

REPRESENTATION OF DANCE IN THE FIGURAL ART OF THE EARLY NEOLITHIC KÖRÖS CULTURE

János Makkay

Keywords: Hungary, Early Neolithic, Körös Culture, figural plastic art

In writing an article like this, one is struck by the enormous number of figurines and reliefs that occur in different Neolithic cultures of the Danubian area i.e. in the material of the Körös-Starčevo, Karanovo, Vinča, Linear Pottery, Cucuteni, Gumelnița and related cultures. Also by the way these figurines and reliefs might represent locally important aspects of earthly persons as well as supernatural beings, among others goddesses of fertility or gods whose duty was to protect the home. During the Neolithic, the rather vague eternal spirits (of clouds, rocks, trees, hunted animals, dead, etc.; venerated in the Upper Palaeolithic in all probability) became detached from their temporal – mostly naturalistic – representations, and take on more abstract associations. Thus we commonly find (at least in the early Neolithic Körös culture) the steatopygous representations of women, very probably a goddess of fertility, fecundity and childbirth, and very rarely her paredros (παρεδρος, son-consort) or male equivalent (attendant, assessor): schematic figurines of mostly old men (*Makkay J., 1993, 73, and fig. 3,1-3; Makkay J., Starnini E., forthcoming, fig. 27, 1-6, fig. 28, 2-4, and fig. 29, 2-3*). Curiously enough, these male statuettes are complete (unbroken) pieces while unbroken female figurines are extremely rare.¹

The idea of an original Fertility or Mother Goddess in the Neolithic is surrounded by an intense controversy. Instead of entering the debate on the nature of female divinity (or divinities?²) in ancient Carpathian and Balcanic societies, this paper is intended to shed light on an aspect, often neglected when studying ancient clay images of the female. Recent years, however, created a renewed interest in the ritual and symbolic world of Neolithic representations. My primary material comes from (I hope) mostly careful excavations, but it often is of fragile character.

In his bulky volume, Y. Garfinkel has explored his remarkable thesis that human statuettes (furthermore their painted and relief representations) virtually always appear to be dancing (*Garfinkel Y., 2003*). These painted, modeled, carved or incised representations occur in assemblages locatable in the Near East, Anatolia, the Levant and Egypt, and also Southeastern Europe between the earliest Neolithic around 9000 (Pe-Pottery Neolithic B) and 3000 B.C. Although some (or even most part) of our Körös figures are far from convincing as dancers, others strengthens his thesis. I fully agree with his main conclusions with a relatively minor modification: representation of dancing was not the most important and widespread representational subject throughout Neolithic Eastern and Central Europe. Catalogue entries of Garfinkel list several pieces of the Neolithic of Southeast Europe (including cultures of Greece, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Romania and the Dniester Basin), Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republik (*Garfinkel I.Y., 2003, 205-231*). Most of them date to the Late Neolithic, others belong to different phases of the Linear Pottery cultures while a few pieces are characteristic find of the Early Neolithic Körös culture.³ Two more pieces date to different developing periods of the Alföld Linear pottery (one to its later group, the Bükk culture)⁴ and, finally, the relief fragment of Villánykövesd is a rare find of the Late Neolithic Lengyel culture, and its site lies in Transdanubia.⁵ This latter piece was once published by the author of this article in a detailed account, now forgotten.⁶

According to Garfinkel, this European group (of Early, Middle and Late Neolithic pieces) represents the northwestern extremes of the distribution area of the dancing motif. While dancing figures of the relevant types (i.e. relief-modelled and incised representations) were a common motif on pottery vessels, most of them from Southeast Europe – as seen from a technical point of view – were decorated with plastic applications. Only a few items were incised, and still fewer painted.⁷ Usually broken sherds are reported with only one applied or rarely incised figure. However, in some cases complete vessels were found – or reconstructed – bearing two or more figurines on their outer walls.⁸ Female figures seen on these scenes, however, do not represent dancers, while other anthropomorphic reliefs do⁹. Remarkably, most part of the applied dancing figures of the Körös culture was found on the well-excavated Körös site of Hódmezővásárhely-Kotacpart, Vata farm.

