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ARCHAEOLOGY

BEGINNINGS OF THE NEOLITHIC IN TRANSYLVANIA: A FRAGMENTARY FIGURINE FROM LIMBA-OARDA DE JOS-BORDANE (ALBA COUNTY)

Abstract: The discovery of a fragmentary figurine within a sunken structure in the *Bordane* sector of the Limba-Oarda de Jos archaeological site (Alba County) contributes to the understanding of the cultural and chronological position of the earliest Early Neolithic horizon in the Middle Mureş Valley. The fragmentary piece, of which only the lower part (the legs and the beginning of the abdomen) has been preserved and which appears to have been intentionally broken, represents a female figurine with evident steatopygia features. The modelling of its forms and the treatment of its surfaces reveal distinctive traditions and techniques commonly found among anthropomorphic representations discovered at contemporary sites associated with the earliest phase of the *Starčevo-Criş Cultural Complex* (phase I), alternatively known as: the *Gura Baciului group* (of the Protostarčevo Culture), the *Precriş Culture*, or the more recently accepted term: *White-on-Red Painted Pottery* (WRPP). The anthropomorphic figurative art characteristic of the material culture in the settlements of the first Neolithic colonists north of the Danube, though relatively scarce, preserves archetypal traditions specific to the original areas of southern Balkan Peninsula and even Anatolia. The typological and stylistic analysis of the artifact is complemented by a thorough investigation of the clay paste used in its modelling, as well as the surface treatments applied (slip coating, burnishing, painting etc.), revealing previously undocumented aspects of the piece's manufacture. Based on the obtained data, the authors raise several questions regarding the figurine's origin - namely, whether it should be interpreted as a locally produced item or as an artifact crafted in the original homelands of the earliest waves of Neolithization in the territories south of the Danube.

Keywords: *Early Neolithic, Mureş Valley, anthropomorphic female figurine, steatopygia, archetypes, migration.*

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1. THE CONTEXT

As previous publications have emphasized the cultural and chronological particularities and successions at the site of Limba-Oarda de Jos¹ - particularly the deposits belonging to the earliest Early Neolithic horizon in Transylvania, located at the base of the archaeological layer in the *Bordane* sector - we will merely note here that the

¹ PAUL/CIUȚĂ 1999, 66-67; CIUȚĂ 2000, 51-101; CIUȚĂ 2001, 9-26; CIUȚĂ 2005; CIUȚĂ 2009a, 65-88; CIUȚĂ 2009b, 219-233; CIUȚĂ 2015; CIUȚĂ/TUDORIE 2022; CIUȚĂ/TUDORIE 2024, 30-32.



Fig. 1. Bordane sector during the rescue excavations in 2016. Aerial photograph (a), Photogrammetry (b). The yellow arrow indicates Complex 427.

way in which the earliest Neolithic occupation was delineated has been shaped by the development of both systematic and preventive archaeological investigations².

The archaeological site is located in the south-western corner of the Transylvanian Depression, at the crossroads of several natural communication routes, the most important of which is the Mureș River. More precisely, the site is located between the confluence points of two major tributaries, the Sebeș River downstream and the Ampoi River upstream, about 2 km south of the centre of Alba Iulia. The archaeological deposits lie on a flood-free terrace, bordered to the west by Oarda de Jos (Alba Iulia municipality), to the east by the village of Limba (Ciugud Village), and to the south by the slopes of Berc Hill. The Mureș River provides a connection, through the Corridor that begins right next to this site, with Banat, the Pannonian region, and even the area of the Iron Gates on the Danube. To the north and east, it connects with the rest of Transylvania. To the east, through the valleys of the Secașul Mare and the Cibin Rivers, it links southern Transylvania with Oltenia via the Olt Gorge or Jiului Gorge³.

The most complete stratigraphic sequence is found in the *Bordane* sector, where within 2.4 m of deposits all cultural-chronological sequences are represented, ranging from the earliest Early Neolithic horizon: *Gura Baciului Group*, *White on Red Painted Pottery (WRPP)* or *Precriș Culture* to Vinča B phase. During the systematic investigations carried out between 1995 and 2001 in this sector, *WRPP* occupation was identified at the base of the archaeological layer, in sunken features located beneath the Starčevo-Criș IIIB level. Above these, the Vinča A3, Vinča A3-B1, and Vinča B1 levels were documented. The ceramic and lithic materials specific to this horizon were identified in 1998 within the yellow loess layer. It is noteworthy that the entire *WRPP* stratum lies in the yellow loess, which

had been interpreted as *archaeologically sterile* between 1995 and 1997. The typology of the white-painted decoration and the lithic tools reveal analogies in most *WRPP* sites both north and south of the Danube⁴.

Preventive excavations for the A10 highway *Sebeș-Turda*, carried out in 2016, allowed large-scale research units, ensuring full investigation of Neolithic features. In the *Bordane* sector - situated at the edge of the terrace, near to the river (**Fig. 1**) - excavation was systematic due to its complexity. In the North-Eastern part of the sector, affected by terrace-edge erosion, features with *red-ware*, *white-painted pottery*, and a figurative representation were identified (**Fig. 1-2**).

As previously presented on various occasions, the complexes belonging to the earliest Neolithic horizon within the *Bordane* sector - characterized by *red-ware* pottery and white-painted pottery on a red-ware background - are grouped in cluster-like formations. At least two such groupings have been identified⁵. The Complex (Cpx.) 427, together with Cpx. 434 and Cpx. 434A - all located precisely on the edge of the terrace (**Fig. 3**) and showing signs of erosion on their northern sides - belong to *Group B*, as defined at the time of publishing the first materials featuring white-painted decoration on a red background⁶. Based on the way these sunken features (relatively circular pits, overlapping features) overlap, we do not exclude the possibility that they were part of a single residential complex, similar to those investigated at *Gura Baciului*⁷ *Miercurea Sibiului*⁸, *Ocna Sibiului-Triguri*⁹, *Șeușa-La Căraea Morii*¹⁰, and *Cristian*¹¹.

² CIUTĂ 2005; CIUTĂ/TUDORIE 2022.

³ CIUTĂ/TUDORIE 2024, 30-32.

⁴ CIUTĂ 2001; CIUTĂ 2005; CIUTĂ 2009; CIUTĂ/TUDORIE 2022.

⁵ CIUTĂ/TUDORIE 2022.

⁶ CIUTĂ/TUDORIE 2022, Fig. 3.

⁷ VLASSA 1972, 8. fig. 14/2; LAZAROVICI/MAXIM 1995.

⁸ LUCA *et alii* 2008

⁹ PAUL 1989, 3-28; CIUTĂ 2005, 69-71.

¹⁰ CIUTĂ 2005, 30-71; CIUTĂ 2009, 41.

¹¹ LUCA 2015; LUCA *et alii* 2014.



Fig. 2. The Complex 427 during outline tracing, view from the south (a), and during excavation, view from the northwest (b).



Fig. 3. Complex 427 at the completion of the excavation.

The ceramic materials recovered from the excavation of Cpx. 427, *red-ware* type (**Fig. 4**), are typical for this horizon and comparable (contemporary) to those from Cpx. 271¹². However, at the current stage of material processing¹³, white-painted decoration is absent¹⁴.

Among the inventory, two ceramic artifacts stood out due to their morphology, colour, and appearance. At first glance,



Fig. 4. *Red-ware* ceramic materials from Cpx. 427.

