

ARTICLES

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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: ON FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC STROKED POTTERY CULTURE

ABSTRACT

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Once characteristic of the Southeastern and, to a lesser extent, Central European Neolithic lifestyle, the use of clay figurines, figurative vessels and applications took a turn at the start of the Middle Neolithic (5000 BCE). While thousands were still found in Southeastern Europe, their number dropped significantly in large parts of Central Europe. This article focuses on the Stroked Pottery culture, the Samborzec-Malice culture, and the Southeastern Bavarian Middle Neolithic group as an area of transition between a figurative Southeastern Europe and a non-figurative Northwestern Europe. Observing notable changes in both the shapes and contexts of the finds as early as when farmers settled in Central Europe, I argue that the disappearance of the Southeastern clay tradition was tied to changes within communal practices, as well as a transformation of figuration through a common, stylised motif.

Keywords: Neolithic, figurines, figurative representations, fifth millennium BC, Stroked Pottery Culture, Middle Neolithic, toad engravings

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INTRODUCTION

As farming communities expanded into Central Europe, they retained many of their southeastern traditions, including the creation of clay anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, vessels, and figurative applications. However, when the Central European Linear Pottery culture (LBK) split into distinct regional cultures at the turn of the 5th millennium BCE, its figurative landscape underwent a decisive change. Placed at the margins of a non-figurative area along the Rhine, and a figurative burst in Transdanubia, the Stroked Pottery culture (Stichbandkeramik, SBK), Samborzec-Malice culture and Southeastern Bavarian Middle Neolithic group (Südostbayerisches Mittelneolithikum, SOB) seem like a transitional area. Eventually, figuration disappeared from most of Central Europe (Becker in print). A simple explanation for this development could be that the traditional use of clay shifted to wood. However, although submerged settlements were present during the Early and Middle Neolithic periods, as well as pile dwellings that yielded textiles and wooden artefacts, not a single wooden figurative object has been uncovered. It is hard to imagine that wooden representations were still being made during the Middle Neolithic, but none have been found, whereas Mesolithic and Bronze Age ones have been uncovered (Iversen *et al.* 2024; Verhart 2015; Capelle 1995). An alternative explanation that I will explore in this article is that figuration became increasingly diversified and stylised throughout the Early and Middle Neolithic, eventually turning into abstract pottery motifs. The context of this shift is particularly interesting, as it lies at the turn of the Middle Neolithic (5000 BCE) and involves many cultural changes (Fig. 1).

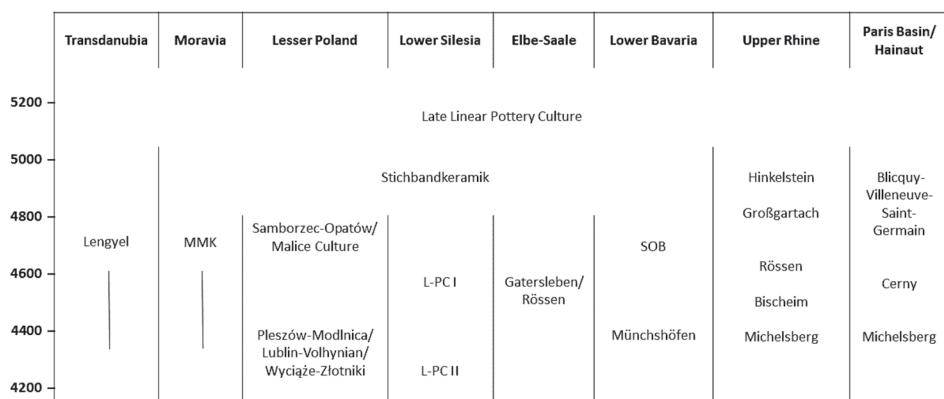


Fig. 1. Simplified chronological table of the mentioned areas. MMK: Moravian Painted Pottery Culture; L-PC: Lengyel-Polgar Culture

FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

The LBK

Types of representations

Through the project ‘A World without Images’ at the University of Copenhagen, Starčevo-Körös-Criș, LBK and post-LBK figurative finds were recorded in a relational database, which amounted to c. 2500 entries. The main publications used for this data collection were Becker 2011, Hansen 2007, and Quitta 1957. Data for Lengyel figurines was kindly provided by Corina Fiutak (2021). This indicates that, compared to the southeastern Starčevo-Körös-Criș cultures, LBK figurative representations decreased in density but increased in variability (Figs 2 and 3).

The two main anthropomorphic figurine types from the southeastern Starčevo-Körös-Criș cultures remained. These are Valeska Becker’s Type 1, defined as column-like, without arms or legs, and Type 2, including more articulated figurines with legs (Becker 2007, 121). However, they became less naturalistic and more heavily decorated, with regional variants (Becker 2007, 121-124). While two-thirds of the Starčevo-Körös-Criș figurines could be sexually identified as female, only one-third of the LBK finds were identifiable as female. This ambiguity may have been deliberate, as even the distinction between human and animal was sometimes blurred (Hofmann 2014, 51). The proportion of anthropomorphic figurines also decreased compared to the proportion of anthropomorphic vessels and applications (Fig. 3), which were characterised by their variability: anthropomorphic vessels consisted of three main categories: *face vessels*, *feet vessels* and *figurine vessels* (Becker 2011, 109), with signs of regionalisation regarding face vessels – in the Lower Danube region and Carpathian basin, many face vessels bore a distinctive ‘M’ shaped incision (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 109). However, despite this variability in vessel shape and decoration, sexual identification, when it was possible, always pointed to female features.

The increase in vessel and application proportions during the LBK was also visible in zoomorphic representations. In Bohemia, zoomorphic applications often appeared as horns on vessels, as seen in the example of Bylany’s early LBK vessel (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 87).

When identifiable, zoomorphic representations mainly depicted cattle, *caprinae* and pigs in both the Starčevo-Körös-Criș and LBK cultures (Fig. 4: a). Post-LBK finds suggest an increase in the proportion of cattle depictions, but the number of finds is too low to make solid observations.

