

Imprints of the Neolithic mind – clay stamps from the Republic of Macedonia

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ABSTRACT – *The presence and unusual structure of clay stamps found in Neolithic settlements often give rise to multiple interpretations to define their character. The small dimensions and specific shape of the stamps suggests that these portable objects were important in the social relations and visual communication between members within the same community and, possibly, more distant communities. The definite patterns distinguish their function in maintaining the visual traditions of the populations inhabiting southeastern Europe. They had an important role in building the Neolithic image modularity, so that they fitted into the comprehensive decorative structure of Neolithic iconography, and the patterns present on the stamps are related to several aspects of Neolithic material culture from the Balkans and Anatolia. This homogeneity of patterns indicates that they were actively included in the transposition of cognition into visual metaphors.*

IZVLEČEK – *Glinasti pečatniki, ki jih najdemo v neolitskih naselbinah, in njihova nenavadna struktura so pogosto interpretirani na različne načine. Majhne dimenzije in značilne oblike kažejo, da so ti prenosljivi predmeti imeli pomembno vlogo v družbenih odnosih in vizualnih komunikacijah med člani iste skupine, morda pa tudi med bolj oddaljenimi skupnostmi. Njihovi očitni vzorci kažejo na njihovo pomembno vlogo pri oblikovanju neolitske vizualne kulture; njihovi vzorci so del neolitske ikonografije, ki se pojavlja v materialni kulturi od Anatolije do Balkana. Homogenost vzorcev kaže na njihovo aktivno vlogo pri oblikovanju vizualnih metafor.*

KEY WORDS – *Southeast Europe; Anatolia; Neolithic; stamp-seals; symbols; ethnographic implications*

Introduction

This paper presents both published and unpublished Neolithic stamps from the Republic of Macedonia, in an attempt to pose new interpretations as to their cognitive and social character across southeastern Europe. For that purpose, their decorative meaning will be of primary focus, as it allows us to discern the visual dynamics of the patterns and their communicative nature regarding their use with material culture. Furthermore, emphasizing the context and location of some of the stamps, the emphasis will be on the possibility of their role as objects used for imprinting patterns on certain media mediating relations between the inhabitants of one dwelling or set-

tlement. Previous research on Neolithic stamps shows that these objects were always approached through several lines of observation, due to their unconventional appearance and form. Departing from solely function and meaning, the stamps were often interpreted as objects belonging in several categories depending on their utilitarian or ritual sociological context. Within the frameworks of these analyses and interpretations several important fundamentals have been reached in an effort to offer a basic definition of the characteristics of stamps from southeastern Europe and Anatolia (Makkay 1984; Budja 2003; Džhanfezova 2003; Naumov 2005a; 2006a; Türk-

can 2006; 2007; Skeates 2007; Prijatelj 2007), thus pointing to their multifunctional character and their role in the visual culture of the Neolithic communities in these regions.

Between function and meaning

So far, the definite function of the stamps has not been determined. There are many hypotheses widening the functional boundaries which could encompass these objects, mostly emphasizing their socio-economic or ritual character. Regarding their most elementary feature – decoration – they were often related to the tattooing of the human skin, and thus the term *pintadera*, by which they have been referred to by some researchers (Cornaggia-Castiglione 1956; Mellart 1967.220; Makkay 1984.91). Two questions concerning Neolithic tattooing still remain open: was it necessary to create a tattoo using stamps, when this could be done with other tools more convenient for colouring the body, and considering the small dimensions of the stamps, how big a mark could they leave on the human body? The authors mentioned above point out that on a number of stamps, including several examples from Republic of Macedonia, the remains of colour are noticeable, so the possibility that they were used to decorate the human body is not excluded (see also Prijatelj 2007. 242, Fig. 6). In this case, the probable combination of several smaller patterns could leave remarkable traces on the skin. On the other hand, several authors treat the remains of colour on the stamps as indicative of their use as tools for colouring textile (Mellart 1967.220; Makkay 1984.91; Perlès 2001.252; Budja 2003.119). The use of the stamps for imprinting patterns on ceramics is still under discussion. Regarding southeastern Europe, and especially Republic of Macedonia, the association between the concrete patterns belonging to the stamps and the imprinted motifs on pottery and figurines are not yet confirmed. But in the Early Neolithic and Late Neolithic phases of the site at Tell Sabi Abyad (Syria), a large number of ceramic fragments bearing imprints from stamps were excavated (Akkermans & Verhoeven 1995.21–25; Akkermans et al. 2006.131). It is interes-

ting that in one Late Neolithic dwelling, where numerous imprinted fragments were found, not one stamp appeared, thus highlighting the personal meaning of these 'tools'; that is, that they were taken by those who used them. It is assumed that the patterns denoted the origin, mode of distribution or the contents of the material preserved within the pots. In this way, the authors remark, a stylized symbolic intercession likely facilitated long-distance communication between two groups (Akkermans & Verhoeven 1995.23). By discussing ritual communication and identification through symbols, the distance between the recipients of these objects does not play a significant role, since the symbols directly addressed specific members of one or several communities. On the same site, a fragment of a vessel bearing an imprint in the form of a human body was discovered, and it is possible that this region was the place of origin for anthropomorphic stamps. Anthropomorphic stamps were supposed to represent the owners of the containers and the contents, or a mythical character who protected the goods.

The tradition of marking ceramic containers with stamps was maintained in the Balkans throughout the Bronze Age, but also over a wider area (Dickinson 1994.189–193; Vasilakis 2001; Kircho 1989. 123–125; Joshi and Parpola 1987.XV). Researchers do not exclude the possibility that these Bronze Age objects could also have had a magical or apotropaic character beside their use in the administrative control of products. The patterns and representations of the mythical characters, figures and ritual scenes on the stamps point towards their magical benefaction

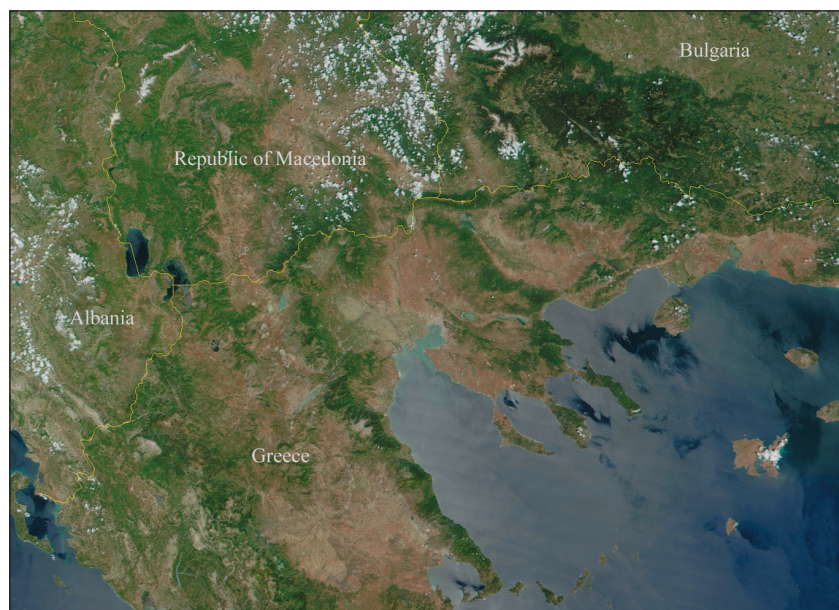


Fig. 1. Position of the Republic of Macedonia in the Balkan Peninsula.



Fig. 2. Ceramic stamps from the Republic of Macedonia. 1, 4, 6 – Po-rodin; 2, 3 – Mala Tumba-Trn; 5 – Golema Tumba-Trn; 7 – Un-known site; 8 – Tumba Bara; 9 – Ustie na Drim; 10, 11 – Veluška Tumba. Photos by G. Naumov, courtesy of the Museum of Bitola and the Museum of Macedonia.

over the goods contained in the pots and bags, and perhaps they also functioned as talismans for the people who possessed them (*Dickinson 1994.189–192; Joshi and Parpola 1987.XV–XVII; Keršak 2005.94*). Support for this idea comes from stamps discovered in Neolithic and Bronze Age grave inventories. Namely, at several Balkan sites and elsewhere, stamps have been discovered interred with both male and female individuals in equal numbers, and are often aggregated in relation to the head, the pectoral area and the pelvic girdle (*Mellart 1967.209; Türkcan 2006.46; Kircho 1989.123, 124; Bačvarov 2003.82, 220; Skeates 2007.186, 195*).

Besides the double function that could be attributed to Neolithic stamps, it is important that through these objects messages concerning some sociological relations could be sent, thus providing information on the mutual co-functioning of Neolithic groups and individuals. It is interesting that the largest number of stamps were discovered in, or around dwellings, thus pointing to their mediating function between members of individual households/families. But if we con-

sider that a great number of the patterns used on stamps present, in part, the general 'decorative Neolithic alphabet', then we can confirm that they represented a medium through which some sort of interaction between the family and the community, or between the settlements in the surrounding environment was performed. This wide use of recombinant cognitive patterns points to developed communication between several settlements in a larger area in which they wanted to acclaim their origin and define their identity. The painted vessels from the Balkans and the similar patterns on the stamps confirm these ideas (*Naumov 2008*). In any case, they do not have to present signs of individual, but rather of a collective identity, of the whole community. It would be logical to expect that by using signs, connections between different communities were established (*Perlès 2001.289; Bailey 2000.110*).

