

Figurines in Pietrele: Copper Age ideology

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ABSTRACT – *Major trends in figurine production of the copper age settlement of Pietrele (Romania) are discussed. The bone figurines are seen as an ideological innovation of the Early Copper Age system in the Eastern Balkans.*

IZVLEČEK – *Predstavljamo glavne trende v produkciji figurin na bakrenodobnem naselju Pietrele v Romuniji. V koščenih figurinah vidim ideološko inovacijo zgodnjebakrenodobnega sistema na vzhodnem Balkanu.*

KEY WORDS – *Copper Age; Romania; Pietrele; settlement; figurines; ideology*

Introduction

Figurines are among the characteristic features of the South-East European, Anatolian and Near Eastern Neolithic and Copper Age, and have been attracting attention since the 19th century. They belong to the most thoroughly published class of objects, but the quality of illustrations remains a major problem in discussing their details. Elisabeth Ruttkay was one of the few researchers who had dealt with this problem, and in several articles explained how to recognise the details of figurines (Ruttkay 1972; 1992; 2001; 2005). In one of her outstanding studies, she showed the inter-regional connections of a certain symbol in the South-East European Neolithic and Copper Age which she had found on a spoon (Ruttkay 1999). Figurines were used in settlements of local communities, and modelled according to a regional style (of different 'cultures'), but their general features were rooted in a long tradition and were supra-regional (Hansen 2007).

During the 10th millennium BC, a major shift in figurine production took place. The whole posture of the figurines' bodies changed (Fig. 1). The upper part of their body is now slightly leaned back; the head is laid a little in the neck; their gaze is turned toward the sky. In comparison to Palaeolithic statu-

ettes, which cannot stand on their bent-in legs and hold their head bowed down, Neolithic figurines constitute something basically new. In the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, new types of representation and formal means of expression were invented; now we find both standing and seated figurines. There is an evident break between Palaeolithic and Neolithic sculpture.

Figurines belong to the Neolithic package which came to the Balkans via Anatolia. They seem to be closely connected with painted pottery. There is a sharp division between the Balkans and Western Europe, where figurines are completely absent from contexts of impresso or cardial ceramics.

After an Early Neolithic horizon of the late 7th and early 6th millennium with similar figurines from Turkish Thrace to the Middle Tisza region, already in the second half of the 6th millennium we observe regional variations in figurine style and quality, in the number of different types, and in the number of figurines found in settlements. In the 5th millennium, these variations between different regions became more and more obvious. In Thessaly, the style of the figurines changed profoundly and their numbers de-

creased. In the Central Balkans, figurine production ended with the Vinča culture, around 4650 calBC according to the new radiocarbon dates (Borić 2009). The same is true for the Tisza culture in Eastern Hungary.

In most regions, figurine production came to an end in the middle of the 5th millennium. The apparently sudden end of the figurines was interpreted as the result of profound changes in spiritual life, and was seen in connection with migrations (Gimbutas 1994). But a closer look at the material shows that the causes were more complex. In this respect, it is worth looking back from the West to the Near East. It is surprising that also in the Near East, figurine production ceased in the 5th millennium. One of the latest examples comes from the Ubaid culture. In the cemeteries of Eridu and Ur, mostly female figurines, but also some male figurines were found (Parrot 1981:96, Figs. 92, 93, 98). The rhythm of figurine production in the Near East and South-East Europe seems to have been similar.

In contrast to the decline of figurine production in these regions, figurines became very popular in the Eastern Balkans. In the middle of the 5th millennium, when the KGK VI complex emerged between the Aegean and the Danube, figurine production was intensified and the number of types increased. It is noteworthy that some types were still in the tradition of Neolithic figurine production, like the large sitting figurine from Pazardžik (Fig. 2), but new types also appeared. One of the most remarkable changes is the introduction of bone figurines. Since the 10th millennium, anthropomorphic figurines had never been made of bone. Because the material and meaning of the figurines were closely related, the introduction of a new material can not only be seen as an innovation, but also as an ideological change. The same is true for the first metal figurines.

