

## Figural representations in the Early Eneolithic: an unpublished figurine from Bubanj (Eastern Serbia)

Jovan D. Mitrović, Selena Vitezović

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Reprezentările figurative eneolitice sunt relativ puține în sud-estul Europei, mai ales în comparație cu perioada neolitică și sunt rar discutate în literatura de specialitate. Pe durata culturii eneolitice timpurii Bubanj-Hum I, parte a complexului Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol, figurinele antropomorfe erau realizate din lut și os ; cu toate acestea, mai ales în zona central balcanică sunt rare. În acest articol vom prezenta o figurină fragmentară, anterior inedită, din situl eponim de la Bubanj. Piesa a fost descoperită în 1956 și este în prezent parte a colecțiilor Muzeului Național din Belgrad. Vom prezenta caracteristicile sale tipologice și tehnologice, discutând în același timp locul ei în contextul mai larg al comunităților eneolitice timpurii din zona central balcanică.

### **Abstract**

Figural representations from the Eneolithic period in the south-east Europe are not very common, especially in comparison with the Neolithic period, and they are also seldom discussed in the archaeological literature. In the Early Eneolithic Bubanj-Hum I culture, part of the Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol cultural complex, anthropomorphic figurines were produced from clay and bone ; however, particularly in the central Balkan area they are rarely found. In this paper, we will present a fragmented figurine so far unpublished from the eponymous site of Bubanj. The figurine was discovered in 1956 and is currently stored at the National Museum in Belgrade. We will present its typological and technological traits and we will also discuss the place of this figurine within the wider context of the Early Eneolithic communities in the central Balkan area.

# FIGURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE EARLY ENEOLITHIC: AN UNPUBLISHED FIGURINE FROM BUBANJ (EASTERN SERBIA)

Jovan D. MITROVIĆ<sup>a</sup>, Selena VITEZOVIĆ<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> National Museum, Belgrade; e-mail: j.mitrovic@narodnimuzej.rs

<sup>b</sup> Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade; e-mail: s.vitezovic@ai.ac.rs

**Keywords:** Eneolithic, Bubanj-Hum I culture, Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol cultural complex, anthropomorphic figurine

**Abstract:** Figural representations from the Eneolithic period in the south-east Europe are not very common, especially in comparison with the Neolithic period, and they are also seldom discussed in the archaeological literature. In the Early Eneolithic Bubanj-Hum I culture, part of the Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol cultural complex, anthropomorphic figurines were produced from clay and bone; however, particularly in the central Balkan area they are rarely found. In this paper, we will present a fragmented figurine so far unpublished from the eponymous site of Bubanj. The figurine was discovered in 1956 and is currently stored at the National Museum in Belgrade. We will present its typological and technological traits and we will also discuss the place of this figurine within the wider context of the Early Eneolithic communities in the central Balkan area.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Eneolitic, cultura Bubanj-Hum I, complexul cultural Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol, figurină antropomorvă

**Rezumat:** Reprezentările figurative eneolitice sunt relativ puține în sud-estul Europei, mai ales în comparație cu perioada neolitică și sunt rar discutate în literatura de specialitate. Pe durata culturii eneolitice timpurii Bubanj-Hum I, parte a complexului Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol, figurinele antropomorfe erau realizate din lut și os; cu toate acestea, mai ales în zona central balcanică sunt rare. În acest articol vom prezenta o figurină fragmentară, anterior inedită, din situl eponim de la Bubanj. Piesa a fost descoperită în 1956 și este în prezent parte a colecțiilor Muzeului Național din Belgrad. Vom prezenta caracteristicile sale tipologice și tehnologice, discutând în același timp locul ei în contextul mai larg al comunităților eneolitice timpurii din zona central balcanică.

## INTRODUCTION

Representations of the human body are among the most attractive archaeological finds. The first representations of humans originate in the early Upper Palaeolithic period (Hahn 1972), and figurines carved into or made from diverse raw materials (stone, bone, ivory, clay, etc.) are encountered throughout the prehistoric Europe (Insoll 2017a). Their interpretation, however, is at the same time a very difficult task. As T. Insoll stated, “Figurine definition and ‘meaning’ is variable, but critical is the realization that figurines require interpretations, not just descriptions” (Insoll 2017b, p. 1).

