

APPROACH TO ANTHROPOLOGY OF EVERYDAYNESS
SYMBOLS IN THE PREHISTORIC ENCULTURATION PROCESS

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Introduction

In 2002 in Karlovo (Bulgaria) was held the Exploratory Workshop “Early Symbolic Systems for Communication in Southeast Europe” sponsored by European Science Foundation, Strasbourg, France (Nikolova (ed.) 2003a).² One of the main outcomes of this scientific event was the shielded opinion to search for the symbolism of the prehistoric culture in depth and at different levels of social integration and hierarchy, as a purposeful means of communication between households and communities, as well as between the generations, and as a social strategy for social cohesion and integration - in other words, as a means for enculturation and social reproduction. In this approach will be proposed that many prehistoric activities in the everyday life embodied both utilitarian and symbolic functions and understanding the prehistoric symbolism is a very difficult task that requires a multi-aspect functional and contextual analysis. Case studies from Balkan Prehistory will be introduced such as the symbolism of spinning and spindle-whorls, of the ornamented pottery and of the village-interments and an attempt to define semiotic groups of material culture defined as specific symbolic types.

For the most part, the prehistoric symbolism functioned in social systems in which the language and the symbols were two equal or complementary systems for communication and the writing was not or only initially developed. The social character and the cross-cultural generality of the symbolic significance (Hallpike 1979) lay the foundation of the symbols as a strong device for communication. In this approach we will limit our goal to recognize specific clusters of material culture and social practices in which were integrated a variety of functions including everyday symbolism.

THEORETICAL SETTING

The culture as a system of symbols and meanings consists of two fundamental functions - integrative and generative (in terms of David Schneider): the integrative is a synchronic function while the generative is diachronic.

The other classification concerns the symbols themselves - for instance the so-called cognitive and so-called expressive symbols or symbol-systems. Both are extrinsic (v/s intrinsic) sources of information in terms of which human life can be patterned - extrapersonal mechanisms for the perception, understanding, judgments, and manipulation of the world. It is worth the opinion of Clifford Geertz (1973) that the culture patterns (religious, philosophical, aesthetic,

scientific, ideological) are “programs” since they provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, likewise genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes.

A considerable part of the prehistoric symbols are element of the religious systems. At the same time, the religion as a “system of symbols by which man communicates with his universe” Jan van Baal equals with models mediating between the individual’s conflicting needs for self-expression and self-containment. Then, “the interhuman communication is realized by the communication between the individuals and their common model of ritual action” (Baal 1971:242).

In terms of Victor Turner, the rituals are aggregations of symbols (1975:59). For both, Edmund Leach and Victor Turner, from information standpoint the distinction between verbal and nonverbal symbolic communication was unimportant (Turner 1975:59 and ref. cited there).

Social environment and the changing meaning of the artifact within the time give the material culture a potentials for ambiguity that according to Ian Hodder, is higher than by the speech and the writing which are linear (as ordered sequence of words) (1989:72-73). “There are therefore reasons to argue that material culture meanings are more contextual and practical than language. The study of material culture thus raises, even more acutely than in the study of language, the relationship between structure and context” (1989:73).

Most of the rituals have been interpreted based on the recognized by Arnold van Gennep structure including three stages - separation, transition, and incorporation (1960:10-11). However, the rituals are characterized by a great diversity and as Jan van Baal stresses ... “The form and contents of the symbols for communication differ from one culture to another. The study of religion necessarily results into the study of religions, of the diversity of the total complexes of symbols permitting man to enter into discourse with his culturally defined universe” (Baal 1971:278).

In prehistory of primary importance were the ritual gifts and social-symbolic exchanges. For instance, the shells were one of popular forms of exchange in Prehistory. An ethnographic case study is reported from Melpa society (Melanesia) where the pearlshells were a means of prestige exchange. While the pigs and the lands could be owned by every member of this society, the pearlshells as the most prestige standard of values were exchanged only by the bigmen in return for “political allegiance, patronage, labour, or simply for prestige” (Feil 1984:83). Obtaining a prestige item could raise the status of the owner. Nevertheless, the symbolism is embodied not only in formal rituals and exchanges, but also in the everyday life.

