

AN UNPUBLISHED EARLY BRONZE AGE ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINE FROM TELL EZERO, UPPER THRACE

Petar Minkov¹

¹ National Institute of Archaeology and Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia,
petraki_orlovski@abv.bg

Abstract

This article is dedicated to a previously unpublished ceramic anthropomorph from the Early Bronze Age layer of Tell Ezero in Upper Thrace. It was discovered during the excavations at the tell site in the 1950s and was erroneously logged in the catalog of the Nova Zagora Museum of History as a handle fragment of a ceramic vessel. Only the lower part of the flat figurine is preserved. Dot punctations seem to show a single anatomical detail – the navel – as well as a necklace and probably folds of a garment such as a skirt or dress. This artifact belongs to a small group of decorated figurines from the Early Bronze Age of Bulgaria. Its closest parallels can be found in Western and Central Anatolia, at the sites of Alacahöyük, Alişar Hüyük, and Kocumbeli. The relative dating of the figurine is thus based on its parallels in the second phase of the Early Bronze Age.

Keywords: *Anthropomorphic figurines – Tell Ezero – Upper Thrace – Early Bronze Age – Anatolian parallels.*

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Introduction

A review of the existing literature reveals that no studies have been published on the Early Bronze Age ceramic anthropomorphs from Bulgaria that include artifacts similar to the subject of this paper recovered from the well-known tell site of Ezero (aka Dipsizka settlement mound; cf. Georgiev et al. 1979; Katincharov 1972 and 1979). This could be explained by the difficulty in identifying such objects from preserved fragments.

The objective of this paper is twofold: first, to correct the description of an item logged in the catalog of the Nova Zagora Museum of History as a fragment of a vessel handle, and second, to discuss its relative chronology and culture-historical affiliation. Its formal typology and decorative characteristics suggest that it is actually a fragment from a ceramic anthropomorphic figurine.

The figurine

The artifact is catalogued under No. 2631 in the Nova Zagora Museum of History (fig. 1), as a knobbed, decorated handle fragment of a pot, found at the Dipsizka settlement mound on 18 September 1956, with no additional information about the specific archaeological context. It was made from a clay paste with a medium to high concentration of fine quartz and gravels, white or brown/black in color (0.1–0.2 cm). The light brown to brown-beige surface displays moderate smoothing, with occasional irregularities and roughness evident in specific areas, resulting from the modelling process.

Only the lower part of the flat figurine is preserved. It has an irregular oval shape and a neck that tapers in height. The head is broken off and missing. A single decoration technique was used – dot punctation. A dot located roughly in the central lower part of the ‘front’ side represents the only anatomical detail, a navel. A ‘necklace’ is depicted on both sides of the neck, with seven or eight dots respectively; the dots were made unevenly and inaccurately. Dots ($n=45$) are also visible on the side edge of the flat torso, which lends the impression of stylized clothing folds. The preserved piece measures 5.3 cm high, 4.4 cm wide, and 1.4 cm thick. The artifact seems to represent a stylized female anthropomorph with schematically rendered features that are characteristic of the Early Bronze Age figurines in Bulgaria.

Parallels

No close parallels of the figurine from Ezero can be found in Bulgaria (fig. 2). It is thus a rare example of a group of decorated anthropomorphs that includes ceramic pieces (fig. 3) from Kiten (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 310, fig. 4/4), Kapitan Andreevo (Minkov 2018, 76, figs. 2 and 4), Svilengrad (Valentinova & Nenova 2008, tab. XV/5 and 6), Galabovo (Leshtakov 2021, 65, fig. 17/4), Popskata mogila (Ivanov et al. 2017, 125, fig. 3; Ivanov & Dzhurkovska 2018, 77), and Oryahovo (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 311, fig. 5). Their decoration seems to indicate clothing, ornaments, and/or tattoos (Minkov &



Figure 1. *Ceramic anthropomorph from Tell Ezero. Above: line drawing. Below: photograph. Image Credit: the author.*