Painted representations are still completely unknown in Körös-assemblages, while the singular painted and applied piece of the Late Neolithic Tisza culture from Szegvár-Tűzköves¹⁰ (Fig. 2.3) has its further parallels with applied reliefs.¹¹ Amongst the fragments with incised decoration, the most important piece was found on the well-known site of Hódmezővásárhely-Kökénydomb, published by J. Banner already in 1930.¹² The sherd is a fragment of a thick-walled vessel of unknown shape, and its decoration shows a quadrangular platform on which two incised human figures of obviously different sex can be seen: according to their leg position the woman and the man were represented in couples dance (Fig. 2.1), which is the rarest type of dance in the archaeological inventory.¹³ Another possible interpretation of this scene may be that these two interlocking figures perform the sexual act: lead and clay plaques from archaic Assur in Mesopotamia represent couples standing face to face performing coitus. In some cases cylinder seals show scenes where participants can be seen on the top of a rectangular support, which seems to represent mud brick¹⁴. The quite common occurrence of dancing figures on two large sites of the Tisza culture (Hódmezővásárhely-Kökénydomb and Szegvár-Tűzköves: Fig. 2.4-5 from the Kökénydomb site) underlines the assumption of Y. Garfinkel: both in the Near East and Southeast Europe, the dancing motif predominated in a period in which large village communities were developing. (Figures of the Körös-culture apparently are the exception that proves the rule.)

At the same time, dancing should not be associated with economic activity or propaganda but rather should represent mythological details or comradeship between members of society at times of leisure in a relaxed atmosphere. It appears that the motif answering such criteria is that of the communal banquet, in which people are eating and drinking together. Details of the well known Kronia or Saturnalia of the Greco-Roman world would perfectly agree to similar conditions in the Late Neolithic, described – for example – in Lucian's Saturnalia.¹⁵ Dancing (also unclothed) and the use of masks was an important part of these rural harvesting rituals and following festivities.

Two dancing scenes from two Körös settlements are presented in this short paper. Both are applied plastic decoration on pottery vessels. Chronologically, they are related to their parallels discovered in Halafian and Samarran assemblages in Northern Mesopotamia, and also to their

peers coming from Early Neolithic sites of Greece, Bulgaria and the Starčevo culture (Fig. 1.1-2 from Sofia-Slatina, Bulgaria, and Fig. 1.3 from the Argissa Magula, Thessaly¹⁶).

During excavations, conducted on sites of the Körös culture in the Körös valley three decades ago, two broken fragments of very large containers came to light. The shape of the vessels has remained unknown. According to Y. Garfinkel, the vessels chosen for decoration with dancing scenes are usually small or medium sized: cups, small bowls, pedestal bowls and medium-sized jars. On the other hand, in Southeast Europe most of the dancing scenes of the Körös culture were found on large pithoi. These containers may have been used to serve (or only store) food to the entire community participating in the ceremonies (for instance in the annual cult and ritual of the Kronia).¹⁷

One piece was discovered at the site 119 of Endrőd in trench 33/1988, in a depth of 160-200 cm, coming from the deepest part of rubbish pit 12 (Fig. 1.5). It is a wall fragment of a very large storage jar, with part of a female figurine in high relief corresponding to the buttocks and legs. This sherd was found in Pit 12 together with one complete female steatopygous statuette, one small face vessel, and another sherd of vessel with an applied human figurine. They were recovered from a burnt area very close to the western end of sacrificial Pit A5. Unfortunately, it was not easy to determine whether they were belonging to the fill of the sacrificial pit or to the burnt layer of the fill of Pit 12, but their almost complete condition suggests a sort of ritual deposition (*Makkay J.*, forthcoming, the description of House 2 in trenches 25-33. *Makkay J., Starnini E.*, forthcoming, Fig. 40). Another interpretation (if the piece would be turned upside down) suggests that two women were schematically represented in the scene when dancing. If this latter interpretation is correct, and the scene was depicted around the circumference of the jar, this type of endless motif created a circle of dancing figures, representing dancing women.

Another fragmented piece was found at the site Endrőd 39, in trench XIII/1977 (belonging to House 1), with an applied plastic decoration (*Makkay J., Starnini E.*, forthcoming, Fig. 47). It is not possible to establish if the decoration was running around the neck (or the upper part of the shoulder) of the vessel or it was placed only on one part. I would support the first possibility. The motif represents a row of oblique, intersecting ribbons, which can be interpreted schematic and stylized representations of

human bodies and legs. This piece has no parallel amongst the presently known Körös or Starčevo pottery assemblages. A continuous row of at least three (or four?) – partly preserved – human figures is represented frontally, touching (or crossing) one another with their legs, thus creating a dynamic representation of movement. The figures are not identical to one another, depicting the upper part of the body in a very schematic style and the lower part of the body in a linear style. The legs end in a pointed element which may represent the feet. One (or two?) figure has a hanging curved right arm (Fig. 1.4). The complete scene probably consisted of a chain of many similar figures in a circle. No other scenes depicting interaction between people have been reported from Körös assemblages.

