



RELIGIOUS THEMES FROM THE PLASTIC ART OF THE CARPATHIAN CHALCOLITHIC AND THEIR ECHO IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT - The paper analyzes some themes of the plastic arts in the Eneolithic cultures of the Carpathian region, where the authors think it may be possible to identify an anticipation of certain Greek myths. Three themes will be particularly examined: the androgyny, referring to some bisexual pieces of plastic art made by the Cucuteni culture; the Demeter–Kore couple, which is probably represented in two stylized images present on the great terracotta altar dating to Cucuteni phase A, found at Trușești (Botoșani county); the abduction of Europa by Zeus turned into a heavenly bull, a scene which is represented in two Eneolithic pieces: the first was found in Bilcze Złote (in modern Ukraine) and belongs to the Cucuteni culture; the other in Căscioarele (Călărași county), in the context of the Gumelnița culture. The authors suggest that the religious themes related to such pieces had a long life starting from the Eneolithic Age and passing through the following civilizations of south-eastern Europe up to antiquity, and they were finally absorbed into Greek mythology. This transmission endured in general Balkan folklore up to modern times, as proved by ethnology.

RIASSUNTO - L'intervento analizza alcuni temi dell'arte plastica delle culture eneolitiche della regione carpatica, nei quali gli autori considerano si possano scorgere delle anticipazioni di alcuni miti greci. Si prenderanno in esame tre temi in particolare: l'androgino, in virtù di alcuni pezzi bisessuati della plastica della cultura Cucuteni; la coppia Demetra – Kore, probabilmente attestata dalle due immagini stilizzate esistenti sul grande altare in terracotta della fase Cucuteni A, ritrovato a Trușești (distretto di Botoșani); il ratto di Europa da parte di Zeus, trasformatosi in toro celeste, scena rappresentata in due pezzi eneolitici: il primo rinvenuto a Bilcze Złote (attualmente in Ucraina), appartenente alla cultura Cucuteni; l'altro a Căscioarele (distretto di Călărași), nell'ambito della cultura Gumelnița. Gli autori ritengono che i corrispondenti temi religiosi si siano mantenuti a partire dall'Eneolitico nel corso delle successive civiltà dell'Europa sud-orientale fino al periodo antico, per poi essere ripresi dalla mitologia greca. Tale via di trasmissione si è mantenuta nel folklore generale balcanico fino ai tempi moderni, come attestato dall'etnologia.

The rich themes of ancient Greek mythology often included ideas whose origins are to be found in pre-meal times. Even though the myths, on account of their prolonged oral circulation, have been recorded in different variants, they nonetheless preserved main ideas, which individualize them within the ensemble of such spiritual creations. It is exactly this kernel idea – a myth's distinguishing mark – which, on account of the sacrality that it expresses, is particularly perennial, establishing itself as a fundamental theme of prehistoric religions. For the ages preceding the Greek civilization of the first millennium BC, in the absence of written sources, these fundamental themes can be sometimes recognized through the prehistoric symbols that were incorporated into works of plastic art (statuettes, altars, columns, vessels with anthropomorphic or zoomorphic elements, incised or painted symbolic signs, painted scenes, mythograms, etc). An iconography of religious representations, to which a rather strict adherence was required, also existed in historical times; this allows us to distinguish certain themes and characters even when we lack accompanying explanatory written sources. Similarly, we can admit the existence of such customs also for plastic representations with mythological content from prehistoric times, which allow us to recognize the themes behind the imagery. Even if the end of the Chalcolithic on the one side, and the classical age of ancient Greek civilization on the other are separated by least two millennia, it has already been proved that, independent of the cultural and ethnical transformations that took place during this time span, the religious ideas and their material manifestations enjoyed a particular endurance, having been borrowed from the oldest Anatolian Neolithic by the cultures of the Bronze Age of the Aegean and Balkan-Danubian areas, whence they reverberated into the Greek religion of the first millennium BC.¹ The great religious themes of prehistoric Anatolia and the Aegean basin were transmitted, alongside the process of Neolithization, northwards into the Balkan Peninsula, and from here, beyond the Danube, into the

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¹ Lévêque 1972.