In this way, throughout the communication between Neolithic villages, stamps and other objects of the type 'assemblages' were used as mediators in various contracts, exchanges

of goods, and even in marriages, when two families made 'exchanges' of younger members of the family (*Talalay 1993.46; Budja 2003.116*). So far, the imprinting of stamps on ceramics from the Macedonian Neolithic has not been confirmed and we cannot exclude the further possibility that on such occasions, imprints were also made on organic materials: leather, textile, dough, and even animals.

During the Copper and Bronze Age, clay bulls imprinted with the patterns of the stamps were made, and these have been discovered within dwelling contexts (*Kircho 1989.124*). This shows that by the later phase of the Neolithic a developed system of signs existed, through which an identification and recognition of the house 'inventory' was made. Furthermore, this system of meanings could move in several directions. For example, the analyses of the Vinča settlements show that objects with stamp signs were discovered in 79 of the houses, which surely implies their common use in household activities (*Starović 2005.258*). More generally, stamp 'signs' are not exclusive to a certain region or pe-

riod, and similar patterns appear in social contexts across Anatolia, the Balkans, and into Hungary. Thus, the system of meanings and functions of these signs was developed in parallel to the Neolithisation process, and strengthened their role in the interaction between individuals, families and settlements. In this way, the stamps gradually created their interactive character, first dominating 'administrative' relations, but gradually finding their way into the ritual sphere. These two apparently different categories were probably not so differentiated during the Neolithic period, with the remnants of the practice continuing, as mentioned above, into the Bronze Age. Analogies can also be made through a comparison with ethnographic examples from Slavic populations in the Balkans, where the 'documentation' of the household inventory for ritual purposes is made, and is presented below.



Fig. 3. Ceramic stamps from the Republic of Macedonia. 1, 2 – Zelenikovo; 3 – Madjari; 4 – Gorobinci; 5, 6 – Govrlevo; 7 – Stenče; 8 – Gjumušica; 9 – Unknown site. Photos 2, 3, 5, 7 by M. Tutkovski and 1, 4, 6, 9 by G. Naumov; photo no. 8 by Aleksandar Mitkoski, courtesy of the Museum of Skopje, the Museum of Stip, the Museum of Prilep, the Museum of Macedonia.

Furthermore, the contexts in which the Neolithic stamps are found speak more of their dual function. They are very often found together in groups termed as *assemblages* or *caches*, i.e. where several different objects create a whole as a result of economic or ritual purpose (Budja 2003.124; Prijatelj 2007.247, 248). In one Syrian house, dated to 5900–5800 BC, ceramic fragments with imprints made by stamps were discovered together with approximately 1600 tokens, calculi, and figurines of animals and humans. It is supposed that all these objects represented part of an early administrative system where the tokens or calculi represented the goods and their quantity, while the figurines replaced the animals and the persons that were in the administrative relationship (Akkermans et al. 2006.131, 132). Other types of assemblages including stamps, however, are found at other Neolithic sites and suggest different interpretations. In the excavated houses from Nea Nikomedeia, Rakitovo, Donja Branjevina, Divostin, Vashtemi and Podgorie, the stamps were almost always discovered together with female figurines, anthropomorphic vessels, vessels painted with white patterns, clay tablets, zoomorphic amulets, pins and female figurines with intentionally divided legs (Budja 2003. 124–126). There is a question, however, regarding

the discrete nature of these contexts, so that it cannot be asserted that the objects formed a mutually exclusive assemblage rather than being randomly arranged through the house, a situation very typical of Neolithic houses in the Balkans. In any case, the concentration of these types of object in one specific space points towards a mutual symbolic function probably related to the domestic rites. Regarding the stamps from the Republic of Macedonia, some of them can be denoted as belonging to assemblages, although the publications of the excavations do not always provide precise information regarding the context of discovery. In most of the published or partially published research on Neolithic dwellings where stamps were discovered, there is a concentration on, or bias towards, the other objects that formed these symbolic assemblages (white-painted vessels, female figurines, 'altars', anthropomorphic vessels, and even figurine house models). Until the consistent publication of excavations, it remains open as to whether stamps can be conclusively correlated to the symbolic functioning of surrounding objects,

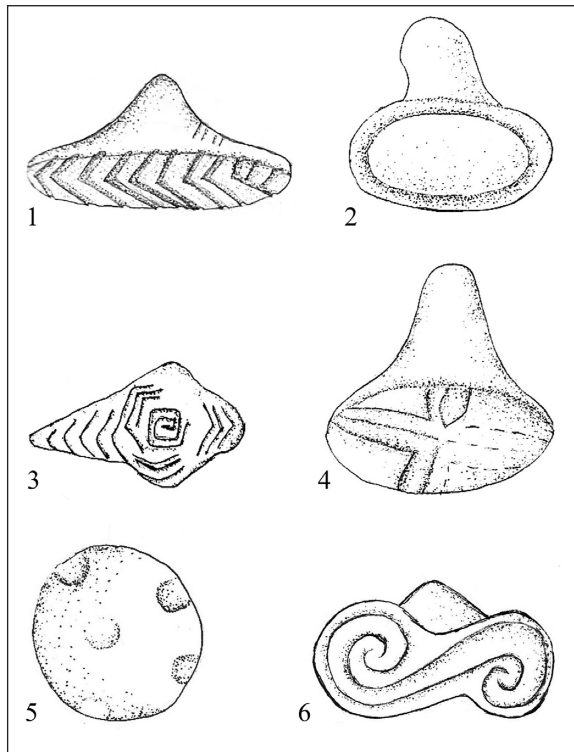


Fig. 4. Ceramic stamps from the Republic of Macedonia. 1 – Amzabegovo; 2 – Golema Tumba-Trn; 3 – Gorobinci; 4 – Nikuštak; 5 – Porodin; 9 – Dolno Trnovo. Drawings by G. Naumov.

or whether they function separately as objects with independent roles in domestic, utilitarian or ritual activities.

In one of the shrines in Çatal Höyük, four stamps together with seven figurines, fragments of vessels, tools and a grain-mill were discovered placed around a fireplace (Türkcan 2006.45). This constellation of objects and their context of deposition connect the stamps to domestic activities performed around the fireplace, most probably in the domain of activities relating to the preparation and decoration of bread.

All the above-mentioned interpretations of the stamps rely on several categories of evidence: the context of discovery, their visual analogies, and traces of their imprints. What is certainly missing from these categories is a belief in their singularity of function. On the contrary, it is likely that, despite the lack of visible traces, stamps could have been equally used in tactile and imaginary relationships between people, as well as in those between people and their numinous environment. In the following section, only the stamps from the Republic of Macedonia will be presented which, in many cases, belong to multi-layered engagements in the above-mentioned category of 'visual analogies'. This will certainly point to their

multifunctional character, while the context of their position and ethnographic analogies with contemporary ritual stamps will enable yet another possibility for defining at least some of their functions.

Stamps from the Republic of Macedonia

In the course of the excavations of the Neolithic settlements in the Republic of Macedonia (Fig. 1), approximately 25 ceramic stamps belonging to all three phases of the period were discovered, although most of the stamps were dated to the Early and Late Neolithic.

In order to obtain more detailed knowledge about their character, data concerning their typological features, their stratigraphic determination and context of discovery was necessary. Unfortunately, this information is not always equally available for all accompanying stamps, since references from previous

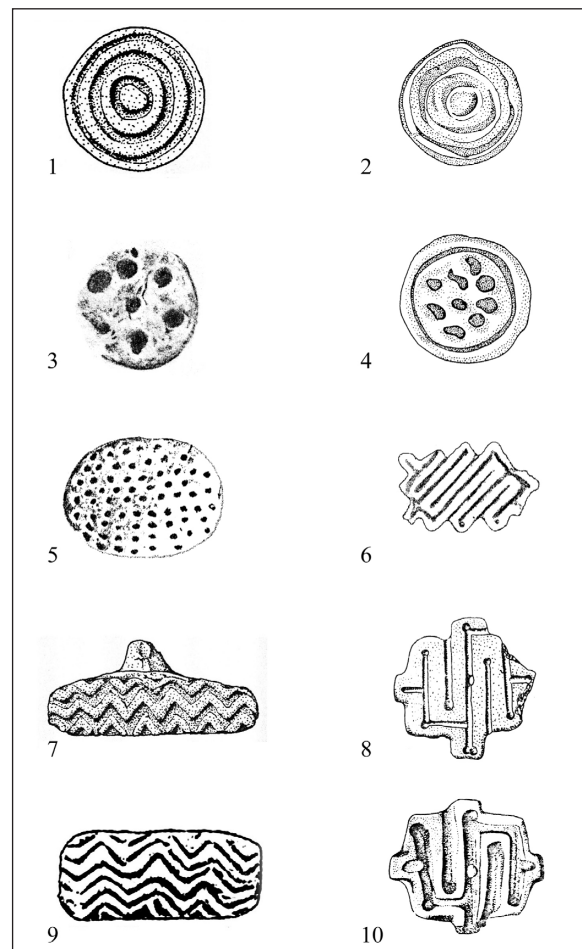


Fig. 5. Neolithic stamps from Greece. Nea Nikomedeia: 1, 5, 9 (Budja 2003.Fig. 6); 3, 7 (Makkay 1984.Fig. VI. 4; Fig. X, 1); Sesklo: 2, 4; Achilleion: 6; Philia; Pyrasos (Makkay 1984.Figs. XII. 12; XIII, 8; XIII. 4; III. 4; III. 1).

publications do not give clear details regarding the petrographic, chronological or contextual data, and, for many of the other excavated stamps, these details have not yet been published. Thus, this evaluation will focus mainly on the bases of the decoration and reflection within the socio-religious aspects of Neolithic life, while the part concerning the content of the clay from which the stamps are made and their precise contextual details will remain vague due to insufficient data.