¹² CIUȚĂ/TUDORIE 2022.

¹³ The processing of materials from Complex 427 has not been fully completed.

¹⁴ The absence of white on red painted decoration in the inventory of some complexes within this horizon does not automatically imply - as some researchers have been inclined to assume - their affiliation with the so-called *Monochrome* horizon (IA at Gh. Lazarovici – LAZAROVICI 1984, 49-52; LAZAROVICI/MAXIM 2005). See about the problematic KRAUß 2009; KRAUß *et alii* 2014, 52.

they appeared to be two slightly elongated hemispheres; however, upon aligning their flattened surfaces, it became evident that they had been broken in antiquity. Following a light cleaning, the pieces were joined, resulting in a fragmentary figurine - specifically, its lower portion. From the first direct observations, it became clear that we were dealing with a unique and exceptional artifact belonging to anthropomorphic figurative art (**Fig. 5-7**). Its morphology and the specific treatment of its surfaces suggested its affiliation with very ancient archetypal models, showing clear parallels with examples from the southern Balkans and even from Asia Minor (Anatolia)¹⁵. Understanding how the "Neolithic Package" expanded from the Near East to Europe continues to be a key issue in archaeological and anthropological studies, within this broader framework, the interpretation of anthropomorphic figurines - most of which depict female figures - plays a crucial role in understanding symbolic systems and cultural dynamics associated with the Neolithic expansion.



Fig. 5. Anthropomorphic female figurine, top-front view (photo: R. Totoianu).

¹⁵ VLASSA 1972, 22-27; BUDJA 2003, 115-130; CIUȚĂ 2005, 100-108; CIUȚĂ 2009, 71.

2. FIGURINE DESCRIPTION

The piece can be classified as a small find, measuring less than 5 cm in length and 4 cm in width (**Fig. 5-7**). The artefact has a light brown-beige overall tone. Both legs of the figurine are entirely preserved, along with a very small portion of the lower abdominal area, which appears to have been modelled in an extremely tight manner, with a circular or elliptical cross-section. The legs are rendered symmetrically, in the elegant form of elongated hemispheres with ample volume, lacking any indication of knees or joints. Each leg is essentially formed as a single volumetric unit, with the lower end flattened into a relatively circular plane, slightly thickened at the edges to suggest the character's soles. The

exaggerated volume of the two hemispheres that make up the lower part of the body suggests excessive adipose tissue - an evident steatopygia. On the upper dorsal side of both legs, there is an unusually modelled elongation toward the back (the buttocks), likely intended to represent the gluteal muscles. This exaggerated extension recalls, as we shall see below, similar female figurines from the original Neolithic cultural areas. Even in the absence of any additional sexual markers, combined with the way the two hemispheres are joined, leaves no doubt as to the female gender attribution of the figurine. It is noteworthy that the two legs are distinct and not fused, displaying a clearly defined space between them (**Fig. 5-7**).

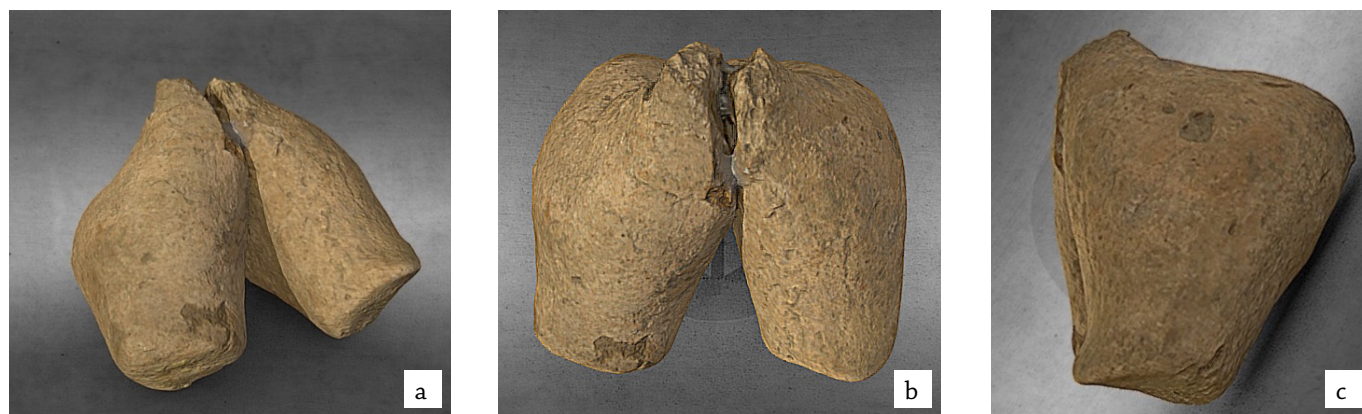


Fig. 6. The figurine from Limba-Oarda de Jos as featured in the Sketchfab presentation: seated position (a), standing position – front view (b) standing position – lateral view (source: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/starcevo-ae8d84f5b0cd4e68be2c8526cc6cd493>)