Pietrele at the Lower Danube

Before discussing some aspects of the figurines from Pietrele and their social significance, it is necessary to give a short general introduction to the Pietrele excavation. The Eurasia Department of the DAI, the Romanian Institute of Archaeology, and Frankfurt University, have been excavating in Pietrele since 2004 (Hansen et al. 2010 with bibliography of earlier reports). The 'Măgura Gorgana' settlement mound is slightly oval, with a diameter of 97m in the east-western direction and 90m in the north-southern direction (Figs. 3–4). The tell site is 9m high and the

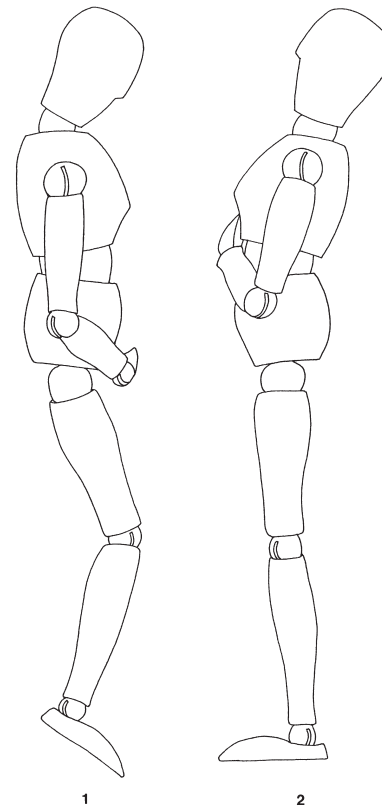


Fig. 1. Paleolithic and Neolithic body orientation of figurines (after Hansen 2007).

cultural layer is probably of the same depth. The Copper Age settlement ends around 4250 BC. We have reached layers which could be dated to around 4500 calBC. After the Copper Age, the mound has never been settled again (Berciu 1956).

Pietrele is situated on the left bank of the Danube, around 170km from the Black Sea coast. It was part of a system of settlement mounds along the lower Danube and in North-Eastern Bulgaria, most of which were probably erected at the same time before 4600 BC. It is worth noting that these mounds were the first settlements of this type in these regions: the latest tell settlements in South-East Europe.

Pietrele is part of the so-called Gumelnița culture, which is considered part of the Kodžadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI (KGK VI) complex. Karanovo in Bulgarian Thrace is still the fixed point of Eastern Balkan chronology, even if its stratigraphy for the KGK VI period is quite low (less than 4 metres) compared to the Pietrele sequence with 7m and four houses.

The background of our excavation is the enigma of Varna (Fol and Lichardus 1988). The idea was to excavate at Pietrele to contribute to a better under-

standing of the increasing social inequality which is displayed in the burials in Varna. How was it possible that some persons, like the man in grave 43, were buried with an abundance of prestigious items like spondylus, gold, and copper? The question is important, since Varna is not a single case, but part of a widespread tendency (Demoule 2007). In South-East Europe this social inequality was a part and the result of a new system. Several elements characterised this system. First, the new copper weapons were the startingpoint for the relatively rapid development of weapon technology in the next 700 years. The need for weapons was the impetus of copper mining. A second major point was the new representation of power, not only in graves, but also in tell settlements. Tells were built to draw distinctions between people. Before 2008, no radiocarbon dates from Varna cemetery were available. By stylistic comparisons, Varna was dated to the end of the KGK VI sequence. With new radiocarbon evidence it became clear that the rich graves in the cemetery had to be dated between 4560 and 4450 calBC (Higham et al. 2007). Varna stands at the beginning of KGK VI development, not at the end. Our excavation in Pietrele does not tell the story of development up to Varna, but from Varna on.

One of the results of the geophysics in the 2004 campaign in Pietrele was a plan of the settlement at the mound, which consisted of four rows of houses (Fig. 5). The second result was evidence of a much larger settled area around the mound. Since then, a completely new dimension of Copper Age settlement has required (Lazarovici and Lazarovici 2007). It differs from the small settlements which were reconstructed after the excavations in Bulgaria and Romania, and accords with similar large scale Late Neolithic settlements in Bosnia (Hofmann et al. 2007) and Hungary (Raczky, Anders 2006). We have to excavate larger areas to discover if the settlement around the tell is earlier or contemporaneous. But it seems clear that living on the settlement mound differed from living around it, which could explain the wealth of finds on the settlement mound.

