Danube, before the building of the dam. The Razvrata site was located on the left (of the photo) alluvial section. Hajdučka Vodenica was located just opposite the Mraconia River mouth. The Danube flows left to right. Upper right: Mraconia Depression, a possible location of a base-site for Icoana-Razvrata outpost sites. (Courtesy of Ivana Radovanović)

fort living in the open, in front of the cave, if a natural shelter was available only a few steps away. On the other hand, it is more likely that earlier and later inhabitants of the cave did throw a great quantity of refuse at and below the entrance. A great part of this refuse washed away by rain, as well as other refuse from inside the cave carried by the ancient stream, would have naturally ended on the terrace. It appears that the excavator may have not been aware of this problem. Moreover, the stratigraphic sequence of the terrace (Boroneanţ 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000) is unclear.

No perforated antler tools characteristic of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture were found at this site.

In Paunescu’s interpretation (2000, 377), there appears to be two Epipaleolithic–Tardigrevetian excavation levels 11 and 12, and a Mesolithic Schela Cladovei excavation level 10. He mentions the remains of a hearth, which is associated with the Tardigrevetian period, excavation level 12.

Boroneanţ describes excavation level 10 at Veterani Terasa as “terre jaune comportant des rares traces épipaleolithiques” and does not mention any cultural remains for excavation levels 11 and 12 (Boroneanţ 2000b, 271). There are no radiocarbon dates from this site.

Razvrata

Before it flows into the Danube, the Mraconia River forms a bassinet (a small semi-enclosure) named Mraconia Depression, of about 1.5 km long and 400 m wide behind Ciucarul Mic Mountain. It then bores through the mountain through a short defile of about 500 m long and, before the formation of the lake of the hydroelectric plant, diverted into the Danube, bringing a great amount of alluvium with it. This alluvium built up two fenny peninsulas at each side of the river mouth. It was on the smaller peninsula that the site of Razvrata was located.

The site was already in great part destroyed by the Danube by the time Boroneanţ (1973a) located it 1967. Excavations took place in 1967 and 1968. Five trenches were dug. There are no details of the area excavated, no excavation plans, or site distribution maps. Two layers of Schela Cladovei culture were re-
revealed. There is one published stratigraphy of the SE wall of section S 1.

At Razvarta it is not clear if the explanation offered by the published stratigraphy refers to the second phase of Schela Cladovei culture, or generally to the second cultural level of the site. Boroneanț (1973c. 9) simply refers to the two cultural levels as ‘Epipaleolithic I and II’. Paunescu (2000.393) defines the lower cultural level as ‘Level I Epipaleolithic Tardigravettian’, and the upper cultural level as ‘Level II Mesolithic’.

Icoana

The site was located on a narrow strip of the Danube bank at the foot of Ciucarul Mic. It appears that the width of this strip was only of about 6 m (V. Boroneanț, personal communication). Information about the exact location of the site varies. Paunescu (2000. 394) gives a distance of 600 m east of Razvarta; Radovanović (1996a.324) thinks that this distance is about 200 m; Boroneanț (1973c.8) refers to “quelques centaines de mètres”. In any case, the exact location of the site is known due to a landmark: an icon mounted in the wall of the mountain after the formation of the artificial lake.

According to Boroneanț (personal communication), there was a feeble stream of water springing from the mountain wall. The site produced a large amount of archaeological material, especially faunal remains (Bolomey 1973).

According to the published stratigraphy of Section II (Boroneanț 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000), there are two Mesolithic Schela Cladovei cultural levels.

Archaeologically, from upper to lower it was possible to distinguish the following levels of site occupation:

Very little can be said about the cultural evolution of the site. As seen in Table 1, there is a sharp discrepancy between the depth inscribed on the samples and the results obtained by the dating of the samples. The situation is not new: the only old dates for which depths were mentioned showed an age of 7460–7170 BC for a depth of 2.1 m, and 8200–7350 BC for a depth of 0.5 m (Paunescu 2000.407). It may be that at the time, Boroneanț may have not noticed the difference, and therefore did not offer any details about the samples’ cultural levels of provenance. Also, according to Boroneanț’s published stratigraphy, at a depth of −0.30 m there should have been a layer associated with Neolithic Starčevo-Cris culture, separated by the Mesolithic layers by some 1.00 m of deposition. The stratum was extremely disturbed (Boroneanț, personal communication; Boroneanț, field notes). However, the human sample AA66568 (Tab. 1) inscribed by Boroneanț as IC, 1969 VII −0.30 m produced a date undoubtedly associated with the Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture occupation of the site, also confirmed by the morphological and metrical analysis comparative to other Mesolithic Schela Cladovei human remains held

Fig. 7. Southeast profile of Section I, Razvarta (Boroneanț 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000): 1. alluvial sand of about 0.05–0.30m; 2. brown-black humus of about 0.35–0.40m; 3. soil light yellow of about 0.20–0.30m; 4. black soil of about 0.17–0.35; 5. light-grey soil, Level II Mesolithic Schela Cladovei Culture of about 0.14–0.34m; 6. yellow sandy soil – Level I Tardigravettian of Mediterranean type of about 0.35m; 7. brown-yellow soil. Levels 1–4 are listed as archaeologically sterile. V. Boroneanț refers to layer 5 as ‘epipaleolithique II’ and layer 6 as ‘epipaleolithique I’ (Boroneanț 1973c.5). No scale is offered originally by Boroneanț (Boroneanț 1973c), but Paunescu adds one (Paunescu 2000).

