

Anthropomorphic figurines from Vinča excavations 1998–2009

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ABSTRACT – *The paper presents figurines from excavations at Vinča 1998–2000 dated to the very end of the Late Neolithic. Along with a presentation and analysis of these objects, the paper addresses questions of the development of sculpture in Vinča, and matters of symbolism in the Late Vinča period. Some interesting contexts with an abundance of anthropomorphic figurines are presented and discussed.*

IZVLEČEK – *V članku predstavljam figurine iz izkopavanj na najdišču Vinča v letih 1998–2000, ki datirajo na konec poznega neolitika. Poleg predstavitve in analize teh izdelkov se ukvarjam tudi z vprašanji razvoja kiparstva v Vinči in vprašanji simbolizma v poznovinčanskem obdobju. Predstavljam in razpravljam o nekaterih zanimivih kontekstih s številnimi antropomorfnimi figurinami.*

KEY WORDS – *Vinča; anthropomorphic figurines; symbolism*

Introduction

Publishing Neolithic figurines is always a real treat for any researcher. The theme ensures attention, but also triggers empathy with those who manufactured the figurines so many centuries ago. Every time they appear from the ground, the magic of these objects is conveyed to researchers. Field methodology and procedures are being adjusted and fine-tuned in order to capture as many details as possible. One cannot be too meticulous or too diligent when excavating and recording them.

Archaeological excavations at Vinča-Belo brdo have been carried out since 1998, in order to continue research at this famous site and further investigate the material culture, and acquire the new knowledge necessary to interpret it and its impact on the social organisation of Neolithic society. Excavations were envisaged and conducted as a continuation of Vasić's work in the 1930s and the work of Tasić, Srejšević and Garašanin in the 1980s. Sector II was excavated during campaigns from 1978 to 1986 and has yielded nine houses of the latest Vinča culture phase, as well as numerous Copper and Bronze Age pits, and

a medieval necropolis. The follow-up to the excavations occurred directly underneath the final Vinča culture building horizon. In the course of these excavations, three building horizons were identified, all dating to the final phase of Vinča D or Vinča-Pločnik II, and filling almost one metre of cultural deposit. The field methodology during the new excavations at Vinča evolved from the square grid inherited from previous excavations to the unit system, but recording techniques were precise and accurate in both systems. The fact that three dwelling horizons ascertained during new excavations were packed into less than a metre of deposit explains their rather poor preservation. It should be mentioned that a number of unfired objects were discovered which left very few traces of architectural remains, apart from isolated kilns and post-holes. Extensive leveling activity has been ascertained, which is linked to the foundation of the most recent Vinča settlements. For reasons already mentioned, the position of finds can be ambiguous and perhaps misleading, since the vast majority of objects discovered are not in their primary context.

The material culture discovered is typical of the late Vinča culture phase (Vinča-Pločnik II after *Garašanin 1984*), and differs from contemporary finds only in the somewhat finer quality and variety of its pottery, figurines, and other archaeological material.

The aim here will be to present the most noteworthy anthropomorphic figurines discovered in the last ten campaigns at Vinča. I would like to offer some comments and personal impressions regarding some interesting details, and contribute some examples for further discussion and interpretation. For the sake of easier presentation, the corpus of figurines has been arranged by type, which should not represent any commitment for other researchers. It is to be hoped that an old style of typology does not deter those interested in somewhat more modern approaches, since such a quantity of newly available anthropomorphic statuettes (classified and systematised) unquestionably yields many elements for further research.

Type 1 (Fig. 1)

No. 1. This cruciform figurine is the best representative of Type 1. It is hard to envisage a simpler model of a depiction of a human figure in terracotta. Anthropomorphic representation is apparent, and beyond any doubt, owing to the rather realistic proportions between the dimensions of the head and the rest of the body. There are no details on the figurine. The triangular form of the head is, in this case, the most convenient choice, since in this way the figure acquires the shape of the head, eyebrows, and nose at the same time. The vertical axis emphasises perfect symmetry. The foot of the figurine is oval; the middle of the figure is somewhat thinner and two dimensional. It is not possible to determine gender for this figure, and this seems irrelevant. However, on a few figurines attributed to this type, one can see representations of breasts as plastic appliqués. Anyway, the relationship between male and female figurines will not be discussed here, since breast representation, as we can see from other examples from Vinča¹, is not decisive for determining the gender of anthropomorphic figurines. What catches the eye is the fact that there is no trace of the representation of robes on this figurine, but it is not clear if it is vested or not. This further suggests that in some cases this dilemma is irrelevant. Traces of paint, discovered on some other figurines (Fig. 1. 19), could hint at another technique used for decoration and the representation of costumes.

