

Anthropomorphic statuettes from Cucuteni-Tripolye: some signs and symbols

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ABSTRACT – *Our article present anthropomorphic statuettes from the area of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture with signs and symbols related to sacred messages used during cultic ceremonies. We also present older and newer opinions on this subject. Signs and symbols help us to decipher some aspects of the religious life of that time.*

IZVLEČEK – *Članek predstavlja antropomorfne kipce iz področja kulture Cucuteni-Tripolye z znaki in simboli povezanimi s posvečenimi sporočili. Uporabljali so jih med obrednimi slavnostnimi. Predstavljamo tudi stare in nove domneve o tej temi. Znaki in simboli nam pomagajo razvozlati nekatere vidike religioznega življenja v tistem času.*

KEY WORDS – *Eneolithic; Cucuteni-Tripolye culture; symbols; signs*

Spread over an impressive area of more than 350 000 km² (Ellis 1984.12–14; Monah 1992.392) and lasting more than a millennium (Mantu 1998.187, Fig. 51), the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture is part of the last great Eneolithic/Chalcolithic complexes in central and southeastern Europe.

The large number of settlements, many of them extend over a wide area (those in Bessarabia and, especially the mega sites from Uman area have been interpreted as proto-cities: Šmagli 2001), elaborate architecture, fortifications and cult constructions, show a hierarchical organization of the settlements, the existence of tribal and cult centres, which play an important role in the control and movement of raw materials, such as salt, flint, copper or of finite products as pottery (Lazarovici & Lazarovici 2003. 412–424).

Magic religious practices play a central part in the life of the Cucuteni-Tripolye communities. Judging from the archaeological finds, their economy was mainly based on agriculture and livestock breeding. The finds reveal communal sanctuaries and house altars with abundant and diverse religious objects (Lazarovici 2003a).

Sanctuaries with monumental architecture including statues, stellae, shrines etc. are documented starting with Precucuteni III (Târgu Frumos: Ursulescu, Tencariu 2004), during Cucuteni A and A-B (Tripolye B I-II), but not in Cucuteni B (Tripolye C). For this phase only a few cult complexes have been discovered (Cucoș 1974; 1993; Gimbutas 1984.Fig. 23; 1991.Figs. 7–9; Gusev 1995; Monah 1997; Mantu et al. 1997.217; Lazarovici 2003). Cult complexes from different phases, as well as other discoveries, show the use of sacred numbers (Gimbutas 1984.135; Ursulescu 2001), perhaps related to the pantheon of this civilization. Some of the most frequently used numbers are 3, 7, 4 and 6 (Lurker 1980.115).

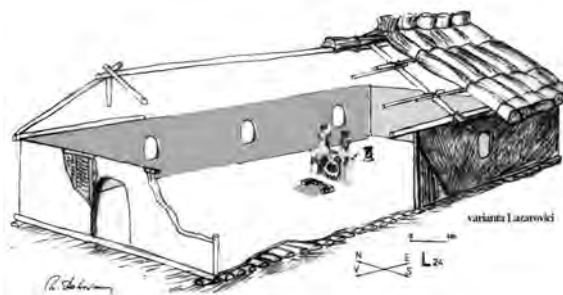


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of a sanctuary from Trușești (L 24).

The pantheon is dominated by the Great Goddess, mistress of life and death; other deities are not very well defined, but can be identified as a divine couple, a pair of goddesses, a male or an androgyne, the sun, the moon etc. Although most of magic religious practices are related to the fertility and fecundity cults, others are also present (for example, for the protection of animal breeding, or of ancestors).

The manner in which the Cucuteni-Tripolye communities expressed their religious beliefs changed over time. Starting with the Cucuteni A-B phase (Tripolye BII), painted anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations associated with signs and symbols were used on a larger scale.

Objects showing signs and symbols are quite frequent, but the archaeological conditions of their discovery are not very clearly depicted in the archaeological records. Such objects have been found in or near public household areas, as well as in sanctuaries, pits and cult complexes.

At this point we should specify that we have analyzed and created a database that includes altars, cult objects, house and sanctuary patterns, pintaderas, tablets and idols from the south and central Europe, the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Near East (Lazarovici 2003; Lazarovici 2003a). Due to the large number of objects with such signs and symbols we have not yet completed this research. The catalogue of signs and symbols includes several hundred signs with many variants. We have already registered over 2500, but our work is still in progress. Considering these new aspects of the research, we will try to present some hypotheses regarding the signs and symbols of the Cucuteni-Tripolye.