Fig. 8. Old photo of the Danube’s left bank at Icoana before the construction of the dam, seen from the Serbian bank. The Hajdučka Vodenica location was in the lower left corner of the picture. The Danube flows left to right. Courtesy of Ivana Radovanović.
at the Institute of Anthropology ‘Rainer’ (Miritoiu, personal communication) in Bucharest (Miritoiu, Sullana and Soficaru 2004) (Tab. 3).

This discrepancy may suggest that levels of occupations at the same depth on different excavation sections belong to different phases of site evolution. If this were true, it may be that the periodization and chronologies offered by Boroneanţ may be subject to reinterpretation. The circumstances are aggravated by the fact that no datum was used, and that the excavation depth was measured individually for each section from the ground level down; according to pictures taken by the excavator (Boroneanţ 1970), the terrain was far from horizontally levelled, and such a method of depth measurement would offer strongly inaccurate premises for comparison. Most regrettably, at this point it is simply impossible to advance any speculations regarding the stratigraphy of the excavated sections.

Boroneanţ (2000b.275) only mentions two layers of Epipalaeolithic and one layer of Neolithic Starčevo. On the same stratigraphic profile, Paunescu (2000,395) notes a cultural level I Tardigrevettian, a cultural level IIa Schela Cladovei, and a level IIb Schela Cladovei.

Ostrovl Banului – Gura Vaii

The site was located on the island of Ostrovl Banului, precisely vis-à-vis the village of Gura Vaii. There was actually a group of three islands, of which only Ostrovl Banului belonged to Romania. Not mentioned in the literature previously published is the fact that, at this point, directly across the Danube, the small River Jidostita disperses its waters. Before the formation of the hydroelectric plant, the Jidostita formed an alluvial fan advancing far into the river and considerably narrowing the distance to the island, making it easily accessible.

The site was located on the south end of the island, which was flooded 2 or 3 months of the year. Presently only a small portion of the island remains

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**Fig. 9. The West profile of Section I, Icoana (Boroneanţ 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000): 1. mass of recently fallen rocks of about 0.20–0.87m; 2. light-brown soil, Starçevo-Cris of about 0.10–0.28m; 3. grayish-black soil of about 0.17–0.33m – Level IIb Mesolithic Schela Cladovei; 4. grey yellow soil of about 0.18–0.75m Level IIa Mesolithic Schela Cladovei; 5. yellow soil, sterile of about 0.25–0.57m; 6. grey soil of about 0.15m – Level I Tardigrevettian of Mediterranean type. Boroneanţ (1973c.9) only refers to layers 3 and 6 simply as Epipalaeolithic. A scale was not originally offered by Boroneanţ (Boroneanţ 1973c), but Paunescu (2000) adds one.**
above the water level. The excavations were begun in 1966, and performed by Petre Roman for the upper, post Mesolithic period, and by Boroneanţ for the Mesolithic and earlier periods (A. Boroneanţ, V. Boroneanţ, personal communication). Boroneanţ excavated six trenches of an unknown area. No site distribution map has been published.

Paunescu advances the hypothesis that the Mesolithic Schela Cladovei found at Ostrovul Banului represents a very late phase of this culture, but some doubts may arise from the reliability of the $^{14}$C dates (2000.391). Concerning the archaeological stratigraphy, Paunescu (2001.381) identifies the following cultural levels from upper to lower. The stratigraphy at Ostrovul Banului is problematic as a result of the fact that there are two strata associated, according to lithic typologies, with pre-Mesolithic cultures (Boroneanţ 2000b; Mogoseanu 1978; Paunescu 2000).

Some authors (Boroneanţ 1973c.8) simply noted the stratigraphy at Ostrovul Banului as ‘Epipaleolithic I’ (the oldest), ‘Epipaleolithic II’, ‘Epipaleolithic IIIa’ (oldest Mesolithic Schela Cladovei), and ‘Epipaleolithic IIIb’ (youngest Mesolithic Schela Cladovei?). Others (Paunescu 2000.382) describe the stratigraphic sequence at Ostrovul Banului as cultural levels I (the oldest) and II Tardigravettian of Mediterranean type, and level III and IV as Mesolithic Schela Cladovei. Yet others (Mogoseanu 1978), referring only to the pre-Mesolithic layers, use the term ‘Romanello-Azilian’.

Typologically, the stone tools from the pre-Mesolithic levels at Ostrovul Banului were thought to be identical with those at Cuina Turcului (Paunescu 1970; 2000), a cave situated on the Romanian Shore of the Danube Canyon, less than 200 m from Veterani Terrace (Fig. 2). The confusion is accentuated by the radiocarbon dates for the tool assemblages from Cuina Turcului, of 10 650±120 BC, 10 100±120 BC, and one date of 8175±200 BC (Mogoseanu 1978.339) and a possible relation with the proximate site of Baile Herculane-Pesta Hotilor on the Danube’s tributary Cerna River (Fig. 1), dated 11 460–11 310 BC (1σ) (Paunescu 2000a.146). Mogoseanu cautiously underlines the estimated 2000 year difference between these dates, if Ostrovul Banului is to be considered one of the most recent pre-Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture sites; at Iron Gates sites, dates of about 8000 BC are associated with Mesolithic Schela Cladovei assemblages. The dates from Ostrovul Banului and Cuina Turcului will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section of this paper.