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²<http://www.iianthropology.org/symbolsystems.html>. Contributions to this workshop were included in Nikolova (ed.) 2003b.



Figure 1. Vinitsa (Northwest Bulgaria). Late Copper Village.

EVERYDAY LIFE AND THE SYMBOLISM

In Balkan prehistoric society the basic organization structural levels were the household and village community. Typical village plan is represented in Figure 1 (Vinitsa, Late Copper Age, Northwest Bulgaria).

To approach the problem of the symbolism in the prehistoric everyday life we would begin with one of the most intensive household activities in the prehistory, in particular in Balkan Prehistory was spinning and weaving. Numerous artifacts interpreted as spindle whorls have been discovered not only in Balkans, but also in very distant regions such as South America. For our topic of interest is that spinning was not only a practical but deeply symbolic activity of household economy (Chokhadzhiev A. 2003 and ref. cited). As it has been emphasized:

“Spinning goes through stages of growth and decline, waxing and waning, similar to those of a child-bearing woman. The spindle set in the spindle whorl is symbolic of coitus, and the thread, as it winds around the spindle, symbolizes the growing fetus, the woman becoming big with child ... Weaving, too, the intertwining of threads,

is symbolic of coitus, and thus spinning and weaving represent life, death, and rebirth in a continuing cycle that characterizes the essential nature of the Mother Goddess (McCafferty & McCafferty 1998:218 and references cited there).

In Balkan Prehistory, the spindle whorls are usually non-ornamented². In context of the symbolic theory, this fact points to the symbolic meaning of the activity that the artifact supports itself, as it is proposed above. Nevertheless, there are also ornamented spindle whorls. Some of the most expressive instances are from Northwest Anatolia Early Bronze Troy that include symbolic signs designed in symmetrical compositions consisted of swastika, triangles, spiral, zoomorphic and other signs and motifs with “powerful meaning” that could indicate their magical function, to stimulate and help the spinning process. John Chapman even presumes that the signs on the spindle-whorls (and on figurines) (e.g. Vinèa culture) represents a formal, ritualized request at a health or life crisis and probably involving the mediation of a shaman (after Chapman 2000:86). If our interpretation is correct, the spindle-whorls are an argument that the symbols could occur not only in the ritualized formal rites but also in the everyday life because of their supplemented function to some activities that have both utilitarian and symbolic meanings. From the field of the anthropomorphic symbolism one expressive instance is the figurine in Figure 2 that can be interpreted as a woman during menstrual cycle, but also as an ancestor or even divinity. The same ambivalent character has the double figurines in Figure 3.

Another instance about the ambiguous function of the everyday material culture is the ornamented pottery. The dominating Balkan prehistoric ornament is geometric (painted, encrusted, incised, relief etc.)³ (Figure 4). It can be divided into three main elementary groups

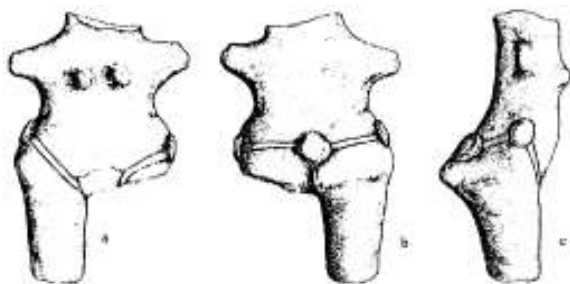


Figure 2. Selevac. Figurine from Vinèa culture.