Objects related to cult practices are quite frequent in some settlements, which are therefore interpreted as tribal and religious centres. Regardless of their number, they always provide interesting information connected with the magical religious beliefs of these communities. The form and decoration of anthropomorphic objects, as well as that of pottery, differ during the cultural evolution. Morphological and decorative reorganization are probably related to transformations that took place in religious life during Cucuteni A-B and B phases/Tripolye BII-CI (Monah 1997.222). The anthro-

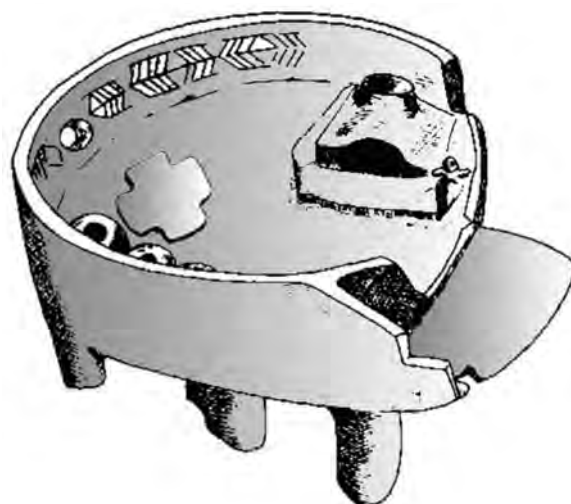


Fig. 2a. Sanctuary with statuettes and various religious symbols, Popudnja.

pomorphic statuettes were part of the sacred inventory (Sabatinovka: Zbenovič 1996) of communal sanctuaries and home shrines. They were also used with other objects (zoomorphic statuettes, anthropomorphic pots, cult pots etc.) during various celebrations. The anthropomorphic statuettes found in cult complexes at Poduri, Isaiia, Dumești, Ghelăiești (Fig. 2/2) or in the sanctuary pattern from Popudnja (Fig. 2/1), (Cucos 1974; 1993; Mantu et al. 1997.179, 191, Figs. 52, 127; Ursulescu et al. 2001–2002) certify once more the use of these objects in magical religious practices.

Most of the representations have been found in a fragmentary state, indicating that they have undergone some kind of a de-consecration process during the magical religious event. The anthropomorphic forms of this culture have been analyzed in monographs by Pogoševa (1985) and Monah (1997); other new publications present materials from older excavations (Soročin 2003.137–155; Soročin, Borziac 2003). Together they provide almost a complete

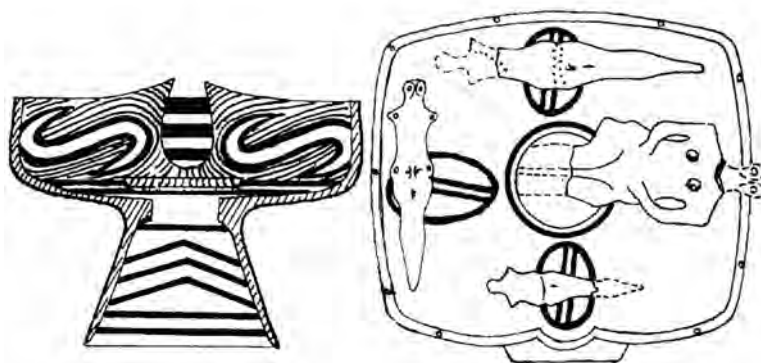


Fig. 2b. Sanctuary with statuettes and various religious symbols, Ghelăiești.

