

Early and middle Neolithic figurines – the migration of religious belief

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ABSTRACT – *In Linear Pottery Culture, two types of anthropomorphic figurines are distinguishable: Type 1 figurines have a columnar body, without legs or hips, while Type 2 figurines show more detail in their body shape. These two types have parallels in the Neolithic of south-east Europe, especially in the Starčevo culture. These parallels become evident not only in the shape of the body, but also in other features such as sexual characteristics, breakage patterns and find circumstances. It is therefore, likely that LPC figurines and Starčevo culture figurines are manifestations of similar sets of religious beliefs.*

IZVLEČEK – *V kulturi Linearno trakaste keramike lahko razlikujemo dva tipa antropomorfnih figur: figure tipa 1 imajo stebrasto telo, brez nog in bokov; figure tipa 2 imajo detajlno oblikovano telo. Oba imata paralele v neolitiku jugovzhodne Evrope, še posebej v kulturi Starčevo. Te so očitne tudi pri drugih potezah, kot so spolne značilnosti, vzorci prelomov in okoliščine odkritij. Verjetno je, da antropomorfne figure tako v kulturi Linearno trakaste keramike kot v kulturi Starčevo izražajo podobna verovanja.*

KEY WORDS – *Neolithic; figurines; religion; Linear Pottery culture; Starčevo culture*

Introduction

In attempting to draw a picture of prehistory and to reconstruct our predecessors' life, it is essential to regard all aspects of a culture, as defined by Max Weber (*Weber 1980*): society, economy and religion. It is this last and most ambiguous facet which will be the subject of this paper; ambiguous because religion is probably the most interesting of the three aspects mentioned above, but also the most difficult to assess. The following considerations will confine themselves to the middle Neolithic Linear Pottery Culture (LPC) of central Europe, with some limited digressions to the early Neolithic cultures of south-east Europe. Obviously, it cannot be my aim to attempt a full reconstruction of LPC religion. Such an effort would have to comprise analyses of mortuary practices, as well as investigations of natural and artificially constructed cult sites, cult imagery, cult equipment, cult

participants and cultic actions (*Bertemes and Biehl 2001.18*). Instead, I will restrict myself to anthropomorphic representations of the LPC, placing the main emphasis on figurines (*Becker in print*).

All in all, the following six types of anthropomorphic representation can be distinguished in LPC contexts (Fig. 1):

- ❶ massive and hollow figurines,
- ❷ vessels, specifically face vessels and vessels that imitate the whole human body,
- ❸ applications fixed on the outside of vessels,
- ❹ lugs, knobs and handles with human faces,
- ❺ incised anthropomorphic representations, formerly often misinterpreted as frogs or toads,
- ❻ anthropomorphic figurines made of bone.

Distribution of finds

Anthropomorphic finds from LPC can be found in almost the whole distributional area, from Hungary and Romania in the east, to France in the west. I noted no anthropomorphic finds in Ukraine, but this might be due to the lack of published excavations, or otherwise to my poor knowledge of foreign publications.

Oddly enough, anthropomorphic finds are not evenly distributed. There are regions of a certain density concerning this artefact group – East Austria; the Rhine-Main area, and the region around the rivers Elbe, Saale and Unstrut, for example. This unevenness in quantity cannot be explained with the current state of research, as the following example shows: East Austria yielded around 80 anthropomorphic finds, whereas Bavaria yielded barely a dozen. These two regions are comparable both in geographical and climatic respects and in their state of research, so this discrepancy must have other reasons, although what these reasons were is not so easy to determine. A possible explanation might be the existence of settlements with a special significance (*'Zentralplätze'* according to *Kneipp 2001.33–35*), where finds consist of a disproportionate amount of flint and stone tools, stones used for colouring (hematite, graphite) and last, but not least, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, vessels etc. These settlements might have served as places of trade and religious feasts and rituals, religion being not a private, but a public matter.

