

Review

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for the dissertation of the full-time PhD student at the Department of Archaeology, Faculty of History, Sofia University. "Kl. Ohridski" **Vanya Mladenova Stavreva** "Anthropomorphic Sculpture of the Late Neolithic Cultures of Varna, Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI and Krivodol-Salcutsa-Bubani - Possibilities for Interpretation", submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education and Science

The presented dissertation is devoted to a complex and extensive topic of the Late Prehistory of the Eastern and Central Balkans, namely the possibilities of interpretation of the anthropomorphic sculpture of the Late Chalcolithic cultures mentioned in the title. The topic is very extensive in terms of territory, volume of the source base and temporal boundaries, which makes it very topical due to the lack of relevant summarizing studies. The topic is very labour-intensive and requires the application of an appropriate methodology for the study of the heterogeneous as informative source base. To develop it, it was necessary to extract information from hundreds of publications of individual collections or complexes, mainly from Bulgaria and Romania, as well as to get acquainted on the spot with anthropomorphic sculpture in museums in both countries. I must say in advance that the dissertation has met this challenge to a considerable extent.

The chronological and cultural-historical frameworks of the dissertation are indicated in the thesis, namely the Late Chalcolithic cultures of Varna, Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI and Krivodol-Salcutsa-Bubani, which cover the territory of Bulgaria, Southern Romania, the Western Black Sea Coast and Eastern Serbia.

The methodological approach of the dissertation follows the way of studying prehistoric sculpture proposed by L. Talalay and P. Ucko. In order to fulfil the aims and objectives of the work, data and illustrative material were collected for 3349 whole and fragmentary anthropomorphic figures from the three cultural complexes. The finds are from 232 sites, mainly settlements and necropolises in the mentioned territory. No such significant amount of anthropomorphic sculpture has been collected from the vast region studied as a basis for research.

The dissertation consists of two parts, text and appendices. The text part contains 423 pages, of which 353 pages are the author's text and 66 pages are bibliography. The catalogue of objects contains 60 pages, the catalogue of figures - 207 pages. The appendices include 297 plates and 27 maps. The structure of the work is appropriate in terms of fulfilling the stated objectives.

The first chapter, "Theoretical Issues" (17-38) (in this context "issues" is an inappropriate word to use!) is relatively short but useful. An extensive literature is reviewed on several important aspects of the study of prehistoric anthropomorphic sculpture, primarily in the Eastern Mediterranean range - figurines (the diminutive version of the term does not sound appropriate!) as works of art (for prehistory one can only speak of representational activity - art appears in classical antiquity!) and social phenomenon; figurines as part of material culture; religion, magic and ritual as approaches to research; anthropomorphic sculpture and cultural memory; some limitations to interpretations. The dissertation cites ample opinions of specialists regarding the term "religion" who definitively do not associate it with prehistory, but goes on to use it, which is surprising. And again, something terminological - an otherwise good dissertation like the one reviewed should not use the archaism "clay figurines". This piece of prehistoric anthropomorphic sculpture was made of clay, but it was fired and therefore ceramic! Throughout the text only "clay" is used, which is irritating. Missing from the text on the limitations facing interpretations of prehistoric sculpture is an exposition of the very important postulate concerning the

significant differences in the thinking of prehistoric and modern man - while in the thinking of Chalcolithic man the profane and the sacred were inseparable, and this is no doubt reflected in the imagery, in the mind of modern man these two aspects are separated, which is consistent with the realities of life. Failure to conform to this scientific concept has further created certain problems for the approach to interpretation.

The second chapter, "A Review of the Main Interpretations of Anthropomorphic Sculpture" (39-88), is important in view of the ultimate aim of the work. By necessity it is built on a substantial scholarly literature, which should be noted as a positive contribution of the author. Quite rightly, the considerable number of interpretations of prehistoric sculpture published to date have been classified into two sections - religious-mythological and those that emphasize its polysemantic and multifunctional nature. The main variants of interpretations in the two sections, as well as the interpenetration in some cases between them, are discussed in detail, focusing on the interpretations of those indigenous to the range as well as a number of foreign researchers. A three-stage periodization of the development of views on prehistoric sculpture is made, and attention is paid to the influence of other humanities and social sciences on the formation of relevant interpretive concepts.

In view of what has been presented so far, the topic of the third chapter of the dissertation, "Approach and Criteria for the Systematization of Anthropomorphic Sculpture" (89-102), follows naturally. Stavreva reviews the classifications of anthropomorphic sculpture in Bulgarian and Romanian literature, pointing out the positive and negative elements in them. She declares a rejection of the formal-typological classification usually used and discusses the criteria for applying a different approach that would be adequate to the stated aims of the work. Presents the elements that should be taken as criteria - gender, presence of specific attributes, gestures, facial expressions, body posture and rawness. Distinguishes between compact (solid) figures, hollow closed figures and vessels as a basis for further work, which is not new but necessary. The text presented in this section is informative but seems unfinished in terms of the actual approach to the systematization of sculpture later in the work.