Because of the variety of decoration, a complete typology has not been made, and has so far only included the range of stamps classified as *pintaderas*, such as those with rectangular, oval, circular, or amorphous bases (Figs. 2–4). Regarding the patterns inscribed on the stamps, it has been much more difficult to create a pattern-based typology. Although the patterns can be generically divided into two groups of geometrical patterns (rectangular and twisted), there is still a large number of patterns that are distinguishably unique. For this reason, it is almost impossible to create one general pattern-based typology since, considering almost all the inventory of stamps from Republic of Macedonia, most stamps have authentic and unique decoration. Regarding the geometrical rectangular patterns, the most common are flat lines, zigzags and triangular patterns, with examples on stamps found at sites at Djumušica, Amzabegovo, Gorobinci, Stenče, Golema Tumba-Trn, Velušina and Porodin¹. Meandering types of stamp patterns appear at sites such as Ustie na Drim, Gorobinci, Madjari², and from two unidentified sites from the regions of Struga and Bitola³. Twisting stamp patterns are probably the most characteristic, and spiral motifs are the most common, followed by simple and concentric circle designs. Stamps with these patterns have been recovered from Mala Tumba-Trn, Golema Tumba-Trn, Porodin, and an unidentified site in the Ohrid region⁴. The remaining examples of stamp patterns are unique in their ornamentation, including amorphous and cross patterns, and bases with ‘warty’ patterns have been identified in

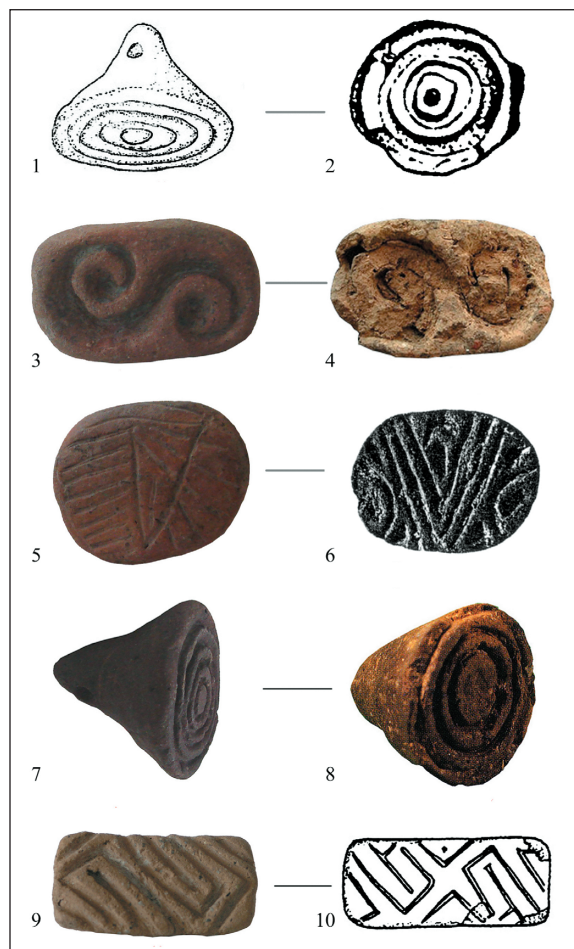


Fig. 6. Visual similarities between stamp patterns from the Republic of Macedonia and Anatolia. 1, 7: Porodin; 2: Çatal Höyük (Budja 2003.Fig. 2); 3: Mala Tumba-Trn; 4: Çatal Höyük (Türkcan on line); 5: Golema Tumba-Trn; 6: Çatal Höyük (Mellart 1967.Fig. 121); 8: Bademağacı (after Özdoğan & Başgelen 1999.152, Fig. 39); 9: Madjari; 10: Haçılar (Budja 2003.Fig. 5). 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 (Photos and drawing by G. Naumov, courtesy of the Museum of Bitola and the Museum of Macedonia).

Tumba Bara, Zelenikovo, Nikuštak, Mala Tumba-Trn and Porodin⁵. A stamp from Govrlevo, is unique, with a decorative pattern organized into several zones. This uniqueness is further accentuated by its but shape and modeling⁶. In a final consideration of de-

1 Basic data on these stamps: Korošec and Korošec 1973.56, T. XIII: 17; Garašanin et al. 1971.43; Gimbutas 1976.Pl. 9; Zdravkovski 2006.193, c. 111; Simoska and Sanev 1976.32, 44, Fig. 2, 3, Fig. 153; Grbić et al. 1960.46, T. XXV: 1. The find from Djumušica has not yet been published. Photo of this stamp used by kind permission of Aleksandar Mitkoski.

2 Basic data about these stamps: Garašanin et al. 1971.48, c. 130; Sanev 1975. T. X: 4,5. The example from Madjari is not yet published, so the data was taken from the exposition's glass-cases of the Museum of Macedonia.

3 One set of the exhibited stamps has not yet been published in the archaeological literature, so that their documentation was performed ad hoc through the exhibition's display cabinets. Due to the inappropriate noting of these and the finds, some of these objects have no information about the site or place of origin, or the information is inaccurate.

4 Basic data on these stamps: Simoska and Sanev 1976.34, 44, 45, Fig. 51, Fig. 154, Fig. 170.

5 Basic data on these stamps: Simoska and Sanev 1976.42, 45, Fig. 148, Fig. 171; Galović 1964. T. XII: 1, 2; Zdravkovski 1992.21, T. IV: 1; Grbić et al. 1960.46, T. XXV: 3, 4.

6 Basic data on this stamp: Bilbija 1986.36.

coration it should be mentioned that numerous stamps from Republic of Macedonia have deeply inscribed patterns, which certainly leads to the conclusion that they were used for imprinting patterns on soft surfaces (Figs. 2–4). Stamp dimensions often vary, but most often the diameter of the base is wide, averaging approximately 3 or 4 cm, although at the opposite end of the spectrum examples from Porodin and Velušina have base diameters closer to 8 or 9 cm, which makes them some of the largest Neolithic stamps in southeast Europe. So far, the biggest stamp is from Zelenikovo, which has a base diameter of 12 cm (Fig. 3.1). It may be concluded that these specific stamps were applied to a media that did not have standard dimensions, or that their size had a secondary role in regard to the meaning of the pattern. It is interesting that stamp bases often have the remains of white, and very rarely red, coloration (Fig 2.6, 7, 11; Fig. 3.7). This points to the fact that these objects were slipped and painted over with white, a characteristic seen also on some figurines and clay models from the same region. The presence of colour could be a result of the use of these objects for making tattoos, but without further chemical analyses, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. Regarding their features, the examples from Porodin, Gorobinci, Stenče and Madjari (Fig. 2.4, 7; Fig. 3.3, 4, 7), have small perforations on the handles, which suggests that they were hung or carried around the neck. Perforations like these are present on several

Neolithic examples from other parts of southeast Europe (Makkay 1984.Fig. I.6; Fig. IV.3, 9; Fig. V.7, 9, 10; Fig. VII.7; Fig. XII.12; Fig. XIII.2, 6, 8; etc.), but also in Japan (Kobayashi 2004.Fig. 7.3). It can be confirmed that only certain personal or kinds of stamps were carried, as the larger percentage of stamps usually have modelled handles.

The relationship between Macedonian stamps and Balkan and Anatolian visual culture

Many of the stamps discovered in the Republic of Macedonia share similarities with, or are identical to those from neighbouring regions, and further afield to the north and southeast of Republic of Macedonia. Of great importance are the analogous examples discovered in Greece and Turkey. The chronology of these sites, in relation to those in the Republic of Macedonia, suggests the stamps may have been linked to the spread of the Neolithization. Generally, the similarities in decorative patterns are the main indication pointing towards cultural interaction, as the stamp patterns, in large part, recur across southeastern Europe (Budja 2003.118, 121, 123; Perlès 2001. 288; Bailey 2000.109, 110), making it difficult at times to point to primary connections between certain sites, that is denoting Neolithic cultural ties through engraved patterns. In such cases, only the reference sites from Greece and Turkey that have specific chronological and iconographic correlates to

the stamps from the Neolithic settlements from Republic of Macedonia will be discussed. In this way, the accent will be on the eventual directions of the spread of Neolithisation, and of the further penetration of certain patterns into regions north of Republic of Macedonia. Regarding analogies from Neolithic settlement sites in the south of the Republic of Macedonia, it is notable that identical stamp patterns (zigzag, concentric circles, the applications of strings) present at the sites of Gorobinci, Amzabegovo, Djumušica, Govrlevo and Porodin have also been found at Nea Nikomedeia and Sesklo, and this certainly points to cultural similarities and possible communication between these



Fig. 7. Visual similarities between stamp and vessel patterns from Republic of Macedonia and Anatolia. 1 – Amzabegovo (photo by G. Naumov, Courtesy of Museum of Štip); 2, 4 – Çatal Höyük (Budja 2003. Fig. 2); Veluška Tumba (photo by G. Naumov, courtesy of the Museum of Bitola).

regions (Fig. 2.1, 4; Fig. 3.4, 6, 8; Fig. 4.1, 5 compared to Fig. 5.1-5, 7, 9). Similarly, the labyrinth represented on the Middle Neolithic stamp from Madjari often appears in Thessaly at sites at Achilleion, Pyrasos, Tsangli, Nessonis, Philia and Sesklo (Fig. 5.6, 8, 10). Furthermore, aspects of stamp decoration from Republic of Macedonia were also present in the Anatolian examples. Four types of pattern from Republic of Macedonia (including concentric circles, spirals, meanders and triangles) were also found inscribed at Çatal Höyük (Fig. 6). Concentric circles, the labyrinth and parallel lines are also represented on stamps from Bademağacı and Haçilar, and even further into the Levant on stamps from the sites in Tell Halula and Mallaha. On the other hand, some of the stamp patterns from the Çatal Höyük appear on Early and Middle Neolithic painted vessels from Republic of Macedonia (Fig. 7), and a small percentage of the Macedonian examples seem to be closely related to the wall-painting decorations in the shrines at Çatal Höyük.

