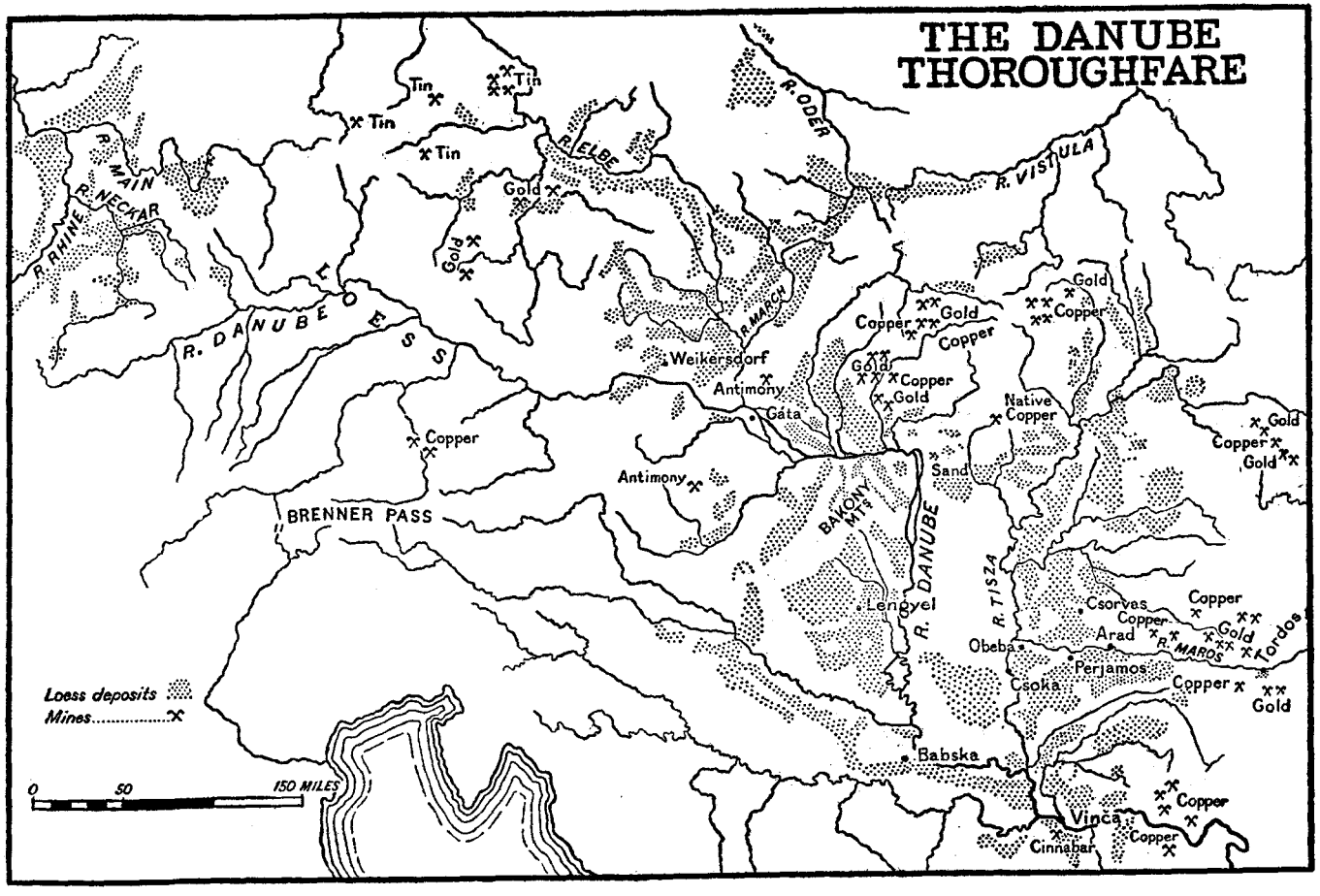
The Danube Thoroughfare and the Beginnings of Civilization in Europe

by V. Gordon Childe

WHILE high civilizations were growing up in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Aegean, continental Europe was still recovering from an ice age. Though the glaciers had retreated, the high passes that led across the Alps from the favoured Mediterranean to the interior were still virtually closed by snow. The tundras and steppes where the men of the Old Stone Age had hunted the reindeer were now for the most part covered with a dense forest fostered by the damp climate then ruling. Through the belt of forest and mountain that fenced off northern and western Europe early man could not easily penetrate. To reach Britain or Denmark he must take ship and face the perils of the Atlantic in a dug-out canoe or some only slightly superior craft. But one moving road leads right into the heart of the continent. From the Black Sea to Bavaria the Danube opens out a passage way far safer than the stormy Atlantic. Moreover it leads into territories where the uncongenial primeval forest did not grow so densely nor so inhospitably as on the coasts or highlands.