One surprising point was the high quantity of more than 60% of wild animals in the settlement. There were large-scale hunting and fishing activities. The distribution of artefacts enables the identification of specialised households. The occupants of the houses in trench F were mainly engaged in fishing and hunting. Almost all our hunting weapons/tools came from these houses. Two unburnt looms and several loom weights from the burnt houses show that wea-

ving was one of the main activities of the occupants of the houses in trench B. The specialised craftsmanship of the Early Copper Age is visible in several products in the settlement mound, such as the copper artefacts. The specialists did not necessarily work in this settlement. Specialised and experienced craft workers were also needed to produce long blades of up to 30cm length.

In the settlement around the mound, we opened several trenches in the last two campaigns, with surprising results. In trench J, the Copper Age layers came to light at a depth of 170cm (Fig. 6). The preservation was not so bad. We found an oven and an installation for grinding. In the western part, a number of large sherds came to light which originally belonged to a pot standing on a clay bench next to the oven. Beneath one house, we were able to unearth a second, older house. This is the first time that such a sequence has been observed in a plane settlement.

Related to pottery processing, a large *pithos* with a height of 130cm and a capacity of 400 litres could be restored (Fig. 7). It is quite clear that the making of this *pithos* required specialised craftsmanship as well. The distinction between potters producing 'normal' pottery and potters making large pots has been shown by ethnographic studies. Such large vessels are not unknown from other Neolithic sites: a remarkable piece was found at Toptepe in Turkish Thrace (Fig. 8). But *pithoi* larger than one metre seem to have been produced only in certain Neolithic cultures.

Pietrele was a central place in a much larger economic and political system with a clear division of labour and social differentiation on the Lower Danube and in Northern Bulgaria.

Figurines in Pietrele

The use and working of metal since the Pre-Pottery Neolithic has been established for Eastern Anatolia, but metal was not in the Neolithic Package in which most of the innovative techniques came to Europe at the end of the 7th millennium and beginning of the 6th millennium. All in all, it was around 1000 years BC before people began to look for metals, to collect surface material, began mining and process the copper. In the first half of the 5th millennium, copper casting was established in the Central Balkans. In the middle of the 5th millennium copper and gold were used in large parts of South-Eastern Europe. It must have been a fascinating time. A new material

appeared; its qualities were different from most of what was known at that time. It was hard and soft; it was not easy to break it; it had special colours and was shiny. But the most important quality was that it was never destroyed. The dynamic and special attractiveness of metal lay in the fact that it could be melted. Every broken axe could be melted down and a new axe recast. Alternatively, a broken axe could be melted down in order to cast an object in demand, such as a bracelet or a chisel. Thus, two remarkable features were united in metal that were absent from other materials: reparability (that is, renewal) and convertibility.

With the possibility of re-melting an object and producing a new object, a new quality appeared: namely, the material remained (almost) whole; it was not used up. Once exploited in the mine and processed, metal could be used repeatedly to produce new objects. Thus unlike broken stone axes, it was sensible to accumulate metal for use when needed. All metal objects could, and usually were, reused. To summarise, the enormous technical and social possibilities offered by metal were a challenge to existing ways of thinking.

We will first discuss the first human representation in metal. In 2009, we found a gold pendant together with a large number of spondylus beads in one of the burnt houses on the mound (Fig. 9). Such golden amulets are often interpreted as human figurines. Three main distribution areas are known: Greece, where they were mostly found in caves; the Eastern Balkans, where they were predominantly found in settlement mounds (*Chohadziev 2009*) and in the cemetery of Varna; and in the Carpathian basin, where they were used as grave goods. In some cases, they were included in votive deposit. The case of the golden amulet also sheds some light on the practice of deposition. Its weight is half of the amount of the gold found in the richest grave in Varna. This shows that the accumulation of wealth was possible in different regions in Southeastern Europe at the same time. The use of gold for amulets or animal figurines, or even representations of certain bones, was supposed to transfer the qualities of the material to the representation.