Early researchers tried to find a universal explanation for prehistoric figurines, and often interpreted them as objects of cult, as representations of divinities and/or related to different forms of magical practices. In particular, the figurines associated to the early agricultural communities were frequently interpreted as part of “fertility rituals” (especially Gimbutas 1974; 1991). In the past few decades, with the changes in the archaeological paradigms and theoretical frameworks, the interpretation of figurines underwent some criticism (Meskell 1995), and new theoretical models were offered (e.g. Bailey 2005). In particular, the universalistic approach was criticized, i.e. the

presumption of a universal meaning and role of figural representations among the Neolithic and Eneolithic communities across Europe. According to I. Palaguta (2012a; 2016), an approach based on the assumption that the image system of ancient cultures corresponds to a set of universal images-archetypes, is unacceptable, since “the ethnographic analogies and the changes of the shapes of archaeological finds show that the system of images and metaphorical space of prehistoric societies were dynamically changeable. New images and metaphors appeared in all societies under the influence of various circumstances” (Palaguta 2016, p. 329). As T. Insoll pointed out, “multiple meanings were probably ascribed to prehistoric figurines, and exploring this demands attention to figurine context” (Insoll 2017, p. 1).

I. Palaguta (2016, p. 329–330) believes that all figurine representations, regardless of their quality, are works of art, because, nevertheless, they reproduced an artistic image (Palaguta, 2012a; 2012b; 2016, p. 328). He also advocates the application in all studies of plastic representations not only of the archaeological methods, which usually include formal analysis based on classification, but also methods otherwise applied for visual arts, such as iconography and iconology (Palaguta 2016, p. 328 and references therein).

Figural representations among the early agricultural communities in the Neolithic and Eneolithic in the South-East Europe were very rich and diverse, and they attracted a lot of attention of the researchers (e.g. Bailey 2005; Banffy 1997; Hansen 2011; 2013; Insoll 2017a and references therein). In what concerns the Central Balkans, particularly rich in the finds of figurines in the Late Neolithic Vinča culture were frequently the topic of different publications, from exhibition catalogues to scientific papers (see, among others, Milojković 1990; Petrović *et alii* 2009, Porčić 2012).

On the other hand, figurines in the Eneolithic period are less frequently found and received less attention from the researchers (with notable exceptions, e.g. Matić 2009; Hansen 2011; 2013). In this paper, we will present one previously unpublished figurine from the collection of the National Museum in Belgrade found at the site of Bubanj.

### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The site of Bubanj is situated in the central part of Niš basin (Fig. 1), in the contemporary village of Novo Selo, nowadays a suburb of the city of Niš. The site was discovered in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was investigated during several seasons.

First excavations were performed by Adam Oršić Slavetić in the period from 1933 until 1935 (Orssich de Slavetich 1940; Janković 2018, p. 30–39). After the Second World War, rescue excavations on a larger area were carried out in the period between 1954 and 1958 by Milutin and Draga Garašanin (Garašanin 1955; 1957a; 1957b; 1958a; 1958b; 1960; 1978; 1982; Garašanin, Đurić 1983). The site was severely destroyed by large infrastructure works, specifically by the construction of a railway and a highway. Only a small portion of the site remained, and on this part small trench excavations were carried out between 2008 and 2014 by the Institute of Archaeology from Belgrade. The main goal of these excavations was to check the stratigraphy of the site and also to collect samples for analyses by using the most up-to-date research techniques. These researches revealed a rich archaeological site, with traces of settlements from the Early Neolithic period (Starčevo culture), several phases of the Eneolithic (Bubanj-Hum I, Kostolac-Coțofeni and Cernavoda III cultures) and the Bronze Age, as well as a necropolis from pre-modern times (Bulatović, Milanović 2012; Bulatović *et alii* 2014). The most important finds are those from the Eneolithic period, and in fact this site served as the basis for defining the Early Eneolithic culture Bubanj-Hum I, part of the cultural complex Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol (Garašanin 1973).

