



## "UNUSUAL" FIGURINES OF THE ANCIENT FARMERS OF SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

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### Abstract

The excavations of the Eneolithic horizon of the multi-layered settlement Nagornoye II (Ukraine, Kagul lake) yielded the bright material belonging to the Gumelnita circle of Balkan cultures (Bolgrad-Aldeni II sites). Among different finds, two unusual anthropomorphic figurines were discovered. One of them is a sculptural image of a "hermaphrodite" - a bisexual figurine. Analysis of figurines of different Neo-Eneolithic cultures showed that this image was known in the Near East since the Prepottery Neolithic; over the course of time, the number of such figurines increased. We managed to trace three variants of the bisexual creatures' representations. The second figurine - with a flat reverse side and pierced with nine holes - was discovered near an original hearth construction. Probably, in ancient times it was fixed there and leaned against some surface. We don't know the analogies for these two figurines either in the Bolgrad-Aldeni II materials or in the Gumelnita cultural circle.

KEY-WORDS: Eneolithic, settlement Nagornoye II, clay anthropomorphic figurines, bisexual statuettes, ancient belief

### INTRODUCTION

The clay anthropomorphic figurines known since the Early Neolithic have been the indispensable attribute of most early agricultural sites. In the first instance, this assertion is true for the Near Eastern, Middle Asian and South-Eastern European cultures, where settlements contain collections of figurines ranging from a few statuettes to some hundreds of items. The importance of studying this category of archaeological material depends not only on its great quantity, but also on the fact that the anthropomorphic figurines, together with pottery, are the most important "cultural indicator" which represent the unique polymorphic source.

Although a lot of different works have been devoted to this theme, many problems connected to the ancient agricultural statuettes are still insufficiently clarified, and new excavations continue to astonish and to yield surprises. Two unusual figurines from the settlement Nagornoye II serve as confirmation<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> We consider it necessary to be said that the authors do not present an exhaustive discussion of the characteristics of the two figurines, including problems of semantics, but give a preliminary discussion, because such a goal is impossible within the scope of such a small article. At present, our main purpose is to bring the data into scientific circulation, while presenting some commentary.

This multi-layered site, its lower horizon belonging to the Eneolithic (Bolgrad-Aldeni II - Gumelnita cultural circle, IV mil. B.C.), is situated on the high cape (over 20 m) of Kagul lake's eastern bank, 1 km south of Nagornoye village in the Reni district (Odessa province, Ukraine) and 15 km north of the Danube river. On the north-eastern side, the settlement's territory is limited by a deep ravine, on the western side by the bank's precipice, and its south-eastern part was very much destroyed by excavations. At the beginning of investigations, the settlement's area was 60 x 100 m<sup>2</sup>.

Nagornoye II was discovered by the archaeologist L.V. Subbotin in 1964, and the first probe trenches were made then. Archaeological excavations of the settlement began in 1966<sup>3</sup>, but systematic investigations of this site have been taking place since 1983 by the Eneolithic team of the Institute of History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg, Russia) headed by N.N. Skakun<sup>4</sup> /fig. 1/.

From the Eneolithic layer, a rich collection of clay anthropomorphic figurines (about 30 fragments) was found; among them

<sup>2</sup> SUBBOTIN, 1971: 182.

<sup>3</sup> SUBBOTIN, 1983: 24-27.

<sup>4</sup> SKAKUN and ROMANOVA, 1987; SKAKUN, 1992; SKAKUN, 1994; SKAKUN, 1996; SKAKUN and RINDYUK, 1996.

there are both figurines with female and male signs<sup>5</sup>. On the whole, they demonstrate significant parallels with the materials from other Bolgrad-Aldeni II sites /fig. 2-6/ and have some differences from Stoicani-Aldeni figurines with their diversity of statuette types including sitting figurines. But two "unusual" statuettes are of special interest.

#### BISEXUAL FIGURINE

One of them represents a bisexual creature ("hermaphrodite") /fig. 7/. This figurine was found as two fragments (upper and lower parts) preserved almost completely (height 11,3 cm); only the head and arms were lost. It is made of dark grey clay with small grog inclusions, covered with a thin layer of lighter engobe, well polished. Its upper part is rather flat, and the lower truncated cone-shaped part, with traces of vertical cuts made on damp clay, narrows downwards. The feet are made by round nipping. On the boundary of the arms and shoulders and on the thigh projections, holes have been pierced through. The bosom and navel were made with pieces of clay, and for the male sign, two pieces of clay were used, a rather common phenomenon for Bolgrad-Aldeni II figurines /fig. 6: 3, 5/6.