Bone figurines are very common in KGK VI group settlements. They are quite numerous, and do not vary much in quality. Some still have their original copper ornaments. In Pietrele, we were able to show for the first time that clay beads were also used as ornaments. As already mentioned, bone figurines

did not appear before the Copper Age. In the Early Copper Age, flat bone figurines were very common and widespread, and produced in large numbers. The close connection between human figurines and clay was not accidental – it was supposed to express some common qualities of human beings and clay as a material on a metaphorical level. Using animal bone to represent human beings must have opened a new horizon of thought. Animal bone was used for representations of women and men (Fig. 11).

The male figurines are clearly phallic. This is the only type of figurine which occurs in settlements as well as in graves. Figurines were normally not used as grave goods. Therefore, it is the only figurine group in the European Neolithic which allows a comparison between settlement and grave. In Varna, these phallic representations are known in the well-equipped graves, such as grave 36. An outstanding example of the male representations is a marble figurine (Fig. 10) from Grave 3 – one of the so-called mask graves in the centre of the graveyard – which was decorated with several golden *tutuli*. It is the only example of a copy of a bone figurine in marble.

Bone figurines are known from 20 graves in Varna, 14 kenotaphs and 6 burials. All of these were combined with metal and/or spondylus. All graves containing figurines belong to the small high status group. On the other hand, in grave 43, the richest one, no phallic figurine was found.

In Pietrele, we found six figurines on the settlement mound. A further three figurines have come from Dumitru Bercius' excavations of in the 1940's. All figurines were found in houses; not a single one came from open areas, street and courtyards.

In comparison with other settlement mounds, the number of figurines is relatively high in Pietrele (Fig. 12). Eight figurines were found in Ruse, and nine in Karanovo. In Goljamo Delčevo, four figurines were found. We have to consider that in all these places, a much larger part of the settlement mound was excavated than in Pietrele. In general, the high number of such figurines is an argument for the social significance of the settlement and the high status of its inhabitants. An interesting detail is the complete absence of these figurines in the Kodžadermen tells in Northeastern Bulgaria.

The bone figurines are representations of male genitals. As Hans-Peter Duerr has argued by using ethnographical and historical evidence, the demonstra-

tion of the penis is an aggressive demonstration of male power. In the case of Gumelnița, it is underlined by their size. The social exclusivity which can be seen in the Varna graves shows that male dominance was expanding in the Early Copper Age at the same time as social differentiation was increasing.

In the Pietrele settlement mound the number of clay anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines is quite high. 391 anthropomorphic and 66 zoomorphic figurines were found on the mound where we excavated approximately 940m³. In the flat settlement, their number is much smaller, but it is too early for a precise comparison. The quality of the figurines is different, which is obvious in the modelling of the heads. There are very simple forms of heads, heads with holes in which copper ornaments were fixed, and figurines with plastic modelling (Figs. 13–14).

The Gumelnița figurines rely on the Late Neolithic figurine types of the Tisza and Lengyel cultures much more than on the older tradition of Hamangia in the East, or the Boian in Southern Romania. One group consisted of standing figurines with outstretched arms, a position found among figurines in the second half of the 5th millennium BC in wider parts of Europe, as can be seen in the figurine from Zauschwitz in Saxony from Stroke Linear Pottery culture, a Lengyel site at Falkenstein-Schanzboden, and a KGK VI site at Krivodol (Figs. 15–17).

Human representations are widespread, and the great distance between Krivodol in Bulgaria and Zauschwitz in Saxony can be underlined by another case. In 2008, we found a pot with a flat bottom and vertical rim. The incised decoration is not very common in Pietrele. On the bottom, a human being is incised with raised arms and spread legs (Fig. 18). Similar pictures are known from several Stroke Pottery pots in Saxony and Bohemia (Fig. 19), where they were interpreted as people at prayer. But I would prefer an interpretation which takes into consideration the sexual dimension of these pictures.

The striking characteristics of all these clay figurines are the variety of types and their large number. Additionally, many other clay models exist, especially miniature furniture and small clay houses. Several house models came to light during the excavation campaigns in Pietrele. Lids with handles in the form of houses were also quite popular (*Reingruber 2008*). Jan Trenner (*2010*) could show that the occurrence of house models has a chronological and

regional focus. They are very common in the ‘Kodžadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI-complex’, an earlier distribution centre is Thessaly and Macedonia. The large number of house models in Pietrele is not surprising compared to other settlements in the Eastern Balkans.