No. 3. This figurine is characterised by its extremely long neck, which is seldom seen on Vinča culture terracottas. Otherwise, it fits well in Type 1.

No. 4. The head of this figurine, preserved as a bust, is typical and modeled in the simplest way to represent a human figure. The top of the head is round and somewhat more extruded than the sides. In the arm region, one can observe two perforations on the left side of the figure, but we can suppose that the same number of perforations also existed on the right side. Heads like this can be seen rather often in the form of protomes on pottery or altars.

No. 5. On the triangular head there is a detail which represents the mouth, which is seldom represented on Vinča culture figurines from the Belo brdo site. A perforation in the nose area adds to the realistic appearance of the face.

No. 6. This figurine, with its attributes drawn to an extreme, could clarify the attempts of Vinča artists at expression within the specific canon of representations of the human figure. The bird-shaped head with grotesquely extruded nose is probably the limit of this sculptural strategy. Its anthropomorphic character is determined with two plastic breasts. There is also an unusual number of perforations; apart from those so frequently found in the arms or at the back of the head, there are more in the neck region. The function of these perforations is still being discussed. It is possible that they served for inserting feathers, hair, or string with some other ornaments or robes hanging from it.

Nos. 7–10, 12, 15, 16. These cruciform, symmetrical, minimalist figurines have no hint of individuality.

No. 11. This figure looks as if it were on the move. Alas, given the traces of burning, it is also possible that this apparent movement is a consequence of the great heat to which it was exposed. More important than the shape of the figure is that it is decorated with rows of painted parallel lines which are not often detected in this phase of Vinča culture. On the front side, white painted line decoration is obliquely positioned, while on the back, lines run parallel to the base of the figure. Unfortunately, the pigment is not of exceptional quality; it rubs off, and it has not been possible to decalcify the entire figurine, so the decoration is still partly hidden. White paint was not used frequently in Vinča. Only a few objects bearing

¹ There are figurines with undoubtedly female characteristics incised in their abdominal part and no breasts represented at all.