Large tracts in Central Europe are covered with a deep deposit of fine wind-born dust that had formed during the dry ice ages. This aeolian soil termed " löss " is unfavourable to the growth of heavy timber, incidentally it provides ideal agricultural land.

Sailing up the Danube through the Iron Gates, a voyager from the Aegean would come upon high folds of open löss, actually cut by the river, in Serbia and then again, after passing a stretch bordered by swampy alluvium, above Buda Pest. From the Austrian Danube patches of löss interrupted only by belts of forest land constituted an inviting path to the head waters of the Oder and the Vistula. From the löss plains of Moravia it would have been possible to reach similar patches in Bohemia. Thence the Elbe invited descent and led on to the löss areas of Saxo-Thuringia. Up the Danube from Vienna smiling



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löss lands opened out in lower Bavaria above Passau, once the forbidding valley between the Wiener and Böhmer Wälder had been negotiated.

Beyond the Swabian Jura, which in places was neither really precipitous nor very densely forested, lay more open country in the Neckar valley and then on both sides of the Rhine. That river might also be reached without much difficulty from Thuringia by way of the Main valley; and, once on the Rhine, an adventurer might easily be tempted down stream to the North Sea or, branching off westward, into the löss lands of Belgium and northern France. Thus a veritable corridor lay open right across the centre of Europe.

But the Danube did more than lead to lands fit for settlement. In its valley are many lodes of ores and precious metals. The mountains of north Serbia are veined with copper ore and lodes of cinnabar and galena. The richest gold fields in Europe are situated in western Transylvania. They can be most readily reached from the Danube by following the Tisza and the Maros. It was by this route that the informants of Herodotus communicated with the El Dorado of the Agathyrsi. The same mountains contain copper ore. There is more gold and copper in the mountains of western Slovakia again accessible from tributaries of the Danube. And in Bohemia are deposits of tin—a rare metal which in antiquity was in great demand from the moment bronze was discovered till it was replaced by iron.

Finally the shoals of sturgeon and other excellent fish that swarm in the waters of the lower Danube would tempt explorers to venture up stream there to discover the prizes of land and minerals just enumerated. That early men from the civilized Aegean yielded to these temptations, discovered these prizes, and diffused their culture along our corridor, we shall now briefly show.

It must be remembered that the shores of the Aegean can only feed a very limited population, and seldom offer a more inviting hinterland. Until a regular system of industry and trade makes it possible to supplement local food supplies by imports from abroad, the population must be continually overflowing. Even in early historical times, when the rudiments of a commercial system were already growing up, the Greek cities of the coast were constantly forced to find an outlet for surplus citizens in colonization. And the further we go back in time the more urgent must this need have been. Geographical conditions had determined that the colonists must proceed by sea. And it is well established that man became an adventurous navigator at a

surprisingly early stage in his career : in Scotland even before he had learned to polish stone, to cultivate grains, or to tame cattle and swine.

It is therefore intrinsically probable that peoples in the earliest food producing stage of culture should already have found their way through the Hellespont and have reached the Danube mouth. The shoals of fish would then entice them by gradual stages up the river. The early steps in their progress will perhaps be revealed when the numerous mounds in the Dobrudja and in north Bulgaria have been more thoroughly explored.