Dealing with figurines: problems and solutions

The following considerations will be confined largely to clay figurines of LPC. In the course of working with them, several problems emerged that had to be dealt with. The worst was that 99 % of all figurines are fragmentary, so *a priori* there was no knowing how they looked when they were complete. The construction of a typology based on entirely preserved figurines was therefore impossible.

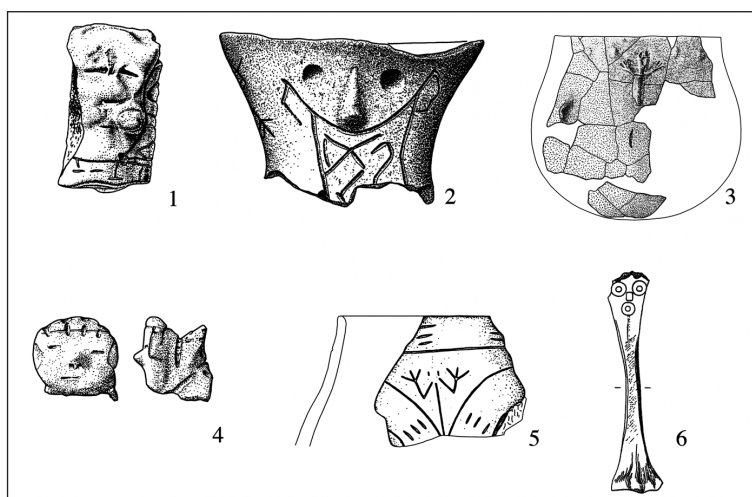


Fig. 1. Categories of anthropomorphic finds from the LPC. 1. Figurine, Bad Nauheim – Nieder Mörlen. 2. Face vessel, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt. 3. Application, Gneiding. 4. Knob, Mužla-Čenkov. 5. Incised representation, Bayerbach. 6. Bone figurine, Berry-au-Bac. Different scales (from Schade-Lindig 2002.53 Abb. 4,1; Keefer 1993. 97 Abb. bottom left; Torbrügge 1963.Taf. 16,6; Kuzma 1990.436 fig. 7, 8; Bayerbach 1997.39 Abb. 10, 6; Sidéra 2001.145 Abb. 14).

There was a problem concerning interpretation because almost all figurines were either stray finds or found in pits in secondary locations, which makes it impossible to determine where they were originally placed. The problem with the find conditions created another setback: precise dating was either difficult or impossible.

Due to the wide distribution of LPC with, consequently, many different chronological systems, a synchronization of those figurines that could be dated also turned out to be a problem. While dating stray finds remains an obstacle yet to be overcome, the reconstruction of the figurines' shape and decoration could be achieved by employing an analysis of features.

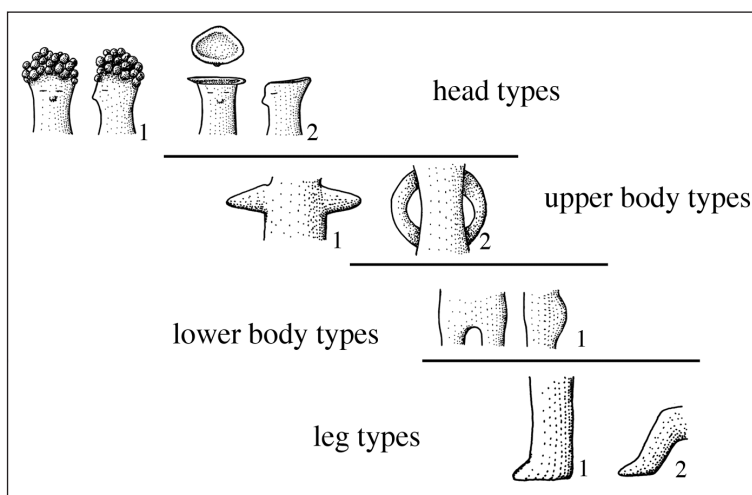


Fig. 2. Types of fragments from LPC figurines.