This wide distribution of identical decorative motifs points to the accepted hypothesis that the Neolithisation of the Balkans developed in close relation to Anatolia as the process moved up through Thessaly, and into the Macedonian region. The question remains open, however, as to whether the presence of similar or identical patterns from different sites indicates explicit communication between settlements, or whether the patterns were the result of local choices that developed independently of direct contact. It must be kept in mind that the geometrical motifs inscribed on the stamps are often simple and common across much of Europe, making it difficult to confirm a single reason for the appearance of identical patterns. Nevertheless, the chronological sequence of stamps at various sites supports this diffusionist hypothesis, as it is clear that the appearance of stamps and their inscribed patterns slowly moved into Europe from the southeast. The presence of the stamps is also synchronized with the appearance of pottery painting, particularly in white, in the Balkans

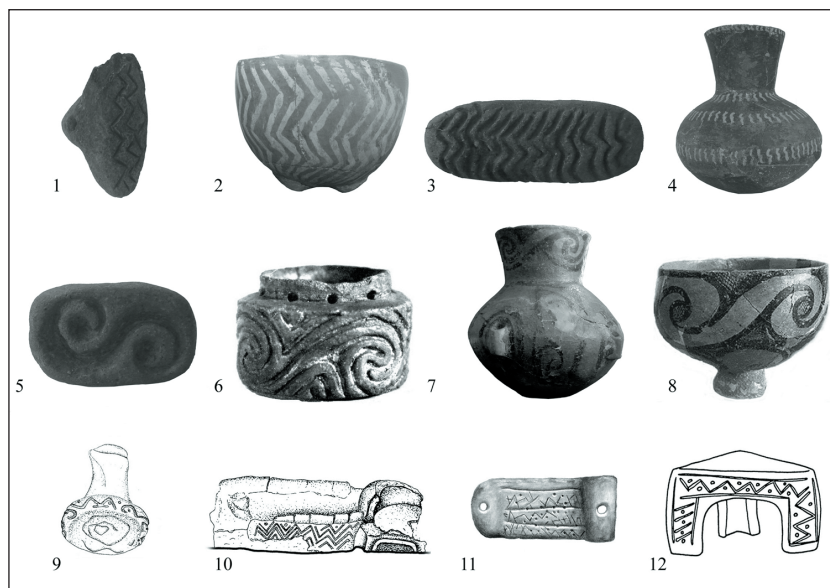


Fig. 8. Similar patterns represented on different types of material culture. 1 - Gorobinci; 2 - Amzabegovo; 3, 4 - Veluška Tumba; 5 - Mala Tumba-Trn; 6-8 - Madjari; 9 - Govrlevo; 10 - Zelenikovo (Garašanin and Bilbija 1988.Pl. II); Yannitsa (Merlini 2005.Fig. 10); 12 - Karanovo (Todorova and Vajsov 1993.Fig. 208.9). Photos 1-8 and drawing on 9 by G. Naumov, courtesy of the Museum of Štip, the Museum of Bitola and the Museum of Macedonia.

(Budja 2003.123), which facilitates the detection of these patterns on material culture. Precise chronological analyses and the established contexts and stratigraphies for some stamps support the manner of their appearance, but it should also be noted that the distribution of these objects and their decorative motifs took place rapidly within the early phases of the Neolithic.

This is evidenced more generally when considering the full range of Neolithic material culture. In the early phases of occupation at Amzabegovo, the appearance of *triticum monococcum* and *triticum dicoccum*, the presence of specific kinds of goat and sheep, red and white wall painting, mud brick construction styles, and burial evidence suggesting individuals of Mediterranean descent, all resemble Anatolian traditions (Hopf 1961; Sanev 2004.36; Gimbutas 1976.68; Bačvarov 2003.223-248; Naumov 2007a; Mellart 1975.99; Veljanovska 2000.45; 2006). Furthermore, recent analyses of Y-chromosome haplotypes have confirmed some migration by the presence of 20-25% of the DNA lineages in southeastern Europe coming from the Near East and Anatolia (King and Underhill 2002; Budja 2004.237). Nevertheless, despite the penetration of Anatolian and Near Eastern populations and their indirect manifestations, the Aegean influence should also be taken into consideration, especially regarding the

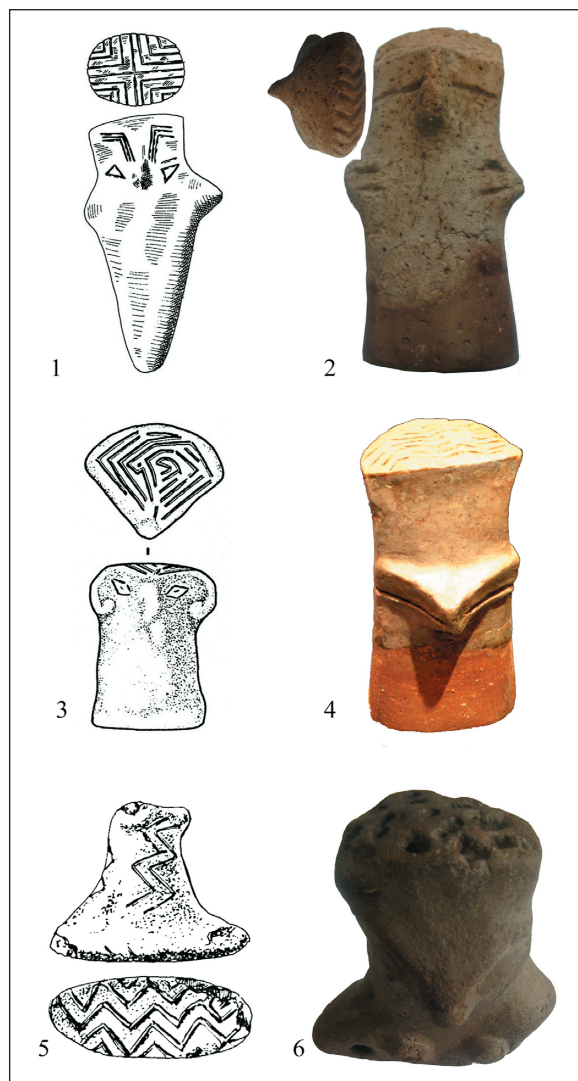


Fig. 9. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic stamps and figurines: 1 - Medvednjak (Gimbutas 1989. Fig. 21); 2 - Amzabegovo; 3 - Kurilo (Todorova and Vajsov 1993. Fig. 175.15); 4 - Zelenikovo; 5 - Szentes (Makkay 1984. Fig. XXX. 1); 6 - Gorobinci. Photos 2, 4, 6 by G. Naumov and 4 by M. Tutkovski, courtesy of the Museum of Štip and the Museum of Skopje.

element of visual expression. In this context, it can be stressed that, considering the typological and chronological parallels, the process of a 'visual Neolithisation' reached Macedonia through Thessaly, but only in the stylistic pattern domain. At the compositional level, even in the earliest phases, authentic structures existed with no obvious parallels in the neighbouring regions of the Balkan Peninsula.

The often cited presence of the already mentioned patterns can be noticed on many stamps discovered in the region around the Republic of Macedonia, but also further north (Makkay 1984. Figs. I-XXXI; Dzhanfezova 2003. Fig. 6). The use of identical pat-

terns in several regions points to strong communication links, which offers information beyond simply tracing the development of the Neolithisation process. Namely, these objects not only speak of the maintenance of traditions either through eventual colonization or indirect visual communication, but simultaneously they point to a tradition of preserving certain patterns which would incorporate further meanings for their manufacturers. The presence of the same patterns in the other spheres of pictorial expression only confirms the fundamental semantics of the patterns imprinted by stamps.

Stamp patterns and their analogies with decoration on other Neolithic objects

The repertoire of patterns imprinted on stamps is also present in other pictorial techniques and media, such as in the decoration of the utilitarian ceramic inventory. Aspects of these patterns are often painted or inscribed in different variations on vessels, figurines, ovens, clay tablets, and the walls of the some Neolithic dwellings or shrines. Objects utilizing these patterns were often of the highest degree of technical production, or were incorporated into particular domestic spheres. The repetition of the same patterns across several media may have represented a deeply engrained corpus of patterns used as a mode of symbolic expression, or it may have been more deliberately created as an insignia through which the local population recognized and differentiated itself from others.