Carpathian area. In point of fact, the unity of the Balkan spirituality existed not only in prehistory, but also in historical times, including in folkloric creations.² Naturally, these themes should be associated with the sedentary populations' fundamental preoccupation: to permanently ensure the renewal and perpetuation of the natural cycle, by promoting fertility and fecundity.

The great mother goddess, who plays the pivotal role in the religions of prehistoric agricultural populations³, is represented in a varied repertoire of artistic expression, particularly through a varied range of statuettes where the focus falls on the oversized rendering of the pelvic area, in comparison with the rest of the body. She is a primordial deity likewise in Greek religion (Gaea). The goddess procreates with the help of male symbols, primarily represented by bulls and especially by their horns.⁴ The male symbol was the abstract representation of the other primordial and cardinal element of nature, the Sky. From Greek mythology we know that Earth (Gaea) united with the Sky (Uranus), to give birth to the most important divinities, from whose will and action life on earth exists and the fate of man was set. The two elements were conceived only as acting in synergy, forming a divine couple, through a sacred union (hierogamy) that ensured the conditions for the reproduction of all animal and plant forms, and hence their perpetuation, and thus effected the necessities of life.

The idea of a sacred hierogamy and of a divine couple occupies a central place in the religions of the Chalcolithic cultures on Romanian territory.⁵ A much discussed piece is the bone plate found in the late Cucuteni-Trypillian site (about 3700–3500 CAL BC) from Bilcze Złote (in the Carpathian foothills of Ukraine). The plate, cut in the shape of a bull's head, serves as the support for an image of a woman rendered using impressed dots⁶ (Fig. 1). The image is strikingly reminiscent of the well-known myth of the abduction of Europa by Zeus metamorphosed into a bull. A fragmentary statuary group, discovered in the region of Muntenia, in the site from Căscioarele (Gumelnița A2 phase, contemporary with the Cucuteni culture), has been reconstructed as a bull's head with a female statuette between its horns⁷ (Fig. 2), and thus connected to the same mythological theme⁸. We also recall that the myth of copulation with bulls is also found in the Minoan world, as exemplified by the well-known legend of the minotaur.

The divine pair is found on a number of representations from the Romanian Chalcolithic, but it is not always clear if it concerns the association between a feminine and a masculine divinity, or if it depicts the mother-daughter couple (portending Demeter and Kore from Greek mythology).⁹ In this sense, the most representative statuary groups from the Romanian Chalcolithic that prove beyond doubt the existence of a cult dedicated to the divine couple are the altars from Trușești¹⁰ (Botoșani County), Târgu Frumos¹¹ (Iași County), the vessel-box from Vădastra (Olt County) and the Parța sanctuary (Timiș County).

Even though the first two altars (Figs. 3–4), attributed to the Precucuteni-Cucuteni cultural complex, are different in terms of their appearance, they nonetheless convey, through a compositional assemblage, the idea of a couple comprising two highly stylized anthropomorphic representations. When the buildings that housed them were abandoned, both were deliberately destroyed; they were found in an extremely fragmented state. Both come from the largest known settlements in Romanian territory for the cultural stages into which they are filed: the altar from Târgu Frumos in the Precucuteni III phase (about 4750–4550 CAL BC), and that from Trușești in the Cucuteni A phase (about 4400–4200 CAL BC), with a lapse of about 200–300 years between them. The buildings that housed the altars (no. XXIV from Trușești¹² and no. 11 from Târgu Frumos¹³) must have played a particular role in the life of the communities, probably functioning as sanctuaries, as suggested by their central location.

The altar from Târgu Frumos (Fig. 3A and 3B) was located near the building's hearth (Fig. 3C) and was enclosed by a U-shaped burnt-clay ledge (*ca.* 1.20 × 1 m). Both the ledge and the two slabs that formed the statue were covered in a white paint, over which linear and geometrical motifs were painted in red and, perhaps, dark-brown, signalling the birth of the trichromatic painting of the Cucuteni A phase. Between the back support and the two front slabs there was a cavity that probably received a supporting wooden plank. Each slab seems to represent the highly stylized image of a human torso with slender shoulders. The breakings from the