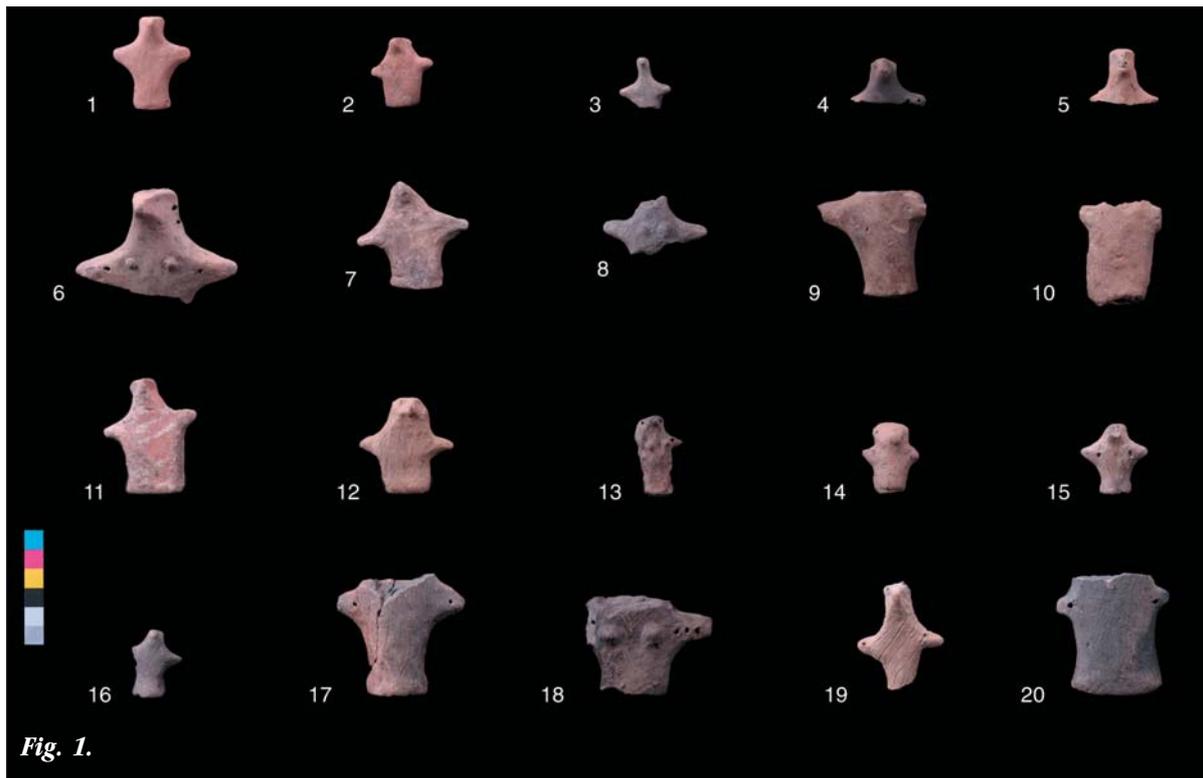


Fig. 1.

traces of white pigment have been discovered. On the other hand, numerous traces of red paint – made either from cinnabar or ferric oxide – denote that incisions and burnishing did not comprise the entire repertoire of decorative techniques (Mioč et al. 2004).

No. 13. This ineptly modelled figure of smaller dimensions has a damaged surface in the lower part of the body. It has two appliquéés which represent female breasts. The eyes are represented with two points sharply incised in the clay, which is unusual for Vinča.

No. 14. This is a figurine, rather small in dimensions, characterised by a disproportionately large, round head, with no further details or decoration.

No. 19. This cruciform figure with short, poorly modelled hands, represents a group of figurines modelled as a two-dimensional form. The body is divided from the head with horizontal incisions, slightly different from those that decorate the rest of the figure. It is commonly believed that these lines and decoration more or less realistically represent actual robes and costume (Tasić 2008). Here, the decoration of the costume is also made with incised lines. Following the path of an instrument, one can reconstruct the strategy of the maker. He or she started the incision at the left shoulder, running it down to the

right hip and back to the shoulder to complete the line. The same procedure was repeated with less success and precision. The figurine's two perforations were apparently made after the incisions had already been made (one of the perforations runs over the incised line).

No. 20. The notable feature of this figure is the unusually small hands. At chest height, where the small hands protrude from the body, there are two perforations. This figurine is fragmented and lacks a head and neck. It is fully two-dimensional and well-suited to be decorated with incisions. A meander formed of three lines runs from the left shoulder to the chest. Another meander, or rather an attempt at a meander, is incised into the lower part of the figure. Two different sets of lines have been ascertained here: deeper and more precise lines (1) are applied in the chest area, and it seems they were incised first (Fig. 2). The difference in the weight and precision of the lines could be due to different tools, or due to a different hand guiding the tool for the second set. This can be also seen in the 'stratigraphy' of interwoven lines. The trace of a string (2) on the chest of the figurine is also an interesting clue. The upper meander was apparently incised after the string impressions were made. It is also later than the decoration on the lower part of the figure, and according to the form and depth of incisions, contemporary with the decoration on the back. This analysis demonstrates

that some time must have elapsed between the first use of the object and its final decoration. These elements are in accordance with earlier assumption that figurines were used for long periods. Given that it has been established that representations of costume denote the individuality of objects and probably their owners, we can suppose that this figurine might have changed owners during its life-time and therefore obtained another set of lines which then represented the new owner (*Tasić 2008*).

Type 1 (Fig. 3)

The figurines presented in this illustration were selected as subtype 1a. These objects differ slightly from type 1, primarily in their larger dimensions and in the fact that their cruciform shape is less pronounced.

No. 1. Only the head with part of a bust has been preserved of this figurine. It could be easily placed among the most numerous of type 1. The head is rounded, with four perforations. There are incised lines running around the body; on the back, these are entwined to form a kind of meander. There are two perforations in the arms.

No. 2. This is by far the most interesting figurine of either type 1 or 1a. It is a female figure depicted with few details. It is flattened and suitable for incising. This particular figurine is an exception in the repertoire of the Late Vinča at Belo brdo, since it is decorated with series of incisions which cover surfaces bordered with flimsy lines, later painted red. In the lower part of the figure is a skirt bordered with rows of triangles. In the neck region, there is a square positioned so that its diagonal is aligned with the vertical axis of the figurine. Two free-standing triangles, painted and filled with incisions, are placed just above the breasts, which extrude from the body. The emphasised glutea which characterise this specimen are rather unusual for this phase of Vinča



Fig. 3.

