



Book Reviews

BODIES OF CLAY: PREHISTORIC HUMANISED POTTERY, EDITED BY HEINER SCHWARZBERG AND VALESKA BECKER

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Body-focused research continues to attract a great deal of interest in archaeology. For almost two decades, studies centred on the body have resulted in a series of edited volumes, such as *Thinking through the Body: Archaeologies of Corporeality* (2001), *The Body as Material Culture: a Theoretical Osteoarchaeology* (2005), *Past Bodies: Body Centred Research in Archaeology* (2008), *Body Parts and Bodies Whole* (2010), *Embodied Knowledge: Perspectives on Belief and Technology* (2013) and recently *An Archaeology of Prehistoric Bodies and Embodied Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean* (2016). *Bodies of Clay* can be classified under the same broad theme as contributors have been invited to discuss anthropomorphic pottery in relation to the human body and the insights its modelling can provide for understanding prehistoric societies. The volume is also directed towards pottery specialists who would like to learn more about the form and use of the particular type of containers across time and cultures.

The volume contains a short preface and a collection of 12 essays on prehistoric anthropomorphic pottery, some of which were presented in September 2013 at the eponymous session of the 19th Annual Meeting of EAA in Pilsen, in the Czech Republic. The book has also been supplemented with further contributions that were invited by the editors at a later stage. In terms of chronology, the papers range from the Neolithic to the early Iron Age, and geographically they cover predominantly regions in Europe, with the exception of one chapter that presents anthropomorphic pottery from Japan.

As stated by the editors in the Preface, the scope of the volume is to highlight the diachronic archaeological patterns and contexts of anthropomorphic pottery in a theoretically-informed framework, in order to draw attention to the similarities and differences through time, and to explore the possibilities and limitations of interpretation of the particular type of vessels. The EAA session held in Pilsen in 2013, as well as the resulting collection of essays, originated from the organisers' intention to produce the first volume that looks at the phenomenon of anthropomorphic vessels diachronically. The editors claim that the contributions have brought forward the interpretative potential of anthropomorphic vessels and express the optimism that the volume will instigate a new interest and discussion on the particular type of pottery.

The 12 chapters do not appear to follow a particular type of order, chronological or geographical, throughout the volume. Regarding the content of the contributions, in the first chapter H. Schwarzberg discusses solid or hollow statues with attached containers from European sites of Neolithic and Chalcolithic date. In the following chapter, E. Voulgari examines Neolithic anthropomorphic vessels from northern Greece and investigates their connections with other vessels in terms of their form, production patterns and contexts of use. Voulgari concludes that we should not assume *a priori* that anthropomorphic vessels expressed humanness due to their form; rather they acquired meaning in the context of social action. On a different line of thought, G. Naumov, who looks at Neolithic anthropomorphic pottery from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, places emphasis on the human traits of the vessels concerned. Naumov argues that the body served as a central metaphor for the understanding of the Neolithic world and that corporeality is a core component of anthropomorphic vessels which ultimately identified with particular individuals that inhabited the settlement space.

Chapter 4, by V. Becker, focuses on face vessels and anthropomorphic representations on vessels from Neolithic Italy. The vessels are approached as expressions of religion which indicate connections between cultural phenomena and mark social identity. Parallels have been sought with cultures of neighbouring regions and Becker concludes that face vessels from Neolithic Italy are similar with their counterparts of the eastern Linear Pottery culture, which can be explained as the result of operating exchange networks, or as an indication of shared religious beliefs or a common origin. In the fifth chapter, J. Recchia-Quiniou explores the relationship between vessels of Early Neolithic to Chalcolithic date from the north-west Mediterranean and the body within the framework of ethnographic and ethno-archaeological studies. The paper concludes that the body metaphor is prevalent in pottery and that it may have been expressed even when the vessel does not bear obvious anthropomorphic features.

