

## REVIEW

of the dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific PhD degree to VANYA MLADENOVA STAVREVA named "Anthropomorphic plasticity of late Eneolithic cultures Varna, KGK VI, KSB - possibilities for interpretation",

by Dr. Krassimir Petrov Leshtakov, Professor of Prehistory, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski"

The doctoral student is a graduate of Sofia University and completed her higher education as a specialist in Bulgarian language and literature with a specialization in folklore studies at SU. After that, V. Stavreva worked as an editor in Vidin Municipal Gazette and as a correspondent for newspaper "24 Chasa". At the end of the period 2015 – 2018, she obtained the educational degree "Master of History and Archaeology" at SU, Faculty of History, Department of Archaeology, and in 2019 - 2022 she was a full-time doctoral student in the same department. In the meantime, she works at Regional Historical Museum in Vidin as a curator in the "Archaeology" department (after 2018). These biographical details are necessary to understand both the positive elements of the work under review and some of its failings.

In general, the work is not completely usual for the traditions of Bulgarian archaeology, which places positivism as its leading direction and contains the aspiration for specifically meaningful field information. In this case, we observe the intervention of a number of borderline or completely separate scientific fields such as ethnology, cultural anthropology, art studies, linguistics, etc. The Anglo-Saxon school in archaeology has left its mark on the terminological apparatus, on the methodology, and on the way of thinking of the author. This unusualness is not necessarily a flaw, in my opinion, but rather an illustration of the maxim that the world (even of science) is colorful and that different, sometimes even opposing tendencies have their place in it. Their acceptance, adaptation and argumentation is a matter of personal position, and the procedures are undoubtedly legitimate and have every right to exist.

The topic has been chosen successfully and is dissertable. Two remarks can be made on the wording of the title: The first relates to the territorial scope, and the second to the chosen research path. The materials originate from the large area of three "cultural blocks" (according to H. Todorova), stretching from the mouth of the Danube to the modern northern borders of Greece. These are the modern territories of Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia (p. 15). It is not explained why Greece is not included, at least its northern part (adm. Macedonia and Thrace) and so called Edirne Thrace up to the coast of the Marmara Sea. What are the author's reasons for excluding the southern parts of the Rhodopes and Sakar-Strandja, as well as the valleys of Maritsa and its tributary Ergene? Since the overall approach is cultural-historical, it was sufficient to choose one

geo-cultural area as the main one and use it as a basis for the comparative analysis. But this is not done. In the second place: it is well known that the possibilities for interpretation in humanitarian studies depend on several main factors – the information security of the process, the results of the specific analysis and the selection of the external correlating factors. The final phase is undoubtedly subjective and creative; it is influenced by a number of additional factors, the characterization of which is hardly suitable to be carried out here. After all, and to put it very briefly, the two formulations - "interpretation attempt" and "interpretation possibilities" (as written in the title and in the text) are not identical. The second wording chosen is disconcerting with its imperativeness. It is hardly suitable for studies of this kind and directs the reader to association with those who are accustomed to perceive the truth from the position of "last resort". Before the interpretation, however, the two mandatory steps – description and analysis – must be done, but I will pay attention to this below in the text.

**The structure of the study.** In my opinion, it is rather complicated, which makes it difficult to analyze critically. The text is divided into an Introduction, seven chapters and a Conclusion, total 340 pages. From the Introduction, we are left with the conviction that, as in any inductive logical construction, the actual exposition will begin with the characterization of the object (building a database and analyze it) and move on to its explanation (interpretation). This is also written in the Introduction:

*"The aim of the present work is to analyze the anthropomorphic plasticity and to propose, according to the current state of research, possible interpretations of its role in the socioeconomic context of the Late Eneolithic cultures of Varna, Kojadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI and Krivodol-Salkutsa-Bubani" (p. 5 ).*

The three steps – description, analysis and interpretation are, in my opinion, well founded and can be welcomed as they form a coherent and logical system. For some unknown reason, this order is not followed and is not recognized in V. Stavreva's text. An overly long introduction to the theory of religion and related fields of the humanities is preferred, which I think is completely unnecessary in this form.