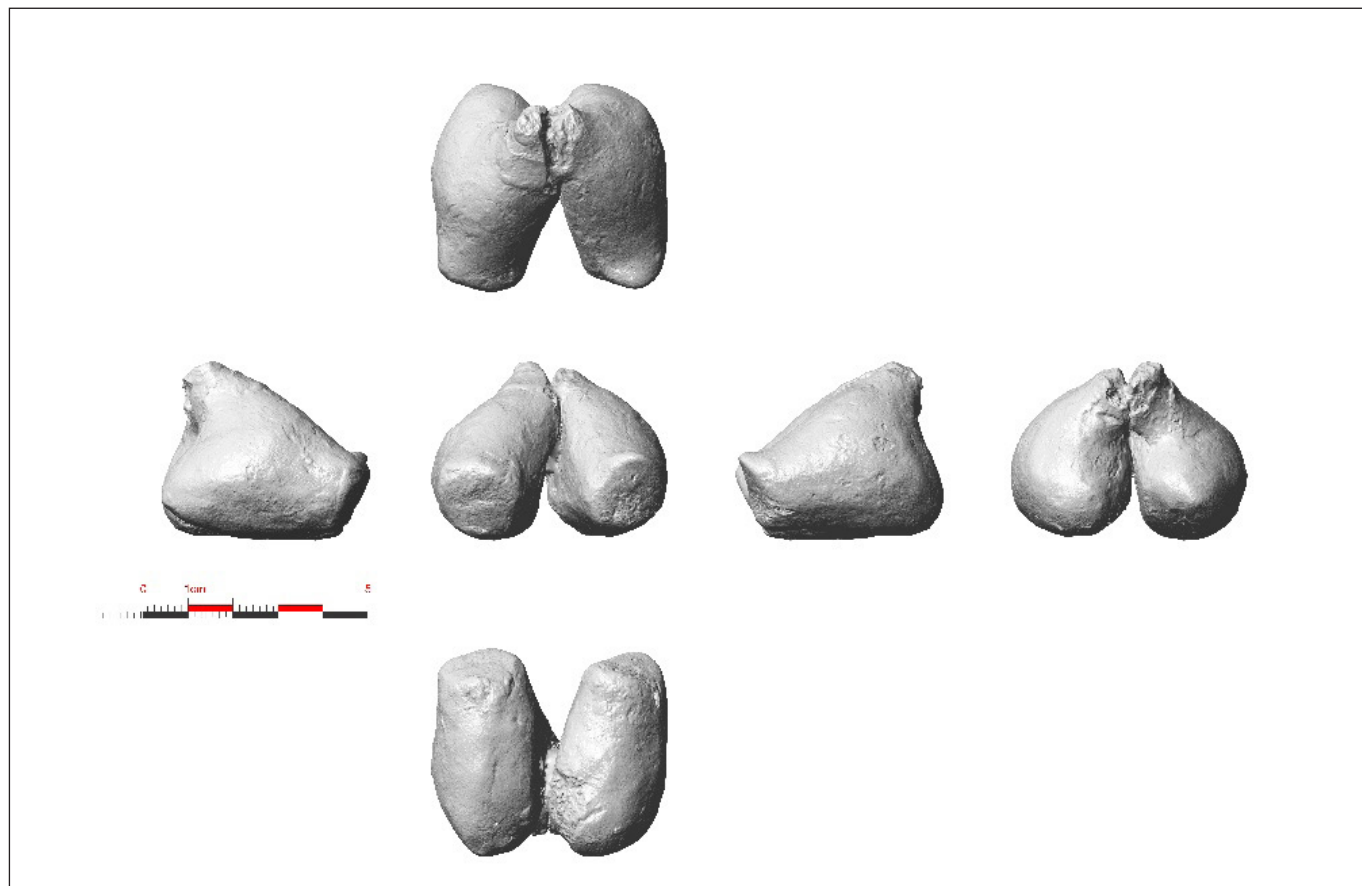


Fig. 7. Anthropomorphic female figurine from Limba-Oarda de Jos-Bordane, multiple view.

The pronounced lateral expansion of the hips and buttocks, contrasted with the exceptionally narrow representation of the waist, produces a somewhat disproportionate aspect characteristic of this category of figurines. Despite its small dimensions, the artefact reflects careful craftsmanship, marked by elegance and a refined understanding of form and volume.

The highly complex morphology of the piece (**Fig. 6**), along with the need to capture its most intimate spatial details, led us to employ 3D scanning as the optimal method of documentation. This allowed for the creation of a Sketchfab model, suitable for accurately and thoroughly capturing even the finest morphological features of the artifact¹⁶.

This raises the first question: was the figurine used (or displayed) in a standing or seated position? The flattening of the lower part into two circular "soles" with thickened edges -intended to enhance stability - suggests that it stood upright. Moreover, direct experimentation demonstrates that, regardless of how its centre of gravity might have been distributed - depending on the shape of the missing upper part - it could indeed be positioned upright. A careful analysis of the figurine's axis (in lateral view), combined with further tests regarding its stability, indicates that the figurine from Limba-Oarda de Jos, while belonging to the category of upright-standing figurines (**Fig. 6/b-c**), could also have been displayed (or used) in a seated position (**Fig. 6/a**)! The stability of the figurine depends on the distribution of its centre of gravity.

This dual potential for display is further supported by the manner in which the gluteal muscles are rendered - through an exaggerated outward extension. This modelling approach not only enhanced the figurine's overall stability but also, as we shall see below, evokes parallels with figurines from the Anatolian cultural sphere. In conclusion, we propose the hypothesis that the figurine could have been used, within the context of the procedures for which it was created, both in a standing and a seated position.

Close examination of the figurine's surface, as revealed through 3D scanning, has brought to light another remarkable detail. Impressions left by a very fine fibre weave



Fig. 8. Detail showing the impressions of woven textile fibres on both soles of the figurine.

¹⁶ To this end, we were supported by our colleague Dr. Călin Șuteu (GigaPixel Ltd.), who conducted a high-resolution 3D scan of the artifact, resulting in a highly satisfactory and, arguably, remarkable outcome.

- likely a piece of textile - can be observed on both soles of the figurine¹⁷. These impressions suggest that the figurine was placed on the textile while the clay was still soft, at the end of the modelling process (**Fig. 8**). Further analysis of the type of weave will, we believe, provide new insights into textile craftsmanship within the earliest Neolithic horizon north of the Danube.

Despite its fragmentary state, the general morphology of the figurine demonstrates a notable complexity and a thoroughly considered artistic conception on the part of the modeller, indicative of substantial experience in this craft, as evidenced by both the surface treatment and the applied manufacturing technology.

TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS

There are some technological aspects regarding the manufacturing of the figurine from Limba-Oarda de Jos, showing the lower body, specifically the buttocks area, modelled in steatopygia form, that are to be taken into consideration.

Related to its general aspect, we can say that it can be framed in the fine category, although, as it can be easily noticed in the detailed photos of the fragmentation area (**Fig. 9-10**), small pieces of gravel, an element that might be connected more likely with the semi-fine category. But, in our case, there are also other attributes that link this figurine with an important role for the Early Neolithic community, which were taken into consideration when "she" was manufactured.

The colour of the figurine is very light brown, covered with a smoothed whitish brown slip and it was tempered with sand with small gravels, silt, and chaff. The firing was good oxidating. The texture and colour closely resemble the Donja Branjevina, "Red-Haired Goddess"¹⁸. In comparison with the general ceramic composition observed in this complex - characterised by a predominantly black core resulting from the widespread use of chaff as a temper in the original paste - the fractured surfaces of the figurine suggest either a different technological process or the use of a distinct type of clay, with a texture resembling that of adobe, which is unusual for figurative artefacts in Transylvania. This latter observation raises the possibility that the artefact was not locally produced, but rather imported from another region, most likely from the Danube region.

Another aspect that first was noticed at a macroscopic examination and then, on a microscopic one¹⁹, was the fact that near the area that came of the surface there was a trace of red colour. During the microscopic examination (**Fig. 11**) it was noticed that, more likely it was a trace of ochre (**Fig. 12**). Due to the conservation state of the piece, other traces of red colour weren't identified, and at this moment, we can't state if the presence of ochre was intentional on the surface of the

¹⁷ This detail was verified by means of a magnifying lens, under low-light conditions and with the aid of an oblique light source, confirming the presence of the fingerprint.

¹⁸ KARMANSKI 2005.

¹⁹ We want to thank dr. Ionuț Tăușan, from the Faculty of Sciences from *Lucian Blaga* University of Sibiu for facilitating the access to the microscope.



Fig. 9. Detail of the fragmented area of the figurine.



Fig. 10. Delimitation and optical magnification of the areas where small pebble fragments were identified.

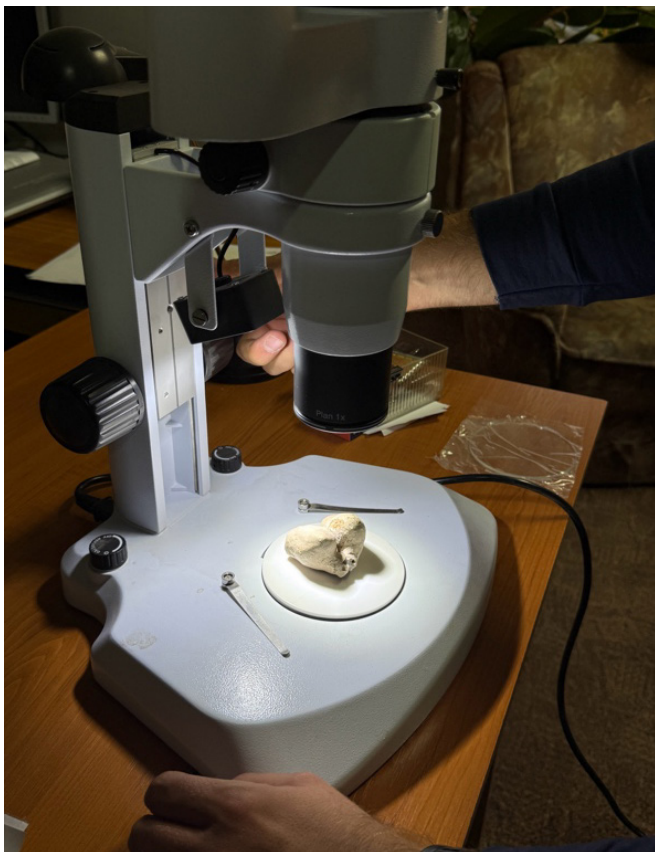


Fig. 11. Microscopical examination of the figurine.