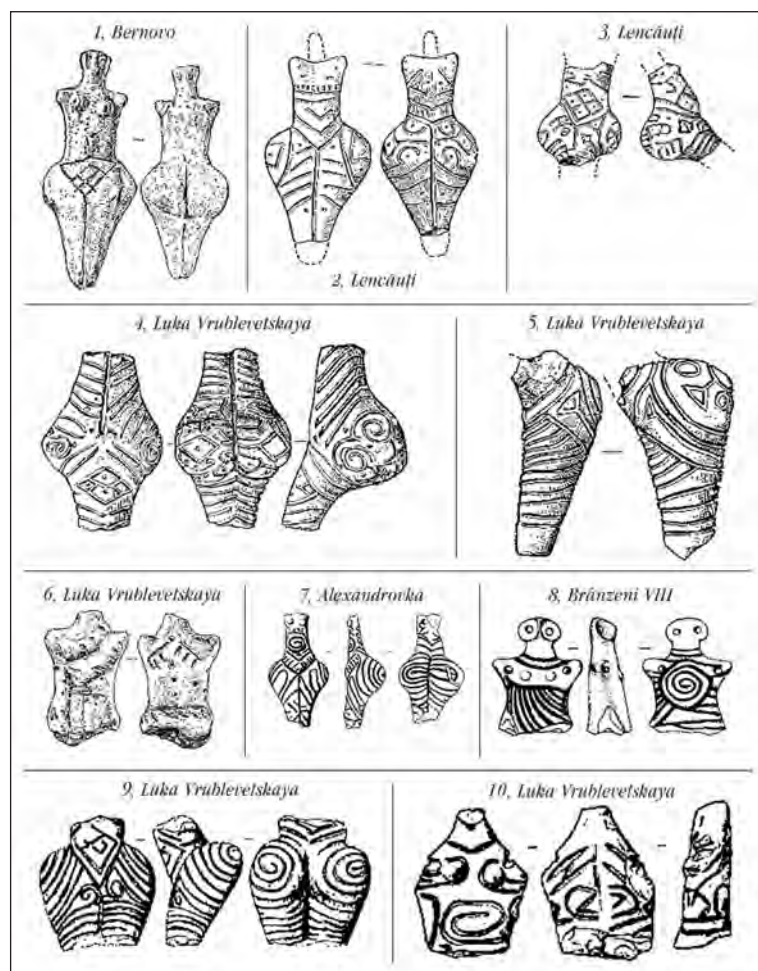


Fig. 3. Female statuettes from Precucuteni-Tripolye A.

guide to the male and female statuettes, as well as their historical interpretation. In our study we decided to focus only on some aspects of this complex issue of the statuettes, that is, on those we consider the most interesting.

For the purpose of our study, the female statuettes are the most interesting ones, not only because they greatly outnumber the male examples (Figs. 3–11), but also because of the many signs and symbols they bear. They represent the Great Goddess, the goddess of life and death, and other unidentified goddesses.

The Great Goddess of the Cucuteni-Tripolye pantheon is represented in association with the tree of life or a column with (Monah 1997.205; Petrescu-Dîmbovița 1957.10, Pl. V), snakes, fishes and carnassials, the latter elements suggesting a high level of fertility (Evseev 1983.76, 234; Monah 1997.207; Gimbutas 1999.109).

In most cases the deity is depicted naked, following specific canons and the features of the face are usu-

ally missing. The highly stylised manner of representing the head could be connected to an interdiction on showing the face of the deity, but also, with the use of masks. Many prehistoric Balkan cultures associate masks with attributes of deities (Gimbutas 1991.23, 62, 69), this being the case of the statuettes of the Cucuteni-Tripolye (Movsha 1991; Lazarovici 2004). Human faces with masks decorate the upper part of some lids (Bodești-Frumușica and Scânteia), which were used perhaps for offerings of libations (Gimbutas 1999.81), as well as some painted pots. People with masks, mimetic representations of rituals, and mythological scenes (Gimbutas 1984.57–62; 1999.9) are still seen today in ritual dances related to the beginning of the New Year in Romanian folklore (bear, goat, wolf).

Sometimes the head is beak-shaped. This can either suggest the use of masks, or the existence of a 'Bird Goddess' (Fig. 12/3, Gimbutas 1991; Tsvek 2001. Fig. 2/5). Mythical birds incarnate a solar principle and the revival of life, but are also symbols

of prosperity and good fortune (Gimbutas 1991. 228).

In some cases the statuettes have very intricate hairstyles (Figs. 4/10, 5/1–2 and 8/8, Monah 1997. 199), involving 'hairpins', and even physiognomies can seldom be traced (Figs. 8/7–8). Some statuettes also have a disc in the top of the head (Monah 1997. Fig. 207/11), as well as some painted silhouettes (Brânzei III, Marchevici 1981. Fig. 59/3; Monah 1997. Fig. 249/3), perhaps representing the solar disc (Rybakov 1965).

The body of the statuettes is usually decorated with incisions, or painted (monochrome or polychrome painting). Considering the tattoos of the 'Ice Man' discovered in the Alps, we do not reject this practice, but we must add that in some cases, beside the actual decoration, one can observe signs and symbols that also appear on other cult objects from the area we investigate. The interpretation of these signs and symbols is more complex, and they cannot be reduced merely to suggesting a tattoo. There are areas