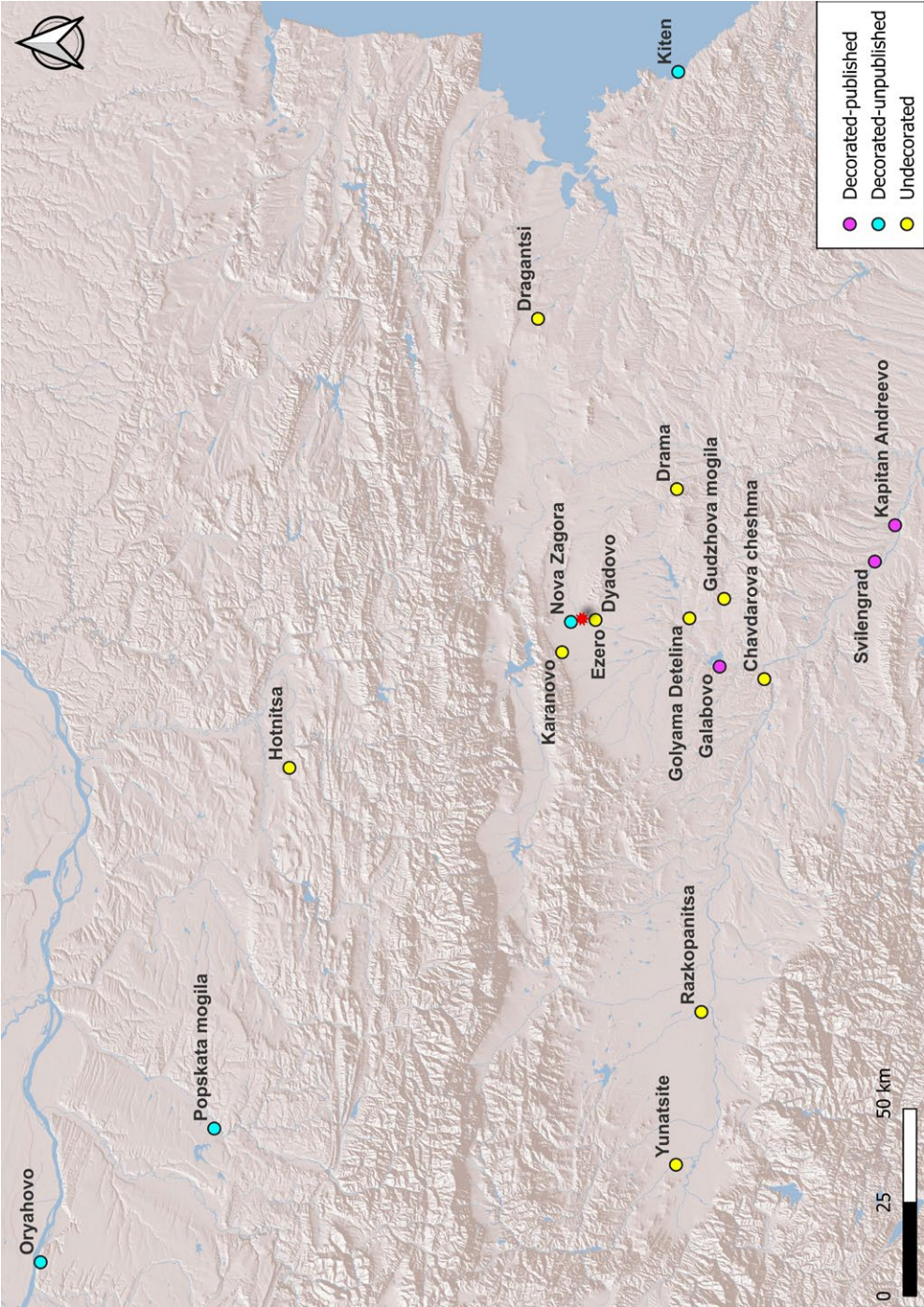


Figure 2. Map showing the distribution of the Early Bronze Age ceramic anthropomorphs in Bulgaria. Image Credit: Denitsa Sandeva.