This figurine was found in the Eneolithic pit XXII /fig. 1/. In addition to this bisexual statuette, fragments of thin-walled and rough pottery, half-finished flint products and waste, a fragment of the lower part of female figurine and also an intact female statuette /fig. 2/ were discovered there. Although the anthropomorphic figurines of the Gumelnita circle of cultures are represented by different types of statuettes including both female and male figurines<sup>7</sup>, such bisexual statuettes are unknown to us in the sites of the Lower Danube region.

As is well-known, most clay statuettes of the early farmers represent female figurines, but male statuettes (although their number is significantly less) appeared

already in the Neolithic (Catal Huyuk, Hacilar, Tell-Munhatta, Jericho, etc.). In general, investigators mention that in Near Eastern sites, when clay sculpture appeared, a sharp reduction in the number of male figurines occurred, as compared to the previous period. The impression is formed that the male image went as if to the background. Obviously, the investigators who consider the male principle in agricultural-farming societies to have been symbolized by a bull image are correct. This causation (woman - bull) is traced by the materials of many ancient agricultural sites in both the Near East and South-Eastern Europe<sup>8</sup>. The sculptural images of "twins" and "matrimonial couples" belong also to the same time<sup>9</sup>.

Some of the most ancient images of the bisexual creature are also known from Neolithic sites. Such figurines have been found in the site of the Prepottery Neolithic - Cafer Hoyuk (Anatolia)<sup>10</sup>, Byblos<sup>11</sup>; in Europe, there is the statuette from layer III d of tell Karanovo<sup>12</sup>. Over the course of time, the quantity of similar figurines grew. As examples, we can mention the settlements of Iran and Central Asia: Tall-i-Bakun A, Tureng Tepe, Chong-depe, Ulug-depe<sup>13</sup>; and the Tripolian sites: Dumesti, Medvezha, Krutoborodintsy II, Koshilovtsy, Schipenitz<sup>14</sup>, etc.

At the same time, it is necessary to make some important comments, in our opinion. First, not all anthropomorphic figurines found have been published. But even judging by the publications, the investigators often identify bisexual figurines as male images<sup>15</sup>. Second, the majority of the ancient agricultural anthropomorphic figurines were found in fragments. On the basis of the figurine collection from Nagornoye II, which is a quarter of all statuettes known from the territory of the left

<sup>5</sup> SKAKUN, 1994: 63; SKAKUN and RINDYUK, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> BEYLEKCHI, 1989: fig. 4, 3.

<sup>7</sup> MIKOV, 1934; RADUNCHEVA, 1973; DRAGOMIR, 1983: 97-104.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, ANTONOVA, 1977: 25; POGOSEVA, 1983: 130-132; CAUVIN, 1994: 48.

<sup>9</sup> ANTONOVA, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> CAUVIN, 1994: fig. 35, 5.

<sup>11</sup> CAUVIN, 1972: fig. 28, 1.

<sup>12</sup> GEORGIEV, 1961: 64.

<sup>13</sup> ANTONOVA, 1977: 66, 76, 77; ANTONOVA, 1990: 149, 153.

<sup>14</sup> POGOSEVA, 1985: Abb. 606, 919; MAKARENKO, 1927: Pl. 39, fig. 14; CHILDE, 1923: Tab. XVII, d; RINDYUK, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, RADUNCHEVA, 1973: fig. 67-68; CAUVIN, 1994: fig. 31, 5.

bank of the Lower Danube region, the principal differences in modeling of the lower part of the figurines with female and male signs were traced<sup>16</sup>. So, statuettes with male signs have lower parts, in contradiction to the female figurines, modeled from whole pieces of clay, and a vertical line dividing legs is always absent. Thus, taking into consideration the find of the "hermaphrodite" statuette, we can suppose that both the separate fragments of the upper parts of anthropomorphic figurines and lower parts with male signs cannot definitely identify the fragments as belonging to female or male statuettes. Moreover, when we attentively analyse all known intact figurines of practically all Neo-Eneolithic cultures, it becomes obvious that there are several methods for reproducing the figurines' sex and peculiarity of modeling is only one of them. So, the figurines' female sex can be reproduced in the following ways: a) bosom is modeled and there is a sign of sex (triangle, rhomb, etc.); b) only bosom is shown; c) only sign of sex is shown. In addition, there are also "sexless" statuettes, which is the case when sex is not indicated in any way<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, we again come to the conclusion that for the fragmentary figurines, only finds of lower parts with female signs can clearly identify the statuettes' sex. Otherwise, we could mistake the fragments of a sexless statuette or "hermaphrodite" for a female figurine.

Of course, it is difficult to expect that in ancient times there really were far more "hermaphrodites", but we can not fully rule out the fact that some fragments we now have at our disposal belonged to the statuettes of just such a type.

Proceeding from analysis of the finds, it is possible to single out three groups of images of the bisexual creatures during the Neolithic - Bronze Age.