The incised patterns found on the stamps are also common on Early and Middle Neolithic painted vessels from Republic of Macedonia. It is interesting that the stamp patterns and painted pottery also share certain compositional elements. Namely, the painted compositions consist of complex patterns of peculiar and combined permutations, visually segmenting the vessel into zones in some instances (Naumov 2005b. 68-71; 2008). Certain elements of the patterns inscribed on the Neolithic stamps were used, then, in the development of the pictorial compositions. What this shows is that these patterns were not independent or exceptions, but that they were actively employed in the visual expression of multiple media. Such visual dynamics were manifest in many relations and on several types of material culture present at Neolithic sites in Republic of Macedonia.

Several analogies between the patterns on stamps and vessels can be highlighted (Fig. 8.1-8). The zig-zag motif inscribed on the stamps from Gorobinci

and Djumušica was also found painted on an Early Neolithic vessel from Amzabegovo. The stamps and vessels from Velušina have identical twisted patterns. The stamped pattern on Middle Neolithic vessels is also visible on a Pelagonian stamp from Trn. The inscribed spiral pattern on this stamp also appears in several variants on painted cups and amphorae belonging to the Middle Neolithic phases of the Amzabegovo-Vršnik group. The same motif is present on a small pot with inscribed decoration discovered in Madjari, although it is interesting that in this example there is a twisted swastika motif on the bottom of the vessel. This motif in particular belongs to the

repertoire of patterns found on several Neolithic stamps in Albania, at Maliq (see *Makkay 1984.Fig. XVII. 5*). Nevertheless, it is the range of similarities and interactive relationships between the stamps from Anatolia and the painted vessels from Republic of Macedonia that should be noted, and these similarities in style and use continued throughout the Bronze Age (*Dickinson 1994.191; Kircho 1989.123*).

The decorative features of the Neolithic stamps from Republic of Macedonia are also visible, in part, in the architectural interior of some dwellings in Republic of Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Anatolia. Namely, there are similar decorative motifs on a stamp from Ustie na Drim (Fig. 2.9), inscribed on the lower parts of the walls of a house discovered in Azmak, and painted on some of the frescoes in the buildings at Çatal Höyük. The linear patterns on the stamp discovered in Amzabegovo are also present on the upper corner of the house model from Vršnik. What is highlighted in this last comparison is the pattern detail on the far right side which resembles the letter *E* (Fig. 4.1). This same pattern, independent or combined with other patterns, is inscribed on two fragments from the same stratigraphic layer at Amzabegovo from which the stamp was recovered (*Korošec and Korošec 1973.56*). The common reoccurrence of this pattern in two settlements so close to each other speaks to it having a particular meaning or as a certain type of communication shared between the communities in the region. While it would not be ap-



Fig. 10. Stamps, wall paintings and reliefs from Çatal Höyük: 1, 7 (Türkcan 2006.47, 48); 2–5, 8 (Mellart 1967.44, 87, 88, 200); 6 (Çatalhöyük 2006.196); 9 (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 390.2); 10: (Budja 2003.Fig. 2).

propriate at this time to suggest it was part of some alphabetical system, its ideographic function should not be overlooked; all the examples bearing this same pattern belong to the Late Neolithic phases of the settlements, a period during which the so-called Danube alphabet was in formation (*Merlini 2005; 2007; Haarman 2005.228–231; Starović 2004.16–30; Winn 1981*).

In this context, the most interesting stamp is probably from Govrlevo – on its base border it has twisted and zigzagged ideograms separated by dots and whose pattern is partially inscribed on the ‘oven/altar’ from Zelenikovo. This pattern is also present on portable material, such as ceramic plates, and on walls in the neighbouring regions (Fig. 8.9–12). The unique patterning of this stamp suggests many possibilities for further semantic analyses of these ideograms and for defining the specific function of the stamps. The presence of dots may determine a numerical and spatial disposition. Its common correlation to zigzag lines may further point to the existence of prescribed principles structuring ideogram communication.

Stamp-figurines

The example from Govrlevo also belongs to another category of stamps which intersects with the sphere of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic sculpture, combining elements of both objects, and are referred to

as stamps-figurines (Fig. 3.5; Fig. 9). The most remarkable example is the stamp from Govrlevo whose handle is actually a figurine. The base was incised in two zones with a connected line and independent ideograms, suggesting a symbolic function. It can be supposed that in the case of the figurines from Zelenikovo, Amzabegovo and Gorobinci, the inscribed patterns on top of their heads were used for imprinting, since their ornamentation is almost identical to that on the bases of some of the stamps (Fig. 9.2, 4, 6).

The pole-like figurines from the Balkans could be delineated as a different category, then, where the patterns visible on their heads are similar to the decoration of the stamps. The example from Medvednjak is excellent, and the context of its discovery provides insight into the function of these objects (Fig. 9.1). This object, which lacks a plain base so that it could be put on a plain surface, was discovered inside a silo which, according to the chemical analysis, was filled with grain (*Gimbutas 1989.14*). This information points to the figurine being used as an amulet

protecting the grain, although it probably also functioned in activities related to the preparation and decoration of bread – a suggestion also supported by the decoration on its head. Identical decorative motifs are present on several Neolithic stamps discovered in Greece, Bulgaria and Hungary (*Makkay 1984.Figs. XIII, XXIII, XXVII*). It is difficult to say whether all the figurines bearing decoration on the tops functioned as stamps, but if we consider the depth of the inscribed patterns and make an analogy to the symbolic relation between human hair and grain in contemporary archaic cultures (*Chausidis 2005.234*), it can be supposed that some of them were used for imprinting patterns on soft dough.

A small subset of ‘anthropomorphic’ stamps belongs to a group made in the form of a foot or palm. Such examples have been discovered at Bikovo (Bulgaria), Çatal Höyük and Gura Văii, although the earliest forms of these stamps were discovered at Byblos (*Makkay 1984.26, Türkcan 2007.261*). The last example resembles a bear foot, so the possibility that some of the figurine-stamps represented animals can-

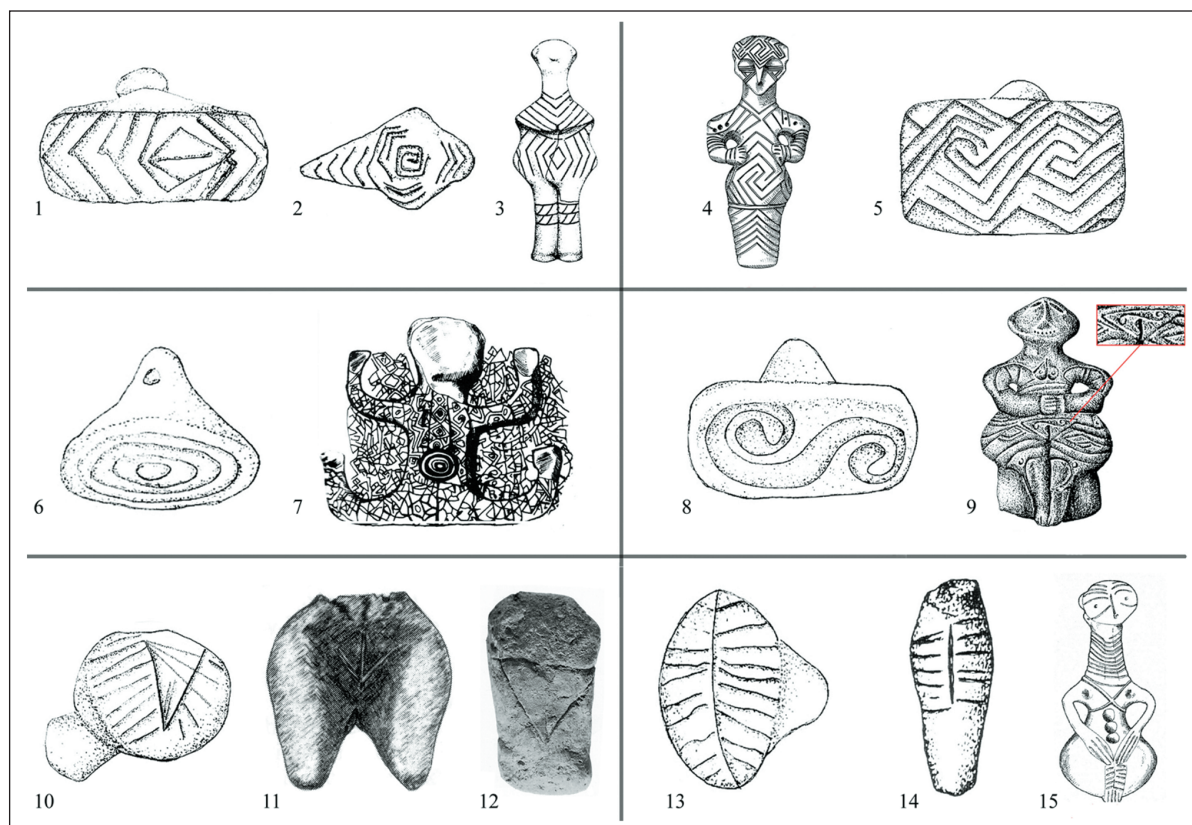


Fig. 11. Visual similarities between patterns on stamps and figurines: 1 – Stenče; Gorobinci; 3 – Balčik (Chausidis 2005.Pl. B11. 18); 4 – Potporanj (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 18); 5 – Ustie na Drim; 6 – Porodin; 7 – Çatal Höyük (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 390.2); 8 – Mala Tumba-Trn; 9 – Pazardjik (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 220); 10 – Golema Tumba-Trn; 11 – Čaška (Jovčevska 1993.T. II:7); 12 – Golema Tumba-Trn (Simoska and Sanev 1976.Fig. 165); 13 – Veluška Tumba; 14 – Yablona (Sorokin and Borziyak 1998.Fig. 5.5); 15 – Nudra (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 148.1). 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13 (Drawings by G. Naumov).

not be excluded. Two stamps from Çatal Höyük in the forms of a bear and leopard suggest a further use of zoomorphic figurines as stamps (*Türkcan 2007*).