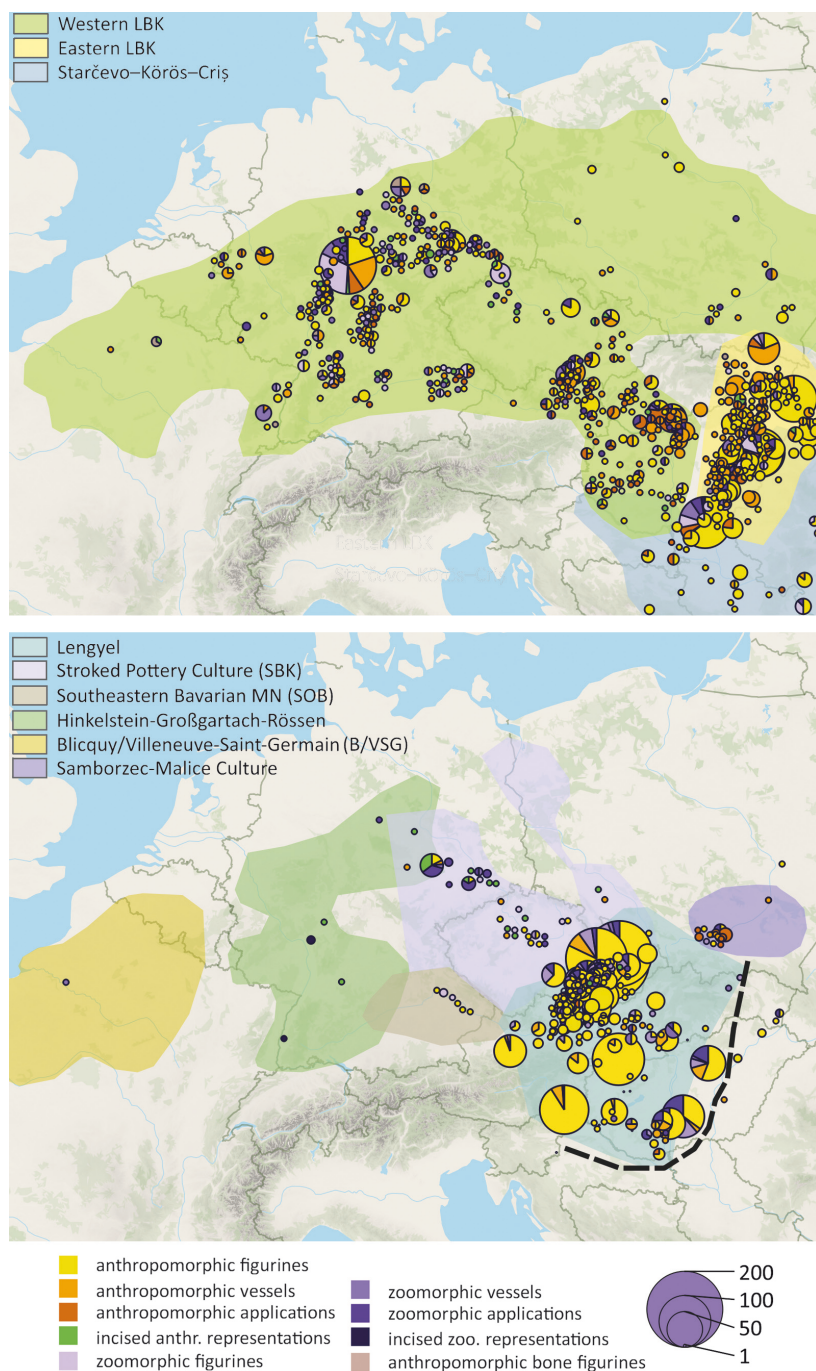


Fig. 2. Distribution of Early and early-Middle Neolithic figurative finds in Central Europe

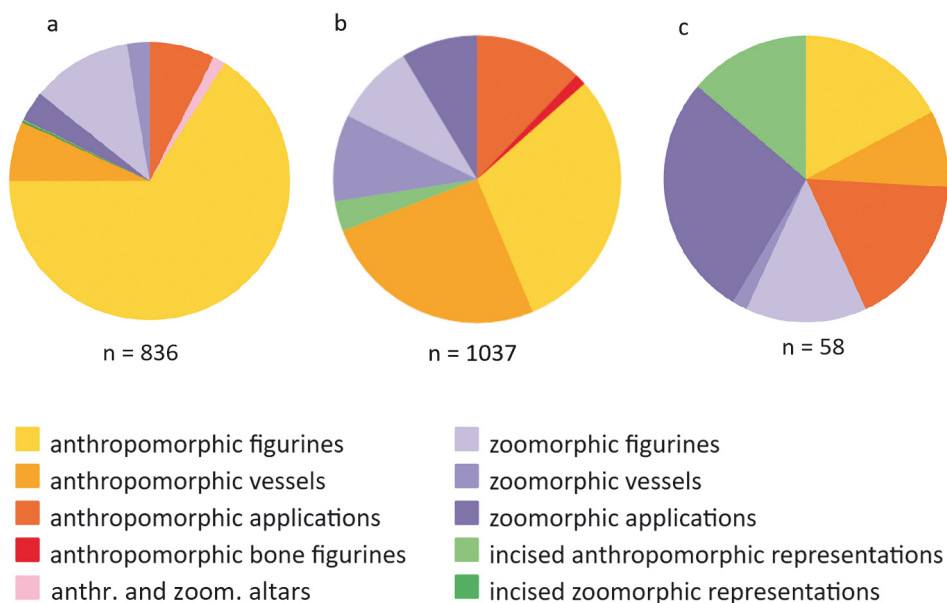


Fig. 3. Figurative representation types:
a. Starčevo-Körös-Criș, b. LBK, c. eastern post-LBK (see list of representations below)

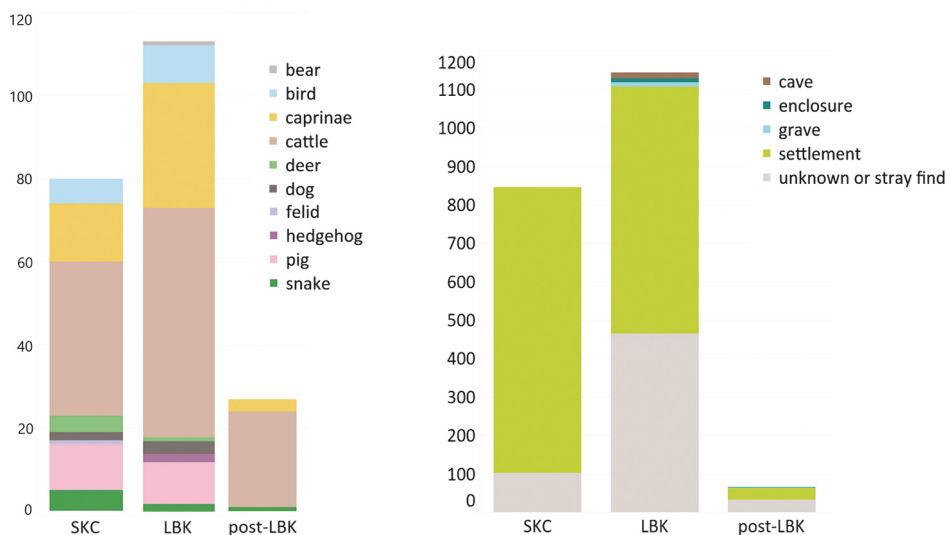


Fig. 4. Identified species and find contexts of the Starčevo-Körös-Criș, LBK, and eastern post-LBK datasets

Contexts

In terms of context, figurative finds of all kinds were tightly linked to the settlement throughout the Early Neolithic. However, the term ‘settlement’ often groups together very distinct types of contexts. Many Starčevo-Körös-Criş representations were found directly in houses (often near the hearth), whereas in LBK the longhouse context emerged, with representations found in long pits alongside houses (Bánffy 2017, 718). Of the 41 LBK figurative finds in our database that were tied to a house, 35 came from long pits, three from pit houses and one from a posthole. Whether these different contexts led to distinct uses of the figurative representations remains to be investigated further.