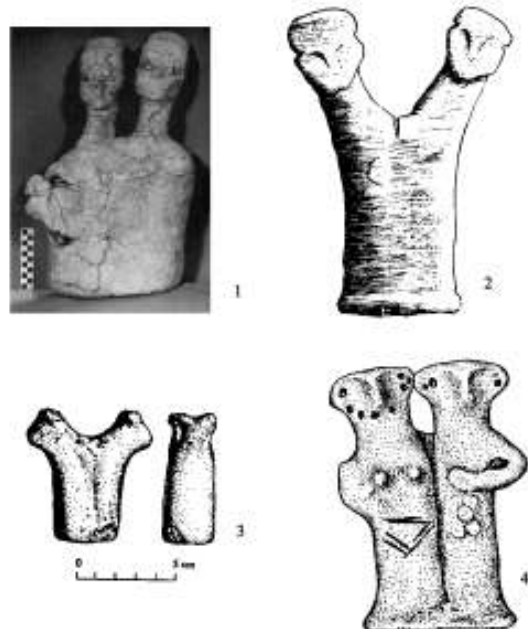


Figure 3. Prehistoric double figurines from Anatolia (1) and the Balkans.

² For instance from Early Bronze Dubene-Sarovka, <http://www.iianthropology.org/Dubenesmallfinds>.

³ See instances at <http://www.iianthropology.org/thebalkansites.html>

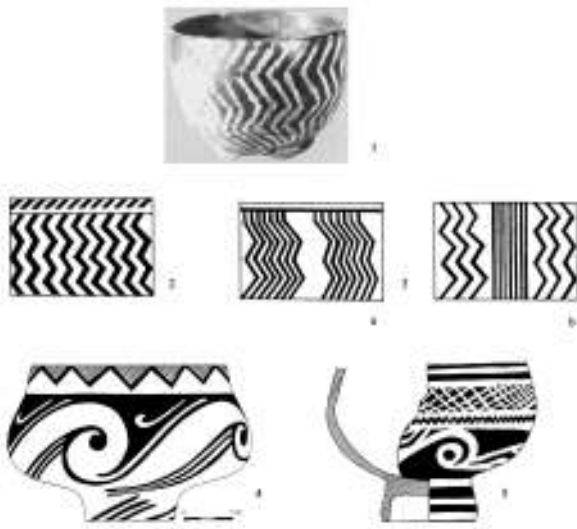


Figure 4. Painted pottery. Early Neolithic. Starčevo (1) and Karanovo cultures (2-4).

- linear, curvilinear and other included in a variety of motifs and compositions: single or parallel lines, triangles, rhomb, metope or more complicated compositions. The curvilinear ornament varies from arch-shaped motifs to spiral and more complicated motifs and compositions. In some periods the geometric ornament may represent zoomorphic motifs (e.g. snake) (possibly Figure 4:1-3). As exception, realistic anthropomorphic, zoomorphic motifs or applications occur (Figure 5), as well as floral ornaments. Another peculiar group includes zoomorphic and anthropomorphic vessels in which the ornament can have complimentary function. Some of the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic vessels carry ornaments similar to the contemporaneous pottery decoration.

The dominated conception in the interpretation of the Early Neolithic pottery is the symbolization of fertility in different aspects (wreath of fertility, phallus, etc.) (e.g. works of Vassil Nikolov). Nenad Tasić (2003) connects the Early Neolithic ornament with the idea of domus. During the late Copper Age was popular the snake ornament (Todorova 2003). In the Early Bronze Age symbolic meaning of triangle, rhomb, chess and other geometric motifs can be proposed.⁴ In all cases the location of the ornament is one of the main backgrounds for the interpretations. Despite in most of the cases the visibility of the ornament is a precondition for its communication function, there are many instances when the ornament is placed on invisible part of the vessel or of the object.

Douglass Bailey (2000:234) discusses the visibility in context of the problem of the so-called incised marks which are very popular in the Balkans especially during the Early Copper Age - e.g. Vinča and Boian cultures (Winn 1981, Sirbu & Pandrea 2003). That author pointed to the fact that the marks on vessel bases are visible only when the pot "was moved, stored, sold, bought, or transported", but not when it was used.

