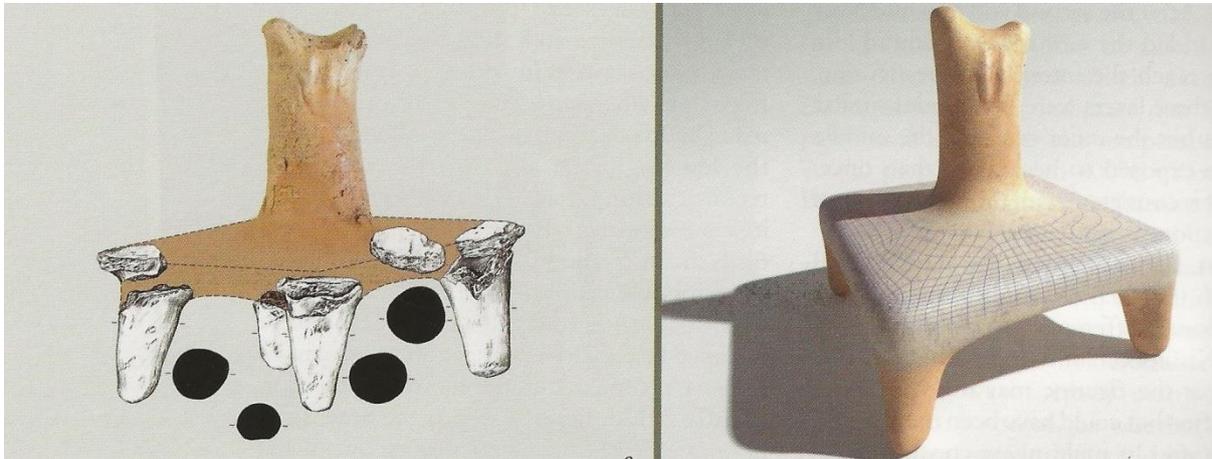




## Book Reviews

### **THE FIRST FARMERS OF THE CARPATHIAN BASIN. CHANGING PATTERNS IN RITUAL, SUBSISTENCE AND MONUMENTAL FIGURINES BY ESZTER BÁNFFY**

*Prehistoric Society Research Paper 8. Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2019. 154pp, 44 figures, 63 photos, hb, ISBN 9781789251647, £35.00*



This book represents Eszter Bánffy's mature research phase – a vintage volume whose starting point – a single, exceptional figurine – leads the author to a wide-ranging discussion of the spread of the Neolithic across the Aegean, the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin (the 'ABC'), touching on recent aDNA results, changes in subsistence practices further to the north and west, the biographical approach to ritual objects and dairying as a key adaptation to the cooler, rainier climates of Central Europe. In a way, the title of the book could have been 'clayscapes', not so much as a tribute to Tim Ingold but rather because of the importance of the material in the construction of Balkan Neolithic lifeways: clay played a crucial role in transforming the natural world into a cultural world. The tension between more traditional approaches and more recent materialist thinking runs deep in this volume. Western Hungary is characterised as a marginal ecological region, presenting challenges and crises to early farmers and prompting change in their behaviour and ritual systems, with clay ceding material dominance to stone and timber further North. The big claim that the author makes is that, further North, there was not such a major use of clay, leading to a decrease in the number of objects.

The exceptional figurine in question is presented in detail in Chapter 4, with further interpretation in Chapter 9. The object was found in or near a house in the small Early Neolithic Körös settlement of Szakmár-Kisülés, in the Sarköz region of the Danube valley. The unusually large horned figurine was 26.6 cm high and 12.5–7.5cm wide, with its height increased to 42–43 cm by standing on a four-legged 'altar'. The non-local marl clay was fired at 600–700°C to produce a pale yellow-reddish colour, tempered with much chaff but also wheat. Below the horns, the face was replaced by a vulva – a unique design feature in all Early Neolithic figurines. CT scans showed that the figurine had been built up in at least three main clay layers – each layer progressively finer and more porous. The figurine had been made within a brief period of time, perhaps no more than two weeks, with all its layers and successive firings.

For the author, the Szakmár figure is an imaginary hybrid, though not a monster *sensu* Wengrow (2014). The combination of realistic elements, such as the horns, the cylindrical body and the relief depicting a vulva, produces an imaginary result. The biography of the figurine created its own temporality, since, rather than conveying a single meaning, Bánffy maintains that it incorporated the entire previous history of South-East European female figurines, their manufacture, their use and (probably) their deliberate destruction.