Another novelty during the LBK was the use of enclosures as deposition areas of figurative finds, which may once again indicate a shift of usage – especially if certain enclosures were used for social gatherings and ceremonies (Fig. 4: 2). Finally, the very few LBK finds found in graves were very distinctive figurative representations made of long bones with what appears to be eyes (Allard *et al.* 1997, 40). Due to their features and the fact that they were found in children’s graves, they are considered here to be separate from the clay corpus and are interpreted as children’s toys.

Post-LBK

Types of representations

At the beginning of the Middle Neolithic, the number of figurative objects in northern Central Europe dropped significantly (Bristow 2025, fig. 3). The use of the term ‘object’ is important here, as figuration may have shifted from individual clay objects to abstract motifs on pottery vessels, thus becoming almost invisible to our modern eye. This might be the case with the so-called ‘toad engravings’, which overtook the first phases of the SBK and western Hinkelstein pottery decoration at the start of the Middle Neolithic (Quitta 1957; Spatz 2003). These stick figures with bent arms and legs, incised or applied on pottery, were well known from the LBK and even in Starčevo-Körös-Criş contexts, but seem to have developed into a highly schematised motif at the start of the Middle Neolithic. The rise in anthropomorphic applications shown in Fig. 3: c consists, in fact, mainly of the stick figures from Targowisko (Lesser Poland), which might be a variation of the toad motif (Fig. 5: c). The SBK vessel from Stary Zamek (Lower Silesia) depicts its inside another possible variation of the stick figure with no head, but bent arms and legs (Fig. 5: e).

From the start of the fifth millennium BCE, this motif found itself at the core of northern Central European pottery, and is hard to interpret as anthropomorphic confidently. Therefore, only the most distinctive toad figures were recorded in the database, *e.g.*, the figures that detached themselves from a band-like pattern and clearly showed pairs of bent arms and legs. If we were to add to the database every single vessel bearing a variation of

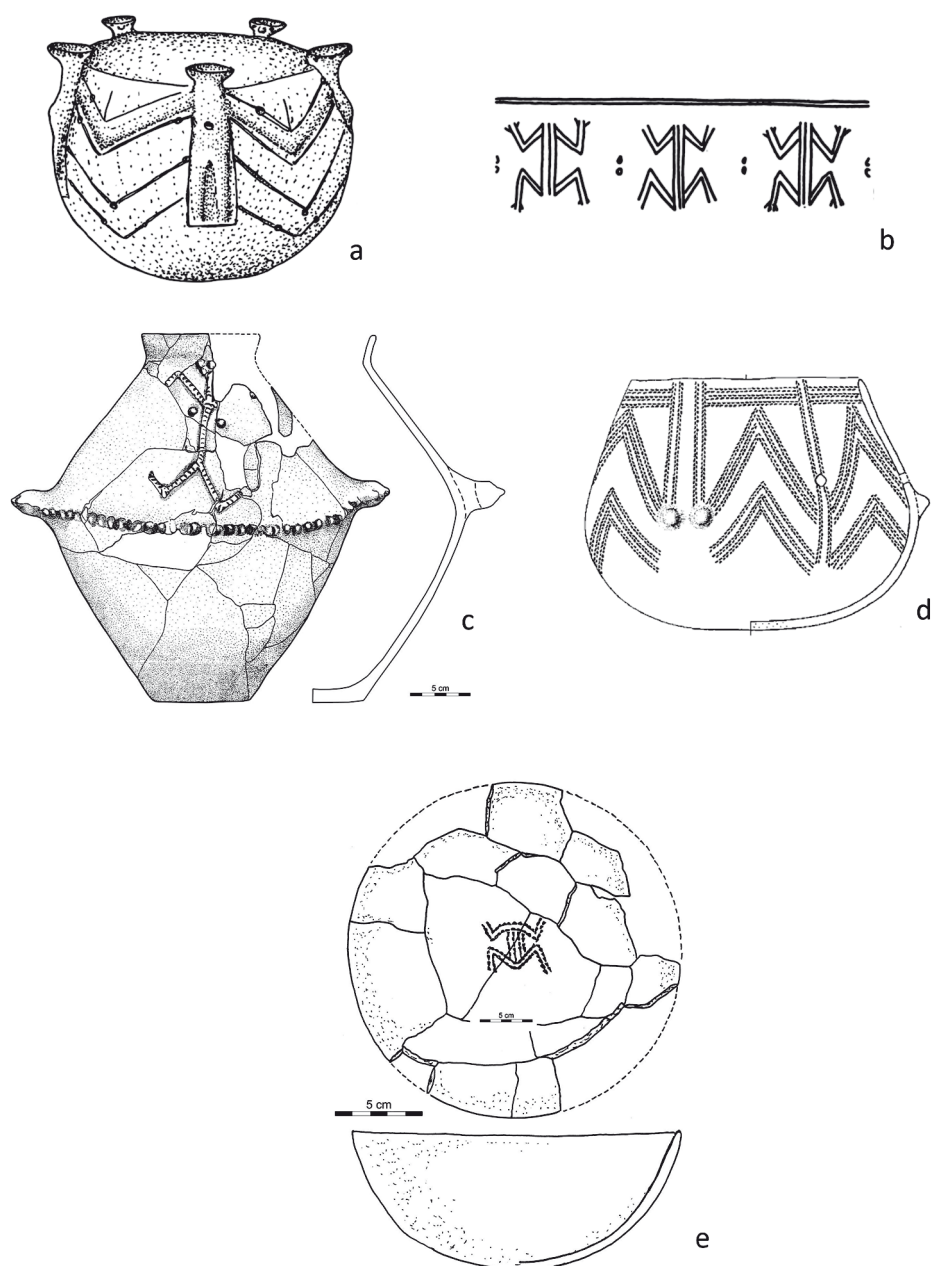


Fig. 5. 'Toad representations': a – LBK find from Vedrovice (after Becker 2011, 774); b – LBK find from Prag-Bubeneč (after Becker 2011, 788); c – Malice Culture find from Targowisko (after Grabowska and Zastawny 2008, 72; Pyzel 2017, fig. 3); d – SBK find from Hořovičky (after Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 43); e – SBK find from Starý Zámek (after Romanow 1977, 51; Pyzel 2017, fig. 20)