Every figurine and every fragment was treated as a closed find, all the features on it being contemporaneous. Thus a typology was accomplished with fragments, not with entirely preserved figurines. For example, ‘head types’, ‘arm types’, ‘body types’ and ‘leg types’ were constructed (Fig. 2). Every fragment made up of two or more features could be used in a combinatorial analysis. Finally, the combination of types of body parts yielded hypothetical whole figurines.

Figurine typology (Figure 3)

Two main types of figurine were the product of feature analysis. Type 1 is characterised by a columnar body without legs or feet. The head is shaped in a peculiar way, with an impression on the upper side that makes it look rather like a small bowl. The base is flat, and sometimes widens slightly.

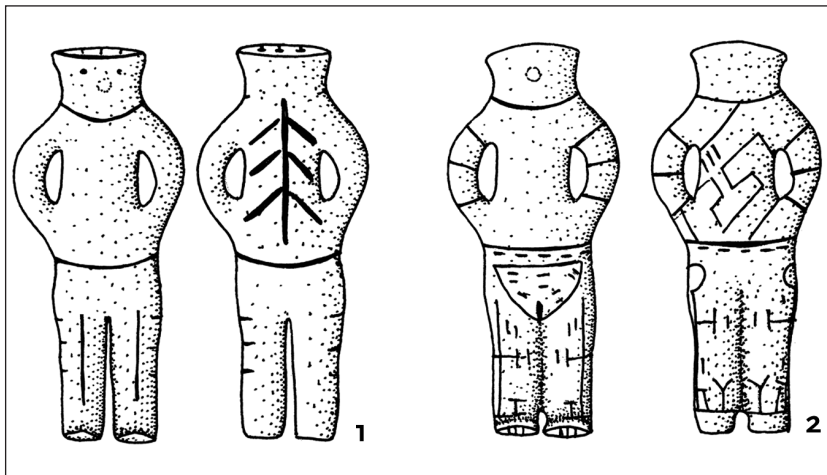


Fig. 3. Decoration styles in the LPC. 1. ‘Danube’ style figurine. 2. ‘Elbe-Rhine’ style figurine. Idealized reconstruction.

Type 2, however, has a body that is structured with more detail. There are always hips and legs. Due to the fact that there are standing and sitting figurines, this type can be divided into subtypes. Figurines of this type occasionally depict some kind of action such as holding a vessel.

These two types appear throughout the distributional area of LPC, so they are not regional variants. Chronologically, they emerge at the same time, starting with the oldest phase of LPC.

The analysis works, however, not only with types of body parts, but also with types of decoration. In contrast to painted decoration, e. g. in the Lengyel culture, LPC decoration is usually incised. It can be found in different places on the figurines, mainly on the

back, although decoration also appears on top of the head, the arms and the legs.

In analyzing the decoration, two different styles are distinguishable. One style is typical of the regions along the Danube: Transdanubia, Austria, Moravia, Bavaria, and rarely, South Poland. This ‘Danube’ style consists of a decorated upper head, a fish bone-pattern on the back, and rectilinear decoration on the legs. The other decorative style can be found along the Rhine and in the Elbe regions, especially around the rivers Saale and Unstrut. Here, heads are not decorated. On the backs of the figurines there are mostly zigzag or meander patterns. The legs are decorated with lines accompanied by impressions.

These two styles can be clearly distinguished in the second phase of LPC development. In the oldest phase they are not so clearly visible; here, it is usually the ‘Danube’ style that can be found. This might be an indicator for the spread of LPC, along the Danube at first, travelling along (or on?) the river from Transdanubia to the north and the west.

With regard to LPC pottery, these different styles were noted some time ago. In 1980, M. Lichardus-Itten indicated that regional styles in vessel decoration existed within LPC culture (Lichardus-Itten 1980: 114). She named these styles according to Europe’s great river systems, speaking of the

‘Danube group’, the ‘Elbe group’, the ‘Rhine group’ and the ‘Seine group’. Obviously, this division can, at least to some degree, be extended to figural finds. As shown above, a ‘Danube’ style can be separated from decorative styles occurring in the Rhine and Elbe regions. Due to the lack of finds, a ‘Seine style’ could not be described.