At the moment the lower Danube has yielded only isolated clues to be mentioned below. Clear vestiges of the first settlement begin above the Iron Gates. An ideal halting place for primitive fishers sailing up the Danube would have been Vinča, a little below Belgrade. Here a fold of löss comes right down to the river bank ; at the foot of the ridge a brook flows into the Danube; incidentally, in the immediate hinterland is a deposit of cinnabar where traces of ancient workings have been observed. The open löss hillock, raised above the reach of floods, was certainly early occupied by men ; the accumulated ruins of their huts and refuse have raised the level of the land by some 8 metres. The site has been very carefully excavated by Professor Vassits of Belgrade, who distinguishes at least three phases of culture—these we may term Vinča I, II, and III.[1]

Material precisely similar to that from Vinča I is found at other sites further north, notably at Csoka on the Tisza (opposite Zentas) and at Tordos on the Maros. Csoka like Vinča stands upon a ridge of löss cut by the river; Tordos, similarly situated, lies in the heart of the auriferous region of Transylvania. The location of these ancient settlements along the classical way of approach to the gold fields is significant. The first inhabitants of these settlements were cultivators who tilled their fields with stone hoes (what are generally termed " shoe last celts ") but at Vinča and Csoka they also caught sturgeon and other fish with the aid of horn harpoons, parallels to which come from the lower Danube in Bulgaria and from Kizil Köi on the shores of the Bosphorus. They dwelt in " pit dwellings," oval excavations in the soil roofed with wattle and daub. What interests us is their affinities to the Aegean peoples as revealed in their handiwork. Their religious paraphernalia provides one indication ; they manufactured rude images of a female deity in clay as did the early folk of Crete,

[1] Vinča : M.M. Vassits in *P.Z.* ii, and *BSA*, xiv.

Greece, and Anatolia. Miniature altars—little clay tables with four legs—were modelled for purposes of cult as in Thessaly from the earliest period on.

The pottery shows more distinctly the fundamental kinship; for the history and traditions of a primitive folk are often crystallized in their pottery. The commonest variety is a black-faced fabric decorated with incised patterns akin to what has been termed "black Mediterranean ware."

A very favourite ware at Vinča also used at Tordos was decorated by burnishing highly narrow strips of the surface so that the pattern stood out in a shiny black on a grey ground. The same technique was in use at Boz Euyuk in Phrygia during the third millennium B.C. and in Thessaly in the second neolithic period. At other times the ornament takes the form of shallow flutings which may be exactly paralleled in both the areas mentioned and also at the early cemetery of Yortan in Mysia.[1]

Another ware, better represented at Tordos than at Vinča, is red outside save near the rim: the inside and the strip near the vessel's mouth have been blackened by the reducing action of the ashes and carbon monoxide upon the iron oxide in the clay. The same feature is characteristic of the pre-dynastic pottery of Egypt.

One style of vase manufactured in this ware was a goblet with a tall solid stem; the same form occurs in red ware at Troy II and, in a different fabric, in neolithic Crete.

Many pot lids from Vinča I, Csoka and Tordos have been modelled to suggest a human face (plate I, fig. 2). Similar anthropomorphic lids were manufactured in large numbers at Troy.

Finally many vases have odd "proprietary marks" scratched on them. Many of the signs employed can be paralleled on spindle whorls from Troy II, and on pots from pre-dynastic Egypt (fig. *e*, p.88).

None of these analogies refer to portable objects of a sort likely to have formed the vehicles of primitive trade. They suggest rather an ethnic connexion between the first settlers at Vinča and the peoples of the Aegean. Quite naturally the closest parallels are with the manufactures of Troy, the great settlement that stood on the waterway between the Aegean and the Danube mouth. That does not so much

[1] Polished and fluted wares in Thessaly; Wace and Thompson, *Prehistoric Thessaly*, pp. 102, 105, 114. The stratification shows that they belong to the second period—not as Tsountas thought to the third.

PLATE I

1.—FIGURINE, ČARŠIJA (= VINČA II)

2.—LID, VINČA I

NATIONAL MUSEUM, BELGRADE

facing p. 83

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imply that Vinča was a colony from Troy, but rather that the first Serbians (or some of them) were a branch of a stock that settled also on the shores of the Hellespont; for characteristic Trojan forms, *e.g.*, jugs and cups with handles, are entirely lacking as yet on the Danube.