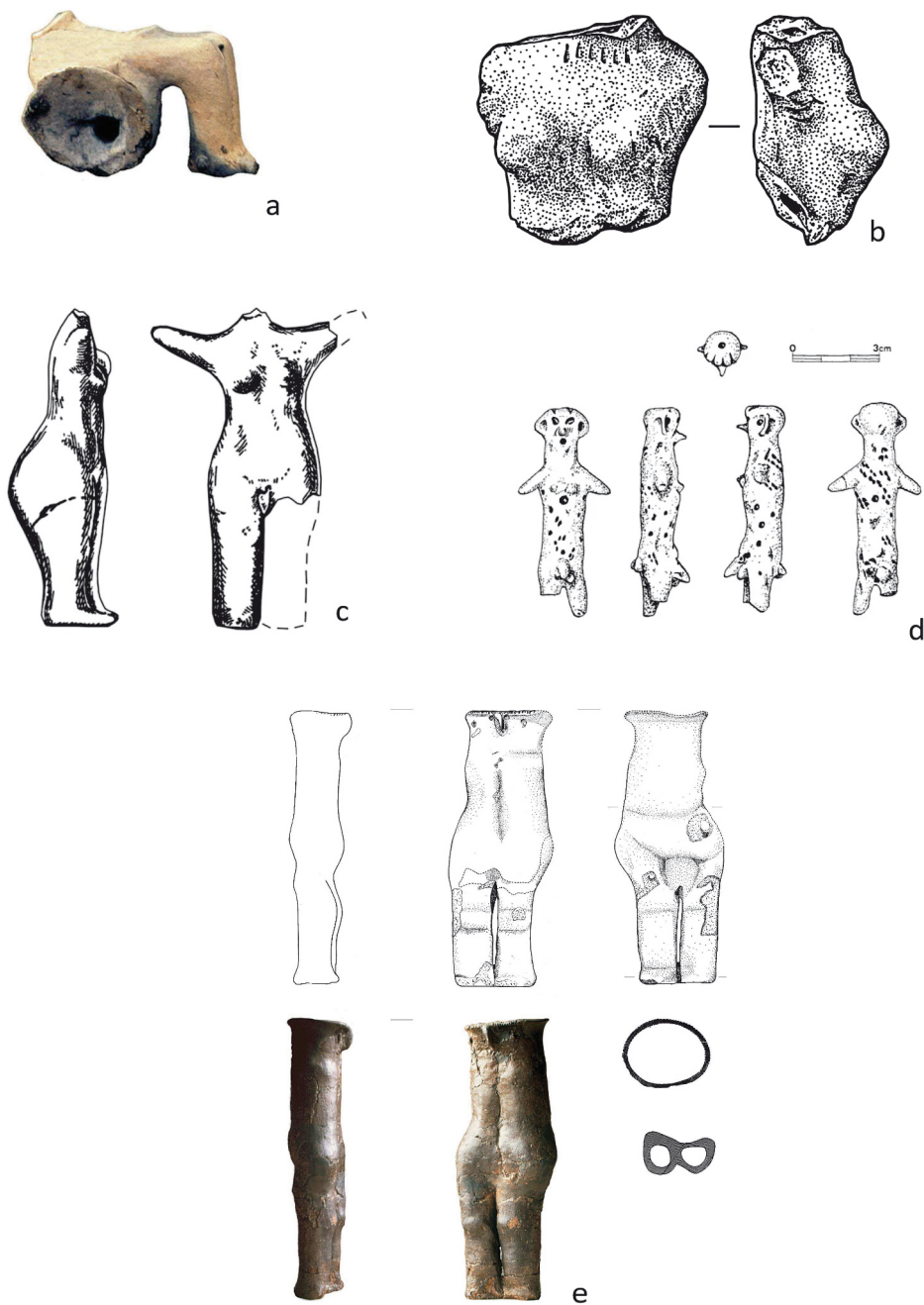


Fig. 6. Some SBK anthropomorphic representations: a – Aldersbach-Kriestorf (after Engelhardt 2010, 51); b – Oberpörling (after Becker 2011, 289); c – Zauschwitz (after Becker 2011, 287); d – Plotičtě nad Labem (after Vokolek 2000, 478); e – Aufhausen (after Engelhardt 2010, 51)

the toad motif, the map of Middle Neolithic figurative finds would look very different. Firstly, it would seem that figurative representations were numerous at the turn of the fifth millennium BCE. Secondly, it would give the burial context a decisive place in the fifth millennium BCE figurative world, as many vessels bearing toads were found in the funerary context.

Interestingly, the toad motif is also known from Late Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Europe, with many examples listed by Judith Grünberg and Heribert Graetsch (Grünberg and Graetsch 2023, 614). It is also known from the Southwestern Asian Neolithic, which makes pinpointing its potential origin difficult but indicates that this motif was shared across a wide geographic and temporal area.

Contrary to Western Central Europe, where almost no figuration is visible outside the area covered by the toad engravings, the SBK and SOB areas retain more traditional figurine shapes. A few anthropomorphic figurines have been found, such as the 'Venus of Zauschwitz' (Saxony) and the female torso from Oberpöding (Bavaria), both very similar to neighbouring Lengyel figurines (Fig. 6: b and c). Similar to the LBK, post-LBK anthropomorphic figurines were female and standing upright, with the notable exceptions of the seated figurine from Aldersbach-Kriestorf and the male/hybrid figurine from Plotišť nad Labem (Fig. 6: d). Although the sex of the seated figure from Aldersbach-Kriestorf is not identifiable, some researchers noted that figurines seating on the ground were always female in the Aegean (Mina 2008, 227) and the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Jarmo (Lesure 2017, fig. 3: 6), while figurines seating on a stool were often male (Mina 2008, 227). The figurine from Plotišť nad Labem, on the other hand, is a notable rarity among both LBK and post-LBK figurines. It bears a male attribute, but the presence of small breasts could indicate a hybrid.

A few anthropomorphic vessels were also found in post-LBK contexts: the anthropomorphic vessel from Aufhausen was not added to our statistics as it was dated as being from the Münchshöfen culture (4500-3900 BCE), but is an example of an anthropomorphic vessel from the second part of the fifth millennium BCE (Fig. 6: e). Similar finds have been uncovered in Poland (Pyzel 2017, fig. 8: 2). A gynaikomorph vessel found in Bavaria proved difficult to date (Engelhardt 2010, 67; Pyzel 2017). Its immediate resemblance to other gynaikomorph vessels from the Alpine region and western Carpathian basin might place it in the fourth or even third millennium BCE. It will therefore not be addressed further here but is an example of one path that figuration took during the fourth millennium BCE, with the abandonment of traditional figurines and a shift towards breast representations on vessels and walls (Höckmann 1965; Becker in print).

In terms of zoomorphic representations, the depiction of cattle was not new, but it was argued that its proportion increased during the fifth millennium BCE (Höckmann 1965, fig. 4: a). This is visible on the site of Zauschwitz, where LBK representations mainly included anthropomorphic vessels, while post-LBK representations consisted of zoomorphic applications and anthropomorphic incisions. In Bohemia, cattle heads and horn-shaped