The problem posed by Douglass Bailey provokes research in depth since the visibility is an important feature but the bottom of the vessel is its integral part and we have numerous instances when the bottom is ornamented similarly to the walls or as a part of more complex

⁴See instances in Nikolova 1995, Nikolova 2002b. Complimentary website at <http://www.iianthropology.org/Dubenepottery>.

compositions. It can be even proposed that in some cases the invisibility was very significant for the function of the symbols. In case of the ornamentation of the Early Copper Age model of oven from Slatino interpreted by Stefan Chokhadzhiev (1984) as a calendar, we presume that the calendar (or a similar symbolic message) is incised on the bottom of the oven since the position had a supplemented symbolic meaning including an element of mystery or puzzle or related to more common cosmological model. It is worth one of the walls has a similar ornamentation that could point to possible symbolic opposition visible - invisible and related ambivalent meaning of the symbols. This symbolic function of the invisibility is confirmed by the incised composition on the invisible belly of the animal figurine from the same epoch (Fol & Lichardus (Hrgs.) 1988:Abb. 195) (see Figure 5:5).

In the context of the symbols as communication means and social strategy in prehistory, we can recognize that the material culture gives opportunity for different kinds of transmission of the information that could be direct and very realistic (or expressive) but it could be also included in a specific system of symbolic communication in which the visible or invisible position of the sign was an integral part of the symbolic message. This conclusion contrasts the ideas that some symbols in prehistory were only an individual expression, without communication function. Whether the pottery made from craftsmen or from household member, the applied ornament produced something that s/he understood and was understood by others (Mackenzie 1968:54-55). It is important not only for visible but also for invisible ornament.

The signs of the Vinča culture (see Merlini, this issue) are just

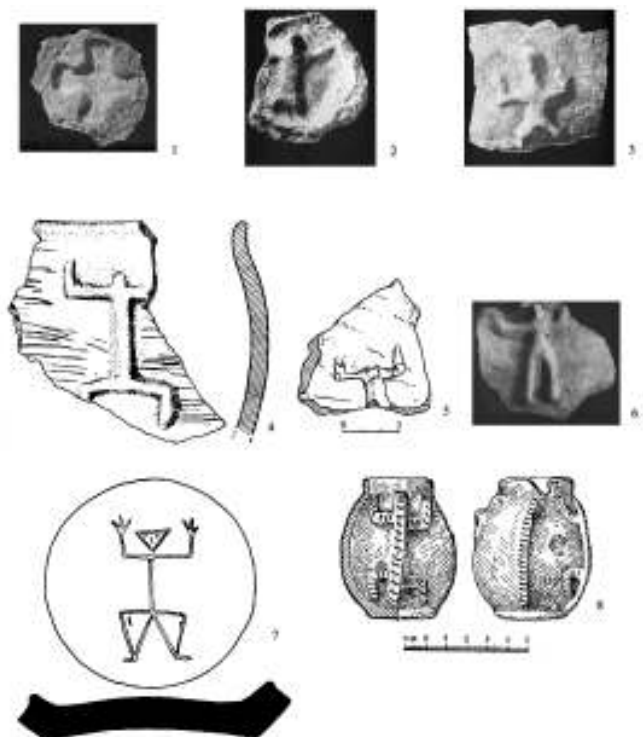


Figure 5. Relief and incised presentation of specific body posture on Copper Age pottery from different microregions in the Balkans. 1-3. Gradeshnitsa. 4. Golyamo Delchevo. 5. Yunatsite. 6. Stoicani-Aldeni. 7. Drama House 206. 8. Vaksevo. See ethnographic analogies and references on line at <http://www.iianthropology.org/prehistoryethnography1.html>

one of the rich polysemous symbolic systems for communication of the Vinëa communities including also anthropomorphic figurines (Figures 2&7), rich vessel ornamentation, language, mythology, rituals, folklore, etc. It has been proposed that the symbolic aspects of Vinëa culture can be understood as a symbolic communication means for interactions between the generations (a diachronic aspect of the enculturation) or between the contemporaneous households (the synchronic aspects of the enculturation) and could have only invisible social characteristics of differentiation and stratification (cp. Tringham and Krstić 1990:609) in terms of “sacred knowledge” (Nikolova, in print b).