But another class of objects show that this racial kinship was cemented by continued commercial intercourse. Vinča and Tordos have yielded clay vessels that imitate stone vases, marble pendants comparable to the marble "owl idols" of Troy II, and even copper beads. The Vinča I people wore shell bracelets, possibly imported from the Aegean, and stone bracelets were fashionable at Tordos.

As raw cinnabar ore was found in the lowest levels at Vinča, this may have been one article of commerce, but naturally the trading activities extended to Tordos. So the little settlements of Aegean fishers became outposts of Troadic commerce.

But the Danube leads far beyond Vinča and the civilizing current was not all diverted to Transylvania. In lower Hungary there were no accessible löss patches abutting on the river. Those reaches, particularly when the heavy rain on the Danube catchment swelled the river above its present level, ran through inhospitable swamps where no trace of settlement is to be expected or has in fact been found. But on the löss lands of Moravia[1] a culture flourished which has many analogies with that of Vinča I. Its authors were peasants in the stage of garden culture. They tilled their plots with the same stone hoes as the Vinča folk. They cultivated in them a species of wheat[2] (*Triticum monococcum*) which was also grown at Troy and in Thessaly and (at a later date at any rate) in Bosnia and Hungary. They lived in rude pit dwellings like those of Vinča I; they sometimes manufactured clay idols of naked women again like those of Vinča; they ornamented their vases with plastic animals' heads—a procedure also noted at Vinča (plate I). The vases themselves are said to imitate gourds which will certainly not ripen north of the Bakony to-day, but may in those days have served for vessels in Serbia as they certainly did in Anatolia.

What is most striking, the people of Moravia imported the shell of a Mediterranean mussel—*Spondylus gaederopi*—to wear as bracelets. This is perhaps the very shell that was worn in Vinča I and in any case hoards of them have been found in Bulgaria.

[1] Danubian culture: Childe, *Dawn of European Civilization*, 1925, pp. 171-183.
[2] See Kozlowska, in *Bull. Internat. Acad. Sci. de Cracovie*, 1920, B, 1-10.

PLATE II

DANUBIAN I POTTERY FROM MORAVIA
MORAVIAN MUSEUM, BRNO

facing p. 84

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Whether these Moravian peasants actually came themselves up the Danube is immaterial; their culture did. Its affinity with that of the middle Danube has just been demonstrated; its meaning is unambiguous. The grain cultivated did not grow wild north of the Balkans; the domestic pigs were probably sprung from a race (*Sus vittatus*) native to Hither Asia; the sheep had a like origin in the Asiatic *Ovis vignei*.[1] These animals and plants can therefore only have been brought up the Danube: the process is not reversible. The civilization that had thus come up the Danube does not stop short in Moravia. Its authors, commonly termed Danubians, were not yet tied to any fixed place by commerce; they had settled where good land was available. At the same time their methods of cultivation compelled them to move on. Like peoples in the same stage of culture to-day in the Sudan or north Borneo they had not learned the secret of rotation of crops. Hence to obtain a good yield they must bring fresh strips of land into cultivation every two or three years. Their wretched pit-dwellings were easy enough to build, and would soon become uninhabitable. So the settlements were moved periodically, every twenty years at least, judging by modern analogies. In any case no site was occupied long enough to form a mound such as we saw in Vinča. Moreover, as the populations grew, each community would send out colonies just as the negro cultivators in Uganda do to-day. And so the Danubians spread slowly but surely over the löss. They planted their settlements in western Galicia and Silesia. They crossed the divide into Bohemia, they spread down the Elbe and up the Danube, they forced their way through the forests to the Neckar and the Main, they occupied the whole Rhine Valley; eventually they colonized the Hesbaye district of Belgium.

Everywhere their presence is marked by the pottery and stone hoes which characterize them in Moravia.

Only in their struggles with forest and mountain they lost some elements of civilization: they gave up making figurines or decorating their pots with animals' heads. But even on the Rhine and in Thuringia they wore the *Spondylus* shell ornaments of Mediterranean origin; such were regularly deposited in the graves.