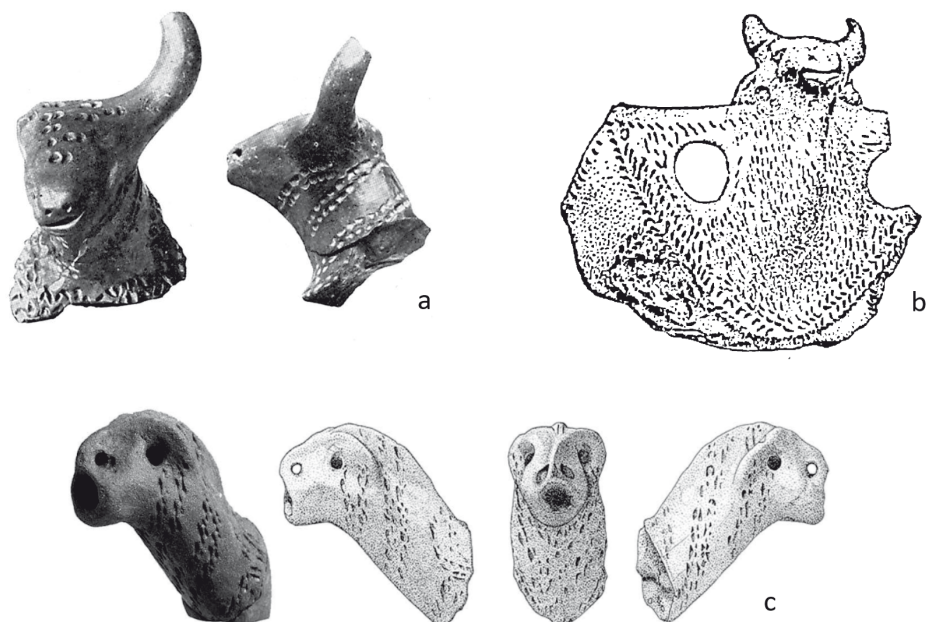


Fig. 7. SBK and SOB zoomorphic representations:
a – Černý Vůl (after Engelhardt 2010, 70); b – Straubing-Lerchenhaid (after Engelhardt 2010, 57)

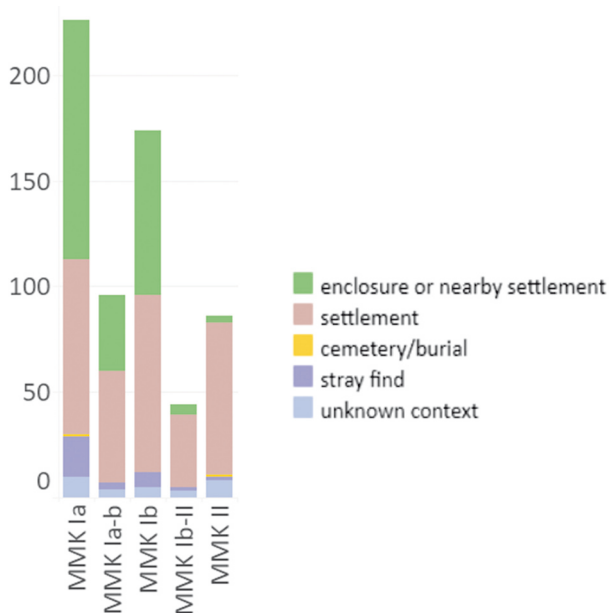


Fig. 8. Contexts of the dated Lengyel finds from Corina Fiutak's dataset (Fiutak 2021). MMK = Moravian Painted Pottery group. The majority of the Lengyel representations were uncovered in Moravia

lugs were applied to vessels, especially during the late phase of the SBK (4800-4500 BCE), as evidenced by the vessel from Kolín, which bears two horn-shaped lugs (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 47). Other creatures were also depicted, such as the snake from Piskowitz (Saxony) and the unidentifiable creature from Straubing-Lerchenhaid (Bavaria) (Fig. 7: c).

Contexts

Post-LBK figurative objects were still linked to the settlements, although two other contexts – depending on whether the ‘toad engraving’ pottery motif is considered anthropomorphic or not – took on a greater role during the Middle Neolithic. The first one, tied to the toad figures, is a funerary one. As mentioned previously, it does not appear in the statistics of this article as the entire SBK pottery decoration was covered in toad-like bands, and only the most distinctive were added to the database. The second context is the enclosure context (see *rondels* in the next section). In the SBK/SOB area, this context is hard to assess, as the sample size of figurative representations is particularly small. Data from the neighbouring Lengyel culture does, however, suggest an important increase in finds in the enclosure context compared to the LBK (Fig. 8). It is furthermore notable that material depositions in enclosures appear different regionally, indicating regional differences in the use of enclosures during the Middle Neolithic.

Changes at the turn of the fifth millennium BCE

A smooth transition

One of the distinctive characteristics of Central Europe at the start of the fifth millennium BCE is its pottery. From the Rhine to the Oder, pottery was decorated with rectilinear bands – often in a toad-like shape – made of alternating pairs of strokes (Fig. 5: d). The bands were sometimes filled with white paint while the inside of the vessel was painted red (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 72). This pottery style appeared relatively smoothly from the LBK, with double lines of strokes already present on late LBK pottery, becoming bands of alternating double strokes during the SBK (Link 2015, 355). The similarity between LBK and SBK pottery sparked debate concerning the origin and spread of SBK pottery and, by extension, SBK people (Riedhammer 2019). Ultimately, while direct evidence cannot yet back any conclusion on an SBK migration across Central Europe, the homogeneity of Central European pottery at the start of the Middle Neolithic does point to contacts between different groups, and possibly greater mobility. According to Karin Riedhammer, the rather uniform distribution of pottery styles across Central Europe could be interpreted as a ‘constant marriage network reaching across regions’. This aligns with the fact that some areas of Central Europe saw episodes of depopulation and violence at the end of the LBK and may have needed to create contacts over long distances (Riedhammer 2019, 154).

These episodes of depopulation and violence, however, are primarily visible in the western part of Central Europe. Eastern Central Europe did show signs of depopulation, with the examples of Schönebeck in Saxony and many hiatuses at the end of the LBK in the Polish lowlands (Wollenweber 2019, 174, 175; Pyzel 2020, 42), but overall, the LBK seems to have transitioned relatively smoothly towards the SBK (Jeunesse 2019, 109). The main LBK elements remained present at all sites that continued to exist: longhouses and settlement locations only saw slight changes, with longhouses becoming more trapezoidal and segmented (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 59; Link 2015, 353; Lenneis 2017, 270; Pyzel 2017, 140). On the Dresden-Prohlis site, this continuity may have even extended to the household level (Link 2015, 358). There does, however, seem to have been a greater distance between houses and farms in Bohemia, which may have reflected a difference in field systems (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 59).

While there does not seem to have been any clear break in settlement and economic levels from the LBK to the post-LBK, some changes are visible in the funerary context. In Bohemia, while inhumations remained prevalent, cremations also existed, eventually accounting for one-third of all single finds (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 102). Another innovation at the start of the SBK in Bohemia was the presence of cemeteries outside settlement areas. Finally, changes also affected funerary ornamentation, with the appearance of white marble armlets and deer canine teeth (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 78-85). The opposite is visible in Bavaria, where cemeteries started disappearing (Hofmann 2012, 234).