A large clay house was found in the Gumelnița settlement of Malul Rosu near Sultana, com. Mânăstirea, jud. Călărași (*Hălcescu 1995*). In the walls and the roof, seventeen holes with diameters of 4.5–5.0cm can be found (*Hansen 2007.Taf. 438*). The model house is 32cm long, 27.5cm wide, and 21cm high. Under the broken house, the excavators found 11 gold objects which were probably originally ‘stored’ in the clay house (Fig. 20).

Several fragments of a very large house (Fig. 21) were found in 2010 under the living level of the house where the gold pendant (Fig. 9) was found in 2009. The preserved length is 55cm and the height is 20cm. The walls are decorated with a chess pattern of reddish and whitish fields. Such decorations are known from the much older houses in Thessaly (Krannon, Larisa), as well as in Walachia (Jilava: cf. *Trenner 2010*).

The similarity of the pattern of younger and older models in two different areas should be interpreted as an expression of a common symbolic language in the South-East European Neolithic and Copper Age, as has been shown in the masterly article by Elisabeth Ruttkay (*1999*) already cited.

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Fig. 2. Seated figurine from Pazardžik (after Hansen 2007).

Fig. 3. Măgura Gorgana near Pietrele (Photo: S. Hansen).

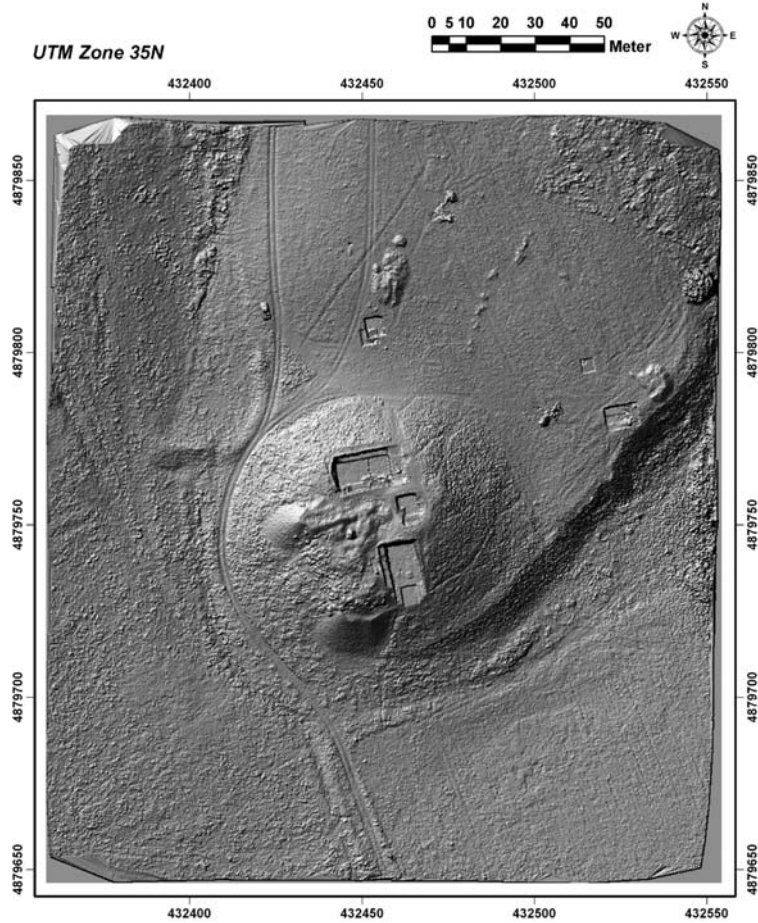


Fig. 4. Măgura Gorgana (Model: K. Scheele).

