



Unique in its chaîne opératoire, unique in its symbolism: undressing a figurine from the 6th Millennium BC Körös culture, Hungary



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ABSTRACT

In the southern part of the Danube–Tisza interfluvium (Hungary), a dense Early Neolithic, Körös culture settlement was identified during the excavation of Szakmár-Kisülés. Among several unregistered finds was a unique, mostly intact, clay horned figurine often referred to as a *clay horn*, *bull representation*. However, female genitalia is represented on the figurine, indicating that the object is a female symbol. The practice of cattle keeping and secondary products are important economic topics in the Early Neolithic of the Carpathian Basin. The broken base of the figurine suggests that at one time the object was attached to a four-legged altar. Importantly, its base reveals that the figurine was created with multiple layers of clay. The various techniques for characterizing the figurine open new avenues of interpretation concerning how the object was made.

A broken section of the figurine shows three distinct layers of manufacture and in order to better understand its construction computed tomography (CT), ceramic petrography, geochemical analyses (LA-ICP-MS and XRD), and phytolith analysis were applied.

The results indicate that the figurine was made from three clearly identifiable layers, created during three distinct manufacturing episodes. The results suggest that after each manufacturing episode the figurine was fired again, implying that it also was utilized after each building phase. The raw materials from the different manufacturing episodes are similar petrographically and geochemically, indicating that the figurine was made from similar raw materials. Nevertheless, the raw materials of the different manufacturing episodes show differences in organic temper supporting our contention that the figurine had three distinct manufacturing episodes. The utilization of multiple interdisciplinary methods highlights the complex biography of the figurine.

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1. Introduction

Technological practices play an integral role in social relationships. While most technological studies focus on ceramic vessels (Quinn, 2009) and lithics (Lycett and Chauhan, 2012), the technological characteristics of prehistoric figurines are studied less

frequently (Kreiter and Szakmány, 2011). Studies of Neolithic figurines mainly have considered iconographic and typological characteristics of objects (Höckmann, 1968; Ucko, 1968; Marangou, 1992; Kalicz et al., 2012) and the ways they represent human bodies, convey social relationships, and reflect identities (Bánffy, 1991; Chapman, 2000; Bailey, 2005). Technological approaches towards figurine manufacturing remain understudied, however by examining their technology we can learn a great deal not only about how figurines were made, but also how they may have been utilized and conceptualized. Material culture plays an important role in mediating and representing social relationships and social links may be identified by identifying how an object was made.

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Artifacts go through various events from manufacture to discard, and in the process they accumulate histories that comprise their biography (Porčić, 2012, 810). Therefore, the figurine can be studied using the *chaîne opératoire* approach that often is applied in ceramic studies (Kreiter, 2007a). The layered nature of the figurine suggests that there was a set of behaviors contributing to the biography of the figurine.

2. Background

2.1. Discovery of the figurine and its archaeological background

The area known as the Kalocsa Sárköz (Danube–Tisza interfluvium in Southern Hungary) is a floodplain extending 20 km from the Danube where a dense Early Neolithic, Körös Culture settlement pattern has been identified. One of the sites, Szakmár-Kisülés (Fig. 1), was excavated in the 1970s (Bánffy, 2013). The Körös culture lived between 6000 and 5500 cal. BC in the Carpathian Basin. Considering the finds from Szakmár, its assemblage neither belongs to the youngest, nor to the oldest period. Therefore, the site was most probably occupied between 5800 and 5700 cal. BC (Bánffy, 2012; Oross and Siklósi, 2012).

Among several unregistered finds there was a unique, almost intact, clay horned figurine (Figs. 2 and 3). The figurine is oval in

cross-section and narrows towards the top. It is 26.7 cm long, with a width of 12.5 cm at the bottom, and 7.5 cm at the top. It has an unusual relief in the place of its face. The figurine was covered with a thin layer of very fine-grained clay (slip) that has broken off in some places. The surface is light brown, yellowish and orangey brown (in the web version). The broken surface shows three layers of manufacture (Fig. 4).