![Fig. 10. The Island of Ostrovul Banului, median-left. In the background the ‘Iron Gates I’ dam.](image)

Samples associated with Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture remains at Ostrovul Banului yielded dates between 6500–7500 BC (Tabs. 1, 2). As a consequence, according to our present state of knowledge, it is almost impossible to outline a temporal framework for the ending of Tardigravettian and the beginning of the Mesolithic Schela Cladovei at Ostrovul Banului; on the other hand, it seems unlikely that a Tardigravettian group would have survived that late only at Ostrovul Banului, surrounded by Mesolithic Schela Cladovei groups. Attempts to parallel pre-Mesolithic Schela Cladovei developments with other Iron Gates sites like Cuina Turcului and Baile Herculane – Pestera Hotilor (Boroneanţ 1973a; 1973c; 2000a; 2000b; Prinz 1987; Radovanović 1996a; 1996b; Tringham 2000) remain problematic (Mogoseanu 1978; Paunescu 2000).

As a parenthesis, it must be noted that no Mesolithic Schela Cladovei remains have been uncovered at Baile Herculane-Pesta Hotilor (Blitiri 1959; Nicolaescu-Plopsor 1959; Nicolaescu-Plopsor and Comsa 1957; Nicolaescu-Plopsor et al. 1957; Nicolaescu-Plopsor and Paunescu 1961; Paunescu 2001a) or at Cuina Turcului (Paunescu 1970; 2000).

**Schela Cladovei**

Given the archaeological material uncovered, this is the most important Schela Cladovei culture site. The site is located in Turnu Severin, at the SW end of the city. Although located directly on the bank of the Danube, prior and after the construction of the dam it was less affected by river flooding and increases in the water level compared to any of the other sites because the bank was higher. Technically, the location is still part of the Iron Gates, but in fact it is placed downstream of Gura Vaiil point, where the river valley widens and the current slows. There was rela-
tively reduced shore erosion, although it was obvious that the water had destroyed part of the site.

Archaeological work was begun in 1965 under Boroneanţ, and continued in 1967, 1968, and 1982. A second campaign was undertaken from 1991 to 1996 by a British team (Bonsall et al. 1997; Bonsall 2004; Bonsall et al. 1996b; Bonsall et al. 2000a; Bonsall et al. 2002). During the summer of 2002 the local authorities reinforced the shore, in an attempt to prevent its further erosion. Presently there is left an area about twice the size of a football field, which gradually has been occupied by the local people and used for gardens and small corn fields. The site is in great danger of being totally destroyed by the locals.

Schela Cladovei offers a number of advantages as a location. It is placed right on the river bank, which gently rises into a forested hill. At about 300 m up the hill there is a small spring that flows in seven smaller streams down into the Danube around and across the site, insuring fresh, clean water. Being placed at the eastern extremity of the Gorge, the site inhabitants could practically control access to and from the canyon. The surroundings consist of very low hills covered by rich, mixed vegetation offering food for humans and animals. The hills are very easy to cross by foot.

There are no pictures of the site before excavations began, but Paunescu mentions that it covered an area of about 2 km between the naval dock and a border patrol post (Boroneanţ 1999a; Paunescu 2000). The site was continuously affected by different construction projects such as installations of water abduction pipes, the transformation of the beach into a gravel and sand quarry, and other smaller or larger, and recently more or less permanent structures were built.

According to Boroneanţ (2000b), the site is divided into two sections, east (‘Sector A’) and west (‘Sector B’), of the small creek that flows into the Danube. Although scant Mesolithic traces were found west of the creek, the actual Mesolithic habitation was found only on the area east of the creek, up to the proximity of a railway check point. A map of the excavations was published (Boroneanţ 2000b.277): in ‘Sector B’, during 1967–1968, excavations extended for about 140 m and a width of about 1.80 m–4 m, depending of the sinuosity of the shore. During 1982–1989, apparently on the same 140 m, excavations were extended into the shore to a depth of 4.50 m. In 1990, excavations were performed west of the 1968 area, on both sides of an access road from a closed gravel quarry. The total area uncovered during this episode appears to be of about 30 m in length and 1.80 m to 6 m in width (V. Boroneanţ and A. Boroneanţ, personal communication).

Paunescu (2000.449) inserts the observation that at least part of the faunal osteological material identified by Bartosiewicz (Bartosiewicz et al. 1995) has its provenance in amalgamated remains that strati-
graphically have been almost impossible to separate by levels, and is therefore unsure.

Although comparable in importance with Lepenski Vir, before 1990 there were no radiocarbon dates for this site. Some dates were offered after 1990 (Bonsall 1997; Bonsall et al. 1996; Bonsall et al. 2004; Bonsall et al. 2000; Cook et al. 2002).

Stratigraphically, there appears to be a level defined by Boroneanţ (1973c; 2000b) Epipalaeolithic II (the oldest), and one Epipalaeolithic I. The same author uses ‘Schela Cladovei’ (Boroneanţ 1973c:8) and ‘Schela Cladovei II’ (Boroneanţ 1973c.9), but it is impossible to determine if the former means Epipalaeolithic I and the latter Epipalaeolithic II, or vice versa. In the periodization offered by the same author, the Schela Cladovei site appears under Schela Cladovei culture phases II and III (Boroneanţ 1973c.15). According to the fact the phase I of the periodization is the oldest, it may only be assumed that phase II is associated with Schela Cladovei I, or, Epipalaeolithic I, and phase II with Schela Cladovei I, or, Epipalaeolithic II, theirs (Paunescu 2000) identify an oldest Tardigravettian level, and a second upper level of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei. There is no mention of an archaeological sterile dividing these two levels. In Paunescu’s (2000.439) opinion, enumerating from upper to lower the cultural levels at Schela Cladovei, he notes level II, Mesolithic Schela Cladovei, the only level associated with this culture (according to Boroneanţ the Epipalaeolithic I, in other words Mesolithic II Schela Cladovei culture) and level I Epipalaeolithic Tardigravettian of Mediterranean type (according to Boroneanţ the Epipalaeolithic II, in other words Mesolithic I Schela Cladovei culture).