It is important to remark that these two figures show the arrangement of the dancing figures around the circumference of round objects (i.e. vessels). This type of endless motif creates a circle of dancing figures which may correspond to an identical appearance of dancing persons in a scene. In the original scene, however, dancers had been arranged around the circumference, and mostly all face the center, but occasionally also outwards. The circle could have been organized around sacred items, such as divine symbols, holy trees, or any other cultic objects, and such a central point might have also been a central fire, an offering, an altar, etc. I agree with Garfinkel's conclusion that these dancing scenes of the Körös culture reflect cultic and artistic ideology of the given society (*Garfinkel Y., 2003, 87-89*).

János Makkay

Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy,

Uri u. 49, Budapest.

E-mail: makkayjanos@axelero.hu

NOTES

1. The eight körös sites (more than 20 assemblages of partly different chronology) – excavated in the körös valley – contain only one two or three completely preserved female clay figurines as compared to hundreds of fragmentary pieces or simple fragments: see *makkay forthcoming*, fig. 106.3. *Makkay J., Starnini E., forthcoming*, figs. 1-26, fig. 4.1-2, and also fig. 26.1.
2. see the extremely different artistic executions of different aspects of idealized persons or heavenly female spirits (goddesses?), as for example *the siren-like plaster figure* from endrőd, site 119 (*makkay forthcoming*, fig. 95.1. – *Makkay – Starnini forthcoming*, fig. 62), *the steatopygous statuettes* of common type, and finally the typologically very different and curious *flat figurines* (*Makkay – Starnini forthcoming*, fig. 30. 1-2).
3. *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, Fig. 10.4. and p. 228 (Szajol-Felsőföld); no. 96 (p. 213. And fig. 10.10.c: Sarvaš); fig. 10.12.c and 10.14.c, and p. 227 (Hódmezővásárhely-Kotacpart); pp. 122 and 124, and fig. 10.18.d (correctly Nagykörü); p. 230, and fig. 10.18.f (Szentes-Jaksorpart).
4. *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, p. 227, and fig. 10.14. E (Tiszavasvári-Paptelekhát); p. 228 and fig. 10.13.c (borsod).
5. *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, pp. 227-228 and fig. 10.11.a (Villánykövesd).
6. *Makkay J., 1968*, pp. 39-62 (the late neolithic Lengyel Culture). – no wonder that Garfinkel located the site in northeastern Hungary. In fact, the site lies in the southernmost part of this country, near the hungarian-croatian border on the left bank of the Drava river. Interpretations of garfinkel occasionally rest on incorrect assumptions of M. Gimbutas as for example in the case of the Borsod piece (mentioned in note 2).
7. see the piece from thessaly and from argissa magula: *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, Fig. 10.15.a and fig. 10.14.a. For a summary see *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, pp. 205-206. For further painted figures see nikolov 2004. Abb. 2.2-3. And fig. 3.1. And 4.
8. *Trogmayer O., Koncz M., Paluch T., 2005*, Nos. 42-45.
9. *Trogmayer O., Koncz M., Paluch T., 2005*, Nos. 47-48. And 50.
10. *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, Fig. 10.15.b, and also *Trogmayer O., Koncz M., Paluch T., 2005*, 80, No. 160.
11. *Trogmayer O., Koncz M., Paluch T., 2005*, Nos. 159 and 16.
12. *Trogmayer O., Koncz M., Paluch T., 2005*, 92, No. 190 with reference to the article of J. Banner in 1930. According to Trogmayer et al., the design can perhaps be interpreted as a schematic human portrayal.
13. for its possible parallel see an incised human – male? – figure with raised hands – also from the Tisza culture (fig. 2.2; diam. 10.4 cm: dancing? Male figurine on the lower wall of a flat lid): Raczky P., 1990, 81, fig. 104. – unfortunately, Y. Garfinkel was not aware of the existence of this piece. For dancing couples see *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, Fig. 2.17., esp. No. 3.
14. *Pinnock F., 1995*, 25., and fig. 5.
15. *Makkay J., 2005*, 111-113.
16. *Nikolov V., 2004*. Abb. 2.2-3 (Sofia-Slatina), abb. 3.1 (the Argissa Magula, Thessaly).
17. *Garfinkel Y., 2003*, 91-92.