The manner in which the base is broken implies that it originally was attached to another object. At the time the site publication was being prepared, the adjoining object was reconstructed from various foot and table fragments found scattered among the ceramics and it now seems that the figurine stood upon a four-legged table, known as an *altarpiece* in the current literature. This observation connects the Szakmár find to an emblematic group of South East European Early Neolithic cult objects: altarpieces or building models with a vertically protruding human or animal head (or a transition in between – Bánffy, 2001) placed in the middle.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Sampling the figurine

The figurine was damaged on the front and on the base. Three clearly distinguishable layers were visible on the base. Samples of

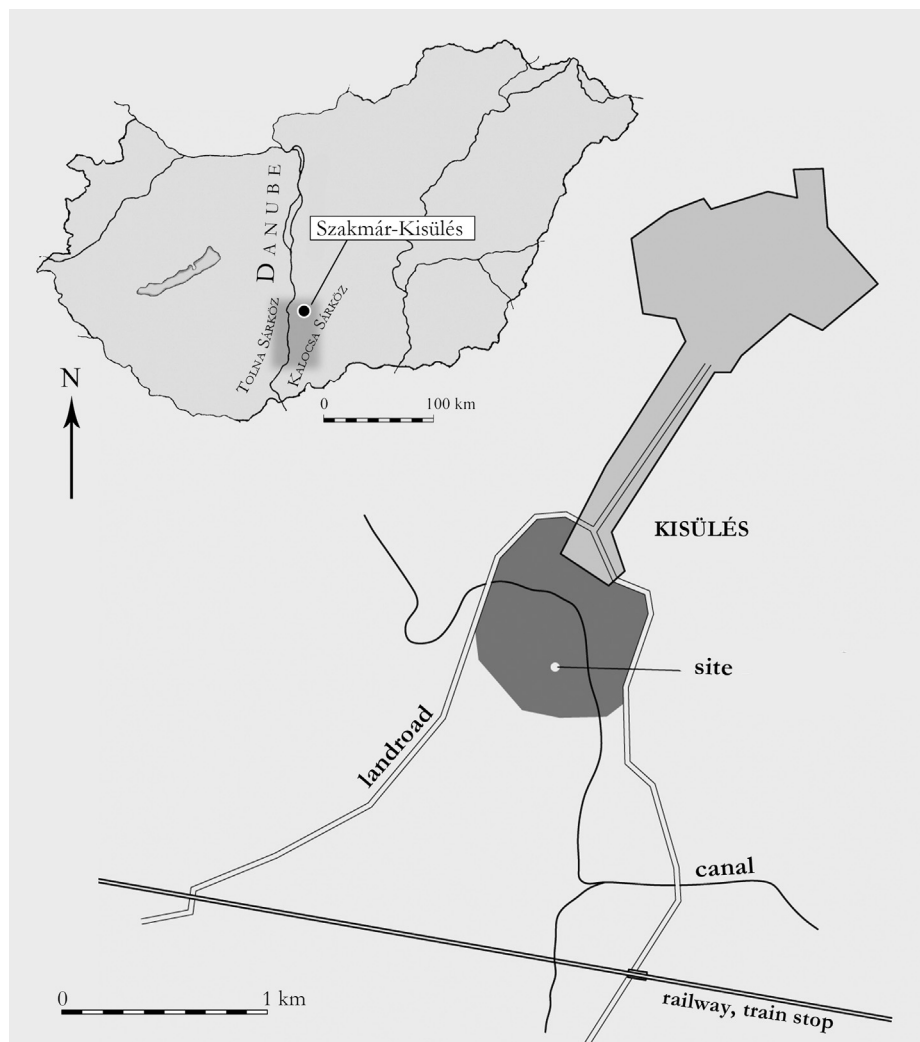


Fig. 1. Map of the Szakmár-Kisülés site.

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