The first group consists of the figurines as if composed from two parts: their

upper parts have female signs (bosom) and on the lower parts there are male signs (phallos) (for example, these are the statuettes from Nagornoye II, Karanovo III, Cafer Hoyuk, Byblos, etc.). The second group is a variant of the first: here there are not two, but more bosoms (figurines from Rakovets, Ubeid, Central Asia)<sup>18</sup>. The third group includes statuettes with a female sign of sex on their one side of lower part and a male sign on another side (Central Asia: Chong-depe, Ulug-depe)<sup>19</sup>.

Although many works have been devoted to the purpose of the anthropomorphic figurines<sup>20</sup>, we do not have enough information to interpret the purpose of the figurine from Nagornoye II. In our case, it is possible only to mention that, judging by the high quality of production, it was intended for rather long-term utilization, and the foot's shape, allowing the figurine to rest in place without any support indicates that the statuette was placed in vertical position. Nevertheless, as is the case for the overwhelming majority of the Neo-Eneolithic figurines, this statuette was already broken in antiquity. Obviously, in this situation, we are dealing with a case of premeditated "destruction"/"killing" of the figurines during ritual activities where the statuettes were the active "participants"; such cases are repeatedly described in the literature<sup>21</sup>.

The image of a bisexual creature itself probably reflects one of the most ancient aspects of the system; it is widespread in practically all religious-mythological systems<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, and obviously, the matter of this image changed with time

<sup>16</sup> SKAKUN, 1994: 63; SKAKUN and RINDYUK, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> RINDYUK, 1998. Probably, in a direct sense they can be sexless only for us modern people, while the ancient population could have meant such figurines to represent female or male creatures. However in different mythological systems, sexless ancestors are actually known (TOKAREV, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> In the literature, the problem of such statuettes was repeatedly discussed. The pieces of clay or spts of painting on shoulders, bosoms and backs of the figurines are interpreted by the investigators, judging by their identity to the bosom images on the same statuettes, as multiple bosoms. In the different mythologies and written sources, this image/epithet - "having many bosoms" - emphasizing the fertility and fecundity of the character is well-known. See, for example, ANTONOVA, 1977: 63.

<sup>19</sup> ANTONOVA, 1977: 76-77.

<sup>20</sup> Among them: UCKO, 1962; PRZYLUSKI, 1950; JAMES, 1959; JAMES, 1960, CAUVIN, 1972; CAUVIN, 1994; and many other studies.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, BIBIKOV, 1951; BIBIKOV, 1953; FRAZER, 1923; GNOLI and VERNANT, 1982; TOKAREV 1978; SKAKUN and SEMENOV, 1990; ANTONOVA, 1990: 155-179; RINDYUK and SKAKUN, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> TOKAREV, 1992.

dependent on changes in the world view itself.

#### LARGE ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINE

Another interesting find from the settlement Nagornoye II is a fragment of the upper part of an anthropomorphic statuette (height 14,3 cm) /fig. 8/. Like the other figurine described here, this figurine was also made of grey clay with small grog inclusions, its surface is covered with a thin layer of engobe and polished. The figurine has a triangle-shaped head, and its large nose is reproduced by nipping. From crown to breast, a rib-"crest" comes down, as if it divides the figurine into two parts. Its arms are bent at the elbows to form a raised right angle. The breast is reproduced by two pieces of clay. The figurine is pierced by nine holes made from two sides: 2 - on the eyes; 2 - on the elbows; 2 - on the shoulders; 1 - between bosoms; 1 - on the navel and 1 - below the navel. The back of the figurine is flat, and the impression is gained that it was leaned against some surface for utilization.

In this connection, it is necessary to focus in detail upon the context of this find. It was found near a hearth construction consisting of a right oval pit (N XXXII) filled in with quadrangular-shaped "rollers" fired to a brown color /fig. 1/. These were situated following each other along the pit's perimeter with a strong inclination to the center. To the south, there was a small round ashpit, westward from which two pole pits situated side by side were traced. These pits are the single find of such pits in the settlement. Although the poor preservation of this feature and the absence of comparisons do not permit an opportunity to reconstruct it in detail, judging by our observations, we can suppose that there was an original arch made of "rollers" and roofing on pole construction above it. The "hearth" is attached to the ground pisé dwelling excavated near it and well fixed due to the rammed floor. The situation of the hearth construction and dwelling allow us to consider them to have been a single complex which has, however, no analogies on the left bank of the Lower Danube<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> SKAKUN, 1994: 61.