The data for the Vinëa symbolic systems for communications are related to visualized symbols, but we also can refer to verbalized symbols that presumably had as essential role in the everyday life as the former once. The figure of the woman has specific iconographic characteristics (Figure 7) that had been repeated from generation to generation, from household to household and from village to village. These visualized and materialized messages connected the individuals, and the different social units, empowering their social identity as an heir of certain (specific culture), in many cases differed from the culture of the neighbors. At the same time in distant regions occur similar symbols related to household like the altars in Figure 6. In Vinëa culture specific were groups of identical figurines (Figure 7). Whether related to genealogy, divinity or/and social stratification they functioned as symbols of everydayness having probably multispect meaning.

To the variety of material culture we have to add specific social practices related to the house and the village in Balkan Prehistory such as some village interments (Nikolova, in print a) (Figure 8). The symbolic meaning of the burial was a primary source for kinship and social identity in Prehistory. It is worth that the concept of the village emerged in the Balkans as a village of the ancestors (Vlasac, Lepenski Vir). The popularity of the village burials during the Neolithic shows that the burials remained an important social symbol of household and community identity, connecting the generations and strengthening the community by integrating the ancestor in the everyday life of the villagers.

A key problem of the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the burial is its relation to the household and community level of worship. In my opinion, the different kinds of burials (primary village-interments, secondary village-interments, primary and secondary extramural interments) represent diversity of levels of interrelations between the household and community (Nikolova 2002a; 2003). At the same time, within the time the function of the village-interments changes and there are many regional peculiarities in distribution of this pattern in the prehistoric Balkans.

In the Balkans the village burials were most popular during Early Neolithic (Anzabegovo, Nea Nikomedea, Karanovo, Stara Zagora-Azmak, Kazanluk, Rakitovo, Kurdzhali, Dositeevo-Tsiganova Mogila, etc.) (Nikolova 2003). But the recent evidence from Maluk Preslavets - together with Ilipinar IX (Northwest Anatolia) shows that already in the Early Neolithic in the Balkan-Anatolian social network developed the concept of periphery village cemeteries on the one hand. On the other hand, the village-interments were a popular custom, but it is characterized by a series of peculiarities. The most popular were the burials of the children, but even this practice is not documented in many excavated villages. Then, we presumed that despite the social symbolism of the village interment, in some villages there were even restrictions against this practice. The adult burials were exceptions in the villages and their analysis infers that the death of special persons

or peculiar death was a precondition for the burial in the prehistoric village. It is worth in some villages there is a repeating pattern of a double burial (e.g. Bulgarchevo and Kazanluk) that also points to specific rituals. Special body positions indicate possible cases of punishment (see details in Nikolova 2003 for the burials from Vaksevo and from Sofia-Slatina). The pattern of village-interments gradually decreases in the prehistoric Balkans, but after the Neolithic, there is one more pick - Early Bronze Age when it again occurs as a common specific burial ritual, but only in Thrace and in the northwest Balkans with regional peculiarities (Nikolova 1999).

In the Zapotec philosophy and cosmology the graveyard occurs as mediating category between the house (as symbols of inside, boundary, trust, good, sacred, safe, etc.) and the field (the locus of the dangerous spirits and symbol of outside, not boundary, distrust, evil, profane, dangerous, etc.) (Guidi & Selby 1976:186-189). Further, the distinction between the children and adult depended not on the age but on the marriage status and the graveyard was divided into old and new, so the people who died “unnatural death” were buried in the old cemetery (1976:190-194). The analysis of the special organization of