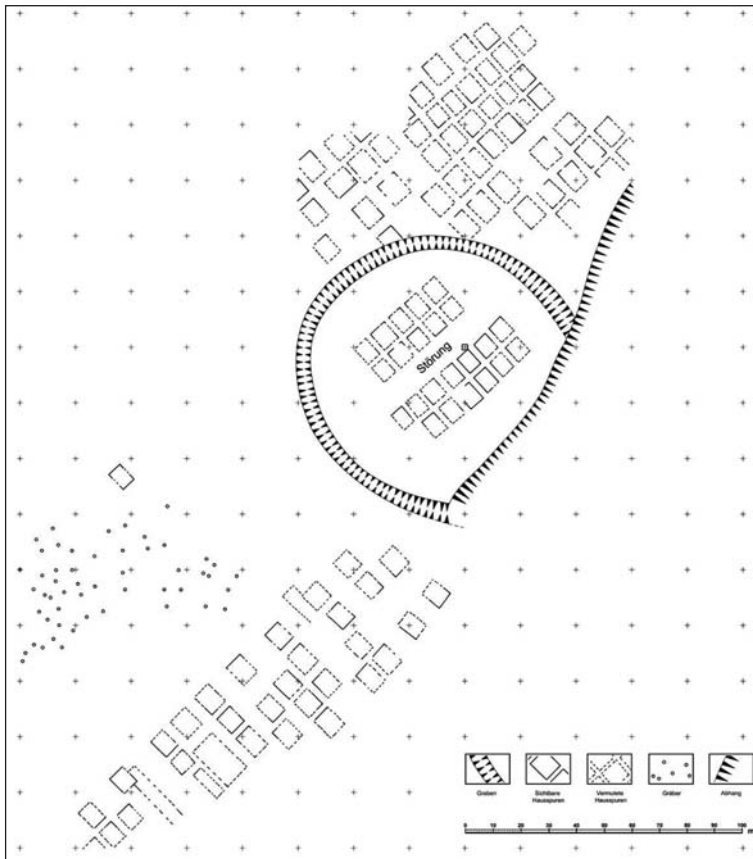


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the settlement plan (Plan: B. Song).



Fig. 6. Pietrele. Trench J with remains of the oven and grinding installation (Photo S. Hansen).



Fig. 7. Pithos from Pietrele 1.2m high (Photo S. Hansen).



Fig. 8. Anthropomorphic pithos from Top-tepe (after Özdoğan and Dede 1998).



Fig. 9. Gold pendant from Pietrele (Photo: M. Toderas).

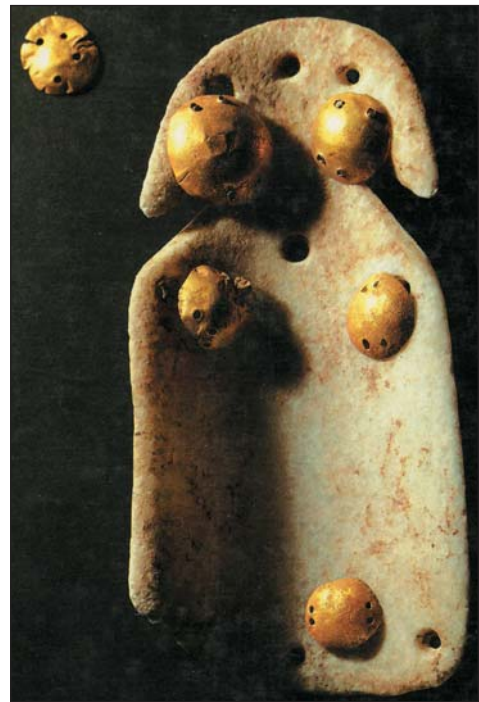


Fig. 10. Marble figurine from Varna (after Fol and Lichardus 1988).



Fig. 11. Bone figurines from Pietrele (Photo: S. Hansen).

Fig. 12. Bone figurines in South-East Europe. Large symbols mark more than 7 figurines (Map: S. Hansen).