Chapters one and two had to be rethought, as they are interpretive (and are duplicated in some of their parts); thus, as they are placed as initials, all subsequent construction becomes a priori. Schemes are lined up, foreign and distant both in time and in context and in genesis. They are imposed mechanically on the specific object of the particular analysis, and its results are incorporated into (and adapted to) these schemes. Moreover, they are too general and affect different (and divergent) sides of the ancient being, significantly exceeding the problematic set in the work. So it is with historiographical analysis: the authors or adepts of one or another thesis have built and defend positions that are based on other facts, from other regions, from other times

and a population having other manners. That is why the criticism is not of substance; it cannot be determined whether it is justified or not. There are many examples and it is impossible to list them here, I will only point out that C. Renfrew builds his "archeology of the cult" on the basis of a specific analysis of data from the end of the II millennium BC, collected during the excavation of a specific site - the sanctuary of Philakopi III. How to make full use of its inferences or attack them, his arguments, operating with another time, environment, culture and society?! The data from the so-called living cultures are incomplete, and this is noted more than once in the author's text.

**The information.** The work includes 3349 information units, which is quite enough to achieve the set goal. Their impressive number is hardly born from the desire to create "...a sufficiently representative collection" (p. 5), but from the desire to work with all artifacts (published or not, whole, fragmented or in parts of them) known so far. Whether it is appropriate to do this in a study and whether this does not demonstrate the lack of measure in the selection of information; does this not demonstrate a naïve research belief that the quantity involved can have a decisive effect on the quality of work? In addition, I did not notice that the information is ranked in terms of reliability, and this depends on the fragmentation of the figurines, the preservation of their context, the care of excavation and documentation, and finally - on the way they are published.

**Terminology.** Along with the apparatus generally accepted in archaeology, a number of incorrectly used or unsatisfactorily explained terms can be mentioned here: starting from the Russian term "источници" (Russian) - in Bulgarian it is "извори" (p. 11), "art" and "style analysis", "ancient artist" p. 96 (modernizations that are at least debatable), "visual image" (a basic operational tool, see Chapter IV, which is borrowed from philosophy and partly from art studies), "collocation" (p. 236) - a term from linguistics, widely adopted today by the IT sector and for some unknown reason used in an archaeological essay. Apparently, it means "connectedness" and "work (existence) of elements in a unified system". The term "interpretive analysis" (p. 95), which is an oxymoron, deserves a little more attention. Analysis means "dividing the whole into elements" with the task of their detailed study. Thus, it has as its ultimate goal the knowledge of the characteristics of the whole. It is clear that interpretation is relative to the whole it is supposed to explain, not to its elements. Therefore, it turns out to be the final goal of the analyzes and crowns them with a result, i.e. it is perceived logically as a synthesis in relation to the nature of the individual (analyzed) elements.

**First chapter** "The present chapter is devoted to the theoretical and methodological issues that are related to the interpretation of anthropomorphic plastic". (p. 17). Not of the plastic in the fixed time and not only in the study area, but in general - from the Paleolithic to the classical

period (the two-faced Janus, the attributes of the classical deities and of Heracles below in the author's text are good examples in this light). Here the reader can ask the question - in the ethnological examples, why was America (North, Central and South) overlooked, and in the art studies - the modern small plastic as part of the sculpture?! Overall, the chapter is general and eclectic. It merely demonstrates the author's effort to cover the vast array of published information and opinions that are argued in a specific way. The first part - "Anthropomorphic figurines as works of art and social phenomenon" (pp. 17–19) sets itself the ambitious task of summarizing the issue in a few pages. Is this possible?! A follow-up attempt follows in a summary of the achievements in the research of such fundamental concepts as religion, magic, cult and ritual, at the same time, on the basis of completely different chronologically and multidirectional studies. I miss shamanism, mentioned only in passing (pp. 146, 221). The arguments in the different schools are based on data from the so-called living cultures (e.g. p. 36) to evidence from historical societies, usually defined as complex and dated to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. Free-roaming from the Paleolithic to the end of the Bronze Age and drawing examples from ethnology to "cult archaeology" and "cognitive archaeology" (i.e. from J. Frazer through Br. Malinowski to Claude Lévi-Strauss, C. Renfrew, etc.) contribute nothing to the better illumination of the object of study in its interpretive phase. The same applies to cultural modernizations resulting from reflections on contemporary art, psychology (in variety the "provocative field of psychogeography" according to Bouff-Vermees 2014) and even aestheticization of public space (p. 35, note 2). They only demonstrate the author's clear desire for self-improvement in a new for her (but also vast) field of research. This leads to a loss of focus and the clear purpose of the research. In my opinion, it was necessary to make a more critical selection of schools, opinions and authors. To limit the geographical and chronological scope. But something else has happened - the huge (and very interesting) literature devoted to the issue has tempted the author to a too frivolous and, in the end, not contributing anything to the pursued goal. There is also healthy skepticism, but it is not dominating - e.g. with the quoted authors on pp. 36 – 37 regarding ethnological parallels.... On these pages, it finally becomes clear (to some extent) the author's opinion, which coincides with that expressed by Sven Hansen and other authors. The existence of chapter II - "Overview of the main interpretations of anthropomorphic plastic" (pp. 39 - 63), which should be historiographical, is also subject to criticism. In practice, it is a variant of chapter I - "Theoretical questions" (p. 17 - 38). As such, the total number of pages written before the actual analysis begins is more than 70!