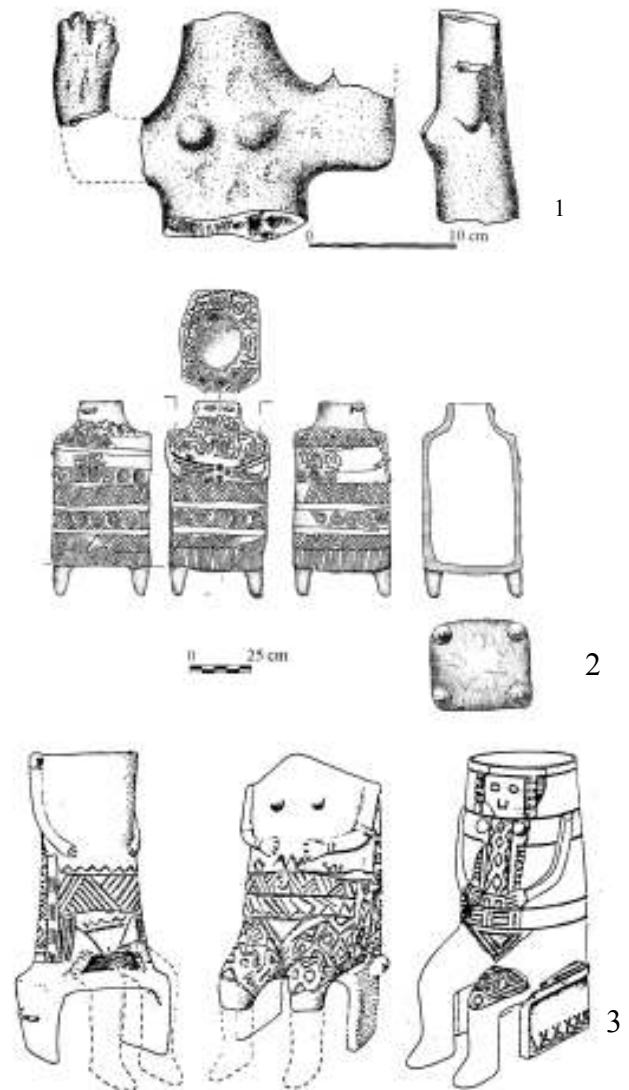


Figure 6. Prehistoric altars from the Balkans and Eastern Central Europe.

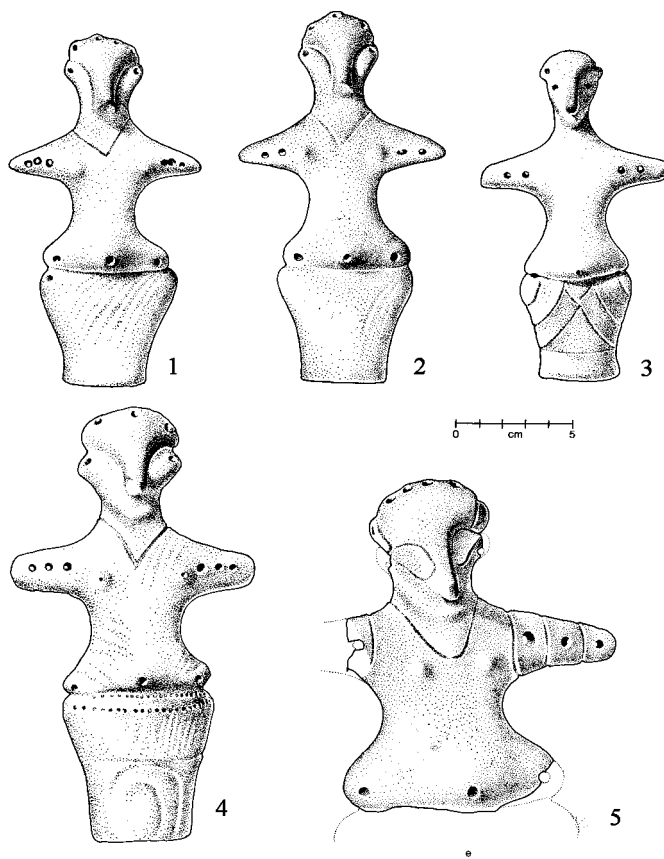


Figure 7. Divostin. Group of figurines. Vinëa culture.

the cemetery for instance of Late Copper Age Golyamo Delchevo (Northeast Bulgaria) shows that at least in some cases the location of the graves possibly depended on gender and the social status. That fact can explain the existed concentration of male graves in this cemetery. The household nucleation characterizes the cemetery of Budakalász (Hungary) (Chapman 2000).