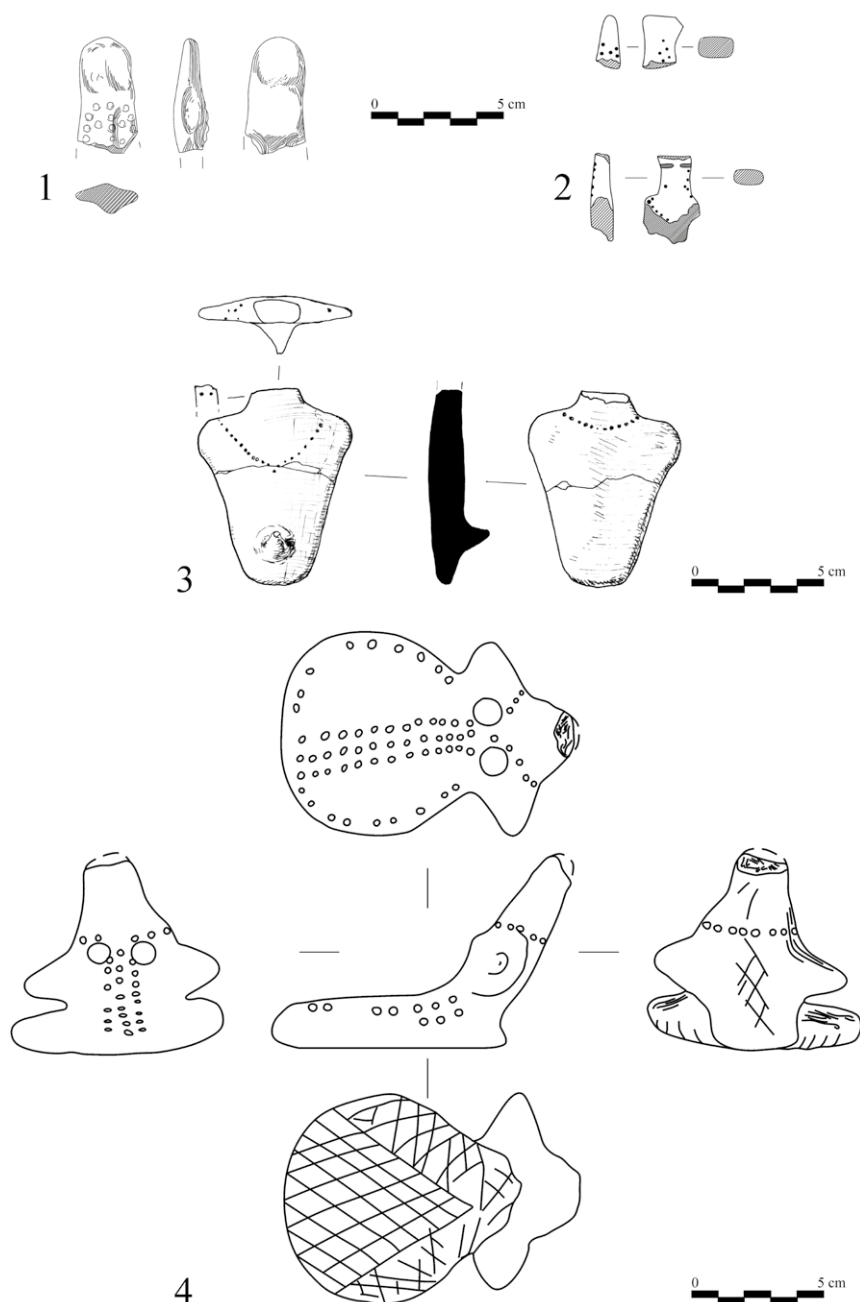


Figure 3. *Decorated ceramic anthropomorphs from Bulgaria: (1) Tell Galabovo (Image Credit: Leshtakov 2021, fig. 17/4); (2) Svilengrad (Image Credit: Valentinova & Nenova 2008, tabl. XV/6); (3) Svilengrad (Image Credit: Valentinova & Nenova 2008, tabl. XV/5); (4) Kiten (Image Credit: Hristina Vasileva).*

Vasileva 2024, 308, fig. 4). However, among the published examples, there are no parallels of the figurine from Tell Ezero in terms of shape and decorative technique, even though the anthropomorphs from Kiten, Kapitan Andreevo, Galabovo, and Svilengrad also show anatomical details (navel), clothing elements (skirt/dress), and ornaments (necklace).