Fertility? Sexual characteristics (Figure 4)

It is important to discuss sexual characteristics, because some authors tend to interpret figurines as mother goddesses and connect them with fertility rites. This feature, like those concerning shape and decoration, was investigated in the course of the analyses.

In LPC, as in most Neolithic cultures, most sexual characteristics indicate female representations: there are breasts, indicated by small clay pellets, and pubic triangles, incised. Only one figurine, from Zschernitz in Saxonia, is definitely male. But not all figurines have sexual characteristics. In fact, only one third of all of them can definitely be characterised as female. Two thirds of the figurines display no sexual characteristics. It is doubtful, therefore, whether ‘fertility’ was the only or even the main aspect in the use of figurines (provided that they are not to be seen as *art pour l’art*). Explanations for the absence of such features are not easily elucidated. Perhaps it was less important to apply sexual characteristics to a figurine, since most people knew whether it was supposed to be male or female; or perhaps the figurines were meant to be neither male nor female, but both or something else altogether. It has to be added that sexual characteristics are not restricted to one of the two types.

Fragmentation (Figure 5)

As mentioned before, almost all the figurines are broken. The question is whether this breaking happened accidentally, *e. g.* during use, or otherwise deliberately, for whatever reason. To answer this question it is necessary to analyze the position of the breakage. For example: if a figurine broke at the neck, the arms or legs, this break might have happened accidentally, since the material is weak at these points. But if a figurine is broken vertically through the body, this break was probably deliberate.

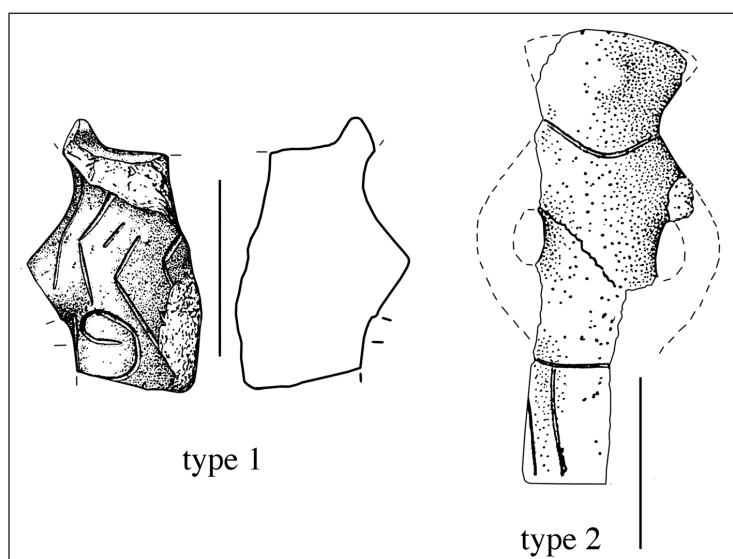


Fig. 5. Breakage patterns. Left: Type 1 figurine from Rimpar, broken in a vertical axis through the massive body. Right: type 2 figurine from Nerkewitz, also broken vertically (from Rimpar 2002.318 Abb. 3,1; Höckmann 1967.27 Abb. 1,4).

Sexual characteristics of LPC figurines

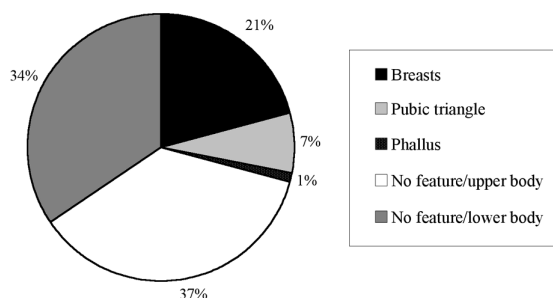


Fig. 4. Distribution of sexual characteristics in the LPC.