REFERENCES

- Garfinkel Y., 2003**, *Dancing at the dawn of agriculture*, Texas University Press, Austin, 2003.
Makkay J., 1968, *The chalcolithic male relief from villánykövesd and the earliest male figurines in south-east europe*, in *JPMÉ*, 13, Pécs, 1968 (1971), 39-62.

- Makkay J., 1993**, *Eine prachtvolle Frauenfigur der Körös-Starčevo-Kultur*, in *Prähistorische Funde und Forschungen, Festschrift zum Gedenken an Prof. Georgi I. Georgiev* (hrsg. von Vassil Nikolov), Sofia, 1993, 73-78.
- Makkay J., 2005**, *Neolithic Theogony: Clay Images of Gods and Men*, in *Hétköznepok vénuszai* (in hungarian), (Ed. L. Bende and G. Lőrinczy), Hódmezővásárhely, 2005, 111-113.
- Makkay J., forthcoming**, *The excavations of Early Neolithic sites of the Körös culture in the Körös valley, Hungary. The final report, I, The excavations: stratigraphy, structures, features, graves – General remarks*, In press.
- Makkay J., Starnini E., forthcoming**, *The excavations of Early Neolithic sites of the Körös culture in the Körös valley, Hungary. The final report, III, Figurines, relief decorations and small finds*, In press.
- Nikolov V., 2004**, *Über dem Denotat der Kulttischchen*, in (Ed. V. Nikolov and K. Bačvarov): *Von Domicia bis Drama. Gedenkschrift für Jan Lichardus*, Sofia, 2004, 33-41.
- Pinnock F., 1995**, *Erotic art in the ancient Near East*, in *Civilization of the ancient Near East* (Ed. M. Sasson j.), IV, New York, 1995.
- Raczky P., 1990**, *Ocsöd-Kováshalom*, in *Alltag Und Religion. Jungsteinzeit in Ostungarn*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, 61-83.
- Trogmayer O., Koncz M., Paluch T., 2005**, *Hétezer eves kerámiaművészet. "Az újkőkör és a rézkör művészete" című kiállítás tárgyainak katalógusa*, in *Hungarian: Seven thousand years old ceramic art, Catalogue of the permanent archaeological exhibition "Art of the Neolithic and the Copper Age"*, in Hódmezővásárhely (1970-2003). Hódmezővásárhely (2005).