2 Caraman 1934, 1987–88; Fochi 1975.

3 James 1960; Neumann 1974.

4 Mellaart 1967, pp. 77–130.

5 Ursulescu 2008, p. 84, 92.

6 Monah 2012, p. 241, fig. 232/6.

7 Dumitrescu 1977, pp. 577–83.

8 Dumitrescu 1988, p. 46; Monah 2012, p. 241, fig. 45/7; Poruciu 2010, pp. 18–19.

9 Lévêque 1972, p. 176.

10 Petrescu-Dîmbovița, Florescu, Florescu 1999, pp. 528–30, fig. 372/6.

11 N. Ursulescu, D. Boghian, V. Cotiugă 2003, pp. 27–40.

12 Petrescu-Dîmbovița, Florescu, Florescu 1999, p. 528, fig. 5.

13 Ursulescu 2001, pp. 44–45.

upper portion of the slabs seem to attest to the existence of heads that have not survived to this day.¹⁴ The main decorative motif of the two slabs consists of circumscribed lozenges, in the middle of which there was a circle filled with colour. The motif of circumscribed lozenges is considered a symbolic sign found among several Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures from south-eastern and central Europe and Anatolia,¹⁵ while the central circle alludes to a feminine representation, according to the interpretation of such motifs found on Cucuteni-Trypillian ceramics.¹⁶

If the painted motif from the altar of Târgu Frumos indeed depicts a feminine symbol, then we can connect it to the veneration of a couple of two feminine divinities, which portend¹⁷ the Demeter–Kore couple, and which ensured the perpetuation of nature, of vegetation and therefore of life itself.

The altar from Trușești (Fig. 4) is larger (1 × 1 m) and has a more elaborate composition. The base of the altar displays, rendered in bas-relief, nine human figures (column-shaped) arranged in three groups (numerically equal), which probably served as orants for the two divinities represented on the upper section of the altar using two cup-shaped heads, each wearing ‘*en violon*’ pendants hanging over the chest. Because the two heads have different heights, the assumption is that the statuary group depicts either the divine couple (the great goddess accompanied a male acolyte)¹⁸, either, more likely, the mother-daughter pair.¹⁹

The bicephalic artefact from the eponymous site of the Vădastra culture consists of a box, partially covered through two handles (for which reason it was labelled as a hamper vessel), over which perch two heads (Fig. 5).²⁰ Their strongly stylized shape, alongside several details that seem to indicate the presence of masks, led to different interpretations: human heads, perhaps covered by masks;²¹ animal heads;²² or a couple composed of an animal (ram?) and a woman.²³ In any case, the central idea is that of a couple, but it seems that the identity of the divinity was concealed behind a mask, just like in certain ancient Greek religious practices.

The most important assemblage from the sanctuary of Parța (the Vinča cultural circle) was the pedestal over which two busts were placed: the great goddess and her acolyte, represented by a bull’s head (Fig. 6).²⁴

The most complex instance of a divine couple is found in the concept of an androgynous deity, present in Greek mythology (Empedocles of Acragas, *About nature*;²⁵ Plato, *The Banquet*, 189 d–192 a), harking back to primeval times when the divinity, in its capacity as the embodiment of the ‘unity of opposites’ principle (*coincidentia oppositorum*), was capable of self-reproduction.²⁶ Images with manifest androgynous content can also be found in the Romanian Chalcolithic, particularly in the Cucuteni culture²⁷. We mention here the idols (Fig. 7) that simultaneously display male and female sexual organs (found at Mihoveni,²⁸ Drăgușeni-Suceava,²⁹ Fetești,³⁰ probably at Cucuteni,³¹ etc), the anthropomorphized spoon handle (Fig. 8) from Parincea (Bačău County),³² or the painted scenes of intercourse, such as that from Brânzeni III³³ (Republic of Moldova).

The three themes selected for this study from the rich iconography of the Carpathian Chalcolithic (*hieros gamos*, divine couple and androgyny) have as common denominator a long period of endurance over the millennia, arriving in the mythology recorded in writing during the classical Greek period. We can thus speak of the existence of ancient roots for the religious beliefs of historical times, with the examples provided by the Neolithic civilizations of the Balkans and the Carpathian area being most illustrative in this sense. The similar process of emergence and evolution of the Neolithic from this area, as well as the subsequent historical developments during the metallurgical periods, to a large degree common for the entire region, were therefore mirrored in the realm of spiritual manifestations.