4800 BCE: innovations and influences

After an initially rather smooth transition between the LBK and post-LBK, a few significant transformations appeared in the late phase of the SBK (phase IV) around 4800 BCE. This is evident in the emergence of new pottery styles in Saxony and the appearance of horn-like knobs on vessels (Becker 2011, 286). From 4800 BCE, settlements became smaller, more dispersed, and were occupied for a shorter amount of time (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 59; Fridrich *et al.* 2015, 454; Czerniak *et al.* 2019, 61). This is noticeably similar to the situation in the West (Breitwieser 2009; Bostyn *et al.* 2018). In Bohemia, the overall weaker house structure was explained by the influence of forager mobility, through seasonal or generational abandonment of houses (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 59). But the most striking early fifth millennium BCE innovation was the sudden emergence of rondels, or ‘Kreisgrabenanlagen’ – circular enclosures with V-shaped ditches up to 6 m deep, several narrow entrances, and often palisades. Their diameter ranged from 45 to 180 metres (Lenneis 2017, 276). Found throughout Central Europe from 4850 BCE, they lasted no more than 150 years (Řídký *et al.* 2019, 181). Their size, location, and the absence of houses within them led to their interpretation as spaces for gathering and potential ceremonies. The ceremonial interpretation of the enclosures was further supported by the fact that some rondels were oriented towards the sun’s setting points during the solstices or equi-

noxes (Schier 2023, 12). Excavations surrounding the rondels in Horoměřice-Chotol, Kolín and Svodín confirmed the hypothesis that rondels were one of the basic components of what Ivan Pavlů and Marie Zápotocká called a ‘rural unit’ (open settlement, cemetery, socio-ritual feature). They argued that these socio-ritual features served as waypoints of long-distance routes (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 66). Rondels may therefore have even been part of a network of contacts between SBK communities from the Czech Republic, Lower Silesia, and the Elbe (Czerniak *et al.* 2020, 265).

While rondels were characteristic of the early fifth millennium BCE, they were deeply rooted in the past, with some of them reusing former LBK sites and trapezoidal longhouses. This was the case at Quedlinburg (Saxony-Anhalt) and many Bohemian sites (Wollenweber 2019, 175; Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 60). Pavlů and Zápotocká argued that building a rondel may have served the same purpose as building an LBK longhouse, namely to involve people from vast surrounding regions through communal activities (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 106). Furthermore, the rondels’ short time span led Wolfram Schier *et al.* to argue that the communal activity required to build them was more important than the result (Schier 2023, 288). They referred to this as ‘performative architecture’, which involves not only the construction process but also the associated rituals performed by the community.

Whether it was an enclosure or a longhouse, building such large features with a pre-designed plan required a great level of social organisation. Already, LBK enclosures – which appeared during the middle LBK and increased during the late LBK – were associated with possible ‘tribalisation’ of Neolithic communities, that is to say their transition from small, loosely organised bands to larger, more structured tribal societies (Kerig 2003, 237). The construction of rondels during the Middle Neolithic might have served to enhance or demonstrate the status of an individual initiating it, possibly a chief (Řídký *et al.* 2019, 39).

The rondel phenomenon was present in the SOB/SBK areas, as well as in the Lengyel culture further to the south-east. The late phase of the SBK, as well as the second phase of the SOB, dating to 4800 BCE, did in fact seem to tie stronger bonds with the Lengyel culture, which led Link to talk about a ‘Lengyelisation’ of eastern Central Germany (Link 2015, 358; Engelhardt 2010, 73). According to Juraj Pavúk, it was tied to a movement of Lengyel communities to Lower Austria around 4900 BCE and subsequently the Moravian basin, occupied by SBK communities (Pavúk 2007, 24; Lenneis 2017, 294). Overall, long-distance contacts across the post-LBK area were evident through raw material exchanges, such as Bavarian chert distributed in Bohemia, Saxony, and Lower Austria (Řídký *et al.* 2019, 150). Großgartach pottery from the Main valley has been found in Bohemia, as has evidence of salt trade and Rössen pottery from the Elbe/Saale region. Marble armlets from Bohemia were also exported to the Saale valley, Bavaria and northern Germany, possibly in exchange for salt (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 109). These intense exchange routes led Ivan Pavlů and Marie Zápotocká to suggest that the late stage of the SBK and contempora-

neous earlier stages of Lengyel were periods of 'social and economic advancement'. The situation was similar in central Poland, where exchanges with Großgartach-Rössen were evident through pottery sherds from the Konary Site 20 in Kujavia. An increase in wild meat consumption post-LBK and the presence of 'Danubian' stone tools on the southern Baltic coast suggested contacts with hunter-gatherers (Czerniak 2012, 158, 159). According to Lech Czerniak, these contacts led to significant changes for both foragers and farmers. He argued that cultural changes in post-LBK groups should be linked to internal social dynamism, contacts with local foragers, and the influence of more complex communities from the Balkans and the Mediterranean (Czerniak 2012, 155). This placed the SBK and SOB between many spheres of influence in the North, West and Southeast.

Discussion: new shapes for new practices?

Different shapes

The rise and fall of figuration in Central Europe can be observed through two distinct developments. Initially, the LBK clay tradition appears as a continuation of the Southeastern one. However, the diversification of shapes and increasing stylisation show an early detachment from the southeastern clay tradition as the LBK reached Transdanubia. This was noted by Eszter Bánffy when observing the monumental cattle figurine from Szakmár-Kisülés, Hungary (Bánffy 2019, 131). Bánffy suggested that as Neolithic settlers reached the forested hills of the northern Balkans, changes in subsistence patterns affected the figurative paraphernalia. According to her, the shift from *caprinae* to cattle was from then on visible in figurative depictions, although this is not so clear for the LBK data (Fig. 4). Bánffy moreover argued that this migration led to the decline of the clay-centered orbit, in favour of a timber and stone orbit. This may be the reason why the figurative tradition ultimately never reached the Paris Basin. By moving away from clay, figuration in that area may have shifted towards new materials and shapes, involving new practices.

Through a second development, events at the start of the Middle Neolithic might have accelerated the progressive abandonment of the southeastern figurative tradition in Central Europe. In the Rhine area, population density dropped significantly on many sites, where a full reoccupation only happened after 4800 BCE (Denaire *et al.* 2017). This could explain the almost complete disappearance of figurative objects in the area. In the Elbe and Oder area, on the other hand, the transition between the LBK and post-LBK groups appeared smoother, which would explain the slower abandonment of southeastern clay figuration.

Parallel to the drop of clay figurative objects at the turn of the fifth millennium BCE was the rise of a common pottery style across Central Europe. Its rectilinear bands may have represented a stylisation of the long-known anthropomorphic 'toad' motif applied and incised on LBK pottery. If that is the case, then the apparent non-figurative landscape

of post-LBK Central Europe was, in fact, filled with figures on vessels highlighted with white paint.

Zoomorphic representations may have increased during this period, often representing cattle as figurines and vessel applications. This led Olaf Höckmann to argue for a shift from toad engravings to a bull cult during the fifth millennium BCE (Höckmann 1965, 25). The idea of a bull cult during the Neolithic is not particularly unlikely, as the use of cattle for traction and meat probably required planning and adaptation to diseases, which gave cattle a special status. Interestingly, horned bovid representations are generally associated with bulls and, by extension, the idea of 'strength' and 'manliness', when in fact, cows are also born with horns and could be the subjects depicted through horned representations (Bánffy 2019, 3). Proving that the representation of bulls or cows was associated with a cult during the Middle Neolithic, however, is difficult, given the low number of representations.

Nevertheless, comparing LBK and post-LBK figurative representations reveals many changes that may have influenced their purpose and use. In this respect, changes in their archaeological contexts are also notable.