The figurine found near the "hearth" has no direct analogies either in the materials of the Bolgrad-Aldeni II sites or in the whole Gumelnita circle of cultures. It is possible to mention only some indirect features similarities. So, while absent for the statuettes of Gumelnita sites of the Lower Danube left bank, such triangular-shaped interpretation of the head is widespread in the Neo-Eneolithic cultures of the Balkan-Danubian region. We can mention as analogies for the Nagornoye II figurine, for example, the statuettes' heads from Vlad Tepes (stage Boian V)<sup>24</sup> and Suceveni (stage III of Stoicani-Aldeni sites)<sup>25</sup>. They have similar dimensions and "crests"-ribs. In general, the figurine from Nagornoye II has two peculiarities: 1) its reverse side, unlike the right side, is flat and rather carelessly made; 2) it has an unusual number of holes piercing it. The first obviously points out, as mentioned above, that the figurine leaned against some surface, meaning as well that the statuette was used in another way than other figurines. It is notable that for Gumelnita, we observe anthropomorphic figurines included in other objects (a cover with anthropomorphic handle from Ciolenesti<sup>26</sup>, the anthropomorphic figurines on the vessels' walls, etc.), which is a contribution of earlier traditions. In this connection, it is interesting to mention that on the table-altar from the settlement near the village of Gradeshnitsa (the initial stage of the Krivodol culture, it is synchronous with Karanovo V - Maritsa), one of its sides ends with an anthropomorphic figurine<sup>27</sup>. It is possible to suppose that the statuette from Nagornoye II found near a "hearth", where it was probably placed in a stationary position, could also have been a part of an original "altar". This similarity is intensified by the great number of pierced holes on this figurine. For the Neo-Eneolithic cultures of the Balkan-Danubian region, many "altars" and models of houses and "temples" with pierced holes are known (Verbicioara, Casioarele, Trusesti, etc.); some of them also have anthropomorphic features. It is remarkable that in Nagornoye II a fragment of a miniature "altar" was also found, and moreover, there is a pierced hole in its lower part /fig. 9/.

<sup>24</sup> BERCIU, 1961: 414.

<sup>25</sup> DRAGOMIR, 1983: fig. 51, 18.

<sup>26</sup> DUMITRESCU, 1974: 242.

<sup>27</sup> NIKOLOV, 1970: 246.

The pierced holes probably had some special meaning and cannot be explained only by the necessity of hanging the statuettes as "amulets"<sup>28</sup>. In this connection, the finds of bone and marble anthropomorphic figurines from the Gumelnita-Karanovo VI time period (Khotnitsa, Lovets, Varna necropolis, etc.) with traces of copper and golden decorations in the pierced holes - ear-rings, temple-rings, necklaces, belts, brackets, etc.<sup>29</sup> - draw attention to themselves. The assumption by M.P.Gryaznov<sup>30</sup> on the purpose of the pierced holes of Tripolian figurines for fastening clothes and different decorations should also be considered.

In general, the relationship of female figurines to the hearth was repeatedly fixed by archaeological materials and ethnological data. According to the ethnography, the figurines represented the spirits of the ancestors - patrons and assistants. The figurine's constant or temporal stay in the house had to consolidate the effects of spells, sacrifices, and other forms of rituals<sup>31</sup>.

Thus, it is possible to suppose that the figurine from Nagornoye II, which stands out because of its dimensions, appearance, design and conditions of find, could be a "witness" of some ritual activities and served as an "idol". It was probably broken/"killed" when its "help" was no longer necessary.

## CONCLUSION

We would like to mention that the excavations of settlement Nagornoye II, in spite of great destruction of the cultural layer, yielded wonderful archaeological materials characterizing different sides of material and spiritual culture of the Eneolithic population of the Lower Danube region.

<sup>28</sup> SUBBOTIN, 1976: 33.

<sup>29</sup> PASSEK, 1965: 80-82; IVANOV, NIKOLOV, 1986: Abb. 30, 49, 176.

<sup>30</sup> GRYAZNOV, 1964.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, DYRENKOVA, 1937; PESHCHEREVA, 1957; ALEXEYENKO, 1971; IVANOV, 1979; ANTONOVA, 1990: 158-166.