The Early Eneolithic settlement at Bubanj, labelled Bubanj Ia, is characterised by above-ground houses and

carefully made ceramic vessels with intensively polished outer surface (Garašanin, Đurić 1983, p. 10–11; Tasić 1979; 1995, p. 28–30, 105). Some of the elements that are typical for the Bubanj-Hum I culture were also already present in the late phases of the Vinča culture, in particular the use of the same techniques in pottery decoration, such as the use of red and white colours – the graffito techniques, the use of gold and copper oxides, channelling, ornaments in shape of a meander, spiral and triangles, etc. The main pottery forms are the conical bowls with inverted rims, often decorated by grooved, channelled or plastic ornaments, plates with thickened rims with a similar type of decoration, jugs with one or two handles, shallow bowls with inverted rims, different variants of cups with two handles, as well as pear-shaped amphorae with two handles. Other characteristic finds include circular, ellipsoidal and rhomboidal altars on a wide shallow pedestal and with long, curved handles that connect the opposite sides of the bowl. The portable finds from the Bubanj culture also included objects made from lithic and osseous raw materials (Vitezović 2018). The economy is characterised by intensive craft production and probably even a certain level of specialisation. The subsistence was based on animal husbandry, in particular sheep, goats and cattle were kept and used both for meat and secondary products (Bulatović 2018).

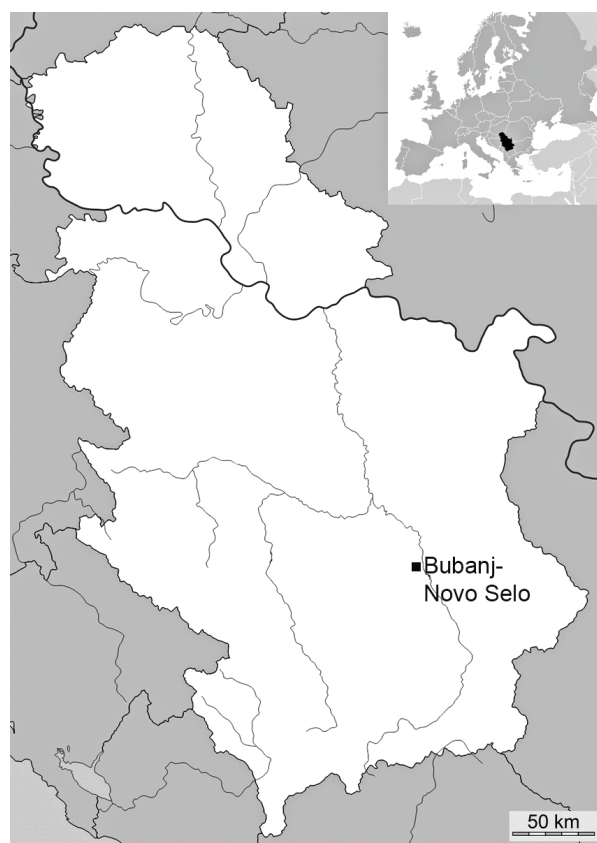


Figure 1. The map showing the site of Bubanj-Novo Selo.

Excavations carried out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century also yielded a series of AMS dates (Bulatović, Vander Linden 2017). The Bubanj-Hum culture horizon can be placed between 4618–4259 cal BC and 4341–3739 cal BC (Bulatović, Vander Linden 2017, p. 1054).

**THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINE FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN BELGRADE**

The fragmented anthropomorphic figurine that is presented here was discovered during the research carried out in 1950's, during the 1956 excavation season (Fig. 2–3).

The figurine itself has formal and stylistic traits that allow it to be attributed to the Early Eneolithic layer of Bubanj-Hum Ia. The figurine was made from high quality clay with few admixtures. It is quite stylised in shape; only its mesial part is preserved, while the lower part of the body and the head are missing. The preserved part is flat, with hands in a form of short, horizontal stumps (Fig. 2–3).