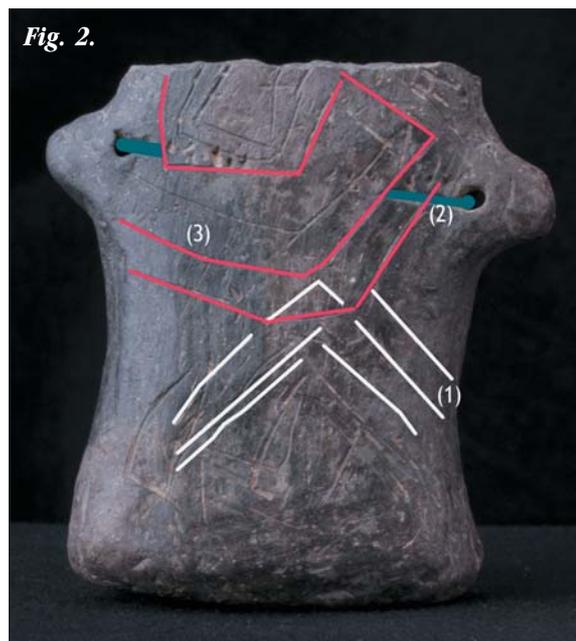


Fig. 2.

culture, but the decoration technique and red paint are also unusual.

No. 3. Although greatly fragmented, and almost obliterated, this figurine still has enough details to be placed in this type. It is interesting for its general state of preservation, which suggests possible secondary use, probably as a pestle of some sort. Does this mean that the sacred or ritual character of these objects was lost when they were broken? The method of their disposal and secondary use suggest as much.

Type 2 (Fig. 4)

Type 2 was distinguished as independent on the basis of the shape of the figurines. All of those of this type are flat, but have glutea depicted two-dimensionally as another curve in the lower part of the body at the height of the hips. This silhouette adds to the feminine impression of these figures. The majority have other female attributes, such as breasts (Fig. 4.5-7), a pregnant abdomen (Fig. 4.5, 12) or pubic triangle (Fig. 4.12). It is interesting that all are fragmented, and apart from number 2, the head is absent.

No. 1. This fragment is classified as type 2 only according to analogies with figurines 9, 10 and 12 presented in Figure 4.

No. 2. This object is an exception with its small dimensions and proportions. It is not certain if the figure is anthropomorphic at all. The head is not unusual for this phase of Vinča culture. The incised V-shaped line would also suggest that this represents a human figure. On the other hand, two perforations placed in a most unusual spot, in the centre of this object, would suggest a more functional role, such as a button, perhaps.

No. 5. The surface of this female figurine is matte; the edges on the fractures are rounded and it seems to have spent some time in water. It has breasts and a swollen belly. Below the neck area is a typical V-shaped incision, frequently associated with representations of costume, rather than with a necklace or other decorative element.

No. 6. This female figurine, decorated with incised ornamentation, is fragmented and preserved as a torso with neither head nor arms. There are two perforations on the hips, and had the arms been preserved, there would probably have been perforations on them also. Representations of such details as the navel are quite rare in Vinča culture. An interesting and unique representation of the costume is another valuable treat: the upper part of the body is more naked than clothed; the incisions probably re-