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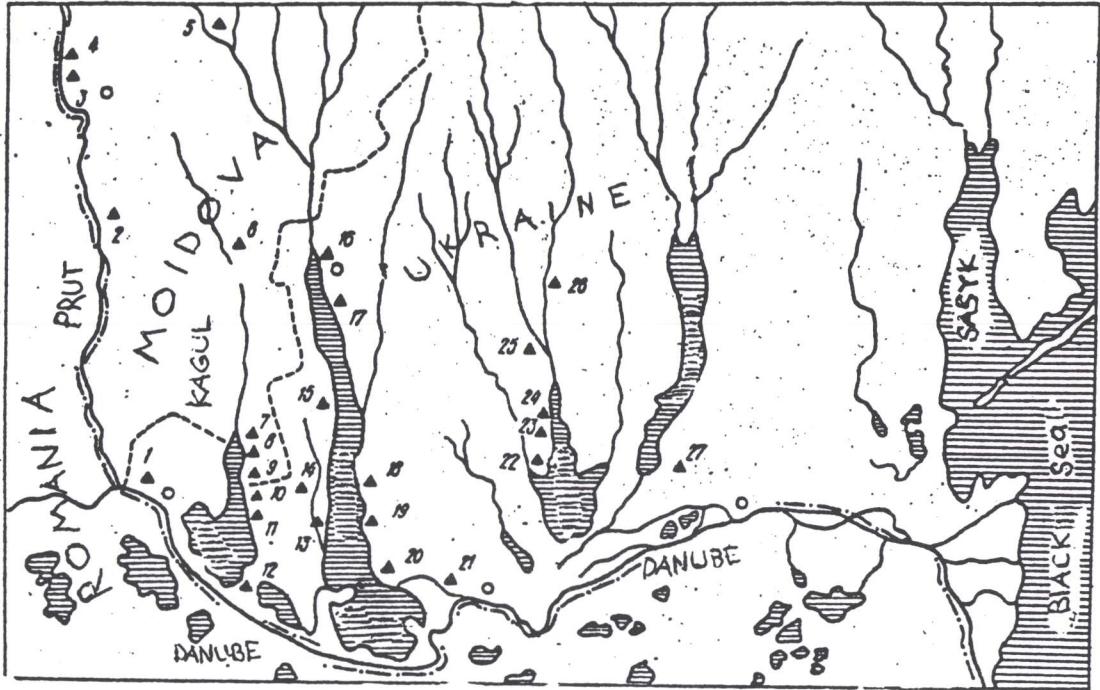
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Map of Bolgrad-Aldeni II sites. (11- Nagornoye II)