**Ostrovel Corbului**

The island of Ostrovel Corbului is 16 km upstream from Schela Cladovei on the Danube, between fluvial km 911 and 916. At the point where the Danube waters separate embracing the island, is Hînova village, and the point is called ‘Botul Piscului’; again where the two branches of the Danube reunits there is the village of Baloti and the point is called ‘Botul Cliuciului’. The excavations at Botul Cluciului were conducted in two areas: A1, right at the point where the Great Danube (the main branch) and the Lesser Danube (the smaller branch) reunite, and A2, about 120 m upstream on the Greater Danube bank. Only in area A1 have Mesolithic Schela Cladovei remains been uncovered.

![Fig. 13. The west profile of Section B1 at Schela Cladovei (Boroneanţ 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000): 1. Humus, XVII–XIX cent. of about 0.12–0.16 m; 2. light-brown soil of about 0.25–0.38 m – Starcevo-Criş; 3. dusty dark yellow soil of about 0.15–0.25 m – Starcevo-Criş; 4. dark yellow dusty soil of about 0.12–0.30 m, Mesolithic Schela Cladovei (V. Boroneanţ 1973c.A refers to ‘Epipalaeolithic I’); 5. dusty light-yellow soil 0.16–0.20 m – Tardigravettian; 6. mud and stones layer of about 0.05–0.08 m; 7. gravel (V. Boroneanţ 1973c.A refers to ‘Epipalaeolithic II’). A scale was not originally offered by Boroneanţ (1973c), but added by Paunescu (2000).](image-url)
shelter or hut marked with a red X in Fig. 15. There is one hearth at the bottom of the hut, one at a median level, and two at the upper level, separated by alluvial sediment suggesting powerful floods. Mogoseanu suggests that one and the same group of people built and rebuilt the first two levels of hearths, and a second group built the third, upper level of hearths. As a total, however, for the entire cultural deposition associated with Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture, Mogoseanu specifies:

“In total, stratul de cultura Schela Cladovei, gros de circa 0.70 m (din care este exclusa adincimea locuiniei) numara 7 nivele de locuire, fiecare nivel fiind marcat printr-o noua constructie de vatra de foc.” [As a total, Schela Cladovei cultural level, about 0.70 m thick (from which the depth of the shelter is excluded) contains 7 levels of habitation, each being marked by a new construction of fire hearths.] (Mogoseanu 1978,339)

The three fire hearth levels associated with the shelter are considered to be two levels of occupation: the bottom two hearths one level, as constructed by the same group of people, and the upper hearths another level, built by a different group of people. The total of 7 levels of habitation consists of these two, plus 5 other fire hearths uncovered only on level 1 (phase 1) Mesolithic Schela Cladovei (Fig. 15, excavation level 7; Fig. 16, excavation level 11), as explained by Paunescu (1996, 134–135). For the second phase of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture, only 3 hearths were uncovered, all in Section I (Fig. 16, excavation level 10). Fortunately, the excavators made available both the depths of the hearths and their association with phase I or II of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei, and the depths of the radiocarbon samples and their association with the phase I or II of this culture. Due to this fact, Ostrovul Corbului is the only site where it is possible to obtain a better evolutionary image of Schela Cladovei culture.

**Ostrovul Mare**

The island of Ostrovul Mare is the easternmost Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture site. The island is engulfed by the Danube proper and a lesser branch of the river, called Dunarea Mica (Lesser Danube). It is 14.5 km long, and has a width varying between 3.2 km at Bivolari-Schela and 0.800 km at Padurea Mica.

The island has been excavated since the beginning of the century by numerous archaeologists, revealing remains belonging to the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval periods (Paunescu 2000). In 1978 Boroneană began to excavate at Danube Km 873 and 875. Most unfortunately, the excavator never published articles dedicated entirely to this site, except for a preliminary report (Boroneană et al. 1979). Scant information and vague references were inserted in texts on the Schela Cladovei culture, providing a general description (Boroneană 1990; 1982; 1980; 1979).

The excavations were performed in two locations: Point Km. 873, and Point Km. 875. Information is tangential and extremely brief. There is no stratigraphic chart or specification on the depth of the strata. At both points there are two levels of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture, not separated by archaeological sterile (Paunescu 2000). According to the infor-
mation offered in this section, it is only possible to assume that by ‘Paleolitique Supérieur’ (Boroneanţ 2000b) Boroneant generally meant Epipaleolithic; by Epipaleolithic he generally meant Mesolithic; by ‘Epipaleolithic I’ he meant ‘Mesolithic I; and by ‘Epipaleolithic II’ was meant ‘Mesolithic II’. Considering also the fact that at some sites there were actual Epipaleolithic I and II levels, this would translate chronologically as Epipaleolithic, Mesolithic I, and Mesolithic II. According to other sources, ‘Paleolithicque Supérieur’ meant the Aurignacian from Baile Herculane-Pestera Hotilor, and by Epipaleolithic is meant both the Tardigrevetian and the Mesolithic as one cultural phenomenon (Boroneanţ, personal communication).