Stamps and animal imagery dynamics of Çatal Höyük

Over the years of excavations conducted first by Mellart and then Hodder, a dozen stamps strongly related to zoomorphic imagery dynamics were discovered (*Mellart 1967; Türkcan 2006; 2007*). The presence of stamps representing both bears and leopards correlates to the imagery traditions represented elsewhere in the settlement. These animals, in almost identical positions, were equally present in wall decorations, both as painted or sculpted images, and are, except for one example, absent from faunal remains (*Türkcan 2007.261*) (Fig. 10). Furthermore, some of the 'non-figurative' stamps are shaped or inscribed with patterns that are equally remarkable on the bodies of the painted and sculptured animals. Thus, the shape of the four-pointed stamp is often painted on the walls of buildings and, even more interesting, is painted on the head of some of the plastered leopards (Fig. 10.2-5). Surely this suggests that the four-pointed stamp is closely linked to representations of leopards, and it probably had the function of transporting some of the symbolic meaning or essence of the leopard through the image, and the leopard stamp itself was probably used for the further manifestation of these meanings onto the media where it should be imprinted. If we can imagine that the people painting on the walls were dressed in leopard skins (emphasized in a moment of a hunt, dance or trance), then we could suppose that these stamps concentrated the energy and skill of the

leopard on the person decorated with or consuming products decorated with these suitable patterns. This will be discussed further below. In contrast, bear is also represented among the repertoire of animals on both stamps and wall decoration, but in a totally different context. While the positions in which these animals are represented are identical, there are distinguishing features in the patterns painted or inscribed on their bodies. In particular, the stomach area is often inscribed with patterns present on the 'non-figurative' stamps, regardless of whether the image is a stamp and on one of the reliefs (Fig. 10.7-10). This recurrent imagery leads to the conclusion that specific features of the animal bodies (especially the stomach) were deliberately isolated, and through the decoration of the stamp these characteristics could be transmitted to the new media. As will be pointed below, specific similarities between the patterns on the stamps and the animals' bellies will also be present in the corporeality of other figurines.

Semantic relations between patterns on stamps and other media

The decoration present on the stamps is also noticeable in different variations on figurines, cult tablets, ovens, cups, silos, wall reliefs, and paintings. It seems that the media and objects that entered the ritual sphere were decorated in order to symbolically protect, stimulate and multiply their contents. Since some of the patterns were precisely elaborated and repeated on different objects, it can be considered that they possessed concrete meanings which can be explored through semantic analyses. The repetition of these patterns suggests that in the Neolithic there was a defined repertoire of patterns which,

depending on the object and its shape, were multiplied or placed in specific areas. In this context, the most interesting data comes from figurines and wall art, which were usually decorated by engraving or painting techniques. It was stressed above that some figurines, due to the deeply engraved patterns and decoration of their bases, belonged to the sphere of stamps utilized for imprinting decoration on other media. But in the Neolithic, figurines bearing the same patterns known for the stamps from Republic of Macedonia were inscribed on their stomach and genitalia. Re-



Fig. 12. House at Govrlevo (Photo by M. Biblija).

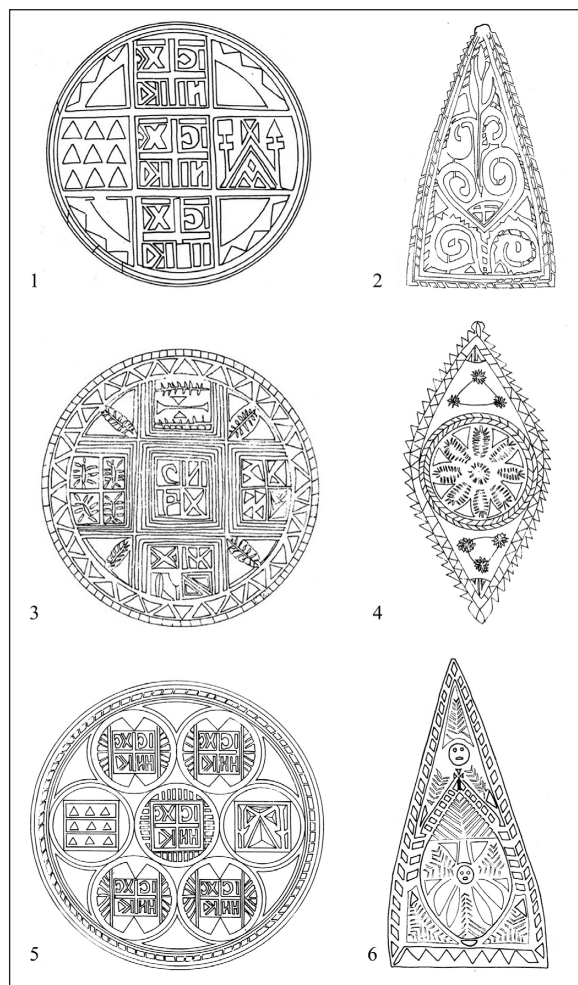


Fig. 13. Wooden stamps (poskuri/šaralki) from the Republic of Macedonia: 1 – Galičnik; 2 – Misleševo; 3 – Vevčani; 4 – Vevčani; 5 – Lazaropole; 6 – Vevčani (Krstevska 2005.Figs. 3, 8, 13, 21).

garding the patterns on the belly of these figurines, the most common patterns are pseudo-meanders, bordered lozenges and concentric circles. Analogous patterns and motifs are found on stamps from Ustie na Drim, Stenče, Gorobinci and Porodin (Fig. 11.1–7). Concerning the patterns represented on the genitalia, most are composed of long spirals, cut triangles or vertical lines with thick oblique or horizontal crossing lines. Such examples can be seen on the stamps discovered in Mala Tumba-Trn, Velušina, Golema Tumba-Trn and two unknown sites in the regions of Ohrid and Struga (Fig. 11. 8–15). Finally, with the last example, a detailed study of on the authentic stamp was made, and it is interesting to point out certain technical characteristics in the manufacture of its decoration (Fig. 11.10; Fig. 2. 5). During the engraving of the lines, the craftsmen intended to

produce a motif identical to the one from Velušina (Fig. 11.13; Fig. 2.10), but for unknown reasons, changed the method of engraving and, while the clay was still wet, a triangle with a line that cuts through its middle over the original set of lines was engraved.

What is interesting about these motifs is that both variations were often used to represent female genitalia on figurines. This stamp may be the best example of stamps being used to impress patterns denoting the vulva, with all its symbolic meaning (*Chausidis 1996.60*). It remains an open question as to what type of context this pattern would have been imprinted in, but considering that the engraved pattern on the stamp from Trn is very shallow, it can be supposed that it was meant to be imprinted on a soft surface, or to be worn simply as an amulet, serving to symbolically transpose the meanings of the vulva to the new media or to its owner. Rudimentary representations of female genitalia are also present on other examples from Republic of Macedonia and the Balkans; and are identical to representations of genitalia on some of Neolithic figurines from south-eastern Europe.

The question concerning the relationship between the patterns on stamps and those engraved on the sex of female figurines remains open for further elaboration and would surely provide greater insight into the function of the stamps. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the media on which these patterns were imprinted and whether these media had a symbolic relationship to the characteristics of the female abdomen. Along these lines, the use of analogies and the context of deposition of some stamps, linking them to the character of the objects decorated with stamps, could be explained. In the recent excavations of building A1 at Çatal Höyük, four stamps along with seven figurines, a grinding stone and tools for processing cereals were discovered together (*Türckan 2006.45*). The stamp-figurine from Govrlevo had a very similar depositional context (Fig. 3.5), being recovered next to a large ceramic structure, and arranged with several grinding stones, models of loaves and the remains of a significant amount of ash (Fig. 12)⁷. Close to this area, one more stamp was discovered (Fig. 3.6), and on the same site the remains of figurine-house models were discovered. On one of them the female representation has a navel and a stomach in a state of preg-

⁷ Information about the context of this stamp and the clay construction were acquired courtesy of the researcher of Govrlevo, Miloš Bilbija.