It is noteworthy that pages 41 – 49 contain incompletely processed text. A template is followed – author, essay (the full title is written in the text, too often), main ideas and views. The writing sounds like a mechanical set of summaries (“cards/фиш” as they were called in the last quarter of the last century in Bulgarian language) or files, if that is more acceptable to the reader.

Chapter III contains the approach and criteria for the proposed classification. A question of the choice of one system or another is the author's preference. The important thing is that it is working. In this case, it is exactly so, which saves me lengthy comments. The next part of the work is more important.

In Chapter IV, a comprehensive description of the individual types (called by the author "visual images") is made. Each subsection concludes with an attempt at an interpretation that is concise, parsimonious, and quite critical. This contrasts sharply with the style of the text in Chapters I and II, but it also demonstrates the fact that when one has to make an authorial interpretation rather than a retelling of works, the task is much more complex and difficult. This chapter is purely author's and contains a number of positive elements that should be evaluated by dignity. In practice, the proposed explanations do not go beyond the obvious or the well-recognized, but I will summarize them anyway:

- Interpretation "mother with child" (p. 107) - stating the obvious, with the novelty "the man also took care of the children" (p. 107). This is based on two examples - from Chatalka and KN of the Cyclades;
- An emotional bond of love and protection in two adult figures - male and female (p. 110) – stating the obvious again;
- Nothing is said about the anthro-zoomorphic image combination except general considerations about gender (pp. 112 – 114).
- The interpretation of the theme "figure and vessel" (p. 120 - 121) contains different assumptions that are not supported by concrete arguments. The examples given by Africa are just curious parallels, nothing more.
- In the interpretation of the two-faced figures (p. 124), V. Stavreva succumbed to the temptation to refer to the Roman pantheon – the two-faced Janus in particular, although earlier in the text she criticized examples from the classical period and the habit of their researchers to transfer mechanical schemes in prehistory...
- Bisexual images are also described in a similar style (pp. 126 – 127), the interpretation of which contains general considerations about androgynes and Hermaphrodites...
- The pregnant figurines are provided with many "parallels" and an interpretation worthy of our attention (pp. 141 – 143). It is a listing of different opinions – e.g. of M. Gimbutas, A. Raduncheva or H. Todorova and V. Nikolov... One goes through ethnographic parallels (Hr. Vakarelski) and those from living cultures in order to reach "variety of functions" – a total of seven options, and it is not clear which of them is the preferred one (p. 143). It is the same with the worshipers: the interpretation (p. 145–146) adheres to opinions existing in the literature – a gesture of prayer or a gesture of blessing.

- Figures with horizontal arms. The interpretation is on p. 148: polyfunctionalism and diversity in meaning. Whatever you prefer – from stories with real or mythical characters to apotropaes and more.
- Figures of women with hands on stomach: of different material, they are united by the position of the hands. Interpretation (pp. 164 – 170): this time the text is more circumstantial, unlike the previous “possibilities of interpretation”: but again an apotropaic force or the progenitor mother...or the mother goddess (pp. 168 – 169). In general – adherence to the opinion of V. Nikolov and A. Raduncheva (p. 170).
- Figures with one hand to the face. Interpretation. Too loose interpretations (p. 173 – 175), e.g. M. Gimbutas' original idea of the grieving god. Again references to antiquity.
- The figures with a hand to the ear and a bowed body. No interpretation is offered because the scarce data (pp. 176, 178).
- Figures with deformities - a hump and other deformities. Here the interpretation is verbose, because the author associates them with various disease states (pp.188 – 195). In the case there was a direct reflection of disease states, not only according to the author, but also according to the works cited.
- Figures with special symbols and attributes (including on the head). The interpretation (pp. 201–204; 209–212) refers us back to the well-known – these are characters with a more special social status, according to the literature. There is more discussion in the text about the signs than about the figurines themselves. Sufficient attention has been paid to the artificial deformations of the skull according to anthropological data.