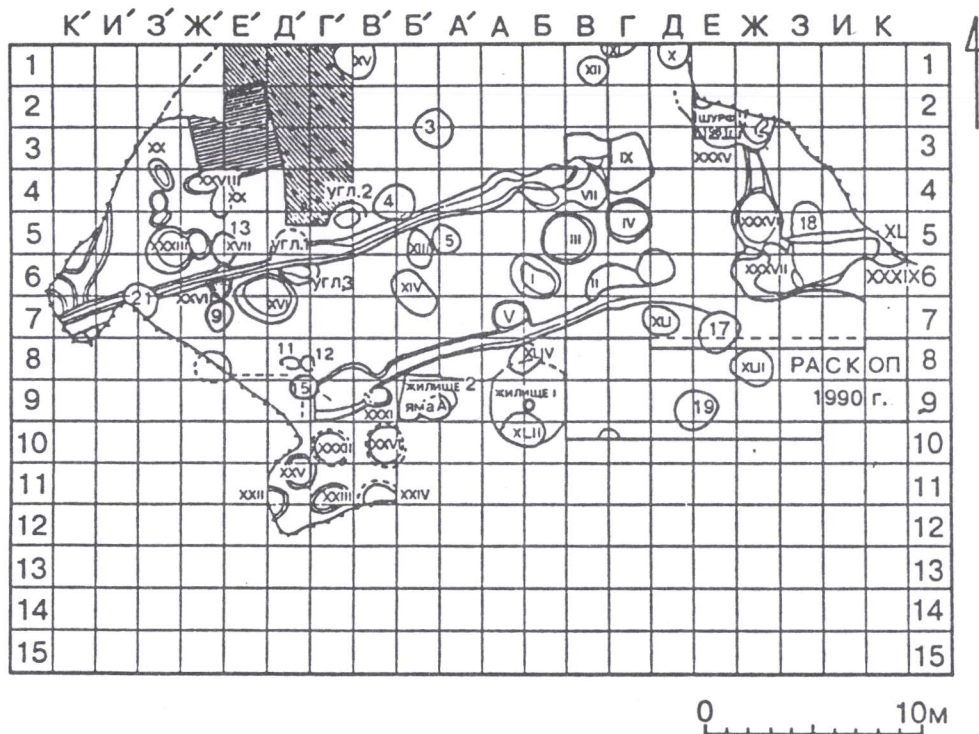


Figure 1 : Plan of the settlement Nagornoye II

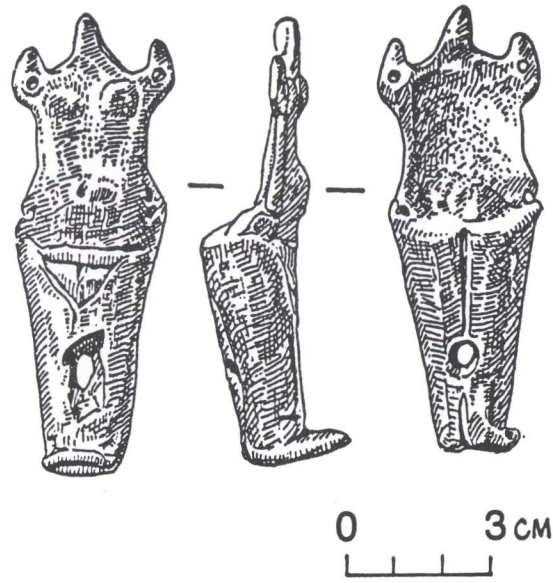


Figure 2 : Female figurine

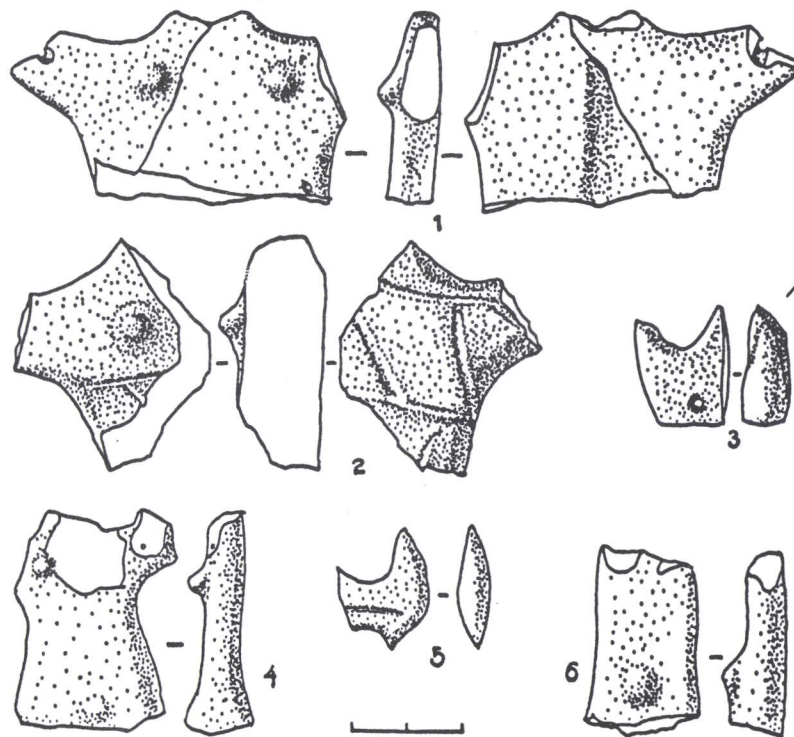


Figure 3 : Fragments of the upper parts of the anthropomorphic figurines