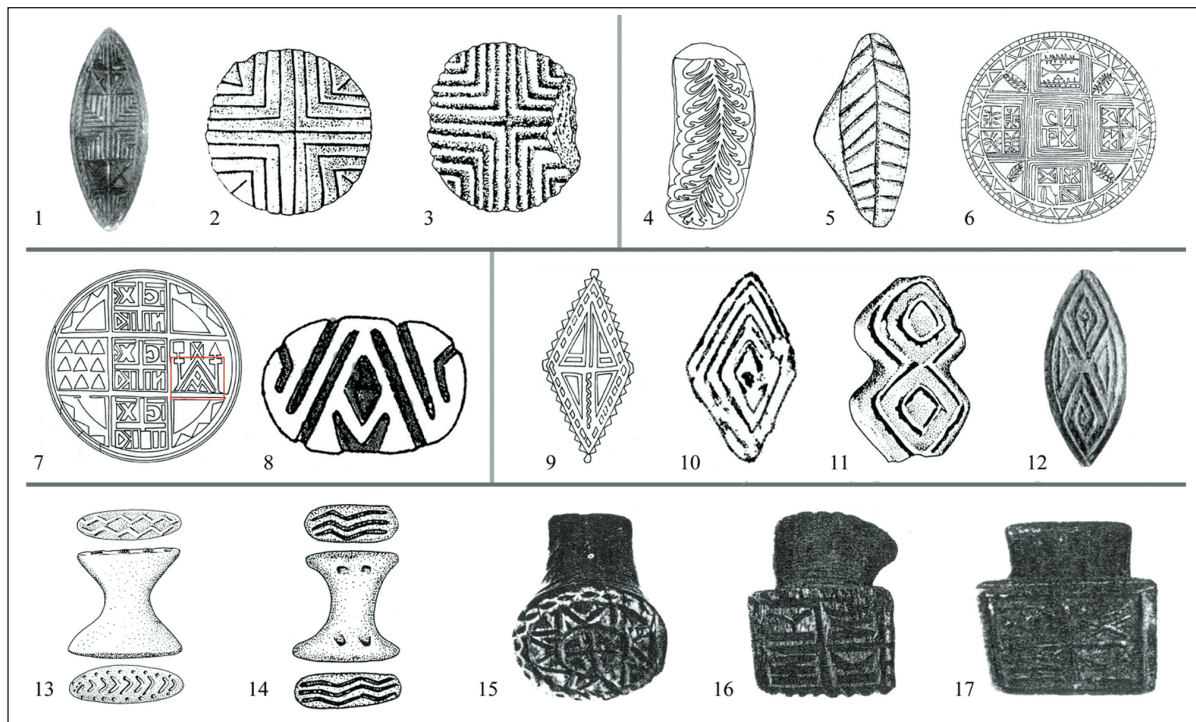


Fig. 14. Visual similarities between patterns on Neolithic and contemporary stamps: 1 – Markovac (Kostić 1967.Pl. II. 1); 2 – Prague (Makkay 1984.Fig. XXIII. 2); 3 – Ruse (Makkay 1984.Fig. XXIII. 4); 4 – Struga (Krstevska 2005.Fig. 20); 5 – Unknown site (Drawing by G. Naumov); 6 – Vevčani (Krstevska 2005.Fig. 3); 7 – Galičnik (Krstevska 2005.Fig. 21); 8 – Čatal Höyük (Budja 2003.Fig. 2); 9 – Volino (Krstevska 2005.Fig. 16); 10 – Szakály (Makkay 1984.Fig. XV. 2); 11 – Eutresis (Makkay 1984.Fig. XIII. 3); 12 – Markovac (Kostić 1967.Pl. II. 4); 13 – Slatina-Sofia (Makkay 1984.Fig. VIII. 8); 14 – Slatina-Sofia (Bačvarov 2003.Fig. 2. 26); 15 – Lika (Kostić 1967.Pl. V. 4); 16 – Ljubizda (Kostić 1967.Pl. V. 2); 17 – Strmosten (Kostić 1967.Pl. V. 3).

nancy represented identically to the loaf discovered near the construction. According to Bilbija, this structure was used in the preparation and baking of bread. It is interesting that the ideograms engraved on the stamp-figurine from this dwelling correspond to those engraved on another structure/oven, located in a dwelling at Zelenikovo, a settlement near Govrlevo (Fig. 8.9, 10). This scenario, along with the depositional context of the stamp-figurine from Medvednjak discovered in a silo with grain, clearly demonstrates that Neolithic stamps were, in part, related to the preparation of bread. Using both the Neolithic models of loaves and ethnographic data, it is likely that some stamps were thus used for decorating unleavened cakes, bread and loaves prepared in some dwellings.

Neolithic stamps and their ethnographic implications

Many ethnographic reports from the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries note that bread was used in many ceremonies and rituals and, for these purposes, it was often decorated with imprinted or applied patterns. During the regular process of decorating

the bread, the woman prepared the soft dough by adding patterns (domestic animals, people, tools etc.) using small leftovers of dough (Svetieva 1997.168). But during the ritual process, always performed early in the morning before dawn, the women usually decorated the bread using strictly defined patterns, and used specially prepared sheep bones or, very often, wooden and ceramic stamps (Fig. 13). These stamps are known variously across the Balkan populations as *proskurnik*, *poskurnik*, *šaralka*, *svača*, *guguška*, *panagijče*, *pisalnik*, *slovo*, *krušno slovo*, *kruće* etc. (Krstevska 2005; Kostić 1967). Linguistically, some of these terms (*poskurnik* and *proskurnik*) originate from the Greek 'prosfora' which means ritual bread or offering. Researchers have defined two types of stamp – *poskurnik* and *šaralka* (decorating tool) – which have independent roles in the process of decorating the bread. First, the *šaralki* are always used for imprinting patterns on bread that is for living members of the community and rituals concerning birth, baptism, engagement, and weddings. In contrast, the *proskurnici* are always included in rituals related to deceased individuals and ancestors, funerals, commemorations, domestic and village celebrations, and *zadušnica* (day of the

dead). According to the researchers' typology, the *šaralki* more commonly have circular or oval shapes, while the *proskurnici* have rectangular bases with engraved inscriptions (*i.e.* IIC XC NI KA (IS HS NI KA) 'Jesus Christ the Triumphant') (Krstevska 2005. 17, 20; Kostić 1967.99). In the context of this research, the relationship between shape, decoration and function of the Neolithic and contemporary stamps for bread is important, and has previously been accentuated by several researchers (Chausidis 2005.98, 128; Antonova 1984.30; Naumov 2006a). It is interesting that some of the *šaralki*, besides being made of wood, were also made of ceramics, with engraved patterns almost identical to those on Neolithic stamps (Fig. 14). Interestingly, part of the pattern, seen on one of the stamps from Çatal Höyük (Fig. 14.7, 8), is almost always present on the *proskurnici* and represents the Virgin Mary⁸. As was stressed above, some of the patterns on the Neolithic stamps are related to female genitalia, so

that the reminiscence of this conception, as presented on the Balkan *proskurnici*, becomes more than suggestive, and is an avenue for further research. Regarding shape, it is important to highlight yet another similarity between the archaeological and the ethnographic material. Several Neolithic stamps discovered in the Balkans have bases for decorating on both sides of the handle. Stamps with the same shape were used in Serbia in the 20th century and were known as *šaralki* with *proskurnik* (objects which had, on one side an oval stamp, a *šaralka*, while on the other side they had a rectangular stamp, a *proskurnik*) (Fig. 14.13–17). Depending on whether the ritual was performed for the living or the deceased, a suitable stamp was used (Kostić 1967.99, T. V). These stamps were exclusively used for decorating ritual breads, and it remains open as to whether these similar Neolithic stamps were used in the same way. In addition to the decorative and typological similarities between stamps, there are also the so-called models of loaves discovered at sites in Anatolia and the Balkans. At Çatal Höyük, Mellart excavated two models of loaves bearing identical patterns to the stamps discovered in the settlement (Fig. 15.1; Fig. 10.8). Dynamic relationships between artifact categories have been argued for, and objects like miniatures, wall paintings and reliefs strengthen the possibility of interpreting these stamps as tools for decorating bread. As an example, models of loaves suggestive of local varieties, were discovered at Neolithic sites in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria, and bore decorative patterns identical to those of stamps discovered in the Balkans (Fig. 15.2–5). These stamp patterns, considering their small dimensions, could have been imprinted on bread in combination with several other patterns, just as in the case of contemporary ritual loaves (Fig. 15.6, 7). Still, as some ethnographic data indicate, it cannot be excluded that one stamp was used to imprint a single loaf. If we consider the dimensions of the larger Neolithic stamps from Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria (those with a diameter between 9–12cm), and the dimensions of the models of loaves discovered in Govrlevo (Fig. 16) whose size was probably comparable to an actual loaf, we can suppose that one stamp was sufficient to imprint a large part of the bread.

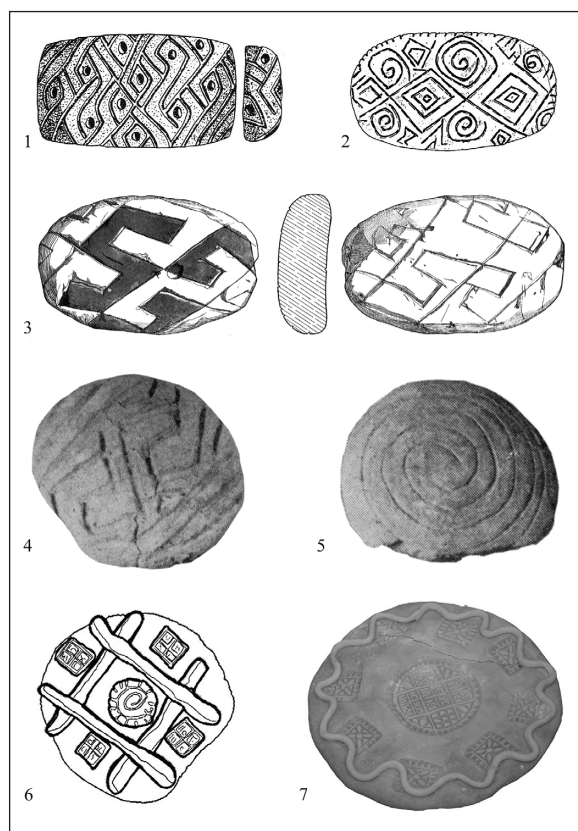


Fig. 15. Models of bread loaves: 1 – Çatal Höyük (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 222. 3); 2 – Potporanj (Gimbutas 1989.Fig. 227); 3 – Vinča (Vasić 1936.Fig. 72a); 4 – Nova Zagora (Kančeva 1992.Pl. VII. 5); 5 – Nova Zagora (Kančeva 1992.Pl. VII. 2); 6 – Kozar Belene (Chausidis 2005.Pl. B32. 6); 7 – Unknown site (photo by D. Karasarlidis).