In Chapter 6, I. Pavlů and R. Šumberová discuss the role of Neolithic face pots from central Europe, by drawing comparisons with analogous finds from the Balkans and the Near East. It is suggested that face pots are personified and that they marked the social unit that inhabited the houses they belonged to, an idea similar to that expressed by Naumov. In Chapter 7, D. Hoffman looks at figurines of the Linear Pottery culture with reference to their contextualisation and other types of evidence, namely anthropomorphic or zoomorphic pots and burial evidence. For Hoffman, the indeterminate nature of figurines, of figurative vessels and anthropomorphic pots indicates that they served to question social boundaries and challenge power relations. Chapter 8, by J. Pyzel, is on the theme of post-Linear Pottery culture anthropomorphic vessels from Poland and it proposes that the variation in form suggests different meanings. E. Solovyeva, in Chapter 9, presents the variety of anthropomorphic images of the Jomon period in Japan, which roughly corresponds to the Neolithic period in Europe.

In Chapter 10, C.-E. Ursu, S. Țerna and C. Aparaschivei discuss vessels with stylised anthropomorphic decoration from a recently excavated Precucuteni settlement in Romania. The authors postulate that the vessels were ritual items associated with the notions of fertility and fecundity that held central place in the religion of the Neo-Eneolithic culture that venerated the 'Great Mother'. Chapter 11 by V. Opreș, T. Ignat and C. Lazăr is also on anthropomorphic pottery from a tell settlement in south-east Romania. The authors propose that the recovery context, as well as the anthropomorphic features of the vessels indicate a connection with the houses and their inhabitants. On a symbolic level, anthropomorphic pottery reveals how humans are metaphorically regarded as containers, but also constitutes a means for manipulation and negotiation at a social level. In the final chapter, K. Ślusarka discusses the use and symbolism of face urns of the Pomeranian Culture in the early Iron Age with reference to urns bearing no anthropomorphic traits, the associated contextual evidence and human remains. The analysis suggests that different degrees of 'humanity' were projected onto face urns depending on the degree to which community members were recognised as fully integrated or developed humans.

On a positive note, the volume does present some diversity in the approaches to the study of anthropomorphic vessels which could spark an interest in the particular type of evidence. It is also apparent that the contributors did make an effort to provide a comprehensive account of the available data in the regions concerned. Indeed, the strongest point in the volume's contributions is the detailed presentation of factual data, accompanied by good quality and elucidating illustrations. Furthermore, as some of these data have been excavated recently, specialists in the field will find this volume useful in bringing old and new evidence together. A number of papers (eg, Voulgari, Naumov) also stand out from the volume in being grounded in the current theoretical discussion surrounding the body and in posing critical questions concerning the use and meaning of anthropomorphic vessels. Anthropological theory and case studies have also been combined with archaeological evidence in an effort to interpret anthropomorphic pottery, as illustrated by the paper by J. Recchia-Quiniou.

Alas, the problematic areas emerging from reading the volume weigh more heavily than its contribution to the advancement of our knowledge on anthropomorphic pottery and body-focused research in archaeology. The weaknesses that characterise the volume can be summarised as follows.

(a) The strong point of the volume, which is the presentation of factual information, is also one of the book's major weaknesses. A number of papers are highly descriptive in presenting the available evidence, with little or no critical discussion on the possible meaning and use of figurines.

(b) The contributors (with a few notable exceptions) do not place their studies in the current theoretical framework surrounding the body, and an *a priori* connection between anthropomorphic vessels and people is assumed, which is not adequately problematised or supported by archaeological evidence.

(c) The context of use and deposition, which holds crucial information for the interpretation of anthropomorphic vessels, is not discussed in all the papers. Such data are essential in order to assess how anthropomorphic containers may have been similar or different from their counterparts in other cultures that the contributors draw connections with (eg, Becker).

(d) In a number of papers, anthropomorphic vessels are placed in the realm of religion, without first explaining the connection between religious beliefs and anthropomorphism, or the communicative use of decorative motifs at an ideological level. Furthermore, adequate evidence is not provided to support the explicit connection between anthropomorphic containers and religious beliefs at the exclusion of interpretations that may favour the vessels' use in social contexts. A symptom of the static approach to anthropomorphic vessels is also the fact that agency and the active involvement of pots in social processes that shaped individual and collective identities are not discussed in the interpretations.

(e) Anthropomorphic pottery is rarely discussed in association with non-anthropomorphic vessels. In other words, it is not clear throughout the volume why anthropomorphic vessels deserve special study or mention over other types of pottery, which in any case, as suggested by some contributors, may have been equally associated with anthropomorphic symbolism which is a concept inherent in the clay metaphor (eg, Recchia-Quiniou).