The popularity of village burials shares both Neolithic and Early Bronze communities in the Balkans. In the latter period the burials of animal specified the cult practices in some regions. They occur as burials in village pits, on floor of house or in human burials. Ivan Dimitrov (2003) provided a comparative study on the dog burials found in human graves from later Early Bronze in the Balkans and in Anatolia. This innovation in the prehistoric burial customs in the Balkans occurs in graves of persons with high status. Then, at least in some cases the dog occurs as a symbol of high status in the Early Bronze Age (e.g. the burial from Lovech, Early Bronze III). But according to the local traditions and beliefs, in the Vucedol village complex (Early Bronze II) six burials of dogs were documented including one on a floor of a house (Jurišić 1990). Then, we cannot insist in all cases the dog was a high-status symbol and accordingly, the interpretation of the last requires a contextual analysis.

The buried dog on the floor of Vucedol house is in relation with the pit burial of bull head within Dubene-Sarovka village (Early Bronze II) next to which was place a cup with ochre (Nikolova 1996). In this ritual (possible pars pro toto symbolism) again the close interrelation between the household and the household cattle is demonstrated and the opportunity the cult of the ancestry to have enforced the everyday

life of the villagers. This is an expressive instance of the Early Bronze symbolic communication between the people the animal world in which the rituals characteristics of the human cults (burial-goods of pottery and the ochre) were employed in the rituals with animals. Then, the finding from Dubene-Sarovka is directly related to another discovered feature the South Middle Danube Basin - the bucranium from Vinkovci-Hotel (Hoti 1990) which is synchronous with the former. The last was found on a floor of Vucedol house and was originally attached to the wall. This bucranium was a combination of animal horns and a plastered head.

In contexts of the problems of cultural and social reproduction (Nikolova 2003c), the symbolism of the village-interments in prehistory relate both to the generational reproductions and to the reproduction of complex social structures and possibly to non-conflicting and adhesive social relations as a meaningful social activity (in terms of Nancy Folbre). As an aspect of the cult of ancestry and especially of the household ancestry cult, the village burial was also a social strategy for strengthening of the household and community units and an aspect of the cult of fertility. During the Neolithic they were an alternative burial practice to which were devoted mostly special individuals - from newborn children to high-status persons and even to possible persons who we a subject of punishment. But even in the last case (in the interpretation is correct for the graves from Vaksevo and from Sofia-Slatina with an unusual body position) the persons desired a grave that increases the chances non-located cemeteries to have existed.

As the analysis of the meaning of the settlement burials depends on the record base, increasing the last would also develop the knowledge on the function of the different burial locations in the prehistoric society, including the prehistoric settlements.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

In the prehistoric Balkans there were a variety of meaningful systems of symbolic means of communication - figurines, rituals, myths and legends, etc. But symbolism was embodied not only in these forms of symbolic expression but also in the everyday life where the utilitarian and symbolic functions were incorporated or the symbols were used for social cohesion and a symbolic means of social reproduction.

This approach introduced a variety of objects and signs with symbolic meaning - figurines, altars, spinning and spindle-whorls, ornamented pottery and burials in the villages as instances of symbolic means of communication in the prehistoric Balkans. From functional standpoint, it was proposed that the symbolism of the spindle-whorls

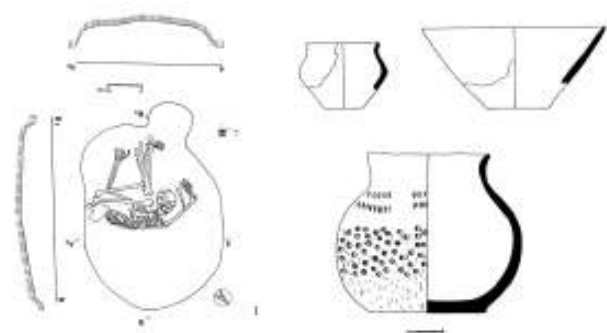


Figure 8. Early Neolithic burial in the village of Vaksevo.

was an integrated part of the symbolic aspect of the spinning process as a household activity. So, the ornament that occurs in some cases on these objects had a supplemental function.

The problem of the symbolism of the ornamented pottery was focused on the visibility and invisibility of the ornaments and it was stressed that in some cases invisibility could strengthen the symbolic meaning. Together with the attempt to initiate symbolic typological groups, in this contribution the village-interments were interpreted as a means of symbolic communication between generations and social strategies for social cohesion that functioned in the village everyday life of the community.

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