where the decoration is not merely incidental; on the contrary, it is meant to enhance attributes or to send messages through the divinity. Many statuettes wear different types of necklaces, circular, rhomb, rectangular or rounded (Figs. 4/4, 5/2, 4, 6/1-4, 7/3, 8/1, 5), and sometimes a combination of these types. The necklaces are protective objects or symbols of the divinity, and we sometimes find the same decoration on monumental buildings in the temples (Fig. 1, Truşeşti, the sanctuary with two divinities: *Petrescu-Dîmboviţa et al. 1999.526, fig. 372/6*). A comb-like decoration was also found in the neck area (Figs. 3/6, 6/3, 7/3, 9/3), and in some cases above the genitals of the figurines (Fig. 4/1). This latter example has been interpreted as part of a special garment used for cult ceremonies (Fig. 4/8) also found on female representations painted on cult pots (*Marchevici 1981.117-118; Monah 1997. Figs. 236/5 and 255/3; Gimbutas 1999.109; Tchaciuk 2000.Fig. 5/5; Lazarovici 2004*). The fringes of the garments, as well as the comb motif ■ are interpreted as a rain symbol or as a pictograph (*Masson et al. 1982.117; Gimbutas 1984.81; Monah 1997.197; Tsvek 2001.Fig. 4/1*). They might be ethnographically related to ritual of rainmaking, the Romanian *paparuda*, common among many Balkan peoples, as well as others (*Frazer 1980.I, 143, 149; Movsha 1991; Evseev 1998.343*). In this ritual, with a variable number of characters, at least 2 people are masked; they all dance and sing a ritual song. The people that participate in this ritual as actors receive ritual gifts, such as eggs, which symbolise abundance; this ritual has beneficial effects on health, fecundity and the fortunes of the people (*Evseev 1998.342-343*). According to Maria Gimbutas such dresses with fringed fringes are related to solar symbols and their meaning is related to energy (*Gimbutas 1989.239-243*).

In the case of the feminine statuettes, the area of the sex is delimited by a triangle with distinctly head down (Figs. 3/1-4; 4/2, 6; 5/1-2; 6/1-3; 8/1-4; 9/1, 4) and on the masculine figurines, the same area is depicted by a triangle with the head up (Fig. 11/5). The inner of the triangle of the feminine statuettes

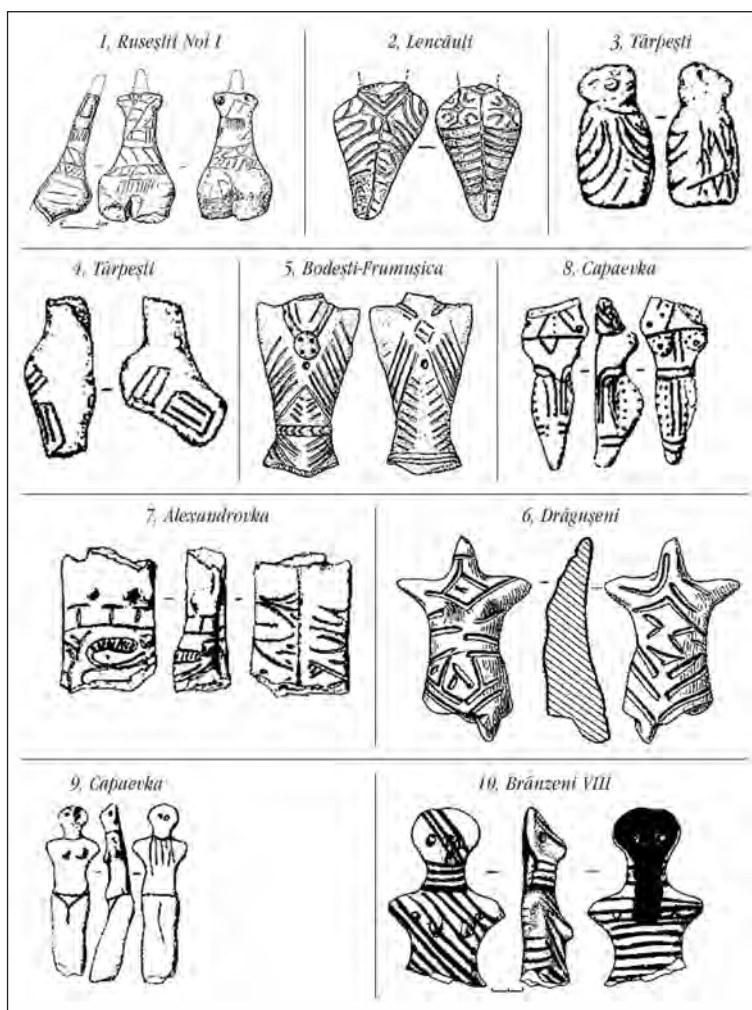


Fig. 4. Female statuettes, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

shows two joined spirals or simple spirals (Figs. 6/1; 8/3; 9/1-2) or other combinations of decorations (Figs. 4/2, 6; 5/1; 8/1,4). Spirals are also present in