(f) Another significant weakness of the volume is that a number of papers propose interpretations that are based on assumptions and parallels with cultures that are geographically and chronologically separated, without critical discussion of the proposed hypothesis or the employed terms. Particularly disconcerting is the paper by Pavlů and Šumberová, which draws parallels from as far as central, south-east Europe and Anatolia, and proposes a similar use and symbolism of face pots. The authors use evidence selectively on one hand to associate gender attributes with depicted human motifs in Anatolia, and on the other to support arguments for a similar use and symbolism of face pots in central Europe.

Equally problematic is the chapter by Ursu, Țerna and Aparaschivei who draw connections across cultures and time and reiterate the Mother Goddess theory without consideration of the critique that has been articulated over the past five decades in archaeological theory and figurine studies. As a result of the specific approach, the possible meanings and uses of vessels

are not considered outside the realm of cult or religion, arbitrary connections are made between motifs and gender symbolism, and standardisation is interpreted solely as an indication of cultic use, rather than as a trait of social significance.

(g) A number of papers put forward interpretations on the use and meaning of anthropomorphic pottery that presuppose leaps of faith, as the arguments are not substantiated with supporting evidence and/or a critical discussion on the proposed connections. For example, it is postulated that anthropomorphic pots represented the individuals that inhabited the house, or that they bear biographical markers of their owners (eg, Opreș, T. Ignat, C. Lazăr, Naumov). Another hypothesis suggests that the size and preferred attributes of face pots correspond to the differences in the constitution of concrete social groups or families who inhabited these houses (see Pavlů and Šumberová).

(h) There is a lack of consensus on what should be classified as anthropomorphic (or “humanised”) pottery, which is apparent in the papers of the volume. For example, H. Schwarzberg includes “figurines with attached containers”, whereas some of them at least could alternatively be classified as anthropomorphic figurines modelled with containers. Alternatively, other contributors have included in their discussions pottery, which is not human-shaped, but bears decorative motifs which themselves are interpreted as anthropomorphic. Setting the criteria on what classifies as anthropomorphic pottery should have been addressed by the editors originally in their communication with the contributors and it should have been also addressed in the Preface.

(i) The volume presents a heavy bias towards central and Eastern Europe. A similar geographical bias also characterises the country of origin of the contributors which in itself is intriguing. One wonders why speakers presenting data from other European regions or even continents did not participate, or why the editors did not invite further contributions that could complement the volume.

(j) A more extensive Preface or an introductory chapter should have been included in the volume, in which the editors could have addressed a number of questions, such as: what vessels classify as anthropomorphic pottery and the variety of their form, why are anthropomorphic vessels special, what insights into social processes of prehistoric societies can we gain? In the same chapter the editors could have also summarised the problems and opportunities presented by the study of anthropomorphic vessels.

(k) I would suggest that the word ‘humanised’ used in the title of the book, in the Preface and in some of the papers, should have been replaced in favour of more neutral terms such as

'anthropomorphic', 'human-like' or 'human-shaped'. 'Humanised' refers to the result of the process that involves turning something into human, which implies that only vessels that were given unambiguous human-like attributes are acknowledged as possessing the quality of humanness. As a number of contributors admit, however, human characteristics may have also been recognised in non-anthropomorphic pottery through the very process of clay moulding or even in the symbolic use of decorative motifs or pigments.

Overall, I would say that the volume partly fulfils its aims in presenting the archaeological patterns and contexts of anthropomorphic pottery, and the variety it takes across time, regions and cultures. It fails, nevertheless, to discuss anthropomorphic vessels adequately with reference to the associated theoretical background or the possibilities and limitations of their interpretation, according to the stated aims. Regrettably, the book also lags behind volumes dedicated to body-centred research with regard to the theoretical rigour, careful examination of the evidence and critical discussion. Ultimately, the volume does not make justice to the "interpretative potential of anthropomorphic vessels", although it could spark an interest among pottery specialists as it marks a first attempt to bring together essays exclusively on the theme of anthropomorphic pottery.

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