14 Our assumption is based on the similar state of the monumental statue from the Parța sanctuary (Lazarovici, Drașovean, Maxim 2001).

15 Ruttkay 1999, pp. 271–291.

16 Markevič 1981, pp. 161–166.

17 Lévêque 1972, pp. 175–76; Makkay 1971, pp. 139–41; Monah 1992, p. 192; Monah 2012, p. 241.

18 M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița 1963, p. 180; Dumitrescu 1979, p. 79.

19 See note 17.

20 Mateescu, 1962, fig. 135.

21 Nica 1980, p. 42, fig. 9; Comșa 1995, 32, fig. 20.

22 Makkay 1971, p. 141, Abb. 5.

23 Dumitrescu 1974, p. 195, fig. 203.

24 Lazarovici 1989, pp. 150–51, fig. 8/2–6; 10; 13/1; 14/4, 6; Lazarovici, Drașovean, Maxim 2001.

25 Devambez et al. 1970, p. 210 (P.-M. Schuhl).

26 Eliade 1949, I, p. 359; Eliade 1957, p. 215.

27 Monah 2012, pp. 239–41.

28 Ursulescu, Batariuc 1987.

29 Luca 1982, pp. 113–15.

30 Mareș 2009, no. 254.

31 Berlescu 1964, p. 72, pl. XV/2; Monah 2012, p. 153, fig. 180/1; Mareș 2009, no. 247.

32 Monah 2012, pp. 214–15, fig. 260/4.

33 Markevič 1981, p. 157, fig. 103/6; Monah 2012, p. 240, fig. 244/9.



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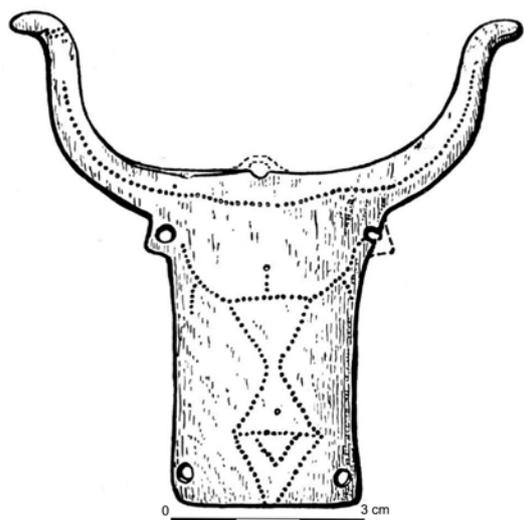


Fig. 1. Bilcze Złote. Bone plate shaped like a bull's head, with a stylized female figure (after Monah 2012, p. 506, Fig. 232/6).

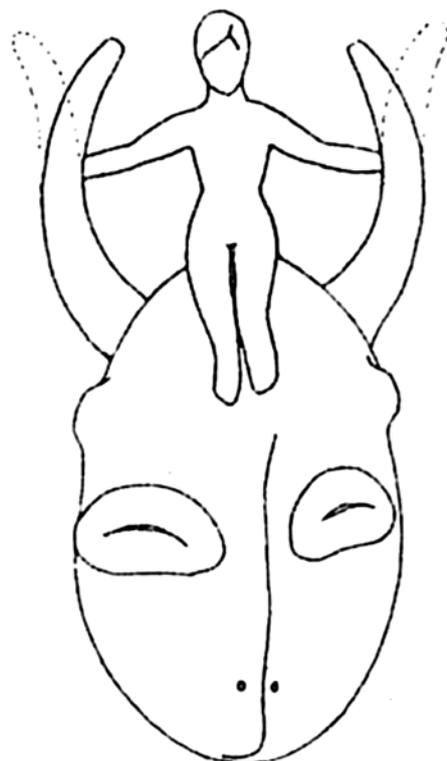


Fig. 2. Căscioarele. Fragmented statuary group depicting a bull's head with a female statuette between its horns (after Dumitrescu 1977, Fig. 1).