Especially interesting for an answer to this question are Type 1 figurines. Their columnar body is very massive and not easy to break. Still, only three figurines are unfragmented; all the others are destroyed. Most of them must have been broken deliberately, since it requires great force to smash them.

All Type 2 figurines are broken, but there are more places where they can break easily: the neck, the arms and legs. But here, also, breaks can be observed that must have been brought about on purpose. There are, for example, breaks vertically through the body, or through the hips, which are the most massive part of the figurines.

Although this is not easy to interpret, it seems clear that part of the figurines’ function was their destruction at some point in time. From this we can conclude that LPC figurines were, at least partially, deliberately broken.

From where? Find conditions

LPC figurines have so far never been found in graves. Instead, they seem to be part of ordinary settlement rubbish, lying in pits with fragmented pottery, flint, animal bones, and stone and bone tools. This is true for almost all early and middle Neolithic figurines, no matter from which culture they originate. It will be not until the late Neolithic that figurines appear in burials (*e. g.* figurines from the Hamangia culture: *cf.* Vajsov 2002).

Oddly enough, the missing parts of figurines have never been found, even when entire settlements were excavated. What happened to the missing parts is unclear. They might have been

buried outside the settlement, or else thrown into a river, or even crushed and reused, although we have to bear in mind that only a small portion of a settlement's vessels could be refitted. So perhaps the missing parts of vessels and figurines went the same way and were simply lost in the course of the millennia.

Predecessors: Starčevo culture

When asking for the origin of the LPC figurines, it is obligatory to direct one's attention towards the early Neolithic of south-east Europe, as there are no Mesolithic figurines that could have triggered LPC figurine development. Is it, therefore, possible to find continuity in form and decoration and in other features in figurines from south-east Europe, or are LPC figurines something completely new? In order to answer this question it will be necessary to take a look at the early Neolithic figurines from the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin. They can be found in almost all cultures distributed in these areas, namely, the east Bulgarian Karanovo I and II cultures and the west Bulgarian early Neolithic; in Macedonia with its regional groups, Anzabegovo-Vršnik and Veluška Tumba-Porodin; in the Romanian Criș culture; in the Körös culture in Hungary, and also in Starčevo culture.

The latter is especially important, of course, as most researchers think that LPC originated from it, although the exact process is still matter of discussion. Recent research seems to prove genetic connections between late Starčevo and early LPC, as can be demonstrated from the excavations in Szentgyörgyvölgy-Pityerdomb (*Bánffy 2004*), Andrashída-Gébárti tó (*Simon 2002*), Vörs-Máriaaszonysziget (*Kalicz, Vi-*

rág and Biró 1998.158–181) and other places in Transdanubia. Over 100 Starčevo figurines, mostly from the literature, could be extracted for examination. There are certainly many more, but the aim was not to produce a complete catalogue of Starčevo figurines, but to gain enough samples for a solid analysis. In order to compare LPC and Starčevo, the same method was employed and the same features (shape, decoration, sexual characteristics, breakage patterns, find circumstances) were considered.

Starčevo figurines: a history of the research

In contrast to LPC figurines, Starčevo figurines and their systematic typology were the object of research early on. In 1966, Srejović noted that Starčevo figurines were geometrical and cylindrical (*Srejović 1966.29–30*). Höckmann, who dealt with Starčevo figurines in the course of his doctoral thesis published in 1968, distinguished cylindrical figurines and 'fat' figurines, with broad buttocks, short legs and long necks (*Höckmann 1968.44–45*). Finally, Letica has to be mentioned. While working with Starčevo figurines from the Divostin settlement, she identified types similar to those of Höckmann, with the difference that she subdivided the 'fat' figurines into seated ones whose arms rest below the breasts and whose legs are short and stumpy, and figurines without sexual characteristics, but prominent chins, which might therefore be males (*Letica 1988*).