In the summary of this chapter (p. 233) reference is again made to the ancient pantheon. In this case, the attributes of the ancient deities or of the hero Heracles are exploited... Direct coverage of diseases, such as Down's syndrome or hydrocephalus, is also debatable (p. 235).

**Chapter V** – Archaeological context. The examination of the issue at three structural levels is positive, reported on p. 236. The analysis is good and detailed; it raises no fundamental objections. The one about the criteria for distinguishing a building as cult makes a good impression. On p. 247 is reflected on "the cult buildings", following C. Renfrew for the Late Bronze Age, but the reference is missing.

Structured deposits, etc. elements are also well developed (pp. 254–272). This makes the section contributory. The proposed interpretation (p. 259) – possible magical practices providing protection to the ancestors – does not cause objections. In general, the conclusions are acceptable, although they are very cautious. Based on the information used, more specific theses could be proposed. There are also parts that cause disagreement. So e.g. on p. 272 it is written that the amount of figurines found in settlements (registered differences are up to 16 times!) is associated

with their production, and not with their use.

**Chapter VI.** Functional interpretation (pp. 276–314). The thesis of the presence of multifunctionality is defended, but mainly through opinions read in the literature. The specific examples are reported in passing, in one paragraph... The thesis that it is not possible to reconstruct the rituals themselves, but only to declare their presence – through ethnographic or historical parallels – provokes agreement. However, the text is not devoid of clichés contained in the literature, among which the parallels from equatorial Africa stand out again.

The next section – VI.2 – is better developed. The exposition is more specific, the assumptions – more justified and verifiable. This is because after the materials used, dimensions, attachment devices and other specific features appear as a factor: the "rattle" figures, the vessel figures, etc. It is worth noting that we are witnessing a good author's analysis.

From Section VI.3. Figures, etc. miniature objects were expected more. The main source is the scene from Ovcharovo. The reader is left with the impression that this chapter could have been further developed. Subsection VI.3.1. contains the analysis of ensembles of figurines (i. e., the focus is on the figurine-figurine relationship, not figurine-other artifacts). "Others" is exhausted by models of dwellings and vessels, i. e. containers in which the "ensembles of figurines" are placed. Some were for display, and the others were hidden (in the vessels). Here the already discussed weakness is noticeable – jumping in time and space is not a problem, it becomes a universal principle in the search for parallels. This is also the case in section VI.3. 2. "Relationship with building models and miniaturized objects". As a conclusion – no specific conclusions are reached. And so until p. 313 – the text is duplicated to a certain extent with the review of the problems and theoretical questions made at the beginning of the work. The scheme is the same, the ideas are the same, there is a difference – a few more examples...

**Chapter VII.** Socio-economic context. Social dynamics and structure of society (pp. 314–322). This chapter is an illustration of over-interpretation of the object of study. It begins with a completely unnecessary detailed review of the literature devoted to the nature, structure and peculiarities of the Late Chalcolithic society in the studied area. The reverse operation follows – it is checked to what extent the object of the study can serve as a source for its characterization. The whole chapter discusses the second question – about the reconstruction of the socio-economic context and the role of plastic in the process, including as a source for specialized production and cultural contacts. After all, no definite opinion is ever given regarding the place of figural anthropomorphic plasticity in the Late Chalcolithic socio-economic system. The enumeration of features such as functionality, ownership, "elitist art", fragmentation, etc. are characteristics of society that are more successfully derived from other parts of culture and their social implication is considered axiomatic – e.g. settlement system and fortification, architectural planning and

housing construction, metallurgy, crafts, exchange and trade, graves, etc. The supposed feeling of anxiety (pp. 332–334, "uncertainty" in the text) in the Late Chalcolithic inhabitants, which led to the mass production of the anthropomorphic figures is interesting, but comparable to the "mourning god" of M. Gimbutas...