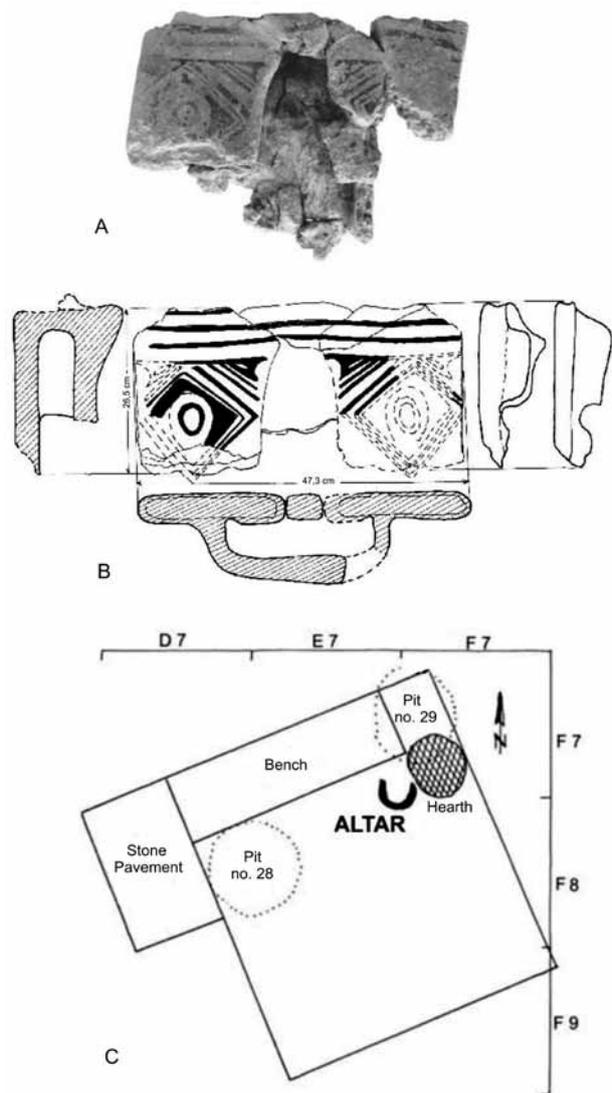


Fig. 3. Târgu Frumos. A and B: painted altar with two affixed slabs; C: the ground-plan of dwelling no. 11 (after Ursulescu, Boghian, Cotiugă 2003, Figs. 3, 4 and 7).

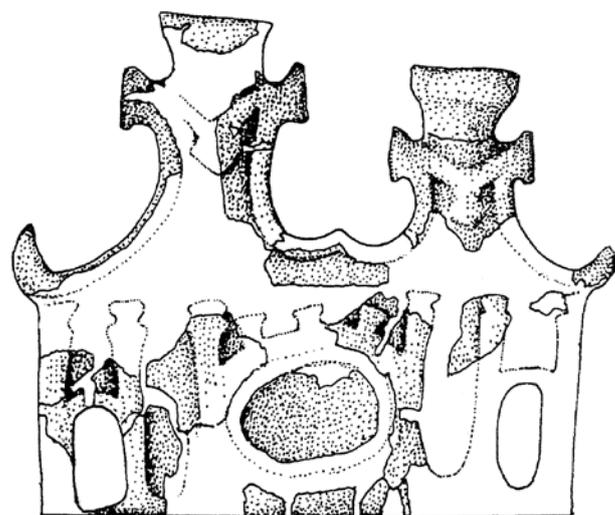


Fig. 4. Trușești. Bicephalic altar (after Petrescu-Dîmbovița, Florescu, Florescu 1999, Fig. 372/6).