It has been suggested that at most Schela Cladovei sites there are two phases of occupation for Schela Cladovei Culture (Boroneanţ, personal communication) generally divided by an archaeological sterile layer. However, as shown in the published stratigraphies (Boroneanţ 1973c; 2000b; Paunescu 2000), it is not possible to distinguish an archaeologically sterile between the Mesolithic levels. Instead, in some cases there is such a stratum between an Epipaleolithic level, sometimes called Tardigrevetian of Mediterranean type, and the layers associated with Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture. As can be seen, there is a major problem regarding stratigraphic explanations residing from a total lack of differentiation between such concepts as excavated layer, cultural layer, cultural phase. For instance, while Boroneanţ (1973a) refers to the Mesolithic deposits at Ostroval Banului as ‘Epipaleolithic IIa’ and ‘Epipaleolithic IIb’, Paunescu (2000) refers to the same deposits as ‘Ostroval Banului level III’ and ‘Ostroval Banului level IV’. Subsequently, in the same publication, Paunescu (2000,386) uses ‘Ostroval Banului IIa’ and ‘Ostroval Banului IIIb’, and only one page further on (2000,387) refers only to ‘Ostroval Banului III’. Also Paunescu informs us that the samples for radiocarbon dating were collected by Boroneanţ from ‘level III’ (Paunescu 2000,67). The unanswered question: does ‘level III’ and ‘Epipaleolithic IIb’ refer to the same cultural phase of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture at Ostroval Banului?

The ‘tell’ of the new radiocarbon dates

All samples for the new AMS dates presented here (Tab.1) were obtained from strata associated with the remains of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture such as antler tools (Boroneanţ 1970; 1990b; 2000b) (Fig. 17) or lithics (Paunescu 2000).

Fig. 16. Segment of the West profile of Section 1 (central) (Paunescu 1990; 2000): 1. modern deposition of unspecified depth; 2. unspecified soil of about 0.30m – Doco-Roman; 3. unspecified soil of about 0.90m – Bronze Age; 4. unspecified soil and depth – archaeologically sterile; 5. unspecified soil of about 1.24m – Neolithic Cotofeni; 6. unspecified soil and depth – archaeologically sterile; 7. unspecified soil of about 0.60m – Neolithic Salcuta; 8. unspecified soil and depth – archaeologically sterile; 9. unspecified soil of about 0.42m – Starăceo-Cris; 10. unspecified soil of about 0.34m – Level II Mesolithic Schela Cladovei; 11. light yellow clay of about 0.29m – Level I Mesolithic Schela Cladovei.

These dates confirm some of the facts suggested by the old dates obtained from Icoana (Tab. 2): the depth of the samples is not always in accordance with the age. This situation was signalled at an early stage of site analysis by the samples Bln–1078 and Bln–1077 at Icoana, as explained in the preceding section. The new dates put a particular accent on this site, suggesting that it may represent the oldest Mesolithic in the Iron Gates region, at least for the northern bank of the Danube; there is one date later than 8800 BC, twelve dates older than 8000 BC. In assigning two levels of Mesolithic at Icoana, Boroneanţ considered the fact that there were antler and wild boar canine tools in both levels, and that these tools were identical to those from the site at Schela Cladovei. No such tools were found in the Tardigrevetian levels at Cuina Turcului or other Mesolithic Iron Gates sites, such as Ostroval Banului.

As a consequence, if Boroneanţ was right in his judgment and there are indeed two Mesolithic levels at Icoana, it means that:

- a Mesolithic population showed up in the Danube Gorge immediately after 9000 BC, with an already well-defined antler and bone tool-making technology;
- these people were already adapted to an economy consisting of both intensive fishing and hunting;
the antler and bone tool, and stone tool technolo-
gies were therefore not rooted in the previous Tar-
digravettian;

by the time these people settled the Danube bank
there may have been Tardiglavettian groups inhabi-
ting the river’s defile, and these two cultures coexis-
ted in parallel for some time. One of the three radio-
carbon dates from the Tardiglavettian layers (Mogo-
seanu 1978; Paunescu 2000) at Cuina Turcului (Fig.
1), a cave site where no remains associated with Me-
solithic Schela Cladovei were uncovered (Paunescu
1970; 2000), shows a time range of 8175±200 BC
(Mogoseanu 1978:339). There are six date at Icoana
older that 8200 BC. It is also possible that late Tar-
digravettian groups were present at Ostrovul Banu-
lui (Mogoseanu 1978).

Paunescu (2000:394–400) considers the lowest level
at Icoana to be Tardiglavettian, on the basis of the
lithic technology of some 100 identifiable pieces. It
has to be noted that, generally, the cultural remains
of this level are scarce. However, there is one huge
problem regarding the dates from Cuina Turcului. As
shown above, Mogoseanu lists the date Bln–802 as
8175±200 BC. The same sample is presented by Pau-
nescu (2000:342) as being dated 10 125±200 BP. If

OxCal calibrated for one sigma, it shows a range of
10 150–9350 BC (68.2 %), or about 9750±400 BC,
a time period far earlier than the one presented by
Mogoseanu. There are no details offered by the Mo-
goseanu, therefore it is impossible to comment on
his source for the calibration of this date. If the old-
est date of about 8800 BC is compared to the late
date of about 9700 BC from Cuina Turcului, there is
a difference of about 900 years. Such a time span
may be long enough, but all the same, short enough
to leave room for speculation on the relationship be-
tween the final Tardiglavettian and the early Mesol-
ithic at Iron Gates.