The breasts are minimally presented. The maximal preserved height and length are 4.4 × 5.7 cm, while its thickness is 1.3 cm. The outer surface of the figurine is burnished, but it does not have any decoration on it.

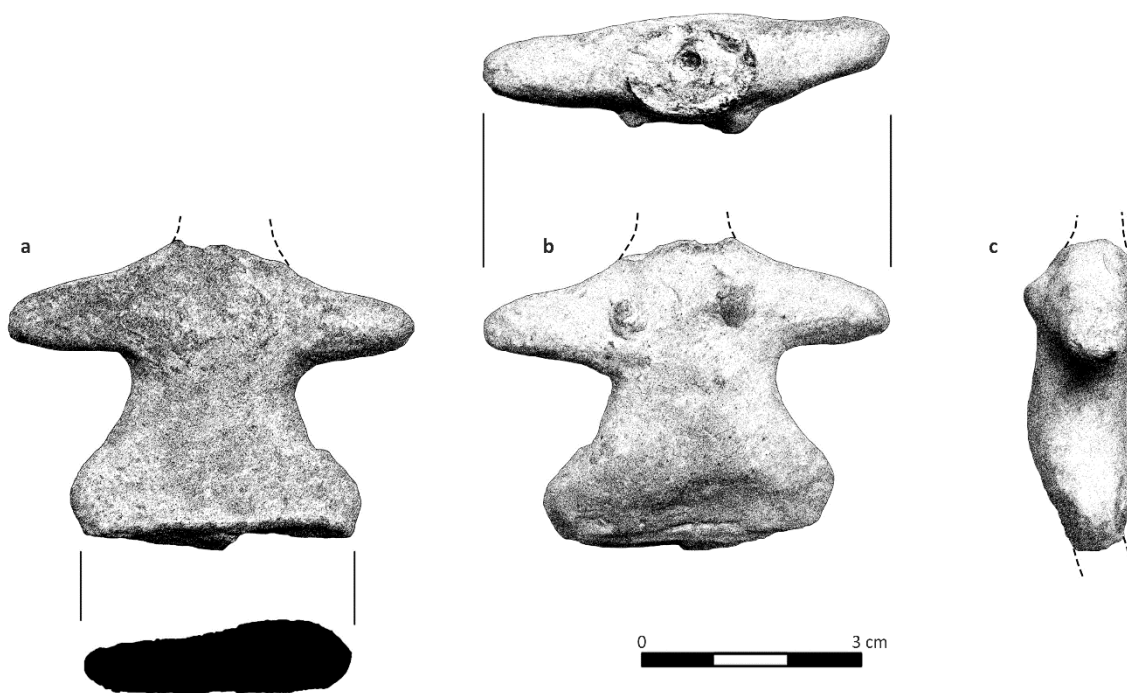
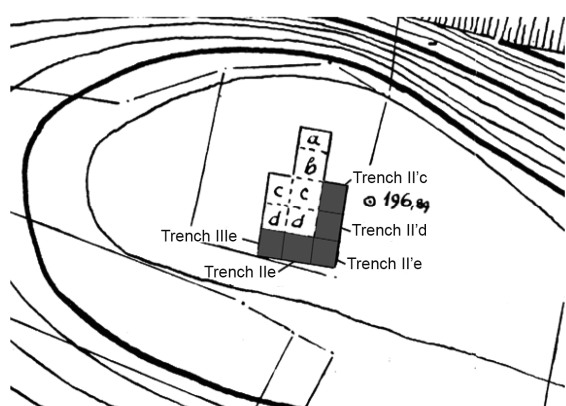


Figure 2. The figurine: a. Back; b. Front; c. Lateral side.



Figure 3. The photo of the figurine (documentation of the National Museum Belgrade).

According to the available field documentation<sup>1</sup>, the figurine was discovered in trench II'e, within the 7<sup>th</sup> mechanical excavation spit. The 1956 excavation season aimed to examine the building that had been previously partially discovered in trenches II and III of 1955. The trench labelled II' was located east of the trench II, as its extension. The trench dimensions were 3 × 3 m, it was oriented north–south and there were 0.5 m control profiles between trenches II and II'. The total investigated area covered a surface of 45 m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 4). The sterile soil was reached at various depths, between 2.15 and 2.41 m.