Different contexts

One context that remained persistent throughout the Early and Middle Neolithic is the settlement. However, the term 'settlement' often lacks precision – it can refer to the inside of a house, or a separate pit. The presence of clusters of figurines and clay altars in South-eastern European houses led to the interpretation of certain rooms as 'sanctuaries' (Bánffy 2001, 59). LBK representations, on the other hand, were often found in long pits or 'unstructured pits' that did not necessarily display special handling (Hofmann 2020). Starčevo and LBK buildings were additionally quite different from each other. The building of LBK longhouses may have required a significantly higher amount of planning and cooperation among the community. Therefore, the use of figurative objects inside and outside Starčevo and LBK buildings may have differed depending on the number of participants and whether the making, handling, and breaking of figurative objects occurred during a ceremony. It would furthermore be insightful to gather more information on the exact location of figurative finds in the pit, in order to examine in which phase of the longhouse they were deposited. Figurative objects could have been part of ceremonies celebrating the building or destruction of a house. This might have also been the case with objects found in the context of enclosures. On the site of Herxheim (Rhineland-Palatinate), the late LBK enclosure that was linked to mass cannibalism also featured figurine fragments (Zeeb-Lanz 2019). In this context interpreted as 'ritualised' (Boulestin *et al.* 2009: 979), figurines may have held an important spiritual value.

At the start of the Middle Neolithic, rondels became a new find-context for figurative representations, especially in the Lengyel culture. In this case, too, the collective building

of the enclosure could have led to ceremonies involving the deposition of figurative objects in the enclosure ditches. However, the majority of dated finds from the Lengyel Moravian Painted culture belonged to its first phase (MMK I, c. 4700-4500 BCE). After this initial peak, figurative finds decreased. By the end of the Lengyel culture around 4100 BCE, figurative objects had almost completely disappeared from Transdanubia (Bánffy 1997, 47; Becker 2025) and Central Europe in general. Given the appearance and progressive stylisation of 'toad engravings' at the start of the fifth millennium BCE, it is possible that abstraction gradually replaced traditional clay figurines, and led figuration towards the funerary context. What is clear is that the shifts in find contexts and figurative shapes reflected broader socio-cultural changes at the turn of the Middle Neolithic, with signs of long-distance contacts and influences, as well as the emergence of large-scale social gatherings.

CONCLUSION

Neolithic figurative representations are often studied as a homogeneous corpus that served a single purpose, despite their heterogeneous shapes and contexts. The decrease and diversification of representations since the start of the Linear Pottery Culture are, however, a clear indication that practices surrounding figuration began to change as soon as the Neolithic reached Central Europe. In fact, it suggests that the Southeastern European clay figurative tradition was progressively discarded as farmers moved northwest. But while traditional clay depictions were abandoned, figuration may not have actually vanished from Central Europe. Instead, it may have turned highly stylised, to the point of abstraction. The so-called toad engravings, already present during the Early Neolithic, flourished in Central Europe at the start of the Middle Neolithic. This common anthropomorphic motif, shared from the Rhine to the Oder, could be the sign of a turn towards ambiguous, stylised ways of representing living or spiritual beings. It also seems to reflect, furthermore, the emergence of new networks across Central Europe, possibly due to a crisis at the end of the LBK and the subsequent movement of people.

Overall, the diversification of figurative shapes and the emergence of new contexts (longhouses, enclosures, and cemeteries, if toad engravings are considered anthropomorphic) during the Early Neolithic, especially at the start of the Middle Neolithic, may reflect changes in the use of figurative objects. These new contexts shared a common feature: they were connected to communal activities. LBK longhouses and enclosures required the movement, planning and coordination of groups of people, which means that their construction may have led to foundation ceremonies and social gatherings. Therefore, the use of figurative vessels and figurines during the LBK may have been significantly different from earlier Starčevo-Körös-Criş use, with ties to outdoor, collective activities rather than domestic ones. Within these large-scale developments were furthermore regional variations, which my research team and I have started investigating in a recent article (Bristow *et al.* 2025).

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List of figurative representations

- Aldersbach-Kriestorf (Bavaria), pit house:** figure seated on a wheel; only the legs and wheel remain. 5.6 cm high. At approximately the same level, bones from a child, an adult, and an animal – possibly a pig – were found. SOB III (Reinecke 1979; Engelhardt 2010).
- Altenburg (Saxony), unknown context:** horn-shaped vessel application. Decorated with incisions. SBK (Nițu 1972).
- Aufhausen (Bavaria), settlement pit:** Anthropomorphic cylindrical vessel with no arms. Eyes, ears and a nose are modelled right underneath the rim. 31.8 cm high. Münchshöfen culture (Kreiner and Pleyer 1999; Engelhardt 2010).
- Bernwitz (Saxony), unknown context:** two horn-shaped vessel applications. SBK (Höckmann 1965).
- Birmenitz (Saxony):**
- **settlement pit:** clay torso. SBK (Deichmüller 1910),
 - **unknown context:** four horn-shaped vessel applications. Decorated with incisions. SBK (Nițu 1972; Hoffmann 1963),
 - **unknown context:** vessel sherd with possible anthropomorphic representation; body made up of curved rows of parallel impressions; rows of impressions branching off could be an arm or leg. SBK.
- Bodzia Site 1 (Kuyavian-Pomeranian), settlement features B501, E301, F208:** fragments of three bowls with human decoration: two stroked and one incised-punctuated. SBK/Late Band Pottery Culture (Czerniak 2012a; Pyzel 2017).
- Bolechowice Site 4 (Lesser Poland), unknown context:** vessel fragment with anthropomorphic decoration. Malice Culture; unpublished (mentioned in Grabowska and Zastawny 2014, 284 and Pyzel 2017, 151).
- Černožice (Hradec Králové), stray find:** torso of an anthropomorphic figurine. SBK (Vávra 1993).
- Černý Vůl (Bohemia), unknown context:** cattle head from a vessel. Decorated with bands of pairs of incisions. SBK (Stocký 1929, pl. 46; Engelhardt 2010).
- Dresden-Nickern (Saxony), settlement:** head fragment of an anthropomorphic figurine. SBK (von Lehmann 2023).
- Dresden-Prohlis (Saxony), unknown context:** one incised anthropomorphic representation. SBK (Hoffmann 1963, pl. 56: 3).
- Eutritzsch (Saxony), unknown context:** two horn-like fragments. SBK (Nițu 1972).
- Geiselhöring-Stockbahnen (Bavaria), settlement pit:** cattle vessel. 16 cm long. Münchshöfen culture (Engelhardt 2010).
- Haidlfing (Bavaria), stray find:** leg fragment of a figurine decorated with lines of incisions. 6.5 cm. Münchshöfen culture (Engelhardt 2010).
- Heldrungen (Thuringia), unknown context:** fragment of a face pot. SBK (Kaufmann 1984, tab. 1: e; Pavlů and Šumberová 2017).

Kolín (Bohemia)

burial: a vessel with two lugs that could be horns. Decorated with incisions. SBK phase IVa (late stage) (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013: 47),

pit 80 metres away from Rondel 3, area VII: fragment of a face pot made of brown-grey sandy clay. The face is shown in profile. SBK, possibly 4925-4763 BCE according to the rondel's C14 dates (Pavlů and Šumberová 2017).