Although the absence of the Ezero figurine's head makes it difficult to connect it to any of the existing Anatolian anthropomorph types, parallels could be found in Anatolia based on the preserved part of the artifact. Its closest parallels in terms of shape, presence of a navel, and punctated decoration are a group of figurines from Early Bronze Age sites in Central Anatolia and the Northeastern Aegean: Alacahöyük (fig. 4a; cf. Yalçın & Yalçın 2013, 46f, figs. 13 and 14), Alişar Hüyük (fig. 4b; cf. Schmidt 1932, fig. 62; Bilgi 2012, fig. 793), Koçumbeli (Atakuman 2017, 93 and 95, figs. 7a, d, and e; 8a and b; and 9), Kalinkaya (Kulaçoğlu 1992, fig. 93), Ahlatlıbel (Kulaçoğlu 1992, fig. 81), Etiokuşu (Kulaçoğlu 1992, fig. 86), and in particular Demircihüyük (Baykal-Seeher & Obladen-Kauder 1996, fig. 118/8; Bilgi 2012, fig. 686), Troy (Blegen et al. 1950, fig. 360/34–36; Bilgi 2012, fig. 730), and Thermi (Lamb & Hutchinson 1930). As already stated, similar elements can be observed in the flat profile of the figurines, the oval, circular, or elliptical shape of the lower body part, the presence of decoration, and the representation of a navel as a central anatomical detail situated in the middle of the body.

Chronological considerations

The absence of any records in the Nova Zagora Museum of History catalog on the archaeological context of the figurine from Tell Ezero makes impossible for us to look for associated finds and diagnostic material which, in turn, rules out the establishment of a reference point for the relative dating of the anthropomorph. Thus, only its Anatolian parallels can be used to fix an approximate date for the Ezero object.

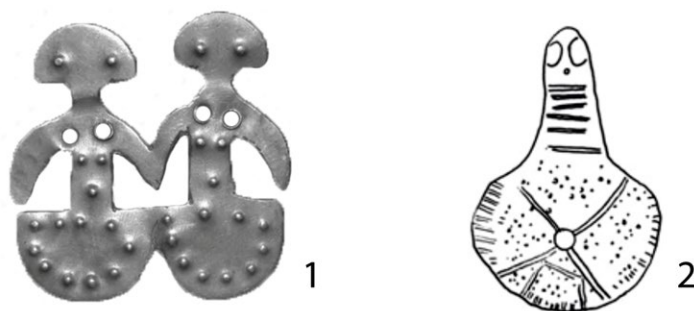


Figure 4. *Anthropomorphic figurines from Central Anatolia: (1) Alacahöyük (Image Credit: Yalçın & Yalçın 2013, fig. 13), (2) Alişar Hüyük (Image Credit: Atakuman 2017, fig. 1e). No scale.*

The dating of the flat figurine from Ahlatlıbel can be broadly synchronized with the second phase of the Early Bronze Age in Bulgaria (according to the most recent refinement of the chronological boundaries for the EBA in Bulgarian archaeology; cf. Alexandrov 2018 and 2020). The ceramic assemblage of Ahlatlıbel is consistent with the assemblage of the Yortan culture (Bertram 2008, 78). Moreover, Bertram (2008, 75) compared the ceramic assemblage of Koçumbeli with that of Etiokuşu, pitchers and vessels with S-shaped profiles decorated with channeling and incised patterns being particularly noteworthy among that material, as well as small bowls and cups. On the other hand, the gold twin figurine from Alacahöyük was dated to the period between 2800 and 2450 cal BC (Yalçın & Yalçın 2013, 38; Atakuman 2017, 90). Considering the dating of the Anatolian parallels and the observations on the appearance of Early Bronze Age decorated anthropomorphs in Bulgaria after ca. 2900 cal BC (cf. Minkov & Vasileva 2024, 311f), it seems reasonable to suggest that the figurine from Tell Ezero also dates to the second phase of the Early Bronze Age.