Fig. 12. Delimitation and optical magnification of the areas where traces of possibly ochre were identified.



Fig. 13. Fragmentary female figurine made of steatite, discovered in level I at Baciú–Gura Baciului (after VLASSA 1972 – a, and LAZAROVICI/MAXIM 1995 - b).

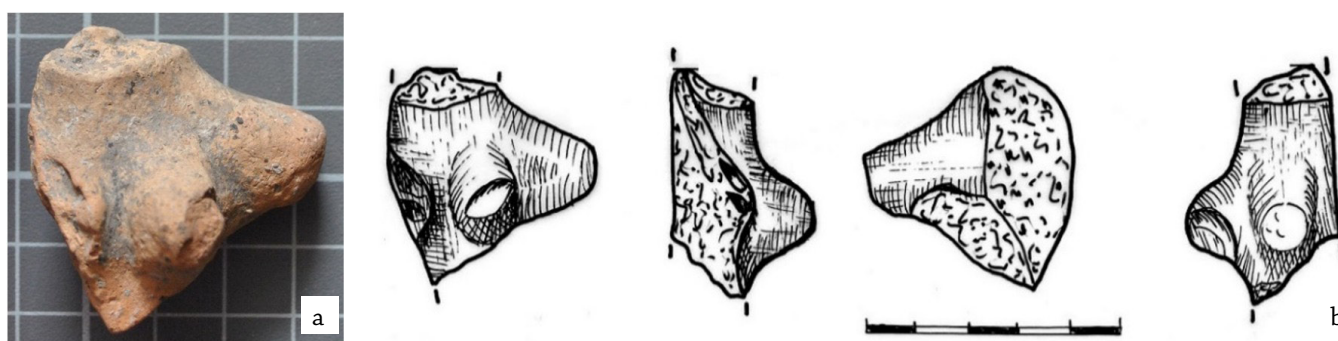


Fig. 14. Fragmentary female figurine, discovered in surface dwelling no. 1 at Şeuşa–La Cărearea Morii.

statuette, or it was generated by the presence of the mineral inside the clay.

But intentional use of ochre on statuettes is documented since the Palaeolithic era²⁰, such as the well-known case of Venus of Willendorf. For the Early Neolithic period, once again there is an analogy with the statuette from Donja Branjevina²¹, which still preserves traces of red in her hair.

The presence of ochre for décor was already documented at Çatalhöyük²², or the Neolithic pottery from Vinča²³ through Raman Spectrometry, IR and X-ray identification which proved that yellow-to-red decor deposited on the external faces of pottery is made of ochre, or on the Neolithic figurines from Knossos²⁴. Also, Kościuk-Załupka²⁵ investigates in her volume whether the use of ochre can be considered part of the “Neolithic package” or whether it is a continuous tradition from hunter-gatherer populations to sedentary agricultural ones. She also points out that chemical analyses have shown that it is possible to differentiate ochre according to its source, which paves the way for identifying mobility and exchange routes between communities and the Carpathian Basin region shows great chronological and cultural diversity, and the emergence of agriculture did not immediately replace previous practices related to ochre.

All the examples mentioned above connect the discovery of the figurine from Limba-Oarda de Jos to a broader geographical area, but also to large scale cultural phenomenon, not only considering its shape and typology, but also the manufacturing methods and resources used by the prehistoric communities.

TYOLOGICAL ANALOGIES

To understand the place and role of this figurine within the Early Neolithic landscape of Transylvania, we must refer to artifacts discovered in deposits belonging to the same cultural-chronological horizon. From the outset, it is important to emphasize that anthropomorphic figurines are extremely rare in WRPP (Precriş culture) sites in Transylvania! Only one fragmentary figurine, from steatite, has been found on the first level at Baciú-Gura Baciului²⁶ (**Fig. 13**), none at Ocna Sibiului-Triguri²⁷, none at Cristian I²⁸, and just one fragmentary figurine at Şeuşa–La Cărearea Morii²⁹ (**Fig. 14**).

²⁶ Regrettably, the authors of the Gura Baciului research did not pay sufficient attention to the artefact, particularly illustrated in **Fig. 13** (VLASSA 1972; LAZAROVICI/MAXIM 1995), possibly made of steatite—which displays a considerably altered surface condition.

²⁷ Here, however, miniature figurines appear that exhibit hybrid characteristics, both animal and human PAUL 1989, 5-11.

²⁸ LUCA 2015; LUCA et alii 2014, 13-27.

²⁹ “At Şeuşa, within the Precriş layer, a single fragmentary female bust was discovered, made of ceramic and small in size. It preserves one prominent breast, the second one fragmentarily, the right arm, and a portion of the neck base (pl. CVII/7). This figurine shows clear analogies with the anthropomorphic representations of the Protosesklo culture in Thessaly and Macedonia, as well as

²⁰ PETRU 2006.

²¹ KARMANSKI 2005.

²² TSORAKI 2020; SCHOTSMANS et alii 2021.

²³ MIOČ et alii 2007.

²⁴ VALIENTE 2023.

²⁵ KOŚCIUK-ZAŁUPKA 2023.

Only the figurine from Gura Baciului (**Fig. 13**) and the one from Șeușa broadly correspond to the type represented by the Limba-Bordane figurine type, with the observation that in both cases only the upper part of the torso has been preserved, featuring prominent breasts and short arms extended in a horizontal alignment.

At the time of publishing the comprehensive study devoted to the Precriș culture, we noted that: *"The female figurative art (...), rendered with remarkable care and realism, of Anatolian influence and featuring well-defined sexual characteristics, stands in contrast to the stylization present in similar representations from later periods"*³⁰.

For a long time, Muntenia (Vallachia) had been considered out of the initial Neolithic starting process³¹, but the recent research from the Teleorman Valley brought useful information about the beginnings of the Neolithic in Southern Romania, chronologically synchronous with discoveries from the West side of the Olt Valley from Cârcea and Grădinile³². According to the author of the discoveries, three artefacts are attributed to *"the Gura Baciului-Cârcea cultural aspect"*, among which stands out a fragment representing the prominently rendered buttock of a figurine modelled from two separate pieces (**Fig. 15**). The same author makes a clear distinction between the figurines discovered in the earliest Neolithic level and those from the subsequent one, belonging to the Starčevo-Criș culture³³.