One other significant fact revealed by the corrobor-
ation of the new and old dates from Icoana is the
longevity of the site occupation from about 8800 BC
to perhaps 6000 BC. The long sequence of radiocar-
don dates offers a most needed reference point for
a comparison among all the Mesolithic sites on both
sides of the Danube. There is one old radiocarbon
date of about 4800 BC, which doubtlessly should
not be associated with the Mesolithic period. Unfor-
unately, there are no details about the sample, but
it appears that the cultural layer of its provenance
should be associated with the Neolithic Starčevo-
Criş.
It is impossible at this point to speculate on the nature of the site's occupation. It is more likely, however, that the site was not occupied permanently all year round. Considering its location and proximity to the site at Razvrata, it has been suggested that these were probably twin sites, probably outposts of a base-site located in the Mraconia River Depression (Fig.2) (Bolomey 1973) which is at present mostly under water. There are two new dates from Razvrata, both showing a time range of about 8100 BC, and an old one of about 6500 BC. The new dates make Razvrata one of the oldest Mesolithic sites on the northern shore of the Danube, and strongly suggest either a parallel, or an alternate coexistence with Icoana. It is simply impossible to say if people were moving back and forth between the two locations, or if they were actually living at the two locations at the same time, or both. It is clear, however, that the sites were contemporary, and that human activity at Razvrata lasted for a very long time. The stratigraphy of the site is identical to the one at Icoana, generating the same controversial interpretations. Probably the most interesting thing about the cultural development in the vicinity of the River Mraconia is the possibility that Icoana and Razvrata on the northern side of the Danube, and Hajdučka Vodenica (Fig. 2) on the southern side represent in fact a related cultural evolution. There are only a few dates from Hajdučka (Borić and Miracle 2004) ranging about 7400–8200 BC; the three sites appear to have been contemporary for some time. Again, according to the available data, it may not be possible yet to speculate if some group of people settled on both sides of the Danube at the mouth of the Mraconia, but according to the location of the sites, it is hard to believe that if inhabited at the same time, these people would have ignored each other. Also, according to some stable isotope results of human, animal, and snail shell, it appears that the Mesolithic people of Iron Gates did move up and down the defile at least to some degree. One great exception appears to be the inhabitants of the Schela Cladoavei site. The values obtained from these individuals may be interpreted in a two ways: either people from along the Danube defile came over and settled at Schela Cladoavei, or inhabitants of Schela Cladoavei travelled intensively on the river (Dinu 2006). Hopefully, future research related to the human DNA of individuals uncovered on both sides of the Danube (present authors; Dusan Borić, personal communication) will shed some light in this direction. Considering also the four dates available from both Mesolithic levels at Ostrovul Corbului, it appears that these sites represent a later Mesolithic development at Iron Gates; and comparing them to the dates from Ostrovul Banului, it may be that the Mesolithic at the later site also represent a late phase in the defile. Ostrovul Banului is a site that, in corroboration with the information from Cuina Turcului and Icoana, may offer crucial information on the cultural sequences at Iron Gates. The Tardigravettian and the Mesolithic layers are well defined, allowing for a clear differentiation between the cultural layers and phases. However, the lack of more precise stratigraphic information does have an effect on the interpretation of the radiocarbon dates. The new date of about 7300 BC was generated by a sample whose provenance context was surely Mesolithic, but whose depth was relatively low: only ~0.40 m. According to the stratigraphic profile and the scale (Fig. 11) such a depth must be somewhere on the border between the first and the second phases of the Mesolithic. No details are available about the other two samples from Ostrovul Banului for a comparison. The new date of about 6800 BC from Ostrovul Mare is currently the only one available, making any chronological speculation about this site impossible, other than that at one point it was contemporary with Icoana-Razvrata, Ostrovul Banului, Ostrovul Corbului, Schela Cladoavei.

Interestingly, the eight new radiocarbon dates from Schela Cladoavei, comprising a time span from about 7300 BC to about 5700 BC represent a perfect continuation of the dates offered previously (Cook et al. 2002) covering a range from about 7600 BC to about 7400 BC, and offering a comparative reference for some 2000 years of cultural development. None of these 8 dates is older than about 7300 BC, which may confer some degree of confidence in considering Schela Cladoavei a site that formed and developed at a much later time than Icoana, Razvrata, or the very little understood site of Alibeg. Equally im-
portant, the date of 5725–5625 BC generated by a sample from −0.45–0.53 m, may reflect the last period in the existence of the Mesolithic at Iron Gates.

It has been suggested that the Neolithic Starčevo elements appeared in the region by 6070–5720 BC (Bonsall et al. 2004). Considering some of the older dates, it has to be noted that offered more recently (Boroneanţ 2000.85–86) for Alibeg (Pescari-Coroni-ni), of about 8410±100 BC, that appears to be less known to scholars interested in the Mesolithic and Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Europe. Besides this date, there is another of about 6100–5980 BC (Paunescu 2000) according to which Alibeg was considered a very late site (Paunescu 2000; Prinz 1987; Radovanović 1996a; 1996b; Tringham 2000). The date of about 8400 BC drastically changes this status, matching some of the oldest dates for Icoana, and making Alibeg one of the earliest Mesolithic sites at Iron Gates.