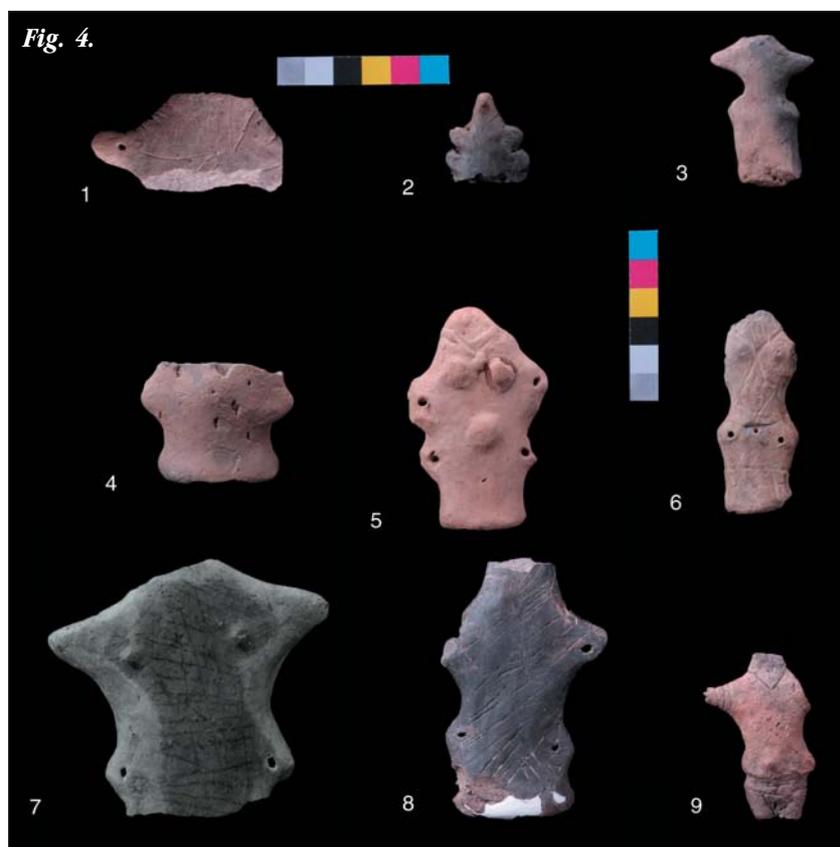
present bands which run from the shoulder to the waist and entwine with another which runs from the other shoulder. A short skirt is represented on the lower part of the figure.

No. 7. This item is extraordinary in more ways than one: it is the only example decorated with polished lines and not incised, and it is also the only one with perforations on the hips, while those at the arms are absent. It demonstrates that the technique of decoration is sometimes irrelevant and that different methods were used, such as incisions, and burnished and painted motifs.

No. 8. Traces of red pigment can be observed in the thin sharp incisions which ornament this figurine. The proper cleaning of figurines discovered at earlier excavations has shown a great number of figurines were decorated with painted motifs. Sometimes figurines were immersed in paint, and sometimes the paint was used to cover reserved patches or certain portions of them.

No. 9. This figurine is a miniature, but unique in some elements. It is fragmented and lacks a head. Analogies with other figurines discovered in the same occupational phase suggest that it was probably modeled as a 'bird-shaped' head. The manufacture of this figure is exceptional; in spite its small dimensions, great care was taken to represent some details seldom found on larger specimens. It is undoubtedly female and has a pregnant abdomen. The almost obligatory V-shaped incisions under the neck and rows of parallel lines around the hand/s adorn the upper body. There is also a 'belt' in the hip region which divides the body of the figure into two parts.

All the figurines of this type are fragmented. Apart from this, what is striking is the fact that no two of these could have been remotely associated with the same maker. The forms are different, the lines are different, sometimes by design (Fig. 4.9. *e.g.*) and sometimes randomly ap-



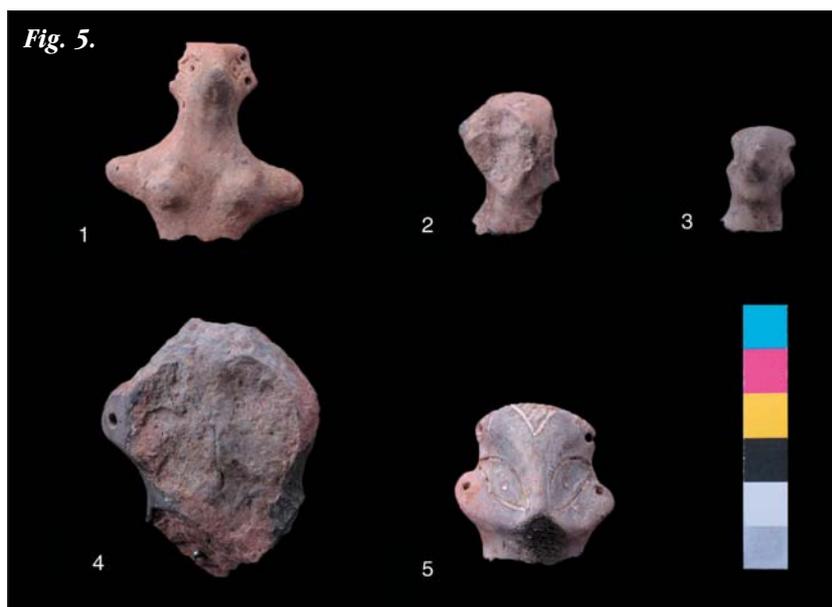
plied, sometimes incised and sometimes burnished. Each is different in size and quality, and has its own individuality. However, they share the same general form of the human figure and the same two-dimensional representation.