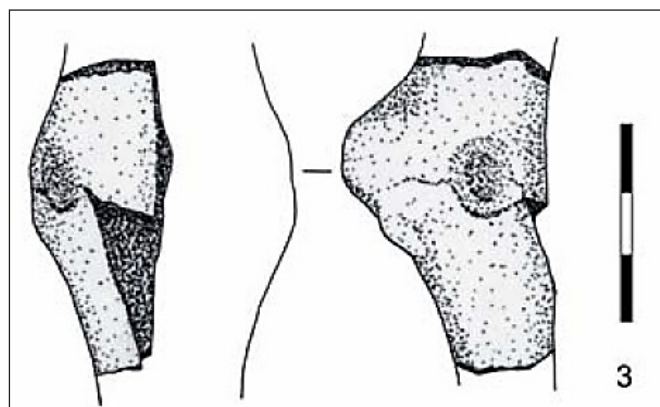


Fig. 15. A fragmentary figurine belonging to the *Gura Baciului-Cârcea cultural group* from Măgura-Buduiasca (after ANDREESCU/MIREA 2008).

with examples from *Donja Branjevina*" - CIUȚĂ 2005, 106. Other information at: CIUȚĂ 2000, 51-101; CIUȚĂ 2009, 71.

³⁰ CIUȚĂ 2005, 106; CIUȚĂ 2009, 71.

³¹ According to the authors of the research, *the reasons for which having been the configuration of the ancient environment, the Black Sea Neolithic transgression for Dobrogea and South-Western Muntenia or, more probably, the lack of research* (ANDREESCU/MIREA 2008, 58).

³² ANDREESCU/MIREA 2008.

³³ The figurines attributed to the *Gura Baciului-Cârcea cultural aspect* „exhibit a highly schematic treatment, particularly evident in the head, which is rendered with minimal anatomical detail. Arms are typically absent or represented as small lateral protuberances, while the torso appears elongated and flat. The pelvic region is prominently emphasized, often through the exaggerated modelling of the buttocks and, in most instances, the hips as well. The legs are either separated by incised lines or merged into a pedestal-like base. Female identity is suggested by the presence of modelled breasts, and in several cases, pregnancy is indicated either by a swollen abdomen or by a distinct abdominal protrusion" - ANDREESCU 2007, 54-55, 57.

It is also necessary to examine the early Neolithic sites located south of the Danube, whose development was synchronous (or earlier!) with that north of the river. In a relatively recent study dedicated to the typology and chronology of Early Neolithic anthropomorphic figurative art in the Balkans, J. Pavuk and A. Bakamska present the representative figurines of the *Gălăbniș Group* - one of the key groups within the *Protostarčevo culture*³⁴ or, more recently accepted: *White-on-Red Painted Pottery* (WRPP) groups horizon - located along the Struma Valley. Actually, this valley functioned as one of the principal northward routes for the expansion of Protosesklo culture communities from Thessaly towards the Danubian regions³⁵.

Of the series of figurines, some are typologically similar to the one discovered at Limba-Oarda de Jos (**Fig. 16/3-8**); however, one figurine in particular - through the rendering of the legs, the volumetric treatment of the hips and buttocks, and the tightly modelled abdomen - presents strong analogies to the point of near identity (**Fig. 16/3**).

According to J. Pavuk and A. Bakamska, the stratigraphy at Gălăbniș demonstrates that the Protostarčevo anthropomorphic figurines differ from those of the Starčevo culture (!) and are not found at sites along the Danube corridor³⁶. While we fully concur with the first assertion, regarding with the absence of Protostarčevo figurative art in the northern Danubian region, the figurine from Limba-Oarda de Jos, along with those from Gura Baciului (**Fig. 13**), Donja Branjevina (**Fig. 19**), and Șeușa-*La Cârarea Morii* (**Fig. 14**), appears to modify this view - a point we shall develop further in the following discussion.

According to the authors, "the most representative figurine of the early phase of the Gălăbniș group's plastic art (*Type A*) is a small female figurine characterized by a massive seat and short legs ending at the knees, as if depicted in a kneeling position. The upper arms are represented as stumps, the breasts appear as small protuberances, and the sexual features are marked by incised lines (**Fig. 16/3**). We consider this to be the type most closely related to the one discovered at Limba-Oarda de Jos. Based on the aforementioned figurine (*Type A*) and the pear-shaped type, the authors conclude a chronological synchronisation between the Proto/Pre-Sesklo cultures of Thessaly and the Protostarčevo culture of the Balkans³⁷.

More recently, within the WRPP groups of the Struma Valley, in the southwest Bulgaria, several fragmentary figurines were discovered at the eponymous site of the Ilindentsi group³⁸, displaying also clear similarities with our piece (**Fig. 17**). During the excavations of the Early Neolithic

³⁴ Including Gălăbniș, Slatina, Nevestino and Anzabegovo-Vršnik I groups. The Proto-Starčevo culture, as defined by Dragoslav Srejšević, includes the Donja Branjevina, Grivac, and Gura Baciului groups in the Danubian and north-Danubian regions, to which are added the groups from the Struma Valley area - Gălăbniș, Slatina, Kovachevo, Ilindentsi - as well as those from the Vardar-Morava corridor, such as Nea Nikomedea and Blagotin (PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 44-46).

³⁵ PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 44-46; GREBSKA-KULOW/ZIDAROV 2021.

³⁶ PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 44-46; GREBSKA-KULOW/ZIDAROV 2021, 44-45.

³⁷ PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 54-56.

³⁸ GREBSKA-KULOW/ZIDAROV 2020; GREBSKA-KULOW/ZIDAROV 2021; GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021

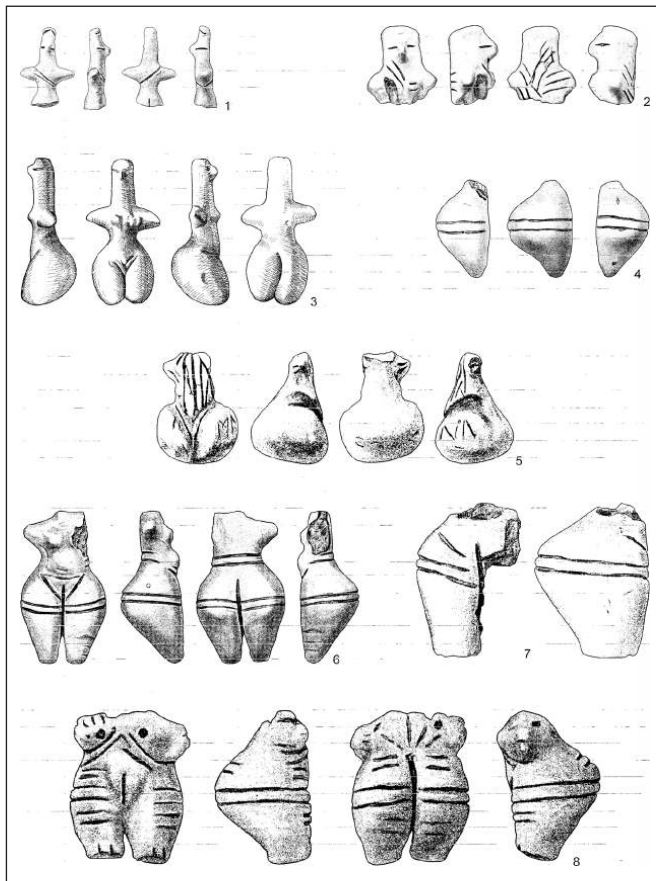


Fig. 16. The anthropomorphic plastic art of the *Gălăbnik Cultural Group* 1-2, 6-7 – Type B1, 3-5 – Type A, 8 – Type B2 (after PAVÚK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 52, Abb.1).

settlement at Ilindentsi, the first Early Neolithic phase is characterised by the dominance of red-slipped and white-on-red painted pottery, small artefacts as anthropomorphic figurines were acquired. Building on previous typological classifications proposed for the anthropomorphic figurines discovered at all early Neolithic sites in the Struma Valley³⁹, the authors identified the first group: *Group 1 – figurines with enlarged hips and buttocks (steatopygia)*, represented by four figurines (**Fig. 17/1-4**) made of several segments (at least three) with a bipartite lower part (two buttocks and legs) and a torso with head but in all four examples only one of the symmetrically made lower parts is preserved⁴⁰. Two figures are certainly seated, and one is standing, two of the figurines are decorated with incised ornaments⁴¹, while the other two are decorated with impressed dots⁴² (**Fig. 17/1-4**).