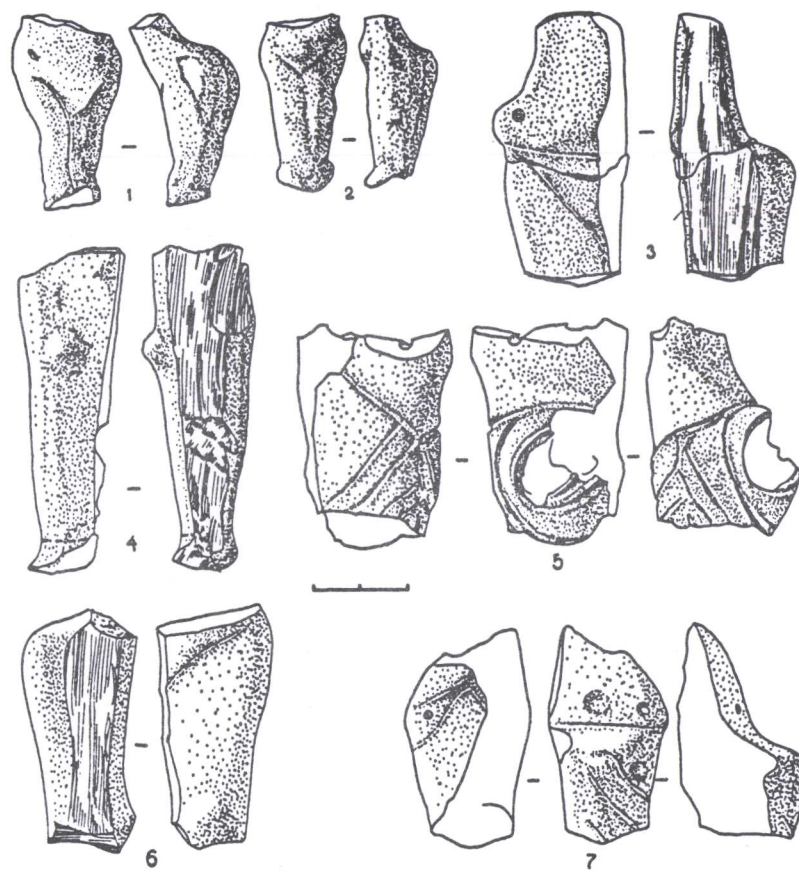


Figure 4 : Fragments of the lower parts of the female figurines

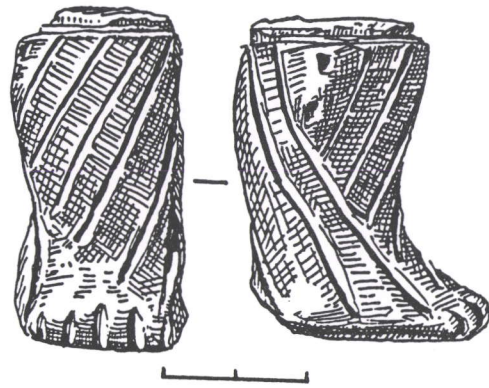


Figure 5 : Fragment of a leg of an anthropomorphic figurine

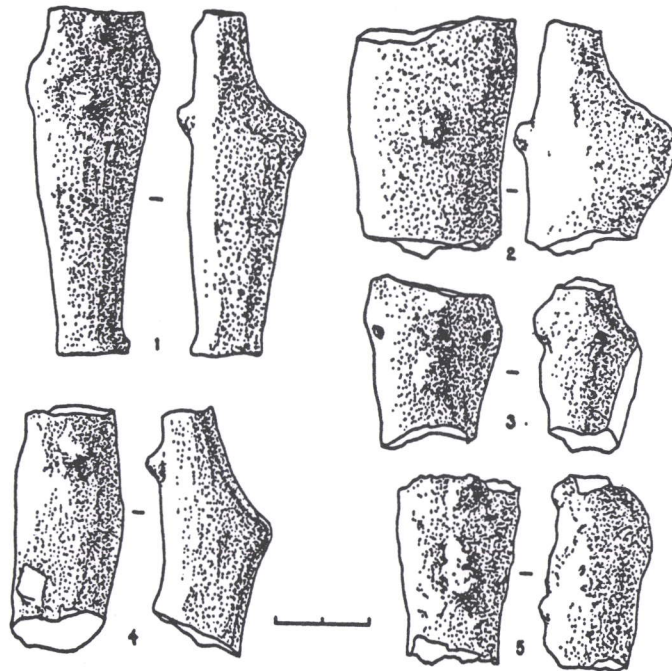


Figure 6 : Fragments of the figurines with male signs