The approach is, however, outlined very briefly at the beginning of chapter 4 of the dissertation, "Major Visual Images and Themes in the Anthropomorphic Sculpture of the KGK VI, Varna and KSB Cultures" (103-235). Stavreva states that she will attempt to present the main images and themes in the anthropomorphic sculpture of the study area. The initial systematization has been done by separating plastic compositions and independent images. The plastic ones are represented by the participating images and their features, while the independent ones are classified on the basis of several criteria, mainly gender, hand gestures, particular features and attributes. A small number of images are systematized by apparent age or hybridity. Only whole or nearly whole figures, perhaps more than half of those included in the catalogue, are involved in the study in this chapter. The approach is used for the first time in our literature on such a large number of anthropomorphic images. This may account for some methodological errors that I will have to point out concerning its application.

The plastic ceramic compositions are presented in three groups - adult with child, man and woman, man and horned animal. As for all the other groups within the scope of this chapter, parallels are sought and possible avenues of interpretation are outlined. I note that the figure from Chattalka (p. 105) is not male, which leads to a corresponding disagreement with its interpretation. Furthermore, the complete avoidance of the religious-mythological aspect of the interpretation of this group of compositions is unacceptable to me.

The main category in this chapter of the thesis is the anthropomorphic self-images. The 18 groups presented are the result of a systematization based on only one leading feature, beyond the initial classification according to the position of the body or the manner of its presentation - solid, hollow or as a vessel. The interpretive approach tends towards the 'polysemantic and multifunctional' option, although in places the religious-mythological is necessarily apparent. It would be very wasteful for a review to consider separately the number of groups mentioned, but

I will draw attention to some more comprehensive and more important ones in view of the subject of the dissertation.

A large and varied group are the figures with a vessel - on the head, head-vessel, on the thighs, on the shoulders, with the hands forming a vessel (IV.4). The criterion "vessel" clearly unites semantically different images. In fact, the included hollow image from the Provadia-Solnitsata (panel 7, 2) is itself a small anthropomorphic vessel with an opening at the top and cannot participate in this group! On some subgroups parallels have been sought outside the study area. A brief and, in my opinion, unsuccessful attempt at interpretation has been made for the figures with a vessel on the head and those with a head-vessel. Many good opportunities for religious-mythological interpretations of the whole group of figures have been missed.

Next comes the group of two-faced anthropomorphic representations (IV.5). Strangely enough, the very first subgroup - two-faced hollow figures with a vessel on the head (p. 122) - overlaps partially with the subgroup IV.4.1 (114-115) already presented - two-faced figures with a vessel on the head! This is already a problem with the systematization principles used, which have not been previously discussed in the work. The second subgroup, two-faced anthropomorphic vessels, includes a large upright figure from Stara Zagora Baths, for which it is unclear whether it is a vessel at all (with an opening on the head) or whether the head was capped. The third subgroup presents solid two-faced figures. No real interpretation of the anthropomorphic images in this group has been proposed.

The next largest group of images of pregnant women are upright, seated, hollow closed, anthropomorphic vessels, and discoid. Quite a diverse group according to its iconography, suggesting rich semantics. The dissertator's cites suggestions for interpretation from various authors, which are mainly in the religious-mythological sphere, as well as ethnographic parallels. The interpretation of a large subgroup of small hollow figures with small balls in them as "rattles", i.e. toys, is for me extremely unacceptable.

The group of images of the so-called praying mantis includes solid and hollow figures as well as vessels. Again we come across an overlap, in this case with part of the preceding group IV.7.3. Otherwise, I have no objection to the prayer interpretation.

The group of anthropomorphic depictions with arms raised horizontally to the side is perhaps the most numerous, comprising standing and seated figures. However, the designation of some upright hollow sculptural images with a broken upper part as vessels (e.g. from Razgrad, Denitsa, Vidra, St. Kyrilovo) is for me unjustified. Various semantic subgroups have been suggested, but no real interpretation has been offered.

The group of a female image with hands on the abdomen is also markedly numerous and includes standing and seated ceramic figures as well as those in bone, marble and gold. I find again, though few, classification matches to figures already included in other groups. The interpretive analysis offered is detailed, and is consistent with the significance of the images discussed.

The figures with one hand to the face (again, a match is available - with subgroup IV.4.4) pique the dissertator's interest and she devotes more attention to suggestions for their interpretation in terms of expressing negative emotional states.

Of the remaining groups of anthropomorphic sculpture, I would mention the figures with represented deformities - with numerous overlaps with figures from other groups distinguished in the thesis, but also with a very good "medical" interpretation. The section on the anthropomorphic representations with special symbols and attributes on the body and on the head, with detailed interpretation, also leaves a good impression. This is followed by the presentation of a few more small groups of plastic images, for which I have no serious comments to make on the text (beyond the problem of partial matches in the groups).