The **Conclusion** summarizes the final thoughts in each of the chapters listed above. A similar approach is also possible, but it is hardly among the most successful, since following it, the author repeats already reported conclusions. And the prospects do not give anything new - only expectations for the accumulation of new field information... In fact, the reader is presented with a "summary" (usually it is translated into one of the foreign languages), and not "conclusion" in which to further develop what was done before. Either way, it is inextricably linked with the text finale.

Finally, let us dwell briefly on the Catalog. It consists of two parts - a catalog of the sites (settlement mounds, necropolises, pit complexes, etc.), and a catalog of the artifacts, the object of the analysis. Was it possible these two to be united, which would make it easier to work with the catalogue? Anyway, we have two catalogs in front of us. The catalog of objects contains a positive striving towards completeness and comprehensiveness. They were clearly achieved, but it is written that "The objects are grouped according to the context: settlements, necropolises, pit complexes" (p. 14–15). The basis of the grouping is apparently according to the location of the archaeological sites objects in the settlement system (settlement model). The context does not determine the main characteristic of the individual categories, which would lead to their unification in the specified groups.

The catalog of the artifacts is text only, there are no illustrations for the individual catalog numbers. The images are presented in Tables – from 1 to 288. The connection of the cataloged units and the tables is almost completely missing because their organization is different. The numbering in the catalog is done by settlements, not by images and themes, as the author does. The tables are not organized by catalog numbers – e. g. on Table 247 to 287, bone figures are illustrated, i.e. grouping is by raw material and then by type. And the text says that the raw material has no leading value and is a secondary mark. Figures from one table have a variety of catalog numbers, which makes it difficult to work with them. The question is also raised to what extent the individual information units in the catalog are equal or at least comparable. Some of them are processed personally and are precisely described (documented), but others are taken from publications. This makes the catalog uneven from the point of view of completeness and reliability of information, and its objectivity and opportunities to build the basis of further analysis are reduced. Therefore, the information is not homogeneous, but it is hardly V. Stavreva to be

responsible for that.

Finally, I will allow myself to summarize the positive aspects of the reviewed work:

1. A good and comprehensive historiographical overview of figurine classifications (pp. 89–94).

2. The principles of classification adopted in the work (pp. 95–102) do not cause objections, except for placing the raw material from which they are made last (p. 101). In contrast to this, it is emphasized in many places in the text that materials lead in determining functionality, durability of use, status, etc.

3. The classification of figurines is also good, as it follows schemes already known in the literature from Bulgaria and Romania (p. 101). There are also novelties that I accept, but not without reservations, such as the "visual images" and "themes".

4. The analysis of the figurines according to their context is very good.

5. Excellent knowledge of the subject of the study and criticality regarding theses for "temples", temple complexes", etc. similar settlement structures from the Late Chalcolithic.

6. Good Bulgarian language and expression skills, which are clearly a legacy of V. Stavreva's previous professional activities.

7. Fully satisfactory and professionally presented illustrations in numerous tables.

Against this background, some mistakes seem curious to me, which are clearly the result of either naivety or oversight. I will mention just a few. On p. 194 the name of one author is written as "J. Lazarovitsi". It must be John, the reader thinks, but in fact he is the famous Romanian prehistorian George Lazarovici (or Georgi Lazarovic according his Serbian origin). On p. 250 it is written "stone volutes joined with sand and clay". They are probably stone boulders, not ancient architectural elements. The expression "their inner content" (p. 234), which is clearly a counterpoint to "external content", also causes a smile. The "composition man and woman" also sounds unusual (title of chapter IV.2); "a female image with a realistic ... body" (p. 92), etc.

The **Summary**. It properly summarizes the content of the individual chapters of the dissertation and here the comment is superfluous. At the end, the text and the contributions in this study are arranged – as seen by the author. Some of them I accept, others – not. They are numbered, which saves me describing them. Those numbered 1–2 and 4–7 (six in total) are perfectly acceptable, while the remaining three are subject to very serious discussion and can hardly be proofed. To these contributions should be added the positive features highlighted above. Failures in the work can be attributed to overtraining, which is common to any new researcher, and the residual influence of previous professional pursuits that obey other rules. The subject is very complex and it would be maximalist to expect the author to completely successfully enter it the first time. Therefore, the work has all the formal grounds to receive a positive evaluation of the

V. Stavreva (MA) to be awarded the educational and scientific PhD degree, for which I will vote.

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