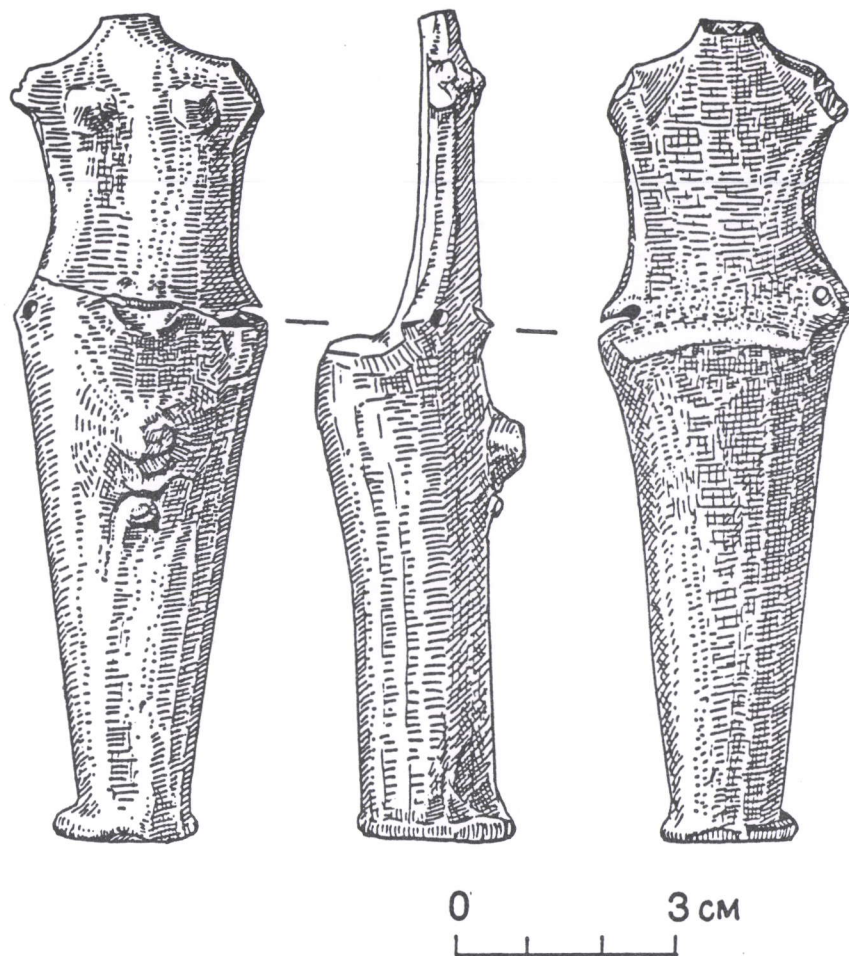


Figure 7 : Bisexual figurine

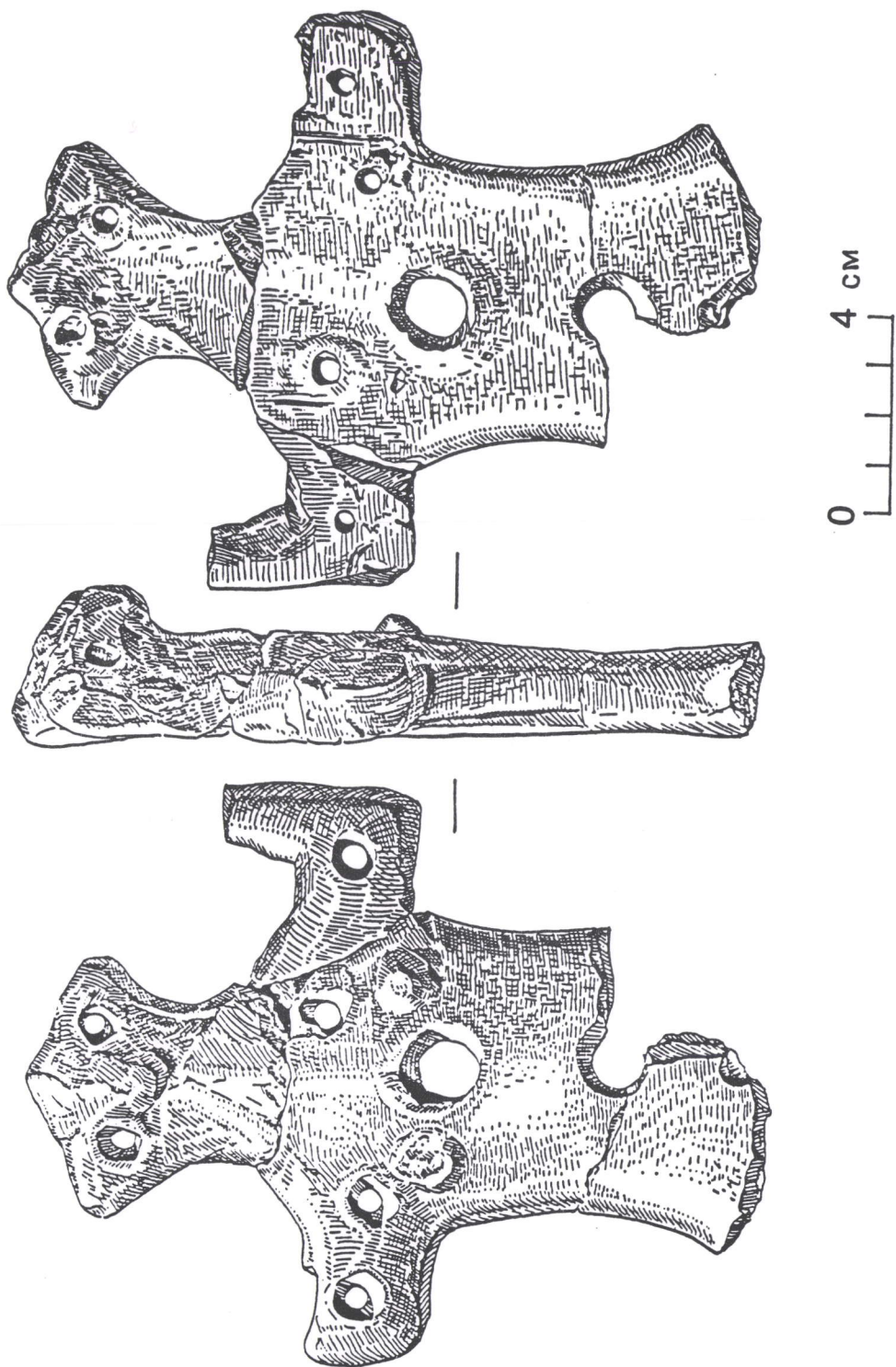


Figure 8 : Fragment of a large anthropomorphic figurine

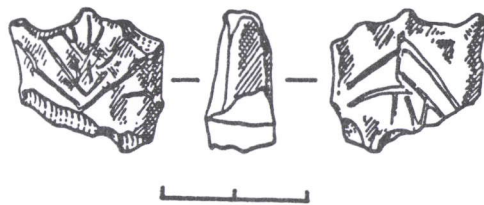


Figure 9 : Fragment of a miniature clay "altar"