Type 3 (Fig. 5)

The bust of a female of Type 1, as well as other specimens of the type presented in Fig. 5, has a pentagonal face, which is an attribute of earlier phases of Vinča culture at Belo brdo. Type 3 has been singled out for these qualities. It is a pity the head given here as number 2 was damaged in such a way that it lacks a nose and the better part of the face. However, from what was saved, we can see an archaic form of a head, from the so-called Vidovdanka period (Fig. 6) dating to the mature phase of Vinča culture (5.40m in traditional Vinča chronology, *i.e.* the beginning of the Vinča C or Vinča-Pločnik I phase). The same would apply to number 4, and it should be said that these were presented here in order to show that the inhabitants of the last phases could have been aware of the styles and art forms of previous generations, probably due to some building activities at ancestral sites. Figurines 1, 3 and 5 also appear older than the rest of the corpus of figurines discovered from 1998 to 2009. The pentagonal faces, incised eyes and overall appearance have been dated to the beginning of the Vinča D (*i.e.*, the end of Vinča-Pločnik I) phase. An interesting feature is the representation of eyes with a pinprick in the centre (Nos. 1 and 5), which adds a realistic touch not so fashionable in the latest phase.

Type 4 (Fig. 7)

The type presented here is distinguished from the dominant form of human representation by the shape of the lower part of the body. Only four figurines have been singled out for this type; all have their legs represented not as part of an unelaborated lower portion of the body, but rather as two recitent protrusions carrying a few details. Figurine number 2 is flat and of somewhat larger dimensions. It is similar to those of type 1a. It is perhaps interesting for the unarticulated doodling on the abdomen area and perforations in the hip area, where the



trace of a cord can be observed. This is the only example with hands directed downward. Figurine 3 is by far the smallest discovered at Vinča. Thanks to its compact size, it was preserved intact. It has a 'bikini' which covers its private parts and hands raised as in adoration.

These are not all the terracotta objects discovered at Vinča in the last ten campaigns, but apart from zoomorphic figures, which will be discussed elsewhere, there are some highly fragmented pieces which could not be attributed to any of the types presented here.

Due to the poorly preserved architectural objects and intensive levelling and truncation activities which were ascertained throughout the investigated area,