In summarizing the above information, a few ideas can be outlined. First, the chronological sequence at Icoana seems to cover most, if not the entire evolution of the Mesolithic at Iron Gates. It provides a comparative timetable for all the other sites on both banks of the Danube. Second, the new radiocarbon dates reshape the entire chronological sequence for the Mesolithic at Iron Gates. The sites at Icoana, Razvrata, and Alibeg appear to be much earlier than previously thought, substantially pushing back the time range for the appearance of the Mesolithic groups in the region. Third, the situation at Icoana-Razvrata and the early date from Alibeg raises some questions about the cultural sequence for all the Iron Gates Mesolithic sites:

1. If there was a cultural continuity from Tardigravettian to Mesolithic, why would an abrupt change in the antler tools technologies occur by 8800 BC, and

2. comparing the radiocarbon dates from Icoana, Alibeg and Cuina Turcului, it is very difficult to explain why perforated antler tools were present at Icoana by 8800 BC, but not present only a few hundred meters upstream at Cuina Turcului by about the same time. It must be underlined that no perforated antler tools were found in the level diagnosed as Mesolithic at Veterani Terasa. Of course, the discrepancy between the dates for the final Tardigravettian at Cuina Turcului must be also considered.

Fourth, the corroboration of the new and old dates raises some questions on the validity of the relative chronology on which previous periodization models were constructed, and the stratigraphic considerations on which these relative chronologies were based. There is an obvious discrepancy between some of the depths inscribed on the radiocarbon samples and the results. Although at present it is extremely difficult to reevaluate the stratigraphy at some of these sites, it is not impossible, and hopefully, future research will at least in part clarify this problem.

**Periodization: absolute and relative chronology**

Due to the fact that at present the archaeological material at most of the sites presented above, can only be analyzed according to the depth inscribed on it, and that the scale offered for each stratigraphic profile appears to be rather approximate and in some cases totally wrong, it is extremely challenging to determine where one particular sample actually came from. Moreover, in cases such as Icoana, early signs that the relative and absolute chronology were in total contrast as confirmed by Bln–1078 and Bln–1077 were ignored. As a consequence, items found at a particular depth may have been interpreted as they belong to an earlier or later level of occupation, but generally the logic according to which, the upper-younger, and the lower-older, seems not to have been always true for a site like Icoana. Such being the situation at one site, questions may be raised about others excavated by the same archaeologist.

This situation is perpetuated mainly due to the periodization advanced by some Romanian archaeologists (Boroneanț 1973c; Paunescu 2000) as a reflection of their views of the cultural evolution at Iron Gates. Some even advanced the hypothesis that there was an uninterrupted evolution from the Upper Paleolithic to Neolithic:

> “If the Neolithic was introduced from outside, where did it come from? The present author believes that it did not come from outside ... The present author believes that the discovery of clay baking and processing towards the end of the Epi-Paleolithi-c in this particular zone led to the abandon-ment of the processing of river boulders into artis-tic forms in favour of the processing of clay into pottery and idols.” (Boroneanţ 1990b:479)

Such models, in which the evolution of Mesolithic Schela Cladovei culture is seen as a smooth linear evolution from local Tardigravettian developments and a basis for a locally evolving Neolithic (Boroneanţ 1973:15–16) were based on the interpretation
of an earlier and a later phase of the Mesolithic at Iron Gates. Although similar in results, such models are in total contrast with those advancing the idea that in most cases the earlier Mesolithic level was in fact Tardigravettian (Paunescu 2000:40, 49, 52). Other authors are critical of these views (Mogosanu 1978:345–346), considering the absence of some raw material as quartzite, art, and portable artefacts, and stratigraphy at sites such as Ostrovul Corbului. Such authors advanced hypotheses according to which the Mesolithic at Schela Cladovei could have originated rather the very late echoes of a Mousterian found at Baile Herculane-Pestera Hotilor (Fig. 1).

The absence of radiocarbon dating meant that these models had to be constructed mainly, and in some cases solely, on a parallel analysis of the archaeological material. Of all periodizations, the most influential is that offered by Boroneanți (1973c), who explains that:

“La periodization de la culture Schela Cladovei pro-
cède des données fournies par sa structure ma-
terielle et des modifications que cette-derrière a su-
bies.” (Boroneanți 1973c:15)

According to such changes in the material culture, four stages of evolution were identified (Boroneanți 1973:15):

1st stage and the oldest at Veterani Terasa; 2nd stage at Icoana I, Razvrata, Schela Cladovei, Ostrovul Corbului IIIa; 3rd stage at Icoana II, Schela Cladovei, Razvrata, Ostrovul Corbului IIIb; 4th stage at Alibeg.

In the absence of radiocarbon dates from Veterani Terasa, it is not possible to make any references to this site. Considering only the absolute chronology offered by the new and old dates from the rest of the sites, it is possible, however, to offer a Mesolithic absolute chronology (Fig. 18), on approximately 5000 year periods:

1st stage, about 8800–8300 BC: Icoana, Alibeg, (Ve-
terani Terasa?);
2nd stage, about 8300–7800 BC: Icoana, Razvrata;
3rd stage, about 7800–7300 BC: Icoana, Schela Cladovei, Ostrovul Banului, Ostrovul Corbului;
4th stage, about 7300–6800 BC: Icoana, Ostrovul Banului, Schela Cladovei, Ostrovul Corbului, Ostrovul Mare;
5th stage, about 6800–6500 BC: Icoana, Ostrovul Corbului, Ostrovul Banului;
6th stage, about 6300–6100 BC: Icoana, Alibeg;
7th stage, about 5700–4800 BC: Schela Cladovei, Icoana.