In summary, Stavreva rightly judges that a comprehensive classification of Late Chalcolithic anthropomorphic sculpture from the study area is impossible, although she has carried out an extremely laborious task. However, the result would have been better by using a systematic approach to classification features. I have drawn attention to the numerous

coincidences of distinct iconographic groups in this chapter to show that they are the result of a wrongly chosen approach due to the use of only one classification feature each time. This reduces the final number of groups obtained in the systematization, but to a significant extent they are artificial, which directly affects the attempt at interpretation. First, the possible iconographic criteria for classifying the anthropomorphic images had to be evaluated, possibly weighted, and then classification was performed using more than one criterion simultaneously. There would certainly be many more iconographic groups, but in view of the ultimate purpose of this paper, a semantic analysis of each, to the extent possible, would allow much more certain interpretive conclusions and new semantic grouping. It would not be a problem for many groups to remain semantically obscure, uninterpreted, but this would be the more correct approach to ancient material evidence.

The fifth chapter, "Anthropomorphic Sculpture in its Archaeological Context" (236-275), is a necessary part of this dissertation. Contextual analysis is always useful in interpretive efforts. And the context in this case is inhabited space. I do not find the dissertation's attempt to examine the quantitative distribution of figures by surveyed settlement to be successful - saturation should be sought not by the extent of the surveyed area, but by the extent of the cultural layer surveyed with the application of other factors. Too relative is also the possibility of real results of the analysis of quantitative distribution of found anthropomorphic sculpture by buildings. A useful conclusion is that of the lack of "figural" emphasis in the buildings interpreted as "cult". The discovery of fragments of large figures in some buildings may still lead to the idea of their public character, although it is unclear what kind. Informative is the dissertator's conclusion that anthropomorphic sculpture is not generally tied to necropolises and pit complexes, but only to settlements, to living people.

The sixth chapter of the thesis, "The Multifunctionality of Anthropomorphic Sculpture" (276-313), presents an important aspect of the study, although in places the exposition is unnecessarily rambling. Religious-mythological ritual and magical action are in unity, which implies the multifunctionality of the relevant material attributes, including anthropomorphic sculpture, the dissertator's postulates. The anthropomorphic representations used for magical actions apparently have a short lifespan in contrast to those intended for the rites associated with the reproduction of life. The second group are made of more durable raw materials and are clearly intended for longer and more varied use. This includes the ensembles of figures and other miniature objects that the dissertation analyses in great detail and suggests variations of use in domestic space. Here I had an expectation of more attention to the 'cult scene' from Ovcharovo. Presumably a major aspect of the Late Chalcolithic sculpture's function was in cult and magical fertility practices, performed both within the home and outside the village. Ethnographic observations from more recent times are drawn upon for their hypothetical reconstruction. Serious attention is given to the use of anthropomorphic sculpture in the healing practices of the ancients, for which evidence from paleoanthropology and ethnography is also drawn. Stavreva also discusses the topic of deliberate ritual fragmentation, including sculpture, and finds arguments to support these actions as part of ritual.

The final, seventh chapter, "Anthropomorphic Sculpture in the Socio-Economic Context of the Late Aeneolithic" (314-343), is meant to outline the influential social background for the existence and role of anthropomorphic images. The first part attempts to outline the socio-economic context of the period under study. I have serious reservations about this text because of a lack of scholarship and hence an incompleteness of the knowledge presented about the social picture during the Late Chalcolithic. The dissertation maintains that anthropomorphic images are symbols of group identity, but that they themselves are influential in maintaining that identity. In support, she analyzes the ornamentation and individual signs applied to the figures, focuses on features in the representation of the head and face, but lacks a clear conclusion. There is a presumption that all these elements of the plastic representations are a reflection of reality, which for the time being requires more interdisciplinary studies of grave complexes. Stavreva also analyses the mass distribution during the Late Chalcolithic of apotropaic miniature bone

sculpture and puts forward the plausible assumption that the causes are rooted in the uncertainty that for many reasons pervaded society at that time. It accepts the thesis that some plastic representations, primarily of bone and gold, were signs of prestige and status.

The "Conclusion" (340-344) presents the main findings of the dissertation in the process of the proposed research. As I have already written about the relevant sites, some of them remain for me partially or completely unacceptable.

The peer-reviewed dissertation is comprehensive, is built on a substantial body of older and more recent published material and research respectively, and is written correctly in a very good style. There are, however, serious problems in the principles of systematization of anthropomorphic sculpture, though I appreciate the dissertator's efforts not to get lost in this sea of diverse variants of imagery. The attempt to move away from a religious-mythological interpretation of late Chalcolithic anthropomorphic representations has not always been successful, and has sometimes led to a profanation of the issues. However, it is important to underline the thesis of polysemantic and multifunctionality of prehistoric sculpture developed in recent times, with the postulate of which I cannot disagree, but one should not forget the inseparable symbiosis of the profane and the sacred in the thinking of the ancient agriculturist, i.e. interpretations must necessarily remain in the field of complexity.

In spite of the comments made and disagreements expressed, I positively evaluate the proposed dissertation and support the awarding of the degree of Doctor of Education and Science to Vanya Mladenova Stavreva.

5.02.2023
Sofia

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping loops and lines, positioned to the right of the date and location.