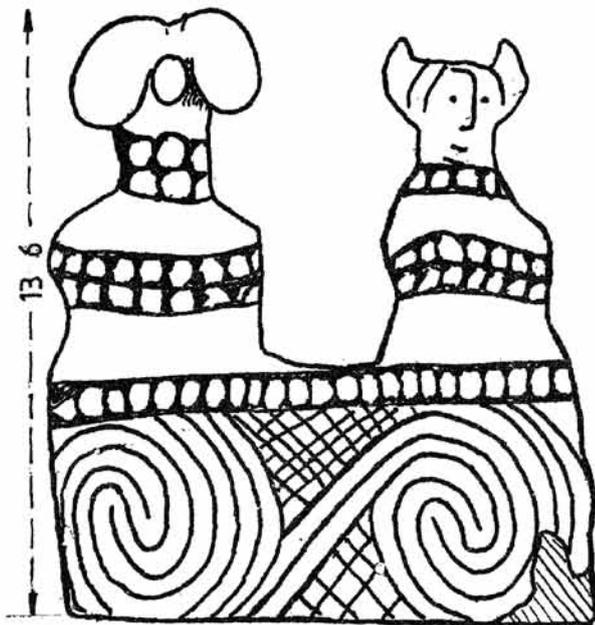


Fig. 5. Vădastra. Vessels shaped like a hamper, with two masked human heads (after Anthony 2010, p. 231, no. 47; Comșa 1995, Fig. 20).

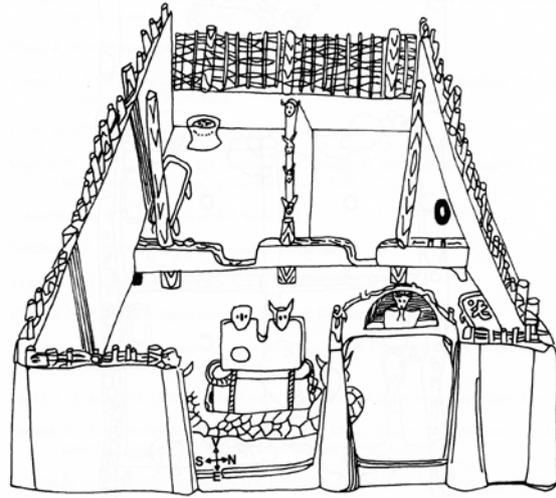


Fig. 6. Parța. Sanctuary with the busts of two divinities (after Lazarovici, Drașovean, Maxim, 2001, I.2, pl. 2).

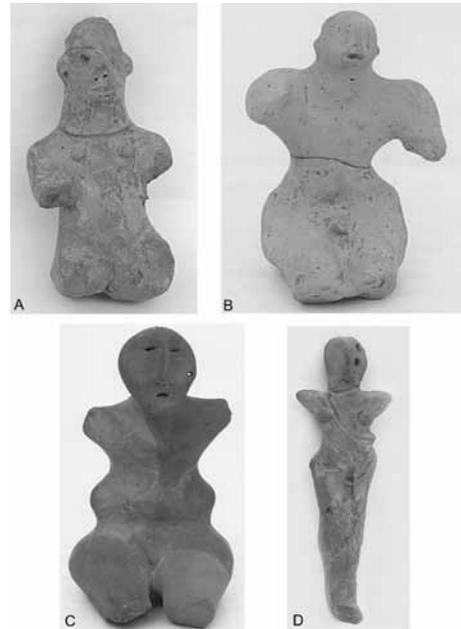


Fig. 7. Androgynous idols. A: Cucuteni; B: Mihoveni; C: Drăgușeni-Suceava; D: Fetești (apud Mareș 2009, nos. 247–249, 254).

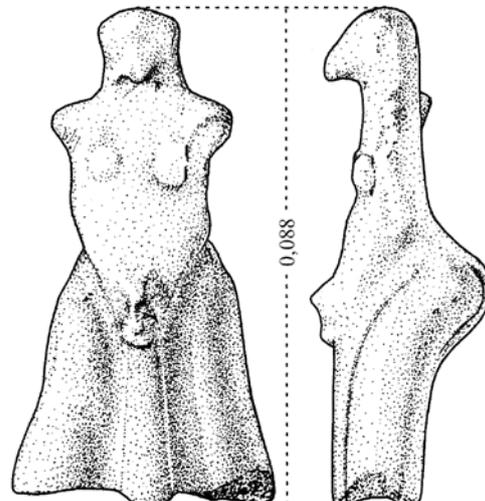


Fig. 8. Parincea. Anthropomorphised spoon handle, with markers of androgyny (apud Monah 2012, fig. 260/4).