**Figure 4.** Investigated archaeological trenches from season 1955–1956, on the central plateau (after Milanović, Trajković-Filipović 2015, fig. 33).

In trench II'e several agglomerations of stones were discovered, and along with them pottery sherds that displayed characteristics of the Early Eneolithic in what forms and decoration techniques were concerned. Daub fragments were also noted, alongside fragments of animal bones. Immediately below these stone agglomerations, long narrow ditches were uncovered, interpreted as foundation ditches of the Early Eneolithic above-ground structures (Garašanin 1973, p. 185–188; Milanović, Trajković-Filipović 2015, p. 45–47). The available field documentation, unfortunately, does not provide any information on the exact location of the figurine within trench II'e.

#### FIGURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE BUBANJ-SALCUȚA-KRIVODOL CULTURAL COMPLEX

The period of the Early Eneolithic is the period of various social, cultural and economic changes that are reflected in the material culture, including the figural representations. While in some aspects of the material culture we may notice some similarities between the Late Vinča culture and the Bubanj-Hum culture, in some we

may observe drastic differences, and this is perhaps most conspicuous in the figural art. The Late Neolithic Vinča culture is characterized by particularly diverse and rich figural representation; figurines are found on every site in large quantities (even hundreds at some sites). They were made exclusively of clay (with rare occurrences of zoomorphic figurines made of stone) and were anthropomorphic, showing human figure (male, female, non-defined), hybrid, or zoomorphic. They often display high labour investment (rich and elaborated incised decoration on the head, face and body, representing clothes, hair decoration, jewellery, perhaps even make-up or tattoos, etc.). They can be finely burnished, polished, with painted decorations, although some less carefully executed examples can be found as well (for more details on the Vinča culture figurines, see for example Milojković 1990; Petrović *et alii* 2009).

On the other hand, Early Eneolithic figurines of the Bubanj-Hum culture show major differences in both appearance and distribution. The quantity of the finds decreases considerably in the Early Eneolithic. Bubanj culture figurines made from clay mainly represent female figures; they are often of small dimensions and highly stylised. They resemble only to a certain extent the figurines of the later phases of the Vinča culture, when we may encounter some less elaborate, more stylised figurines.

In particular on the Central Balkan territory, figurines belonging to the Bubanj-Hum culture were noted in small quantities and at few sites only. According to N. Tasić, who considered figurines as an important part of the material culture of the Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol cultural complex, despite their scarcity (Tasić 1995, p. 32–35), two groups can be singled out given their typological traits: the figurines from Danube valley and the figurines from southern areas, namely Kosovo and Pelagonija. The first group is represented by figurines from the sites of Kovilovo, Krivelj, Zlotska Cave and Bubanj that resemble more the figurines from the Vinča culture. The finds from the sites of Gadimlje and Crnobuki represent the second group, with figurines in half-seated position, with short hands and stylised conical heads.

According to the published data, so far there are at least 53 known examples of Bubanj culture clay figurines in present-day Serbia and Northern Macedonia (for the full list and references, see Matić 2009). These include the figurines with incised decoration from the site of Pilavo-Burilčevo in the Kočani region (Kolištrkoska Nasteva 2007, p. 105), the figurines from the sites of Kovilovo and Zlotska Pečina with fragmented heads (Tasić 1995, pl. XII/4, 5, 8) and one complete figurine from Krivelj with decorations on the lower part of her body (Tasić 1995, pl. XII/1). To this list, beside the figurine discussed here, one may add the

<sup>1</sup> Database of the Bronze Age Collection of the National Museum in Belgrade.





period. The figurine presented here, previously unpublished, was discovered at Bubanj in 1956 and contributes to our knowledge of the distribution of these figurines. It shows the stylistic and typological traits of the Bubanj culture figurines and, furthermore, supports the hypothesis that they were generally connected with houses and habitation contexts, and hence with the activities that took place in these areas (either everyday or ritual).

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