Such was the method by which the "neolithic culture" reached Belgium. The Danubians brought it thither at a time when the

[1] Cf. Duerst, in Pumpelly, *Explorations in Turkestan* (Carnegie Publications, 73) vol. II.

natives (Rutot's "Spiennians") had no domestic animals nor cultivated plants and made implements by chipping, and not by polishing.[1]

The process of expansion just described was naturally gradual; it must have taken several centuries. All that time we may assume that intercourse was maintained at least between the middle Danube and the Aegean. About the period of Vinča II, the evidence of contact with the Aegean becomes particularly clear; it is attested by the introduction of new ritual types—"a goddess" nursing an infant as in central Greece and Thessaly; clothed statuettes wearing aprons of linen; sitting types.[2] Probably to this level belong miniature tables supporting bowls found at Vinča and elsewhere to which Thessaly offers analogies.[3] From Csoka and Tordos, moreover, come several vases standing on human legs, exact parallels to which are known from the Yortan cemetery in Mysia.[4] Finally from Vinča II comes pottery ornamented with daubs of red colouring matter applied after the burnishing and firing of the vase. This very same crusted ware is found in eastern Thessaly in the third period about 2200 B.C. Possibly this last innovation did not come from the south but was transmitted to Thessaly from the Danube basin; for there is reason to believe that the technique was developed on the western borders of Transylvania. In any case it enables us to say approximately what period in world history we have reached. We are now in the latter half of the 3rd millennium B.C.

By that date Troy II had grown to a rich and powerful city through her control of the sea way to the Euxine and land ways to Asia Minor and Cyprus. We should expect to find positive evidence of her participation in the trade along the Danube from which a part of her wealth was derived. The evidence is not far to seek. In a series of graves and settlements along the Tisza and the Danube, and right away to Silesia and Thuringia[5] we encounter imitations of Trojan imports, together with actual objects of indisputably southern provenance. We have firstly clay copies of metal cups with high handles and two-handled tankards. From the graves come numerous copper trinkets, some of which reproduce forms popular at Troy in more precious metals, such as the wire spectacle spiral. That these products came

[1] *Bul. Soc. Anthr. Bruxelles*, xxxix, p. 63 n. 2.
[2] M.M. Vassits in *P.Z.* ii, and BSA, xiv.
[3] Wace and Thompson, *op. cit.* p. 111.
[4] In the British Museum.
[5] Childe, *Dawn*, pp. 177-9.

up the Danube seems proved by the presence of ivory in a deposit of this period at Babska in Slavonia and the discovery of Mediterranean shells at Weikersdorf, Lower Austria,[1] while at Lengyel[2] in Hungary even shells of *Tridacna*, a denizen of the Indian Ocean, were buried in graves at this period. We are not obliged to assume that the folk in whose settlements or graves such objects have been unearthed themselves represent a fresh wave of colonization from the Aegean. The Troadic types appear still as strangers among native or perhaps eastern wares. The typical funerary vessel was a bowl on a high hollow foot which is often perforated with wide circular windows. Only one such bowl has been found at Troy and it is said to have come from the older village that preceded Troy II. Nevertheless we may infer that merchants and explorers from Troy were now about.

Naturally Trojan enterprise was directed first to the gold fields of Transylvania. It led in the end to the establishment of colonies on the approaches thereto. Near Arad, on the lower Maros and the Aranka, the villages Perjámos and Nagy Sancs arose which might pass for Trojan settlements. In any case the typical vase found there was a two-handled hour glass tankard of a form common in Troy II. Perjámos further yielded a torque of copper wire, the ends of which have been flattened and bent back (like fig. *a*, p. 88). The same sort of torque was well known in north Syria, whence an isolated specimen found its way to Egypt. The last-named example and a group recently discovered at Byblos seem to belong to the age of the XIIIth Dynasty (xviiith cent. B.C.) in Egypt.[3]