Facts and features: Starčevo figurines (Figure 6)

Quite obviously, the previous research concluded in the formulation of two types which can possibly be subdivided: there is one type (Type 1) with a columnar/cylindrical body and a base that

can be flat, bell- or pear-shaped, or even slightly rectangular. Legs or hips are not shown. The second type (Type 2) is often characterised by large buttocks and broad hips. A re-evaluation of Starčevo figurines has confirmed these two types.

Decoration is very rare on Starčevo figurines. Two pieces from the eponymous excavation Starčevo-'grad' are decorated. One is covered in a dark, painted net-like pattern (*Arandjelović-Garašanin 1954.tab. 4, 12*); the second is decorated with incised lines in V-shapes around the neck and base (*Garašanin 1979.tab. 25, 3*). Both are Type 1 figurines.

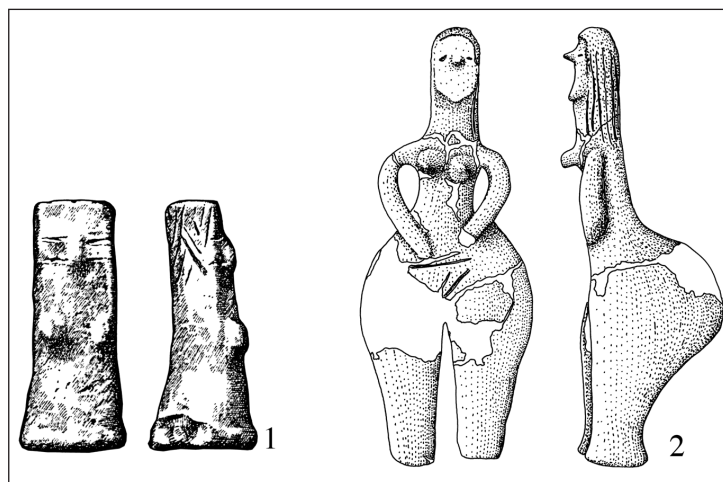


Fig. 6. Figurines from the Starčevo culture. 1. Type 1 figurine from Vinkovci. 2. Type 2 figurine from Donja Branjevina (*Garašanin 1979.tab. 41,6*; after *Karmanski 2005.83 tab. 1*).

These two types do not represent regional variants. There are settlements where both types can be found, and both types appear in the whole distributional area of Starčevo culture. Likewise, they do not differ chronologically.

As for sexual characteristics, only features pointing to female representations are discernible, *e. g.* breasts and pubic deltas. But they are represented on only one third of the figurines, while two thirds show no sexual characteristics.

Breakage patterns are quite similar to those of the LPC figurines. Especially with Type 1 figurines from the Starčevo culture, deliberate breakage seems likely, because the body is massive and column-like, and probably hard to break. Despite this fact, only one third of Type 1 figurines remain whole; two thirds are broken.

Type 2 figurines have bodies more susceptible to breakage, especially at the long neck. In fact most figurines are broken in this area. But there are also breakages through the buttocks which seem to be the most massive part of the figurine. Here, it can often be observed that figurines were made of different pieces pinned together with small wooden pegs. The surface would then be coated with a thin layer of clay, covering the seams of the individual parts. The pegs would perish during burning, making the figurine extremely fragile. Some authors propose that this is evidence of deliberate breaking, of the intention to break a figurine at some point in time.

Like LPC figurines, Starčevo figurines can be found only in settlements, not in graves. Usually, only fragments that cannot be refitted are found. This is true even when whole settlements were excavated.

Starčevo culture vessels and applications

For the sake of completeness it should be noted that there are a few anthropomorphic vessels in Starčevo culture. As they are mostly fragments, and of those only very few, the construction of a typology is difficult. Vessels that depict the whole human body are represented with fragments from Rudnik (*Tasić 1998.432 fig. 16*) and Mostonga (*Garašanin 1979. tab. 40, 1*); perhaps there were also face vessels (*cf.* the vessel from Gladnice: *Tasić 1998.440, fig. 30*). Rarely, anthropomorphic applications appear on the exterior of Starčevo culture vessels. They probably represent women (*Minichreiter 2000*). Two special pieces from Transdanubia conclude this enumeration

of figural finds from Starčevo culture: ‘altars’ with anthropomorphic ends from Lánycsók (*Kalicz 1990. 127, Taf. 11, 3*) and Kéthely (*Sági and Törőcsik 1989.80–81 and 59–60 fig. 25–26*).

