

STATEMENT

of Prof. Ivan Marazov, D. Sc., member of the Scientific Jury, appointed by order of Rector of Sofia University (PД 39-619/18.11.2022) for Vanya Mladenova Stavreva's dissertation submitted for defense to obtain the scientific and educational PhD degree, on the topic: Anthropomorphic plasticity of late Neolithic cultures Varna, KGK VI, KSB – possibilities for interpretation

1. The topic of the dissertation is relevant and important not only from an archaeological-historical point of view, but also from a methodological point of view. Several interpretive possibilities are presented to reveal the semantics of Late Eneolithic anthropomorphic images with greater certainty.
2. The task of the work is to propose a reconstruction of both the ritual function and the mythological meaning of the anthropomorphic plastic from the late Eneolithic cultures. This is a difficult task, since the material refers to a non-literate culture and does not allow for comparisons and control with written sources. Moreover, there are not many works summarizing the vast material.
3. For this purpose, the material of three cultures from the Balkan Peninsula was collected and systematized, subjected to a formal stylistic and iconographic analysis, main images and themes were identified, and a comparative analysis was made of the distribution, frequency and regional features of the identified images and of contexts of finding. This is how general and culturally specific regularities are clarified.
4. The period of particularly wide production and functional purpose of the anthropomorphic plastic was chosen.
5. The work is constructed logically, which further lends validity to the final reconstructions.
6. The review of the literature on the subject is done thoroughly and critically. The main interpretive models are derived.
7. A vast amount of material has been collected, which provides greater validity to the interpretations. The internal classification of the material aids interpretation. Several persistent iconographic types have been distinguished. But they are only semiotic structures, and not only they determine the semantics and function of figurines.

8. Additionally, the classification is articulated by the context of the finds, which clarifies the functional direction of the plastic.
9. Anthropomorphic sculpture is also placed in the context of other types of artefacts to establish the overall functional and semantic value of the art of this era.
10. At the same time, it has been rightly pointed out that although they have a common production base, cult plastic differs in function from ceramics, which requires different criteria for classification and a different type of analysis.
11. Plasticity is considered from the aspects of religion, magic and ritual, viz. in its application in various functional fields.
12. Of particular interest is the attempt to look at figurines from the aspect of collective "Memory", because it stores the identity of the social group. The very fact that the iconography is so persistent suggests the high role of tradition in the art of that time.
13. On the other hand, "hard" iconography is characteristic of the so-called "cold" societies, with an established but not particularly articulated social structure and, accordingly, with a worldview and ideology that are stable over time.
14. The determination of the criteria in the analysis of the semantics and functions of the anthropomorphic plastic is impressive, which creates a basis for interpretation: gender, deformations, as well as the means of communication: gesture and facial expressions. Several basic compositional types with different semantics are thus defined. Gestures are especially important: raised, raised to the face, ear or chest, or horizontally placed hands or hands on the stomach. Here I would recommend considering, based on comparisons with Çatal Hüyük, whether the raised hands of the female figures do not mark the act of 'birth'. Also, deformities can be treated from the point of view of folklore, where they have positive or negative connotations related to the evaluation of similar characters from the social environment. The signs depicted on some figures also carry a certain meaning. This insistence on meaning is particularly important, since usually all these features are seen as "decorative" elements.
15. Methodology. It is natural to draw comparisons from ethnographic and folklore material, magic, as well as methodologies of comparative religious studies, linguistics, art studies and cultural anthropology when revealing the myth-ritual aspects of plastic created by an unlettered culture.

16. It is a separate question whether one personage is represented in the sculpture in different hypostases or whether these are different mythological images. I agree with the conclusion that it is entirely possible for a character to be visualized differently depending on mythological narratives, folk narratives and true stories in society.
17. The systematic analysis of anthropomorphic plasticity leads to the appearance of differences in individual cultures, which shows that despite the common themes and images, there was also specificity in beliefs in individual regions. This also applies to the plastic made and functioning in the different settlements, i.e. it was not the subject of cultural exchange.
18. The ritual function of the figures is explored both in relation to iconography and in comparison with folk ritual practices. Of course, "the rite is done for fertility" is an explanation given when the specific meaning of the given rite has already been forgotten. It is quite possible that some of the figurines were related to the ancestor cult. I also accept the connection with magical practices, in which figurines specially prepared for this purpose are often used in much later eras as well. It is possible that figurines with deformities were used in healing rituals, but perhaps another social factor should not be overlooked – the attitude of society towards such people (eg, hunchbacks bring happiness, crazy people are God's chosen, etc.). The breaking of the figurines is a ritual act widely known both in the ritual system of later eras and in folklore. The assumption that the figurines could have been included in a ritual ensemble is plausible.
19. The sociological interpretation of plastic clarifies not only its ritual function, but also its mythological semantics. The making of figurines from expensive material is undoubtedly a sign of a demonstration of social prestige. The conclusion about the privileged position of the "seated figures" is also supported by the later iconography. It seems likely that the emergence of "amulets" and apotropaies reflects the increased insecurity in society both within it and because of external danger.
20. The precise presentation of the different interpretations of plastic in the archaeological literature greatly helps to clarify one's own contribution to the dissertation.
21. The attached catalog is a contribution in itself and helps to critically evaluate the analyzes and their conclusions.

22. The proposed conclusions from the comprehensive analyzes of the various iconographic types are acceptable. On the one hand, this plasticity is multi-ritual, and on the other, it is polysemantic. In each specific application of the figurines, their specific meaning in the given context is also revealed. This explains the "frugality" of the pictorial system of Eneolithic art.
23. The author's stated contributions of the dissertation are correctly defined. One small inaccuracy – Vilnius is in Lithuania, not in Latvia.
24. Bearing in mind the merits of the proposed work, the courage, supported by a solid methodology, in posing and solving the problems, I allow myself to recommend to the respected committee to highly evaluate the contributions of Vanya Stavreva's dissertation work and to award her the scientific and educational PhD degree.

03.02. 2023

Signature:



(Prof. Dr. Sc. Ivan Marazov)