

FIGURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE EARLY ENEOLITHIC: AN UNPUBLISHED FIGURINE FROM BUBANJ (EASTERN SERBIA)

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Abstract: Figural representations from the Eneolithic period in the south-east Europe are not very common, especially in comparison with the Neolithic period, and they are also seldom discussed in the archaeological literature. In the Early Eneolithic Bubanj-Hum I culture, part of the Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol cultural complex, anthropomorphic figurines were produced from clay and bone; however, particularly in the central Balkan area they are rarely found. In this paper, we will present a fragmented figurine so far unpublished from the eponymous site of Bubanj. The figurine was discovered in 1956 and is currently stored at the National Museum in Belgrade. We will present its typological and technological traits and we will also discuss the place of this figurine within the wider context of the Early Eneolithic communities in the central Balkan area.

Cuvinte-cheie: Eneolitic, cultura Bubanj-Hum I, complexul cultural Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol, figurină antropomorvă

Rezumat: Reprezentările figurative eneolitice sunt relativ puține în sud-estul Europei, mai ales în comparație cu perioada neolitică și sunt rar discutate în literatura de specialitate. Pe durata culturii eneolitice timpurii Bubanj-Hum I, parte a complexului Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol, figurinele antropomorfe erau realizate din lut și os; cu toate acestea, mai ales în zona central balcanică sunt rare. În acest articol vom prezenta o figurină fragmentară, anterior inedită, din situl eponim de la Bubanj. Piesa a fost descoperită în 1956 și este în prezent parte a colecțiilor Muzeului Național din Belgrad. Vom prezenta caracteristicile sale tipologice și tehnologice, discutând în același timp locul ei în contextul mai larg al comunităților eneolitice timpurii din zona central balcanică.

INTRODUCTION

Representations of the human body are among the most attractive archaeological finds. The first representations of humans originate in the early Upper Palaeolithic period (Hahn 1972), and figurines carved into or made from diverse raw materials (stone, bone, ivory, clay, etc.) are encountered throughout the prehistoric Europe (Insoll 2017a). Their interpretation, however, is at the same time a very difficult task. As T. Insoll stated, “Figurine definition and ‘meaning’ is variable, but critical is the realization that figurines require interpretations, not just descriptions” (Insoll 2017b, p. 1).

Early researchers tried to find a universal explanation for prehistoric figurines, and often interpreted them as objects of cult, as representations of divinities and/or related to different forms of magical practices. In particular, the figurines associated to the early agricultural communities were frequently interpreted as part of “fertility rituals” (especially Gimbutas 1974; 1991). In the past few decades, with the changes in the archaeological paradigms and theoretical frameworks, the interpretation of figurines underwent some criticism (Meskell 1995), and new theoretical models were offered (e.g. Bailey 2005). In particular, the universalistic approach was criticized, i.e. the

presumption of a universal meaning and role of figural representations among the Neolithic and Eneolithic communities across Europe. According to I. Palaguta (2012a; 2016), an approach based on the assumption that the image system of ancient cultures corresponds to a set of universal images-archetypes, is unacceptable, since “the ethnographic analogies and the changes of the shapes of archaeological finds show that the system of images and metaphorical space of prehistoric societies were dynamically changeable. New images and metaphors appeared in all societies under the influence of various circumstances” (Palaguta 2016, p. 329). As T. Insoll pointed out, “multiple meanings were probably ascribed to prehistoric figurines, and exploring this demands attention to figurine context” (Insoll 2017, p. 1).

I. Palaguta (2016, p. 329–330) believes that all figurine representations, regardless of their quality, are works of art, because, nevertheless, they reproduced an artistic image (Palaguta, 2012a; 2012b; 2016, p. 328). He also advocates the application in all studies of plastic representations not only of the archaeological methods, which usually include formal analysis based on classification, but also methods otherwise applied for visual arts, such as iconography and iconology (Palaguta 2016, p. 328 and references therein).