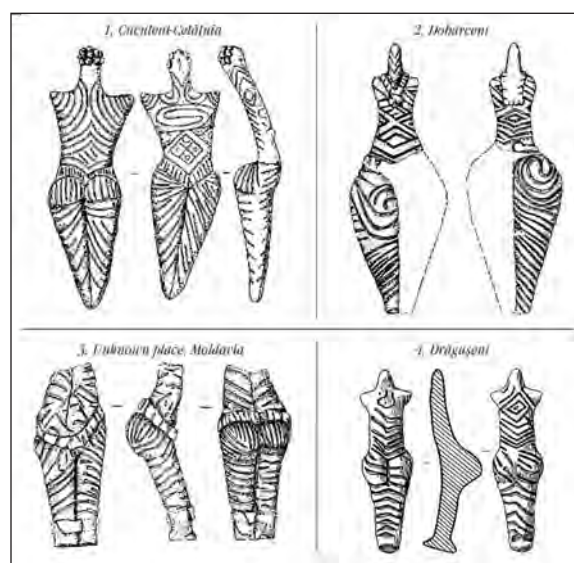


Fig. 5. Female statuettes, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

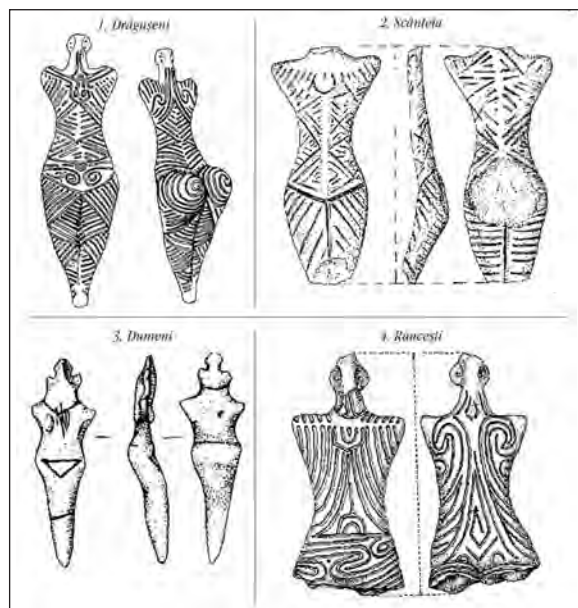


Fig. 6. Female statuettes, Cucuteni culture.

the chest area (Fig. 3/9), on the belly (Figs. 3/7 and 10), on the back, (Fig. 3/8), or backside (Figs. 3/4, 3/8, 5/2, 6/1, 8/3, 9/1). The area of the sex, the belly area and sometimes the backside are marked by rhomboids (Figs. 3/1, 3-4, 5/1, 6/2, 8/2), which are subdivided with or without circles inside them, suggesting a sacred area where life appears. On some statuettes a clear demarcation of 4 zones can be spotted on the belly and backside (Figs. 3/2, 4/2, 8/10).

The same demarcation is found on pots as a decoration or on baked clay plaquets. Some archaeologists believe that they suggest the 4 cardinal points; this idea is also sustained by the display of objects found in several cult complexes (Boghian, Mihai 1987.314; Cucoș 1974; 1993).

Pregnancy and the presence of a foetus are depicted by a triangle from which a line extends (Fig. 8/6); similar representations are found on other Neo-Eneolithic statuettes. Only one piece, probably representing a swaddled baby has incised lines with Λ , T or V shapes (Fig. 4/3).

Some other signs can be observed on some anthropomorphic statuettes such as a T (Fig. 4/7), triangles, (Figs. 4/8 and 9/5), grouped lines, (Fig. 9/5), half circles and V (Fig. 3/10) or ∇ (Figs. 9/7-8).

The snake is another symbol associated with the idea of fertility and life's rebirth. It is used only seldom during the Cucuteni A phase on some anthropomorphic statuettes (Fig. 7/2), but on many painted pots of the Cucuteni B phase, or later on, in Horodi-

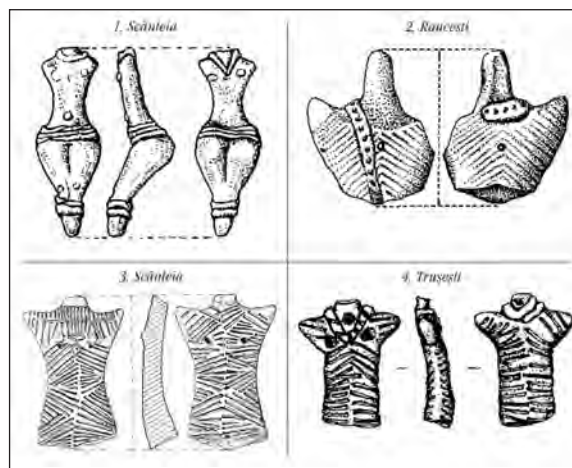


Fig. 7. Female statuettes, Cucuteni culture.