Discussion

A total of 30 ceramic anthropomorphs dating to the second phase of the Early Bronze Age were recovered from 17 sites in Upper Thrace and north Bulgaria: Oryahovo (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 311, fig. 5), Tell Yunatsite (Matsanova 2002, 222f, fig. 1/5; Katincharov & Matsanova 1993, 158 and 170), Razkopanitsa (Detev 1981, 159 and 169; Lestakov 1996, 286, fig. 11/6), Tell Karanovo (Hiller & Nikolov 2002, 9, Abb. 5a), Tell Nova Zagora (Stefanova 2013), the flat site of Nova Zagora (Kancheva-Russeva & Leshtakov 2008, 54 and 69, obr. 9/5), Tell Dyadovo (Sekine & Kamuro 1991, 66 and 85, figs. 16/10; Sekine & Kamuro 2000, 2f and 64, figs. 1, 2, and 27/1, and pl. 2), Tell Galabovo (Leshtakov 2021, 65, fig. 17/4), Chavdarova cheshma (Boyadzhiev & Antonova 2015, 77), Golyama Detelina (Leshtakov et al. 2001, 22 and 62, fig. 32k), Drama (Lihardus et al. 2001, 37), Svilengrad (Valentinova & Nenova 2008, 50 and 52, tabl. XV/5 and 6), Kapitan Andreevo (Minkov 2018, 76, fig. 2/4), Dragantsi (Gergova et al. 2010), Popskata mogila (Ivanov et al. 2017, 125, fig. 3; Ivanov & Dzhurkovska 2018, 77), Osmankin dol (Ilcheva 2000, 35 and 42, fig. 7/3; Ilcheva 2005, 52 and 54, tabl. 4), and Kiten (Minkov & Vassileva 2024, 310, fig. 4/4). The small number of figurines, along with the lack of typological diversity seems to suggest that these artifacts were made only occasionally throughout the different phases of the Early Bronze Age in Bulgaria, and that no tradition existed of their regular production and distribution. However, their presence almost exclusively in residential contexts suggests that, despite their limited territorial and typological distribution, they might have been related to specific domestic practices.

The limited number of ceramic anthropomorphs would render pointless any attempts at the construction of a comprehensive typological scheme. Nevertheless, certain preliminary observations can still be made regarding their form and style. It seems that all Early Bronze Age examples of anthropomorphic imagery from Upper Thrace can be

classified as schematic or stylized figurines characterized by absence of realistic or detailed depiction of individual anatomical details. Moreover, it's noteworthy that no anthropomorphs were uncovered in burial or ritual contexts, except for a ritual ditch at Drama (Lichardus et al. 2000). The figurines discovered at settlement sites in Thrace thus far are typically single finds from individual houses, with the exception of Tell Dyadovo, where two figurines were uncovered in one of the houses, though they dated to different phases of its occupation (Sekine & Kamuro 1991, 66 and 85, fig. 16/10; Sekine & Kamuro 2000, 2f and 64, figs. 1, 2, and 27/1, and pl. 2).

The appearance of numerous figurines in Early Bronze Age Anatolia is associated with the growth of material resources and the division of labor, with specialization in specific crafts and industries, including weaving, the domestic production of essential household items, and the development of metallurgy (Atakuman 2017, 88f and 103f). The pursuit of new resources and raw materials resulted in the emergence of several minor sites, which were satellites to the larger ones. Concurrently, there were indications of the centralization in the major settlements. During this period, the distribution of ceramic anthropomorphs in Anatolia reached its most significant peak. The period of exchange of goods and ideas, and population movements at the end of the second and the beginning of the third phase of the Early Bronze Age coincides with the material flourishing in both Anatolia and Thrace, which may explain the appearance of the anthropomorphs in the latter region.

In the third phase of the Early Bronze Age in Upper Thrace, the number of decorated anthropomorphs increased. This coincided with the appearance of large, enclosed sanctuaries with various features including pits, ritual platforms, altars, wells, basins, and graves, which could be associated with a transition of the Early Bronze Age communities to new beliefs and religious practices. This should not be taken as a shift from private/domestic to public rituals, but rather as a transformation of their constituent elements. If such a theoretical reconstruction is accepted, it could also be theorized that, based on the anthropomorph found in a ritual ditch at Drama (Lichardus et al. 2001, 37), deposition of anthropomorphs in ditches might have been practiced in this period. It is noteworthy that this practice is not attested after the end of the Early Bronze Age.

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