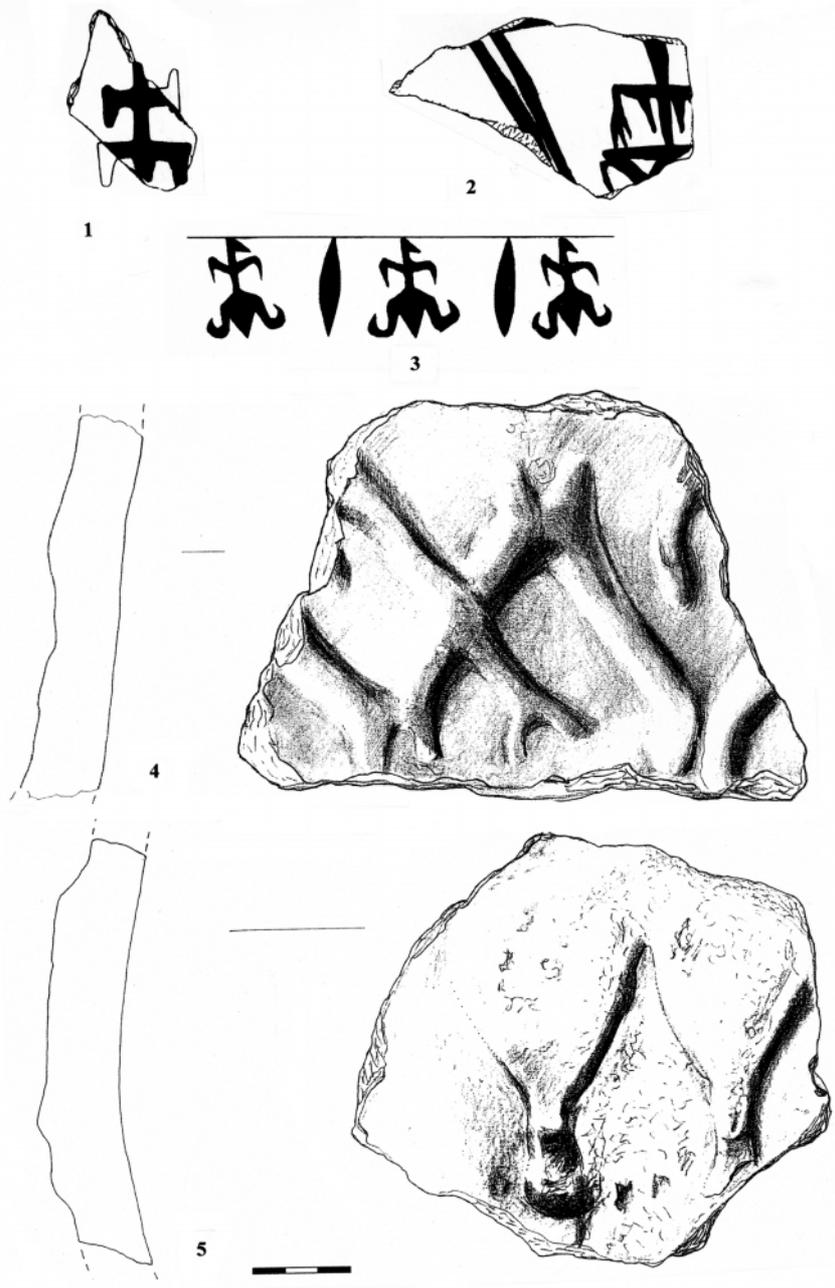


Fig. 1

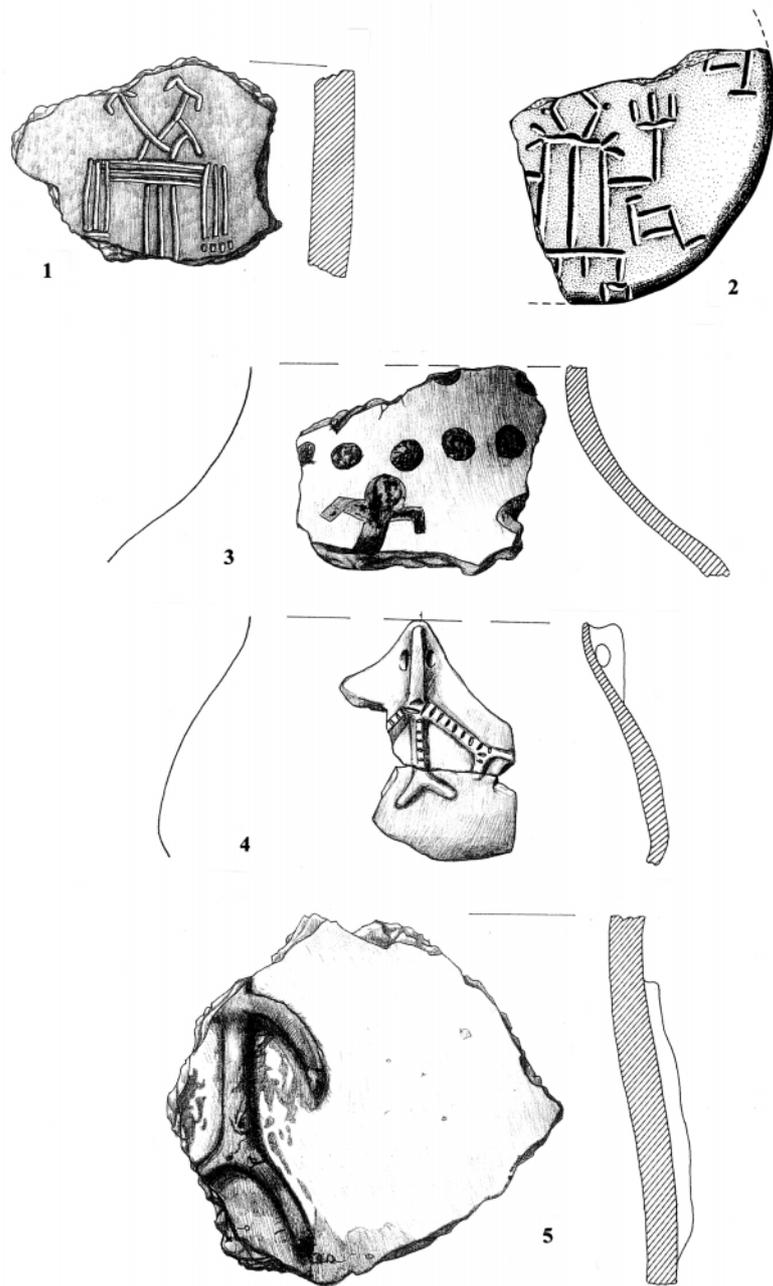


Fig. 2