The Big Picture: figurines in the Balkans early Neolithic (Figure 7)

Quite obviously, parallels exist between LPC and Starčevo culture figurines, not only in the similarity of the two types, especially in their shape, but also in other features such as breakage and the representation of sex. Hence, it might not be surprising to see that in almost all cultures discernible in the Balkans, these two types appear: in the Romanian Criș culture, as well as in the east Hungarian Körös culture, the Macedonian, the east Albanian and the west Bulgarian early Neolithic. Only in Impresso- and Cardial cultures do figurines or other anthropomorphic finds not turn up in the cultural inventory (*Müller 1994.187*).

The figurines are evidently part of some system of religious belief that is the same in almost all early Neolithic cultures in south-east Europe. Of course, there are differences in detail, such as the shape of the head or the position of the arms. But the main idea – one columnar type without legs, and one type with a long neck, broad hips, large buttocks and small legs – seems the same.

From Starčevo to LPC

Now back to the initial question: do LPC figurines have predecessors in the Early Neolithic cultures of South-East Europe? Yes, they do. Both in Starčevo culture and in LPC there are two types of figurines that look very much alike. Obviously, there is continuity of form: in both cultures there is one columnar type and a type with legs and hips. They differ in detail; for example, LPC figurines do not possess the broad hips and tiny legs characteristic of Starčevo figurines. The main idea, however, is identical. Continuity can also be found in other features. For example, the distribution of sexual characteristics is the same in both cultures. And continuity appears in breakage patterns. In both cultures, there is evidence of a deliberate fragmentation of figurines. Decoration, however, is a (almost) unique feature of LPC. Starčevo figurines are hardly ever decorated, whereas since the oldest phase of LPC there is decoration on the figurines.

If we were to take a look at the other kinds of anthropomorphic representations, we could state that