But what was the history of such figurines? In Chapters 5 and 6, the author makes detailed comparisons with other Starčevo-Körös sites in the Carpathian Basin and sites further afield in the Balkans. Of the former, she draws parallels with eight sites, including the well-known 'horns of consecration', which at Szolnok-Szanda were made in two – three layers. In the latter, larger group of sites, there are analogies for elements of the Szakmár figurine (its size at Asmashka mogila and Stara Zagora-Okruzhnitsa Bolnitsa, the use of stands for figurines at Pepelare and Galabnik) but no parallels for the whole object. Other parallels, such as Early Neolithic Macedonian house models with human faces and First Temperate Neolithic horned pendants, seem of less relevance. This comparative exercise simply reinforces the notion of a wide-ranging network connecting all regional groups of the First Temperate Neolithic, whether through bone spoons, slotted antler sickles and rod-head figurines (Nandris 1970). The reasons for selective uptake of the material objects of the early farmers have rarely been clarified in recent studies.

The author is keen to emphasise the domestic context of the Szakmár figurine. By placing the figurines inside houses, cattle were transposed from the outside world to the domestic sphere. The notion of 'cattle' was probably synonymous with 'survival' and 'wealth' for the Körös and Starčevo communities and admitting cattle into their everyday lives in the form of a clay representation must have carried the meaning of bringing wealth and value from the outside into the domestic sphere. But what was the subsistence context of the Starčevo-Körös settlements with bovine figurines?

In Chapter 7, the author uses faunal data from Szakmár-Kisülés and the nearby extensively excavated site of Alsónyék – Báticasék to show that domestic cattle formed an important component of local herd management – more important than in the drier South-East Hungarian Körös sites with their greater reliance on caprines (Bartosiewicz 2007). Bánffy uses Renate Ebersbach's ethno-archaeo-zoological data to show that cattle's low fertility, the high cost of winter fodder and the restrictions on culling cattle meant that cattle husbandry was a complex and burdensome activity calling for long-term planning. As part of Ebersbach's *Neomilk* Project, lipid analysis of Early Neolithic sherds from Szakmár-Kisülés and Alsónyék-Báticasék showed that 33% of sherds from the latter showed a significant amount of lipid concentrations with free fatty acids that came from animal fat: partly remnants of meat (or marrow), but to a greater extent dairy fat from ruminants such as butter, cheese, fresh milk or yoghurt (although no lipids were preserved from Szakmár). The author correctly observes that the initial stages of milking undoubtedly involved a very close physical and emotional relationship between cows and their milkers, including those who prepared the first dairy products.

A final aspect of human – bovine relations concerned disease. Ethier and her team's study of a large sample of cattle skeletal remains from Alsónyék-Báticasék for pathological alterations suggested the possibility of traces of bone tuberculosis. If this assumption can be confirmed, it will be one of the earliest cases of TB in Europe. It will be of great significance regarding early dairying practices, since the most common means of developing TB is by the consumption of raw, unboiled milk.

These provocative interpretations take the discovery of a single, exceptional figurine from the household in/near which it was discovered to a consideration of changing material culture and eating and drinking practices over a wide area of the BC region. It is greatly to Eszter Bánffy's credit that she has created such an inter-disciplinary research framework in which such questions can be posed at all. Nonetheless, several important questions remain unaddressed. The author recognises the decreasing quantity of objects further to the North-West across the Carpathian Basin but, beyond the widespread use of clay, she never questions why there were so many clay objects in the Balkans. This forms a major research question in my recent synthesis of later Balkan prehistory (Chapman 2020). Insofar as the development of cattle husbandry was not a Western Hungarian innovation, its long-term establishment in many parts of the Central Balkans (Orton *et al.* 2016) meant that skills in cattle-keeping had been transmitted between communities for several centuries. And it is baffling that, in such a sophisticated volume, the author shows such continued commitment to the Central European-Balkan-Agro-Ecological Barrier, whose prime characteristics are its utter inability to explain either ceramic distributions or subsistence practices through time and place.

But these are minor issues in an otherwise splendid contribution to our conversation about the start of farming lifeways in Europe. With excellent illustrations and a vivid sense of connections, this book is one of the finest that Eszter Bánffy has yet written. We look forward to further insights into the Neolithic in the Carpathian Basin and beyond.

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*John Chapman*

*Independent scholar*

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