ștea/Tripolye CII-YII, in association with the egg (Ba-dragii Vechi, Petreni, Vărvăreuca XV, Brânzeni IV, Vihvatintî, Bilcze Złote: Nițu 1975. Figs. 26/2-3a; Marchevici 1981.Figs. 17/5, 40/4; Masson et al. 1982.Fig. LXXVIII/158, 174), concentric circles \odot , solar symbols \oplus or embryo (?) \odot (Nițu 1975.Figs. 26/1-3a, 22/4). In some cases the recognition of the



Fig. 8. Statuettes, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

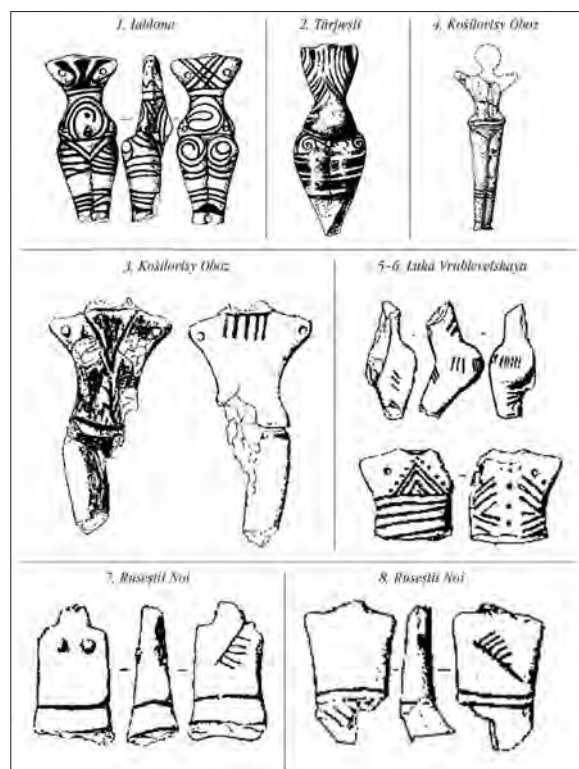


Fig. 9. Statuettes, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

snake symbol on anthropomorphic statuettes is easy, but there are also cases where things are more complex because the same sign, a band that we think represents the snake, is present in the neck area as well as on the belly and under the knees (Figs. 5/3, 7/1, 4). Maria Gimbutas (1991:251) has even identified the Snake Goddess, the goddess of life and regeneration of life, which together with the Bird Goddess protect human (family) and animal life. The snake, a universal phallic symbol, associated with rebirth and the cyclic regeneration of nature (*Eliade* 1976. I, 16), was often identified by Gimbutas (1984. 93) in abstract representations of the spiral, which dominate an important part of Old European art. In Romanian mythology, the house snake represents the soul of the ancestors (*Evseev* 1998:450). Rybakov (1965), who interpreted different types of spirals and their association with symbols or signs, relates the spiral with the cosmic movement of the sun and with the notion of time.

The tree of life (painted or incised), used mainly on pottery (associated with other symbols such as a, column/pillar, the earth, the crescent moon, spirals, snakes, eggs, or ☉ (*Masson et al.* 1982.Figs. LXXVIII/172, LXXX/1-2, 5, 9; *Kadrow et al.* 2003.Figs. 12/3, 14/5, 10, 23/5-6) is also present on some statuettes (Figs. 9/3-4). Several variants of the tree of life might be connected with natural regeneration. Rela-

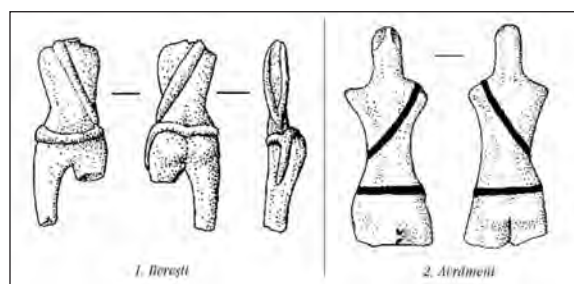


Fig. 10. Male statuettes, Cucuteni culture.

ted with the tree of life is the column cult, suggested by the shape of some very stylised statuettes (Figs. 13/1-2); these pieces remind us of a similar shrine at Trușești (Fig. 1). Both statuettes, in cross form, had dots and a human face depicted in a triangle (Figs. 13/1-2, *Tsvek* 1994; *Monah* 1997.Figs. 45/3-4).