The cultural phases of the Mesolithic layer were not noted for reasons related to discrepancies between sample depth, dating results, and stratigraphic interpretations as explained earlier in this paper.

Paunescu’s identification of a Tardigravettian layer at sites as Alibeg, Razvrata, Icoana, was based solely on lithic analysis, sometimes the entire sample consisting of a rather small number of pieces being accepted as reliable; at Razvrata, for instance, the lower Mesolithic level labeled as Tardigravettian yielded a total of 90 pieces (Paunescu 2000:393). All other cultural elements were largely disregarded. As a consequence, we have considered this interpretation as unreliable.

Considering the fact that the new radiocarbon samples were collected from depths associated with Mesolithic cultural remains, among which signature Schela Cladovei antler tools represent a noticeable reference point, the fact that such tools were not found in pre-Mesolithic cultural levels at any of the sites at Iron Gates, and that Boroneanți constructed his judgments on the presence of Mesolithic cultural evidence, we tend to agree with his identification of two Mesolithic cultural layers at the sites presented in this paper. On the other hand, we tend to disagree with the Boroneanți model of a local cultural and demographic continuity from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Neolithic. Rather, based on the data presented in this paper, we suggest that the Upper Palaeolithic, the Mesolithic, and the Neolithic at Iron Gates represent separate stages of cultural development, and that the human populations associated with these stages were not related in any way.

It is interesting to notice that the earliest Neolithic remains at Iron Gates were uncovered at none of the sites associated with the Mesolithic, but at Cuina Turcului Cave, and, contrary to what may be expected, that is not the earliest Neolithic Starčevo in Romania. The two known Early Neolithic sites north of the Danube appeared at Circea (Bolomey 1976; 1977; Nica 1976; 1977; 1993), and Gura Baciuului (Biagi, Shen-
nan and Spataro 2005; Biagi and Spataro 2005), rather far from the Iron Gates. There are no dates for Circea, but Gura Baciuului produced a date of about 7140±25 BP (Biagi et al. 2005:46). Calibrated OxCal (1σ, 68.2%) the date ranges from 6055–5985 BC. Although there are no radiocarbon dates for the lowest Neolithic Starčevo levels at Cuina Turcului, the
Starčevo ceramic appears to be clearly of a later Starčevo phase, associated by some with Starčevo-Criş IIA–IIB (Nica 1979:22).

Also contrary to expectations, the only Neolithic human remains, consisting of very few bones and skulls (Paunescu 1996:146) uncovered on the northern bank of the Iron Gates, came from Ostrovul Corbului (Necrasov and Bolezatu 1981; Paunescu 1996), and not from large, complex Mesolithic sites such as Schela Cladovei. Unfortunately, the Neolithic human remains from Ostrovul Corbului have been not dated.

Comparing the radiocarbon date from Gura Baciului with the new and old dates listed in this paper, it is not difficult to see that there is only a date from Schela Cladovei, of about 5725–5625 BC (Tab. 1), and one from Icoana later than 5000 BC, that may be associated with the appearance of the Starčevo culture on the northern shore of the Danube at Iron Gates. Also, considering the ceramic typology and its association with a later phase of Starčevo, the date of 6120–5980 BC from Alibeg may still be too early to be connected in any way with possible Mesolithic-Neolithic contacts in the region. It may be said, therefore, with a fair degree of confidence, that the radiocarbon dates presented in this study rather infirm the hypothesis of Mesolithic-Neolithic contacts at Iron Gates.

Conclusions

The data presented in this paper is of dual importance: it reconfigures the absolute chronology for the Mesolithic at Iron Gates, and it raises some questions about the stratigraphic interpretation of the sites discussed here.

Although the new radiocarbon dates shed new light on the evolution of the Mesolithic on the northern bank of the Danube, there are still numerous gaps that may produce surprises. More dates are needed from sites at Ostrovul Mare, Ostrovul Banului, and Veterani Terasa in order to better understand the evolutionary trajectory of the Mesolithic at Iron Gates. The dates presented in this paper shed some light on the Mesolithic cultural trajectory at Iron Gates, but also raise questions about the beginning and the end of this period. For these questions to be answered at least in part, it is absolutely necessary for more radiocarbon dates to be obtained from the Tardigra-vettian levels at Ostrovul Banului, and the Neolithic site of Circeia, the Neolithic human remains from Ostrovul Corbului, and from samples stratigraphically associated with the Starčevo ceramic at Cuina Turcului.

![Radiocarbon dates from sites discussed in this paper](image)

**Fig. 18. Radiocarbon dates from sites discussed in this paper: CT, Cuina Turcului; PH, Pestera Hotilor – Baile Herculane; Rz, Razvra; Ic, Icoana; SC, Schela Cladovei; OB, Ostrovul Banului; OC, Ostrovul Corbului; OM, Ostrovul Mare; Al, Alibeg; GB, Gura Baciului.**
Fortunately, the site at Schela Cladovei is still accessible for future archaeological excavation. It appears, however, that the huge importance of this site in the general context of the European Mesolithic and Mesolithic-Neolithic transition is either not understood, or absolutely ignored by the Romanian forums; if no drastic measures for salvaging it are taken soon, it may be lost forever. Whereas it is not excluded that more Mesolithic sites are waiting to be discovered in places like Ostrovul Corbului and Ostrovul Mare, the complexity of Schela Cladovei, comparable only with Lepenski Vir, makes it unique among all the Mesolithic sites in Southeastern Europe and beyond.

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