In the Delčevo region, funeral rituals include small ritual loaves, called dolls which are decorated with the smaller stamp on the handle of the *poskurnik* (Krstevska 2005.17). In relation to the female sym-

⁸ On the meaning of this pattern in the Christian liturgy, see Mesnil and Popova 2002.107. Fig. 1.

bolism, the terms used for the *šaralki* and the ritual loaves can be explicit. In examples from Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, some *šaralki* were named *sister-in-law*, while the ceremonial breads were called *grandmother* (Petrović 1996; Krstevska 2005. 21, Fig. 17). It is certain that these terms related back to those who prepared the bread, usually the older women in the family, although we should not exclude a deeper symbolic significance related to the presence of these individuals in ritual performance, and also in the frameworks of the material culture, ethnographic as well as archaeological (Naumov 2006b.81; 2007b).

It is important to mention that a model of bread identical to the *grandmother* loaf has been discovered in a Neolithic house in Govrlevo including the same context with the previously mentioned construction, grinding stones, cereals, and ash (Fig. 16. 3). Across the settlement, the number of these models is much greater. The *grandmothers*, as well as the model from Govrlevo, were all made in small dimensions, with a hole for salt in the middle and prepared in hot ash and glowing embers (Petrović 1996.26, 30). The similarities between the model, the Neolithic artefacts and the *grandmother* bread continue on the level of ritual functions. At the end of the ritual, the *grandmother* bread was split or 'butchered' and parts given to those present (Petrović 1996.23, 25). This practice of splitting is similar to the situation of the models of bread in Govrlevo, but also to the Neolithic figurines from the Balkans. On a large part of the figurines discovered in the settlements, the legs are deliberately split, and usually one leg is not in the close surrounding of the figurine. Part of them has hips made of small slice of 'reinforcements', or clay slices, so that, if the occasion required it, the legs could be easily removed or re-attached (Naumov 2007b). This fragmentation of both figurines and breads/loaves relates to their mediation in different processes of exchange and social relationships, such as during rites of passage, where fragmentation represents a temporal or spatial border (Svetieva 1997.172; Talalay 1993.45; Gheorghiu 2001.76, 83; Bailey 2005.102; Chapman 2000; Budja 2003.124, 126; Skeates 2007.195; Naumov 2007b). The active use of bread in rituals (as a mediator between the living and the dead, praying for rain, fortune telling etc.) clearly points to its overlapping with several social, economic and ritual spheres. The required decoration or marking of the loaves with 'images and signs' links these spheres directly. On the other hand, in the context of these rituals, the bread itself represents the property and its ow-



Fig. 16. Neolithic clay model loaves from Govrlevo (Photos by G. Naumov).

ners. Even the *grandmother* bread, which until its division at the end of the three-day ceremony, is constantly exposed on a table and symbolizes the property of those who serve the table (Petrović 1996.31). With other ritual breads, it is very common that dough figurines were prepared and applied to the loaves during bread-making and included representations of the owner, landlord, ploughman, plough, cereals, vessels, shepherd, the shepherd's pall, stable, threshing-floor, and domestic animals. Some of the breads used in domestic rituals were actually referred to as *threshing-floor* or *stable* (Fig. 17), so that the bread symbolically represented the landlord, the landlord's possessions, and their agrarian or economic activities (Svetieva 1997.169, 173; Chausidis 2008). As the figurines used to decorate the bread are made of dough, it is likely that the *šaralki* pattern used for imprinting also had a purpose, probably affording symbolic protection to the land and security for the family's continued existence. Even the *proskurnici*, which are the only ones with Christian funeral connotations, have the identical function of guarding or protecting the deceased. Although the *proskurnici* have far more complex symbolic meanings, especially regarding the inscription IS HS NI KA (Jesus Christ the Triumphant) and the protective intercession by the mythical through the bread, the nature of these objects as markers of certain cultural identities should also be pointed out. For example, in the Balkans, where during and after the Ottoman Empire a diverse ethnic map emerged, it was necessary for certain populations to manifest



Fig. 17. Ritual loaves from Bulgaria: 1, 6 – Gorni Lom (Yaneva 1989.81); 2 – Trnovsko (Yaneva 1989. 83); 3 – Gabrovsko (Chausidis 2008.Pl. VI. 7); 4 – Maraški Trstenik (Chausidis 2008.Pl. VI. 12); 5 – Mihailovgradsko (Yaneva 1989.82).

their cultural identity through rituals and religions, such as through the use of Christian iconography. Later, at the end of the First World War and the rise of the Serbian kingdom, in regions such as Šumadija, Kosovo and Republic of Macedonia (but not further north) *šaralki* bearing two-headed eagles were produced (Kostić 1967.92–94), with the explicit goal of marking the newly constructed identity of the populations in these territories. After the Second World War, Serbian *šaralki* bearing a five-pointed star were manufactured (Kostić 1967.96), accentuating the new ideas and identities by which these populations recognized self and others in this period. The situation concerning the *šaralki* and the *proskurnici* shows that within the domain of ritual activities, one or several populations used the patterns on these objects as an element in their own identification. In this way, it can be perceived that, even in the 20th century, the categories of sacred and everyday secularity were not divided, but on the contrary, intertwined. This situation of parallel interaction between the insignia of cultural identity and religious behaviour is also noticeable today in the numerous rites of passage and initiation celebrations in Republic of Macedonia.

Imprinted mind

The function of Neolithic stamps still remains questionable and might never be fully answered. In an attempt to demystify their function, several interesting and logical interpretations have been presented which offer different kinds of answer. On the one hand, it was noticed that stamps from different regions have been discovered in different contexts, so it can be supposed that they had different uses. On the other hand, some stamps, although discovered in settlements separated by great distances, were of similar shape, decoration and context in relation to other finds, and were thus probably used for similar purposes. The position commonly held by many researchers suggests that these distributional differences support the interpretation that the stamps were multifunctional. Their role as imprinters of signs of identity, property and protection of the bread adds to this complex function. According to the ethnographic examples, we were able to suggest that bread, and its context-dependent pattern was a mediating element between members of one or several communities; the patterned loaves were convenient objects facilitating interaction, especially in rites of passage. The decorative nature of Neolithic stamps, suggests they may have been used in similar rituals, and the visual effect of the imprinted surface should be accentuated. Some stamps have a very shallow engraved pattern, so if they had been imprinted on surfaces with a compact thickness (such as a textile, skin, or ceramic), it is questionable how long the pattern would have been distinguishable. If they were to be imprinted on dough, however, during the rising and baking phases the patterns would enlarge. Thus, lacking the remains of color, dough becomes a suitable media for making these patterns visible. As an active medium in ritual, patterned bread would have a strong visual communication role for participants in both domestic and village rituals.

From this we can conclude that the stamps, and especially their patterns, possessed potent symbolic significance. Their durable nature facilitated their continued and repeated reproduction on soft media, such as dough. In this way, they became completely enmeshed with the cognitive aspects of the community and were reproduced as culturally specific symbols. While Lewis-Williams and Pearce argue that, in the case of the stamps, the engraved patterns represent entoptics, or neuro-psychological phenomenon which were the result of altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005.46–59), we would disagree. On the contrary, the patterns on the

stamps were used over a long period, gradually being integrated into the general compositional repertoire including on painted ceramics, other decorated artefacts and construction elements. The deployment of patterns on several media, their similar context, and their similar presentation on artefacts and constructions indicates that substantial interaction, resulting in a reinforced or concrete meaning becoming established in the domain of the most essential religious concepts. In this way, the stamp patterns became completely embedded in the perception and the symbolic expression of Neolithic populations, which used these symbols in multiple spheres of visual culture. It can be considered that the Balkan Neolithic, even in its early stages, had developed a strongly defined cognitive symbolism as represented in the stamp patterns which could have been engraved, painted or applied, and was repeated over the millennia. It is difficult to treat the patterns as a result of an altered state of mind when they were used across much of southeast Europe and Anatolia. Certainly, in the earliest phases, these patterns were closely related to a shared cognitive repertoire and perception of human existence. Over time, these patterns gradually turned into signs of

identity, and maintained a dual function. Thus the body and the patterns on the stamps were incorporated in the dynamics of social mediation and, through multiple avenues, they mediated the symbolic complexity of human cognition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Professor Nikos Chausidis for his useful suggestions and engaging discussions. I am also grateful to Miloš Bilbija for sharing the Govrlevo excavation data with me and allowing me to use unpublished data and photos from the same site. Many thanks to Marija Atanasoska and Irena Kolištrkovska-Nasteva, who assisted me during the documentation of the stamps from the Museum of Macedonia, to Miško Tutkovski and Darko Karasarlidis for helping me with some of the photos, and to Aleksandar Mitkoski for providing the information and photo of the stamp from Djumušica. My endless gratitude to Orhideja Zorova for the translation of the text, and especially to Sheila E. Kohring for editing and improving the English version. Finally, I thank Professor Mihael Budja for inviting me to the 14th Neolithic Seminar and giving us the opportunity to share our ideas.

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