Two recent female statuettes from Scânteia (Figs. 8/5 and 12/1-2) have a cartridge on their back (one has a round cartridge, with the sign of the four directions, and the other a triangular cartridge with different incised lines). These cartridges might be symbols of the goddess or could be related to their role in different rituals. The statuette in an orant position, (Fig. 12/1), unique in the Cucuteni culture, reminds us of some later pieces from Minoan Greece

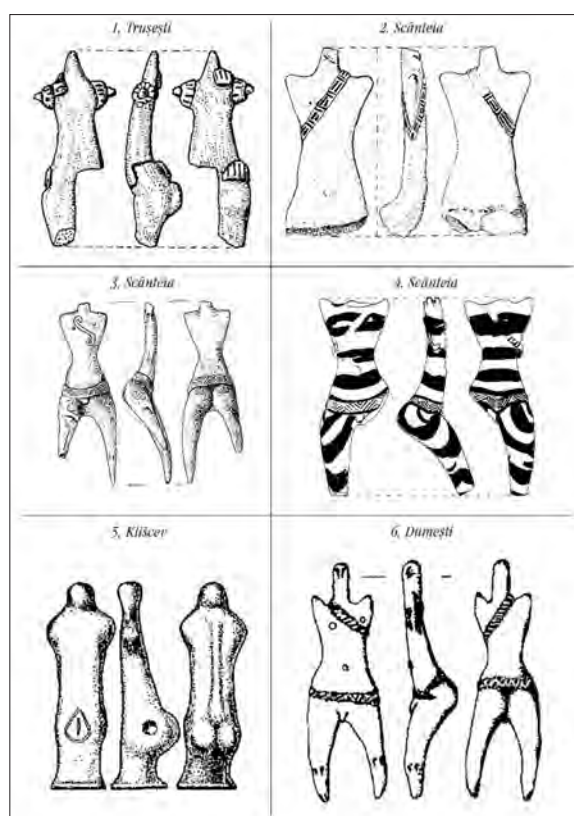


Fig. 11. Male statuettes, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

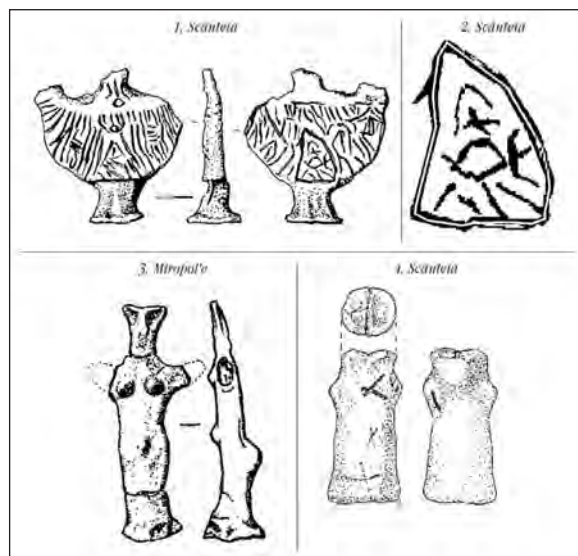


Fig. 12. Idols, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

(Bucholz, Karageorghis 1973; *Idole. Frühe Götterbild und Opfergaben* 1985.86, catalog 33/a; Golan 2003.48, Figs. 43/1–2).

The male statuettes (Figs. 10–11), fewer in number than the female, seem to represent a secondary character in the pantheon of this culture. The male character, depicted in *hieros gamos* scenes or alone, is seen as the partner of the Great Goddess (Mantu et al. 1997.92), but also as an androgyne (Figs. 11/3–4). Some male statuettes have chest bands and a hip-belt (Figs. 10–11), interpreted as symbols of social stature. At Scânteia, such a statuette has an S-spiral and a hip-belt (Fig. 11/3). A statuette from Truşeşti, Figure 11/1 has a band around the shoulder and on the neck. Very interesting is a statuette from Bereşti, where the hipbelt might indicate a weapon (as in the Cernavoda culture: Roman 2001.Figs. 1a–1b, 16/12) or just the local fashion (Fig. 10/1).

Incised or painted signs and symbols have also been found on very stylized idols (Figs. 12/4, 13). Some are directly related to classic Cucuteni-Tripolye (Figs. 12/4, 13/3–6), while others are related to later phases of Tripolye. Very schematic figurines, of phallic aspect, have several M or W signs, lines, dots, a sun, or column symbols (Figs. 13/3–6, Masson et al. 1982.Fig. LXXXVII/8; Dergacev, Manzura 1991. Figs. 4/8–9, 7/4–7, 20/8–9, 44/8, 79/3).