Komořany (Moravia), unknown context: fragment of a seated figure. SBK (Höckmann 1965, Abb. 2: 7).

Kraków Nowa Huta-Mogiła Site 62a (Lesser Poland), settlement feature 219 – probably a grave: anthropomorphic vessel with schematic depiction of arms and a head. Samborzec-Opatów Group (Kamieńska and Kozłowski 1990, pl. 4: 8; Pyzel 2017).

Kraków Nowa Huta-Pleszów Site 17 (Lesser Poland), settlement feature 426: two vessel fragments with breast-shaped knobs. Pleszów-Modlnica Group (Kaczanowska 2006, 46, fig. 5: 4, 129 cited in Pyzel 2017).

Kraków-Wyciąże Site. 5 (Lesser Poland), stray find: anthropomorphic vessel with schematic depiction of arms. Probably Malice Culture; unpublished (Pyzel 2017).

Kuczkowo Site 5 (Greater Poland), settlement: anthropomorphic vessel fragment with breasts modelled on the neck. Decorated with incised lines and strokes. SBK (Czerniak 1998, 33, fig. 18; Pyzel 2017).

Las Stocki Site 7 (Lublin), settlement: female figurine fragment/rim application. Lublin-Volhynian Culture (Zakościelna 1986: 36, fig. 5; Pyzel 2017).

Leippen (Saxony), settlement: head fragment of a zoomorphic figurine. SBK (von Lehmann 2023).

Leipzig-Eutritzsch (Saxony), unknown context: clay stick that could be a horn. SBK (Neustupný 1931).

Litoměřice (Bohemia), unknown context: cattle head from a vessel. Decorated with bands of pairs of incisions. SBK (Engelhardt 2010).

Miskovice (Bohemia), burial: vessel with two lugs that could be horns. SBK phase IVa (late stage) (Pavlů and Zápotocká 2013, 47).

Modlnica Site 5 (Lesser Poland), settlement feature 788 and secondary deposit: two pottery sherds with breast-shaped knobs. Pleszów-Modlnica Group (Grabowska and Zastawny 2011, 103, fig. 9: b, c; Pyzel 2017).

Murr (Bavaria), settlement pit: vessel with incised anthropomorphic representations. Two clothed figures on the outside body of the vessel, one figure on the bottom. Münchshöfen culture (Engelhardt 2010).

Münchshöfen (Bavaria), stray find: leg fragment of a figurine decorated with lines and pairs of incisions. SOB II (Engelhardt 2010).

Oberpöding-Gneiding (Bavaria), unknown context: female torso. 3.2 cm high. Decorated on the back and neck with incised lines. SOB (Engelhardt 2010).

Piskowitz (Saxony), settlement pit: Bottom part of a vessel, sculpted in the shape of a spiral

(probably a snake), and decorated with several rows of incised lines following the spiral. Grey-black, fine-grained clay. SBK (von Baumann 1976).

Podłęże Site 17 (Lesser Poland), ditch enclosure: fragment of vessel on four pairs of human legs. Wyciąże-Złotniki Group (Nowak *et al.* 2007, 461, fig. 9; Nowak *et al.* 2008; Pyzel 2017).

Regensburg-Pürkelgut (Bavaria), unknown context: leg fragment of a figurine decorated with lines and pairs of incisions. SOB (Engelhardt 2010).

Scheuer (Bavaria):

stray find: cattle head that was part of a vessel. Two holes seem to represent eyes. The head is decorated with bands of pairs of incisions. SBK (Engelhardt 2010).

stray find: this vessel fragment looking like a broken version of the cattle head found on the same site. SBK (Engelhardt 2010).

Slavětín (Bohemia), unknown context: fragment of seated figure with stroked decoration. SBK (Höckmann 1965).

Sovětské (Bohemia), Building 24: zoomorphic clay figurine decorated with incised lines and strokes. SBK (Kalferst 2006, 126, cited in Marková 2018).

Stary Zamek Site 2a (Lower Silesia), settlement feature connected with House 1: bowl with incised anthropomorphic depiction/toad engraving inside. SBK III (Romanow 1977, 51, fig. 20; Pyzel 2017)

Straubing-Lerchenhaid (Bavaria), settlement: head with long neck, open mouth and holes for eyes and nostrils. Decorated with bands of pairs of incisions. 6.7 cm. SOB II (Engelhardt 2010).

Straubing-Lerchenhaid (Bavaria), settlement pit: pelvic fragment of a clay figurine. SOB (Engelhardt 2010).

Targowisko Site 11 (Lesser Poland), settlement feature 2823: vessel with anthropomorphic decoration. Malice Culture (Grabowska and Zastawny 2007; Grabowska and Zastawny 2008; Grabowska and Zastawny 2014, 280-285; Pyzel 2017).

Targowisko Site 12-13 (Lesser Poland), settlement features 294, 299, 783, 1978, 2680, 3461: six fragments of vessels with anthropomorphic applications. Malice Culture (Czerniak *et al.* 2007, fig. 5; Pyzel 2017).

Targowisko, Site 14-15 (Lesser Poland), settlement feature 67: two vessel fragments with anthropomorphic application. Malice Culture (Czerniak *et al.* 2007, fig. 5; Pyzel 2017).

Untermixnitz (Austria), stray find, plot 271: foot fragment of an anthropomorphic figurine. SBK.

Vilsbiburg (Bavaria), settlement pit: gynaikomorphic vessel found with animal bones. No date (Engelhardt 2010).

Vochov (Bohemia): pillar-shaped figurine with schematically modelled brow ridges, nose, arms and breasts. SBK or Lengyel import (Böhm 1950; Pleiner 1978, 230; Becker 2011, 287).

Watenstedt (Saxony), FStNr. 12/2, Kreisgraben, Befund 2: what could be a horn application on a pottery sherd. SBK (Heske and Posselt 2017).

Zarzyca Site 6 (Lower Silesia), settlement: fragment of vessel on four human legs. LPC IIb1 (Czerniak 2012, 135, fig. 40: h; Pyzel 2017).

Zauschwitz (Saxony):

15 objects:

Six SBK zoomorphic applications (mainly horns) (Nițu 1972; von Baumann 1976).

Two SBK zoomorphic vessels found in settlement pits (Nițu 1972; von Baumann and Fritzsche 1973).

Six SBK incised/impressed anthropomorphic representations (Hoffmann 1963, Taf. 56; von Lehmann 2023, 94-96).

An SBK female figurine in a settlement pit (Höckmann 1965).

Złota Grodzisko I (Świętokrzyskie), settlement feature 46a: anthropomorphic vessel/female figurine hollow inside. Lublin-Volhynian Culture (Podkowińska 1953, 17, pl. 18: 1 and 19: 2 cited in Pyzel 2017).

Złota Grodzisko II (Świętokrzyskie) settlement feature 75: fragment of anthropomorphic vessel/male figurine hollow inside. Lublin-Volhynian Culture (Podkowińska 1953, pl. 19: 1 cited in Pyzel 2017).