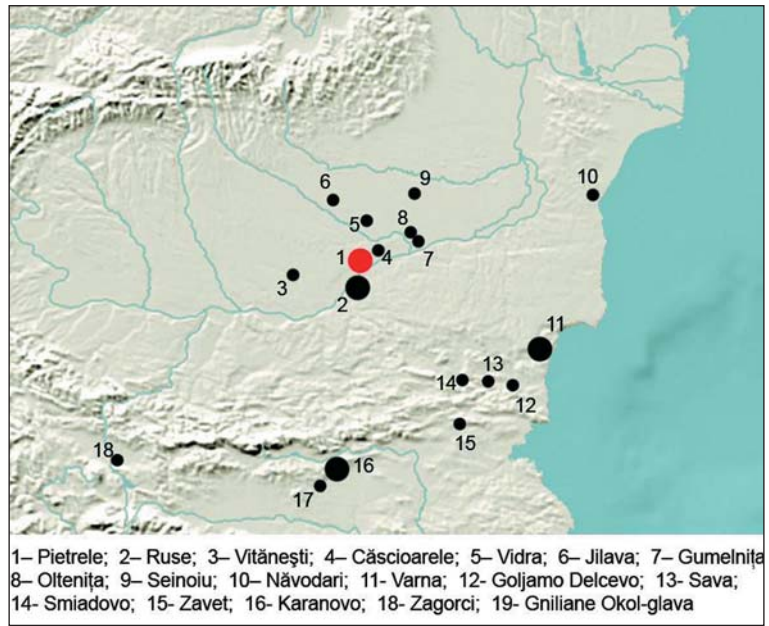


Fig. 13. Pietrele. Standing figurines (Photo: S. Hansen).



Fig. 14. Pietrele. Figurine heads (Photo S. Hansen).

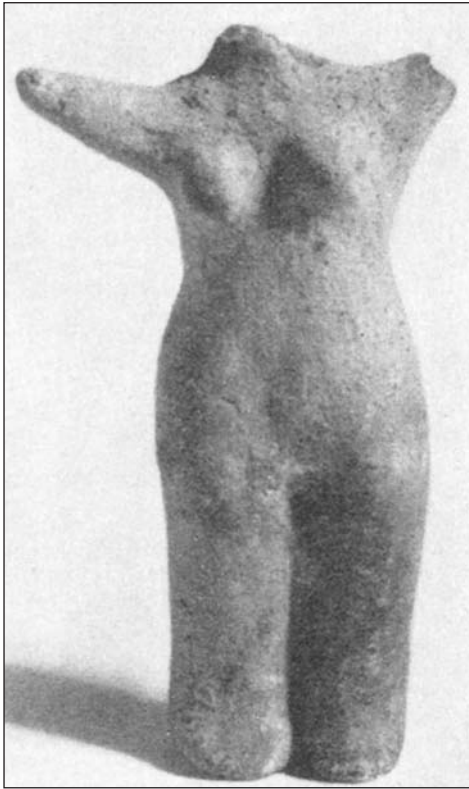


Fig. 15. Figurine from Zauschwitz (after Coblenz 1965).

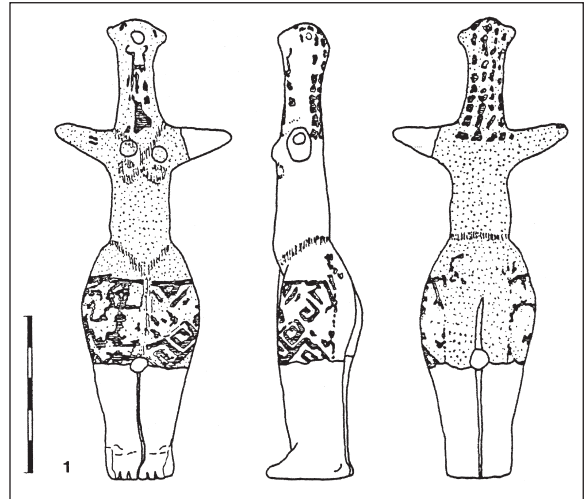


Fig. 16. Figurine from Falkenstein- Schanzboden (after Neugebauer-Maresch 1995).



Fig. 17. Figurine from Krivodol (Photo S. Hansen).



Fig. 18. Pietrele. Pot with incision on the bottom (Photo S. Hansen).