³⁹ The reviewed typologies are quite diverse, defined through the choice of different criteria (figurine posture, shape of torso and neck, decoration). It is clear however that these classifications are heavily influenced by the preservation status of the objects - GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021, 3-4.

⁴⁰ GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021, 4-5.

⁴¹ The incisions have remains of white paste, a feature that must have created a stark contrast with the red coating of the surface GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021, 5.

⁴² The best-preserved figurine (**Fig.17/4**) has exaggerated thighs and buttocks, and well formed foot with an expanded base. There are traces of small, round punctures in the area of the pubic triangle. The remains of a charred stick which was used to attach the two separately fashioned lower parts still remained on the inner side. This one appears to share the closest details with the figurine from Limba (comparison Fig. 6/c with Fig. 17/4b)

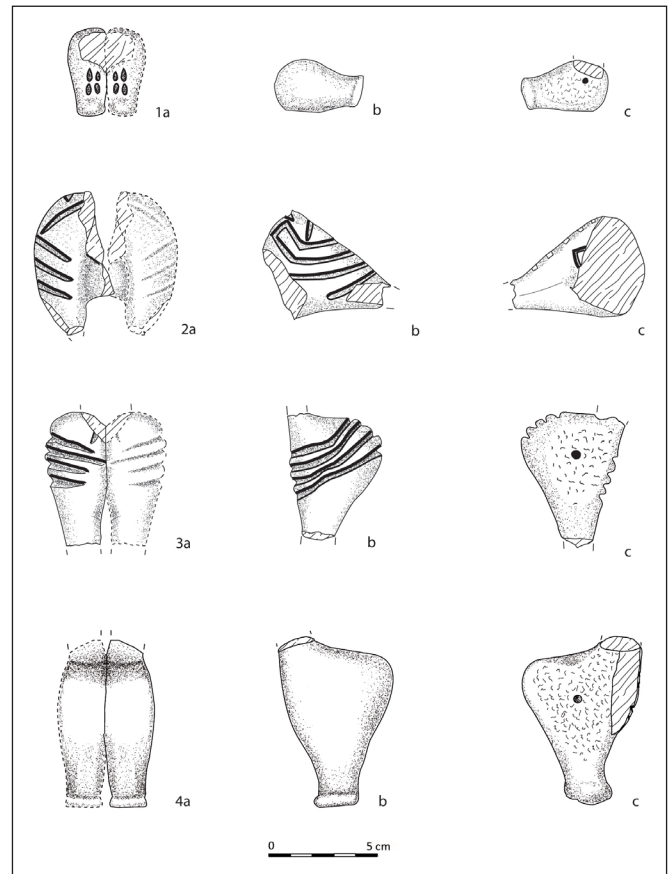


Fig. 17. Ilindentsi Group 1, anthropomorphic figurines with enlarged hips and buttocks (*steatopygia*) (after GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021, 6, Fig. 2).

Another group belonging to the WRPP horizon is the Slatina group⁴³, the northernmost along the Struma Valley route. This group also yields, from the earliest levels of its characteristic sites, a series of anthropomorphic figurines that fit within the same typological series as the Limba figurine (**Fig. 18**). Articulated three-dimensional figurines with enlarged hips and buttocks (*steatopygia*) with a great variety of types based on anatomical details (shaping the thighs, torso and head themselves), decoration and the body posture. It seems that the iconography of some figurines that developed along the Struma valley and in the area of Sofia found further development in the Carpathian Basin during the second half of the Early Neolithic period. And yet, does that necessarily imply unidirectional influence or could we begin discussing the reciprocity of the contacts, including the manifestation of certain Carpathian imports⁴⁴.

Among the figurative plastic representations that reveal typological and morphological similarities, reference must be made to the famous 'Red-Haired Goddess', discovered in the earliest Neolithic horizon at Donja Branjevina⁴⁵ (**Fig. 19**).

Another remarkable discovery, made at Blagotin in the Morava Valley, has brought to light two large ceramic figurines attributed to the earliest Neolithic occupation level of the site. Of particular interest is the morphological

⁴³ GREBSKA-KULOW/ZIDAROV 2021, 1001.

⁴⁴ GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021, 4-5.

⁴⁵ KARMANSKI 2005, 26, 83.