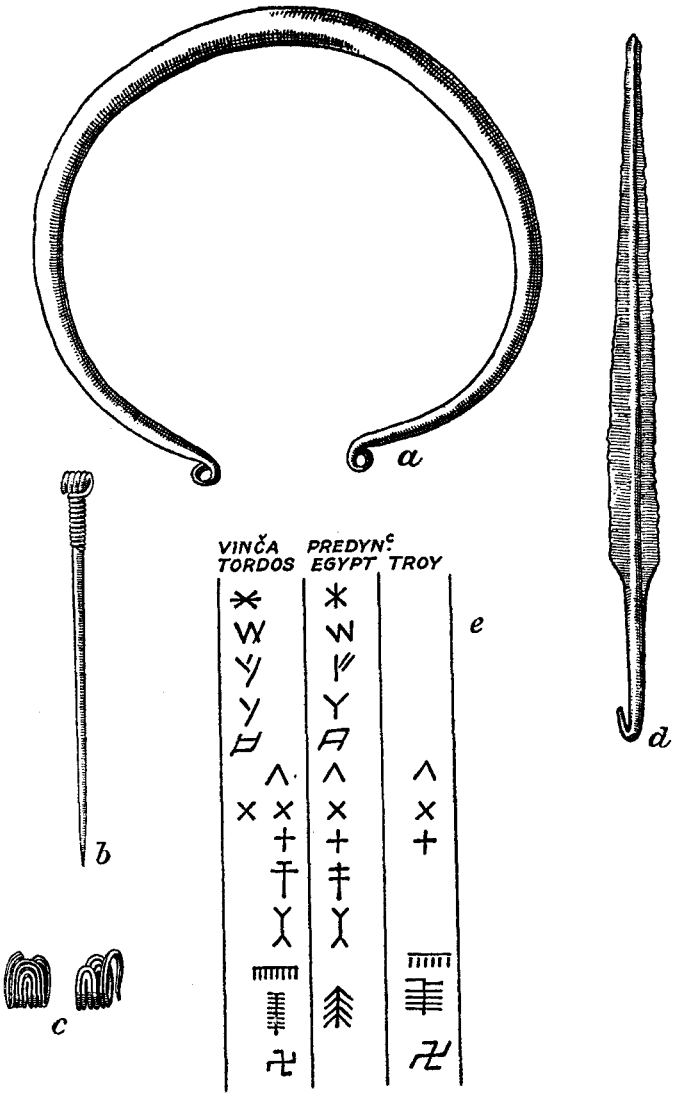
Further documents illustrating the intensity of south-eastern commerce along the Tisza and Maros come from the graves found at Ó Beba[4] not far from the junction of the rivers. These contained *inter alia* Mediterranean shells (*Pectunculus* and *Cardium*), a "knot-headed pin" (fig. *b*, p. 88), *i.e.* a pin of copper (? bronze) wire the head of which has been bent over and twisted round the shaft to form a loop, gold pendants the ends of which have been hammered out flat, and a gold disc ornamented with geometric patterns composed of series of nobs. The knot-headed pin occurs in Cyprus and at Troy; the gold pendants illustrate a type very common in Transylvania which is well

[1] *W.P.Z.*, x, 1-10.

[2] Wosinsky, *Das prähistorische Schanzwerk von Lengyel.*

[3] Carchemish: *Liv. Annals*, vi, pp. 91 ff; Byblos: *Syria*, vi, pp. 16; Egypt Petrie, *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob*, pl. xiii.

[4] *Arch. Ert.* xxiv, pp. 85 f; *Archiv f. Anthrop.*, xv, p. 253, pl.1.



a. "Ingot Torque," Gáta. $\frac{1}{3}$.
b. Knot-headed Pin, Bohemia. $\frac{1}{3}$.
c. Troadic Earrings, Bohemia. $\frac{2}{3}$.
d. Cypriote Dagger, Csorvas. $\frac{1}{4}$.
e. "Proprietary Marks" on Vases and Whorls.

represented in the hoards of jewelry from Troy. The form originated in Mesopotamia where it has recently been discovered in graves of the IVth millennium at Kish.[1] The technique of punctured ornament illustrated on the gold disc from Ó Beba has early parallels in the gold work of Crete and Troy. The juxtaposition here of indubitable southern imports and objects fashioned presumably of native gold, is very significant, especially as the local manufactures are so obviously inspired by exotic models. Still more conclusive evidence for the activity of southern traders is provided by the occurrence (unfortunately isolated) of two Cypriote daggers at Csorvas in the vicinity of Arad (fig. *d*, p. 88). Such daggers, though native to Cyprus, were also used occasionally at Troy and in the hinterland.