ω or the W symbol and its variants reflecting regenerative power, as well as horns depicted in relief or painted, illustrate the male deity, as in the Anatolian and Mediterranean areas, or other parts of Europe. This sign is present on several painted pots, as-



Fig. 13. Idols very stylized, Cucuteni-Tripolye.

sociated with stylized horns, and other signs and symbols (Niţu 1975.Fig. 18/1; Marchevici 1981. Figs. 34/2, 37, 40/6; Masson et al. 1982. Fig. LXIV/6; Mantu et al. 1997.Fig. 74, 234; Kadrow et al. 2003. Fig. 18/2). The reiteration of these signs on the above-mentioned statuettes is intended to underline regenerative power, fertility, and fecundity.

Solar symbols, concentric circles, circles with different internal signs, simple, singular or in combination with other signs/elements ⊕ ⊗ ⊙ ⊕ ⊗ ⊙ ⊕ ⊗ ⊙, can be identified on many pots (Marchevici 1981.Figs. 24/11, 40/12; Masson et al. 1982.Figs. LXXXII/2–6; Gimbutas 1984; Kadrow et al. 2003. Fig. 19/1) and on only a few anthropomorphic statuettes (Figs. 3/5, 13/4–5).

The variety and complexity of the anthropomorphic figurines, pottery and other objects with symbols and signs attract the interest of many scholars trying to decipher their meanings (Rybakov 1965; Niţu 1975; Vl. Dumitrescu 1979; Marchevici 1981; Masson et

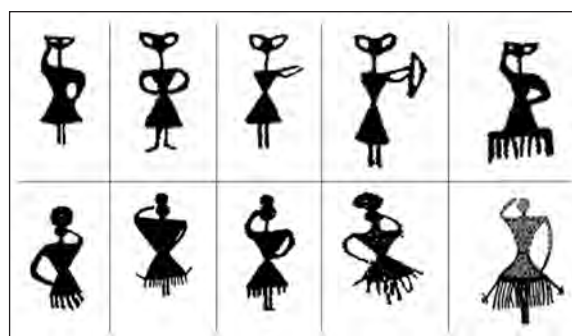


Fig. 14. Painted female silhouettes.

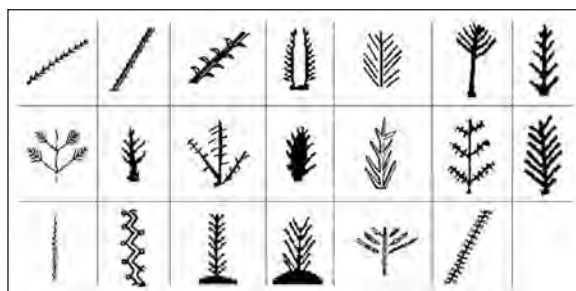


Fig. 15. Vegetal elements as symbols.

al. 1982; Gimbutas 1984; 1991; Movsha 1991; Monah 1997; Golan 2003). Analogies have been established (Nițu 1975; Vl. Dumitrescu 1979.66; the new discoveries support the older ones, Chegini et al. 2000.11), marking the common origin of these manifestations. In Cucuteni-Tripolye there is a common, ancestral background (due to the spread of agriculture and of religious belief related to this; connections between different, widely separated communities have continued throughout the diffusion process of some communities and of the exchanges), but also a very strong original quality. The original aspect is related to Cucutenian perceptions of magical religious life and their manner of expression.

We have found great similarities, when comparing the Cucuteni-Tripolye signs with others from our database (which includes signs found on different objects from a large area during the Neo-Eneolithic period and later). The value and meaning of some cucutenian symbols is identical with that of others discovered in other cultural areas; the difference lies in the manner of expression. Like other authors, we believe that the factors that determined the use of symbols and signs in Cucuteni-Tripolye culture are especially related to the role and importance of magical religious behaviours (Rybakov 1965). Symbols and signs have a close relationship with the expression and reception of forms of sacred messages addressed to the divinity; therefore they are meant to enforce a sacred message. According to Maria Gimbutas their role was also to connect individuals and the community (Gimbutas 1991.320).



Fig. 16. Signs and symbols in Cucuteni-Tripolye

Sacred inventory, including statuettes and other cult objects made of durable or perishable materials (Marangou 2001.28; Hayden 2003.140; Golan 2003.533), plays a major role during religious rites and cult practices. They accompany specific rituals, offerings, dances and myths of different festivities (Gimbutas 1984) and represent for us a valuable source that helps us decipher some aspects of the religious life of that time. For a better understanding of the symbols and signs used by these communities, we believe that it is useful to add in the end of our study some figures and vegetal elements used on painted pottery, as well as a sum of the signs and symbols (Figs. 14–16) which we consider very expressive for this subject.

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