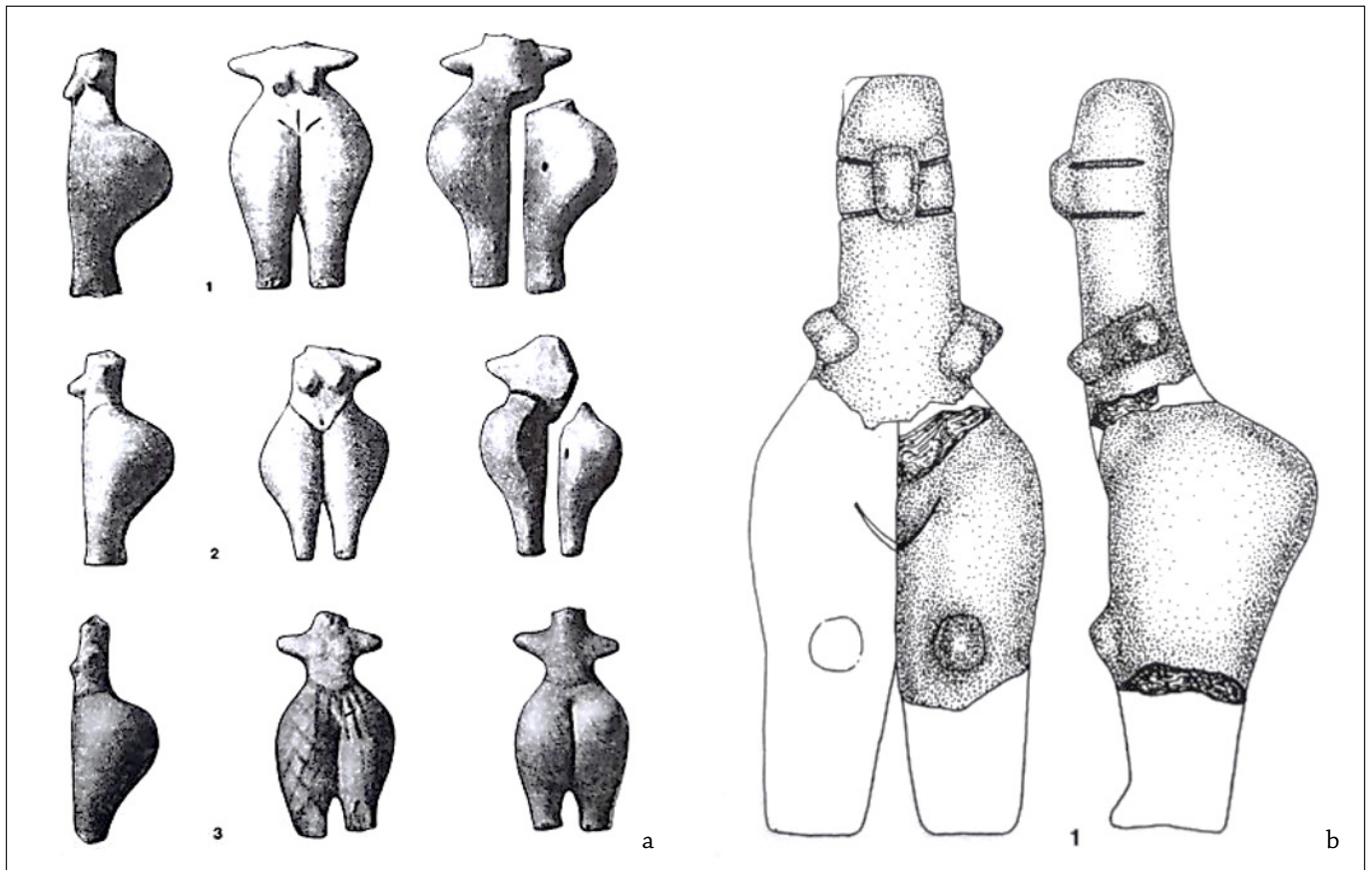


Fig. 18. Anthropomorphic figurines with enlarged hips and buttocks from Sofia and Sofia-Slatina (after HANSEN 2007, Taf. 166 (a) Taf. 165 (b)).

similarity between the figurine from Limba–Oarda de Jos and one of the two (fragmentary) figurines from Blagotin, the smallest one (**Fig. 20**). Including the quality of the ceramic fabric - characterized by the addition of numerous vegetal inclusions that impart a generally archaic appearance - appears to be a shared feature.

In a manner that remains relatively difficult to interpret at present, given the considerable geographical distance, we observe striking analogies between the figurine from

Limba–Oarda de Jos and those discovered within the early Protosesklo horizons at the site of Nea Nikomedeia. The rendering of the legs, the initiation of the narrow abdomen, and the position of the arms - assuming that the upper part of the Limba figurine was similar to that of the specimen from *Șeușa–La Cărarea Morii* - suggest possible strong cultural and chronological connections. Even the surface treatment reflects a comparable approach (**Fig. 21**). According to J. Pavuk and A. Bakamska, "the settlement of Nea Nikomedeia provides a valuable basis for establishing cultural synchronisation between the Protostarčevo culture in the Balkans and the Proto-/Pre-Sesklo cultural stage in Thessaly"⁴⁶.

S. Hansen argues that the figurines from Nea Nikomedeia reflect an independent formal language, with an emphasis on bodily volumetry, and tend rather to align with northern habitation groups, displaying significant differences from the figurine tradition of Thessaly⁴⁷.

The simple standing figurines from Nea Nikomedeia and Prodromos and Gălăbniț display common features, such as: a slender, accentuated waist, and short, simplified arms, resembling those of the female figurines from the Gălăbniț group⁴⁸. These features can also be observed in the figurines from Limba, Șeușa, and Gura Baciului.

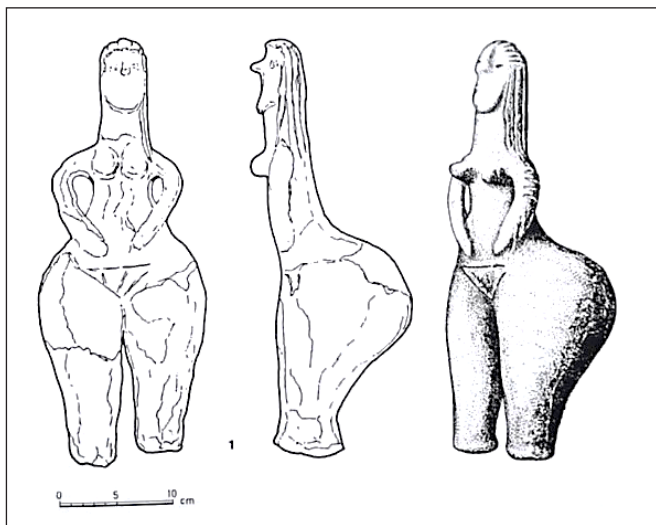


Fig. 19. The "Red-Haired Goddess" from Donja Branjevina (after HANSEN 2007, Taf. 115).

⁴⁶ PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 54-63.

⁴⁷ HANSEN 2007, 151-152; PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 54-63.

⁴⁸ PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 60-64



Fig. 20. Two large anthropomorphic figurines from Blagotin (after GREENFIELD/GREENFIELD 2014 - a, <https://www.facebook.com/archeoserbia/photos/stone-age-figurines-named-great-mothers-terracotta-neolithic-period-star%C4%8DDevo-cul/781052570723536/> - b).



Fig. 21. Early Neolithic anthropomorphic figurines from Nea Nikomedeia (after BUDJA 2003, 122, Fig. 6 - a and HANSEN 2007, 158, Abb. 70 - b).

We are convinced that a closer examination of both older and more recent literature concerning the beginnings of the Neolithic in the Balkan Peninsula would reveal many more southern analogies with our piece from Limba-Oarda de Jos. However, the examples presented above are, we believe, sufficient to demonstrate the origin and antiquity of the fragmentary figurine from the Mureş Valley.

CONCLUSIONS

Anthropomorphic figurines are an important indicator of cultural affiliation and contacts, and a characteristic attribute of prehistoric cultures in Southeast Europe, Anatolia and the Near East. They are one of the elements of the so-called "Neolithic package"⁴⁹. From a synthetic

perspective, one observes a remarkable persistence on the "Neolithic package" of the archetype represented by the figurines sharing the same morphological typology as the specimen discovered at Limba-Oarda de Jos, within a context attributed to the earliest Neolithic phase in Transylvania. This phase is characterized by the widespread presence of fine red-ware ceramics, often decorated with white-on-red painted motifs, and is contemporary with the earliest Neolithic occupations at Gura Baciului (level I), Ocna Sibiului (level I), and Cristian I.