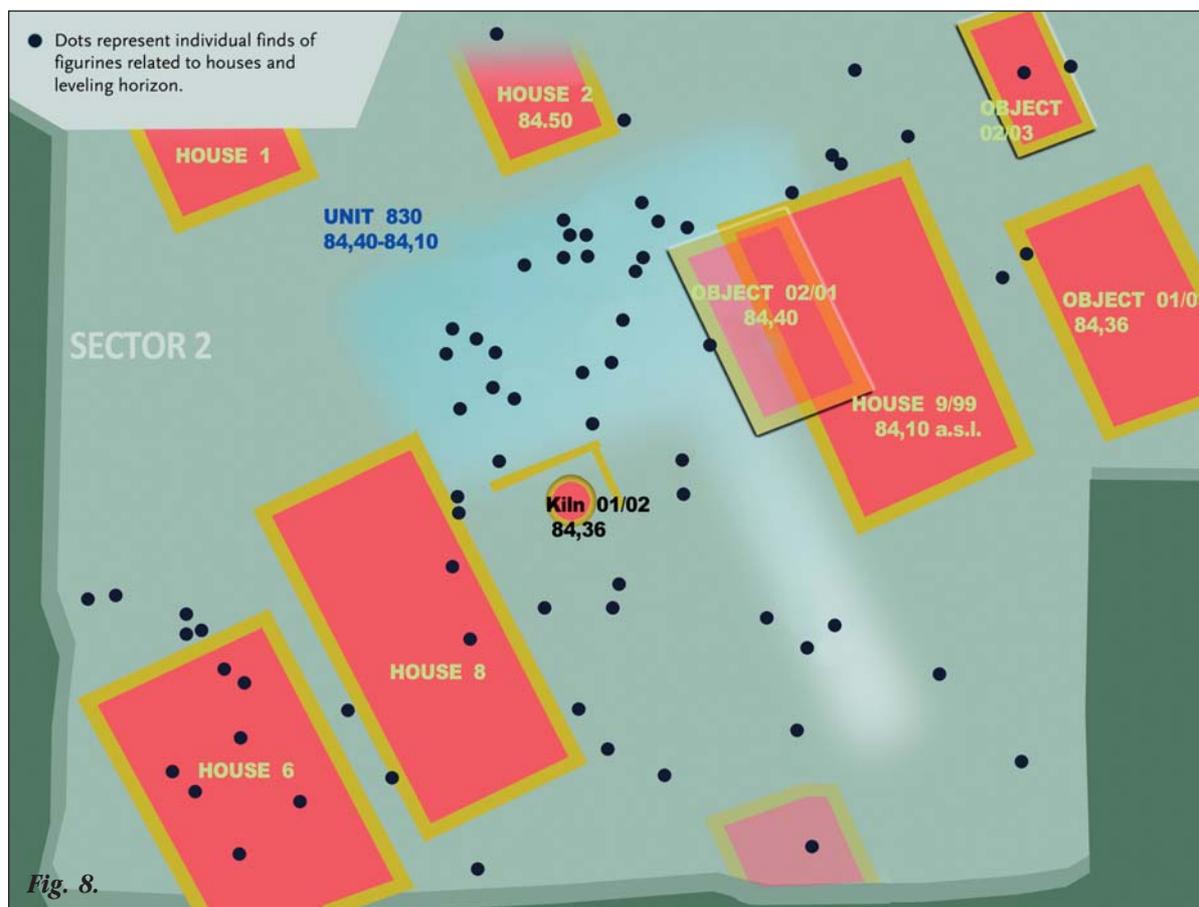


Fig. 6.



a contextual analysis of these objects is possible for two groups of figurines. One is a group of finds which belong to the very horizon which has destroyed other contexts (Fig. 8). The collective endeavour of leveling has been materialised in what we have labelled Unit 830, which consists of characteristic light-brown sediment, 40cm thick, very compact and laden with an extraordinary quantity of pottery fragments, bone and stone material, as well as tools and figurines. This levelling horizon, which spreads over the better part of the area excavated, yields material

culture remains which are contemporary with, or earlier than the time of this activity. The other context is very similar to the previous one and represents the levelling horizon of house 6. The units in the foundation of this structure could easily be equated with unit 830. With the exception of the figurines discovered in these particular contexts, there are few which were discovered in other contexts, such as a foundation trench, house rubble, *etc.*, but their positions cannot add significantly to solving the riddle of their function or use.





The examples in Figs. 9 and 10 were discovered in these two contexts. Apparently, there are different types of figurine, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, big and small, fragmented and intact, decorated and plain, elaborate and simple. Apparently, there is no rule. Along with figurines, there are numerous other objects, such as pottery, bones, malachite, stone tools and their fragments. What can be ascertained here is the dominance of simple forms (Fig. 9.1, 4, 13, 14), and presence of intact, unbroken figurines without, as far we can see, any specific clues or peculiarities. The case is similar regarding the objects discovered under house 6 (Fig. 10), except that here, two marble figurines similar in shape to the dominant types manufactured in clay were found (Fig. 10.6, 8). Apart from the fact that marble figurines are quite rare at the Vinča site, it is impressive to observe how the dominant style is projected in stone, where other techniques of modelling and polishing are used. The result is thrilling and shows

that the canon of the epoch was 'stronger than a stone'. It is easy, therefore, to agree with Hansen when he says that: "... *their extreme stylization, that is, the omission of any personal individuality, is a further form of generalization. These unchanged and inert forms exude a sense of stability. Likewise, the repetition of the same representational*



type holds within or symbolizes stability in societal order” (Hansen 2007).

However, the fact that figurines tend to differ, even within the strict canon, shows that something of the

previous epoch survived in times which were, as we know, coming to a close. The individuality depicted in the unique decoration of robes and costumes so often seen on statuettes of the classic Vinča phase (7–5,5m) remained in traces in its final period.

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