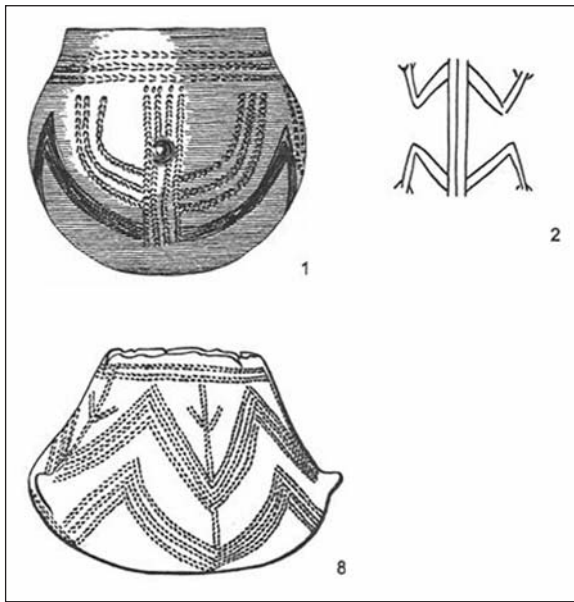


Fig. 19. Potsherds from Saxony and Bohemia (after Spatz 2003).

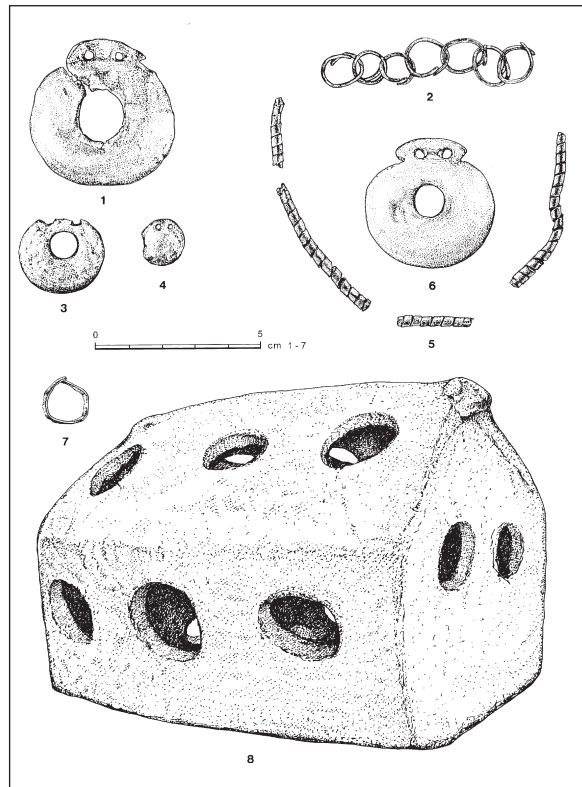


Fig. 20. Clay house from Sultana with gold objects (after Hansen 2007).

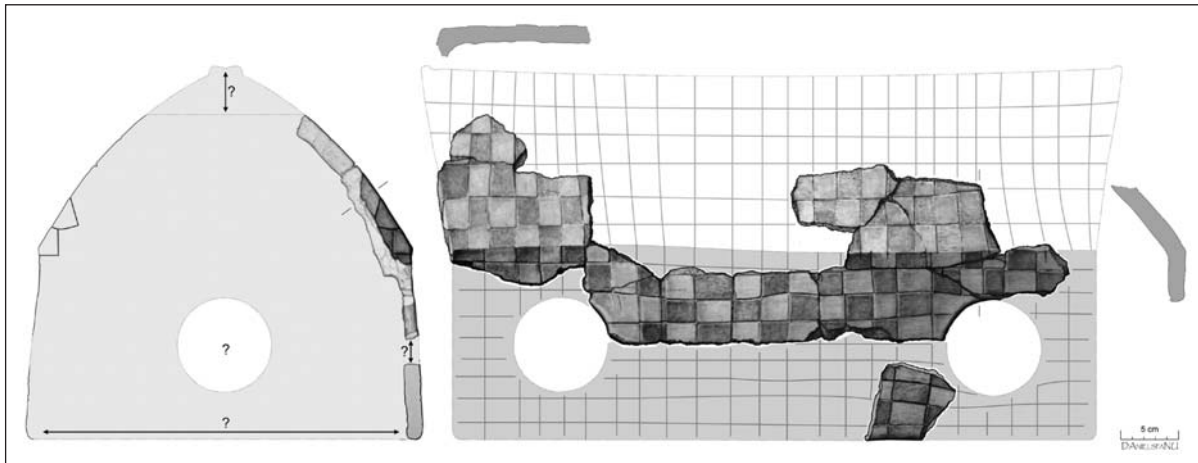


Fig. 21. Clay house from Pietrele (picture: D. Spânu).