We have observed the depiction of short legs, with an emphasis on broad hips and prominent buttocks, a narrow abdomen, and (most likely) horizontally extended arms—features initially characteristic of seated figurines, realistic type, especially those from Anatolia (e.g., Tell Halaf, Çatalhöyük - **Fig. 22** - etc.). We question whether the manner

⁴⁹ HANSEN 2016, 85–86

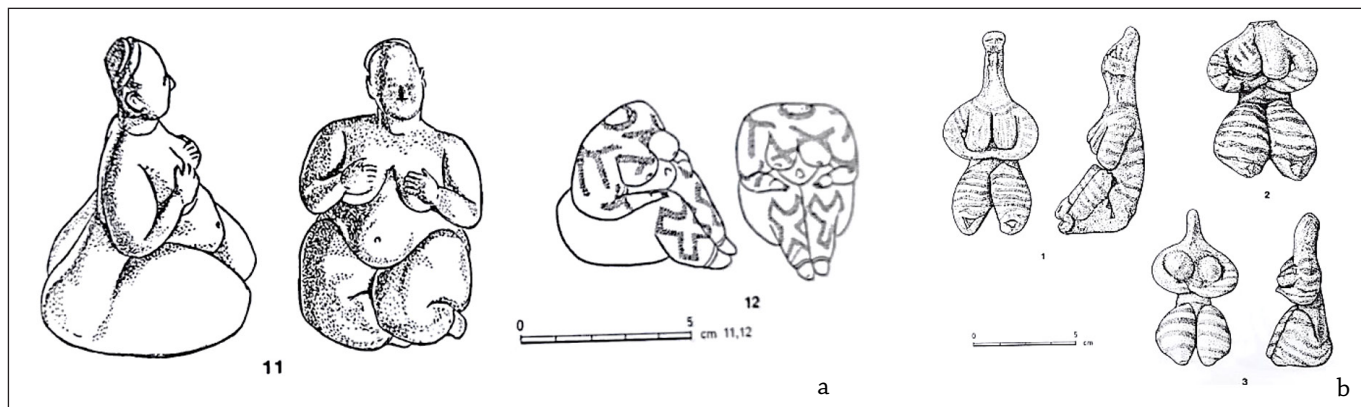


Fig. 22. Anthropomorphic figurines from Catal Höyük and Tell Halaf (after HANSEN 2007, Taf. 57 - a and HANSEN 2007, Taf. 42 - b).

in which the legs are represented might be interpreted as belonging to the type *with the legs bent under the waist* which provide important arguments for plausible links between Anatolia, the Middle East and the Balkans during the 7th–6th mill. BC⁵⁰. These forms evolve westward within the early Neolithic settlements of Thessaly (Protosesklo) and the Vardar–Morava and Struma–Iskar corridors (*Protostarcevo* or *White on Red Painted Pottery groups*) into standing figurines⁵¹, while preserving the exaggerated rendering of steatopygous traits, while also exhibiting a certain tendency toward schematization.

This phenomenon was observed by S. Hansen and illustrated synthetically in the table below (**Fig. 23**), in which he captured the evolution and transformation of early Neolithic female figurines in terms of form, dimensional proportions, and posture (seated or standing), tracing their development from the Near East to the Balkan region.

Figurines with enlarged buttocks and hips were rather popular during the Early and Middle Neolithic in the Balkans, as they were also during the Late Neolithic but with a rather modified shape.

As previously we noted: “a general feature, common to both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurative representations within the Precriș culture, is their small and very small dimensions⁵², with analogies found in the Protosesklo figurative art⁵³. The difficulty of capturing, reconstructing, and above all, understanding the spiritual phenomenon - previously highlighted by numerous scholars - derives from the reality that this aspect of prehistoric communities’ life, being non-fossilizable, manifests, in the best-case scenario, through the *opacity of the archaeological record*. This record, although it may have accompanied the phenomenon, cannot define or explain it, thus rendering access to its inner structures and fundamental motivations virtually impossible. We must, therefore, acknowledge - a

priori - the limits of our knowledge and, more importantly, the limits of our understanding, insofar as the meaning of any cultural act is unchangeably bound to its temporal and spatial context⁵⁴.

The most recent data from the investigation of the earliest Neolithic deposits at the Cristian I site⁵⁵, clearly establish the chronological synchronism between the horizon featuring white-on-red painted pottery background in Transylvania and similar cultural groups from the Danube Valey (Donja Branjevina), Vardar-Morava Couloir (Anzabegovo–Vršnik I, Divostin, Grivac⁵⁶), Struma Valley (Kovacevo, Ilindentsi Nevestino, Gălăbnik, Sofia-Slatina)⁵⁷, Morava Valley (Blagotin), and northern Bulgaria (Dzhuljunitsa)⁵⁸.

The routes of Neolithic penetration north of the Danube remain relatively poorly understood, with the territory of Oltenia playing a significant role in this northward expansion. Unfortunately, no new archaeological investigations addressing the onset of the Neolithic have been carried out in this region over the past three decades. As a result, the earlier discoveries made by M. Nica at Cârcea-Grădinile remain the only available point of reference. In his attempt to define the *Cârcea-Grădinile cultural group*, from Oltenia the author stated the following: *the Neolithic had been brought from the South, more precisely, from Thessaly, from the Protosesklo culture area, by a population that had followed the Struma-Isker Valleys up the Danube, from where they had got in Oltenia through Jiu and Olt Valleys*⁵⁹.

The newest results of archaeological investigations at the Limba–Bordane settlement, as well as at other sites in Transylvania (Gura Baciului, Ocna Sibiului, Miercurea Sibiului, Cristian I), allow us to broaden and revise the interpretation of the cultural, genetic, chronological, and territorial relationships of Neolithic cultures belonging to the earliest phase of the Neolithic in the Danube region.

The type of figurine discovered at Limba–Oarda de Jos, within the earliest habitation level associated with red ware and painted pottery, constitutes strong evidence supporting the relic of the cultural horizon in which it was created and

⁵⁰ GREBSKA-KULOW *et alii* 2021, 3.

⁵¹ We believe that a possible confirmation of this assertion may be provided by a figurine discovered in the first layer of the Dzhuljunitsa site, in central Bulgaria, which although it exhibits morphological analogies with the aforementioned pieces (including the one from Limba), retains the seated position (KRAUß *et alii* 2014, 69, fig. 24)

⁵² VLASSA 1972, 17; VLASSA 1980, 693; PAUL 1989, 5-11, 17 sqq; 1995, 48-51 sqq; LAZAROVICI/MAXIM 1995, 145 sqq; CIUTĂ 2000, 70-74; CIUTĂ 2005, 101.

⁵³ CIUTĂ 2000, 70-74; CIUTĂ 2005, 101.

⁵⁴ CIUTĂ 2005, 100.

⁵⁵ LUCA *et alii* 2022.

⁵⁶ HOREJS 2024.

⁵⁷ PAVUK/BAKAMSKA 2018, 44-46.

⁵⁸ KRAUß *et alii* 2014; DZHANFEZOVA *et alii* 2015

⁵⁹ NICA 1995, 11-28

	KARPATENBECKEN	WESTL. BALKAN	ÖSTL. BALKAN	GRIECHENLAND	ANATOLIEN	VORDERASIEN	
							SPAT
							CHALCOLITHIKUM MITTEL
							FRÜH
							NEOLITHIKUM SPAT MITTEL
							FRÜH
							PPN

Fig. 23. Overview of the figurines shape development (after HANSEN 2007, 363, Abb 202).

used - contemporary with cultural groups from the Balkans. From this type of representation, a new figurine tradition developed later during the advanced stages of the Starčevo-Criș-Körös culture, namely the so-called 'Venus' type (such as the example from Zăuan or those from the Körös region), which became highly widespread and persisted well into the early phases of the Vinča culture. This continuity is demonstrated by the Venus from Limba, found in the Vinča A2 layer at Limba-Oarda de Jos - Vărărie⁶⁰. The high frequency of these "Venus" figurines constitute a key indicator of cultural cohesion across the Balkans, the Danube basin, the Pannonian Plain, and Transylvania. This unity, though marked by regional variation, is continuously recognized and substantiated through common cultural features as a defining aspect of the Starčevo cultural sphere.

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⁶⁰ CIUTĂ/CIUTĂ 2024, 7-18

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