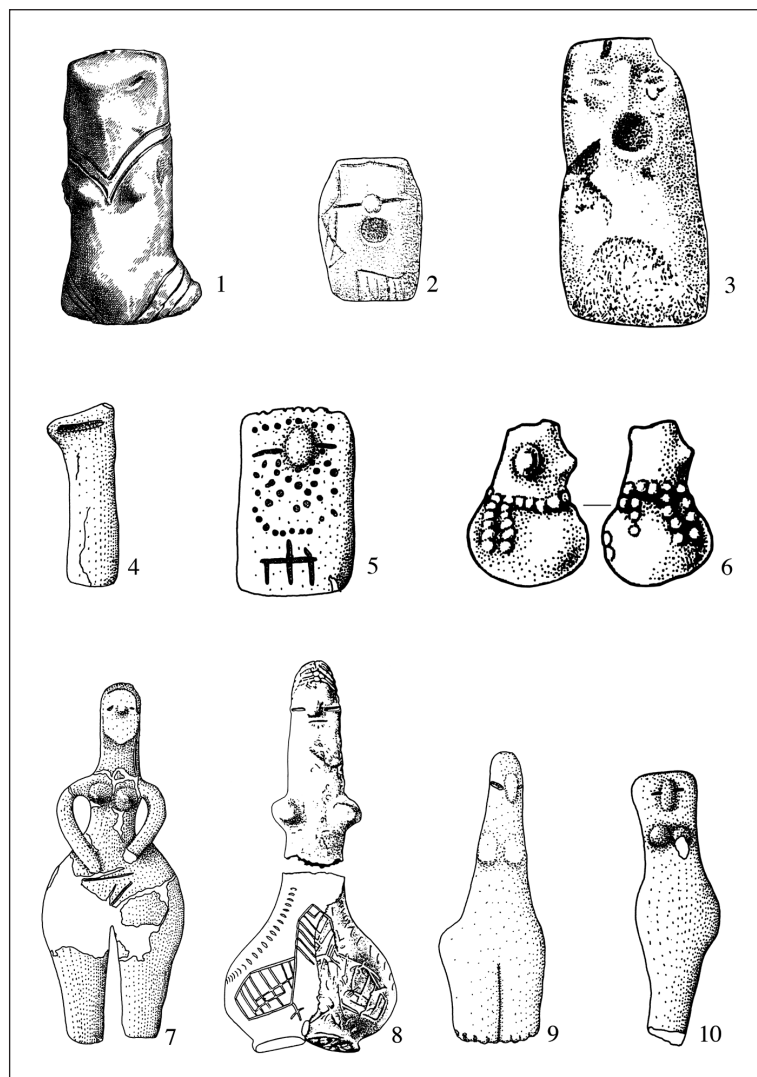


Fig. 7. Type 1 (1–6) and Type 2 (7–10) figurines from south-east Europe. 1. Starčevo, Starčevo culture. 2. Kunszentmárton, Körös culture. 3. Grădinile, Criș culture. 4. Zelenikovo, Makedonian early Neolithic. 5. Gălăbnik, west Bulgarian early Neolithic. 6. Barç, east Albanian early Neolithic. 7. Donja Branjevina, Starčevo culture. 8. Endrőd 39, Körös culture. 9. Zăuan, Criș culture. 10. Čavdar, west Bulgarian early Neolithic. Various scales (from Garašanin 1979. tab. 25,3; Makkay 1993.78 Abb. 3; Nica 1981.36 fig. 5,1; Galović 1964.Taf. 16,1; Pavúk and Čochadžiev 1984.218 Abb. 16,2; Lera 1993.39 fig. 5; after Karmanski 2005.83 tab. 1; Makkay 1993.77 Abb. 2,1; after Lakó 1977.fig. 2,1; after Georgiev 1981.104 Abb. 57).

anthropomorphic vessels and applications can be found in both cultures. On the contrary, incised representations and bone figurines from LPC are without south-eastern parallels.

Still, in my opinion, it is evident that both in LPC and in Starčevo culture we have to deal with similar manifestations of religious belief, with two different types of figurines: figurines that were destroyed at some point in time and can be found not in graves but in settlements and that can never be refitted.

The ambiguity of argument: a question of faith

Though a continuity in belief is likely after the above considerations, it cannot be a help when dealing with the question of how this belief ‘migrated’: whether it travelled along with people coming to central Europe and bringing their religious beliefs, or whether it was a mere idea that travelled and adopted by the local late Mesolithics; or whether it was a combination of the two.

The problem is still heatedly discussed (cf. for example *Lichardus-Itten and Lichardus 2003*). New ideas come from Bánffy, who stated that LPC figurines were a mix of Mesolithic beliefs, proved by a special decoration on the back of some figurines (the so-called herring-bone motif consisting of V-shaped lines – ribs?, sometimes combined with a vertical line, probably marking the spine), and Neolithic beliefs, as proved by the making of figurines, which is uncommon in the Mesolithic. The disappearance of figurines during the Neolithic of central Europe occurred because “two highly conservative set of beliefs clashed” and because “the beliefs of the local hunter-gatherer communities eventually proved stronger in the life of the Central European Linear Pottery communities” (*Bánffy 2004.296*).

This hypothesis shows that discussion of Neolithization really is a question of faith: not the faith of Mesolithic or Neolithic people, but of modern researchers. Figurines can be interpreted in either way: In placing an emphasis on a decorative motif, Bánffy uses figurines as proof of an adoption of the Neolithic way of life by local hunter-gatherers. Yet it is equally possible to argue that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers never employed figurines; therefore, a religion involving the use of figurines must have come from abroad, brought by foreigners.

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