A counterpart to these foreign objects lining the path to the Transylvanian gold-fields is doubtless revealed in the vast hoards of gold ornaments and vessels that lay buried in the ruins of Troy II from the day of its sack till Dr Schliemann laid them bare. But the Trojan hoards also included bronze implements and weapons containing 10 per cent. of tin. These are probably the earliest dated specimens of rich bronze.

The origin of the tin which came gradually into use for alloying with copper in the eastern Mediterranean has long been a puzzle to historians. The evidence adduced above of extensive traffic from the Aegean and especially from Troy up the Danube at this very epoch suggests that one source might well have been Bohemia; for the Danube highway did lead into that country.

Now we have already noted that copper trinkets of Troadic form have turned up in early graves as far away as Silesia. And there is further evidence. A group of three mugs disinterred in the environs of Prague might have come from Troy itself they have such a Trojan "feel."[2]

Moreover the earliest bronze object found in Bohemia is a knot-head pin just like those from Ó Beba, Troy II and Cyprus.

Conversely among the stone battle axes found at Troy is at least one that reproduces a type very common in Moravia and Silesia at the epoch in question. Finally when, at a rather later date, a native bronze-using civilization arose on the upper Elbe, many of the types employed carried on Troadic traditions.

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[1] "Excavations of the 'A' Cemetery at Kish" *Field Museum Anthrop. Memoirs* I.

[2] Stocký, *Praha Pravěká*, 1925, p. 21.

A possible milestone on the path of this assumed trade is provided by some graves found in north-west Hungary close to the present Austrian frontier. The sites in question, Gáta and Jessehof Puszta, lie almost opposite the natural ports for the Slovakian copper and gold producing areas and beside the route which might connect these with the tin country of Bohemia. The graves belong for the most rather to the period of the local bronze age of Bohemia, but the pottery, notably hour glass mugs like those from Perjámos, is peculiarly reminiscent of Troy II. Among the bronzes were torques of the type already described from Perjámos, and basket shaped earrings derived from a Trojan form (fig. *c*, p. 88).

But about 1800 B.C. the great second city of Troy was stormed by barbarian hordes and razed to the ground. The chief mart for Danubian products was gone! About the same time a new route between Central Europe and the Mediterranean was opened up across the Brenner Pass, which was now traversable as a result of climatic changes. As a consequence of these events trade along the middle Danube languished. A vigorous local bronze-using civilization, known as the Aunjetitz culture, arose indeed in Bohemia and Saxo-Thuringia, but in this development Hungary had no share. Only the northwest corner was affected by the new industry. The reason for this eastward extension is clear; it was Slovakian copper that was mixed with Bohemian tin to make the Aunjetitz bronzes. Now, the raw copper was transported in the form of the torques with flattened ends alluded to above. A thousand were found together in one hoard in northwest Hungary[1] (and so on the above-mentioned line between Slovakian copper and Bohemian tin); smaller hoards of these torques, unassociated with other objects, are not uncommon; when analysed they are usually found to consist of pure copper. The use of a north Syrian type of torque for ingots by the exploiters of Slovakian copper lodes is very significant. Its significance would be enhanced if, as seems probable from the number of such torques in the Byblos hoard, they were also used as ingots in Asia Minor. The inference is that the exploitation of the copper mines from which the Bohemian bronze industry was supplied, had been initiated by metallurgists come from Asia Minor. These considerations lend force to the numerous survivals of Troadic traditions in the earliest Bronze Age of Bohemia—survivals which have been enumerated elsewhere.[2]

[1] *Zs. f. Ethnol.*, 1896, p. 80.
[2] Childe, *Dawn*, p. 192.

THE DANUBE THOROUGHFARE

The discovery and original exploitation of the Bohemian tin deposits, and hence the inauguration of a bronze industry in central Europe was due to explorers coming up the Danube from the southeast.

Now the first dated bronze objects found in a definite context in Britain come from the graves of the so-called Beaker Folk, who reached these islands from Central Europe.

It therefore seems likely that we owe our first metallurgy in the long run to those explorers from Troy whose tracks we have been following up the Danube. So not only was that river one of the routes by which a so-called "neolithic" culture reached northwestern Europe, it was also a channel in the diffusion of the arts of metallurgy northward and westward from the Ancient East.