

# THE ICONOGRAPHIC TYPE “FACE OF DEMETER IN A SQUARE FIELD” AND THE CUBUS FROM KOSTURINO AS ITS PREHISTORIC PARADIGM



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*Abstract.* – The starting point of this study is the ceramic cubus from the Neolithic settlement near “Ornice” – the village of Kosturino (Strumica, R. of N. Macedonia). The presentation of the find is followed by an overview of its analogies, first the prehistoric ones, close in terms of form, chronology and territory, and then those from Early Antiquity, corresponding to an iconographic level, i.e. according to the depiction of eyes and eyebrows inscribed in a quadrangle. Emphasis is placed on votive objects from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC deposited in sanctuaries of Demeter at Eleusis and in Zone. As a separate category of iconographic parallels, presented within the study are also stone stelae with the indicated motif from two different archaeological complexes – the Bronze Age cultures of France and Spain, and the cultures from the first centuries of the new era from the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. The interpretation of the presented objects is based on previous studies, according to which their quadrangular contours would indicate the earth's plate, while the face inscribed in them would be a form of its deification, i.e. its presentation as a divine woman – as a birth-giver and nurturer. To support this assumption, the authors present several components. Firstly, it is the snake as a zoomorphic classifier of the earth and the underworld, present on the Kosturino object through the wavy motif that goes around it. Presented in support of this are examples of rock cliffs from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia where, through the carving, i.e. the indentation of the eyes and mouth, a representation similar to the ones discussed here was obtained. In this case, instead through the quadrangular shape, the element “earth” is present on a material level – as the rock cliff itself which is part of it. As a second component, the authors point to the aquatic meaning of the wavy motif as a representation of the cosmic waters that encircle the earth's plate, equated with the snake as their zoomorphic symbol. They point out the presence

of this element in the encircling bordures of the stelae from France, as well as on the gold funeral masks from Macedonia from the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century BC with the intention to identify the deceased with the Mother Earth as the patron of death and its overcoming. In such a context, the initiation ritual of the Pheneatians is also analyzed, referring to the mask as an important attribute of their goddess Demeter Cidaria. At the end, a comparison is made between the cubus from Kosturino and the Neolithic anthropomorphic house models and miniature table models, pointing out the mutual relations regarding their genesis, semiotics and cultic, i.e. religious purpose.

*Key words.* – Macedonian Neolithic, Demeter, Mother Earth, anthropomorphic house models, miniature table models, votive objects, golden funeral masks, Strumica.

During 2018, as part of the archaeological excavations of the Neolithic site of “Ornice” near the village of Kosturino (in the vicinity of Strumica, R. of N. Macedonia), archaeologists unearthed a find which was the main cause for this study. For those reasons, we begin the article, written as the result of this discovery, with the presentation of the find itself.

### **Neolithic ceramic object from the “Ornice” site near Kosturino**

The site is located 12 km south of the city of Strumica, on the western edges of the Belasica Mountain (R. of N. Macedonia). Based on the performed geomagnetic surveys and the findings of the archaeological excavations, it has been confirmed that it was a prehistoric lowland settlement, located on a small mound consisting of buildings organized in several concentric zones, with an empty central space. During the excavations conducted between 2016 and 2020, extensive ceramic material was found there, mainly represented by monochrome pottery (without the presence of finely smoothed and painted specimens), various stone tools, as well as cult objects represented by ceramic figurines and miniature sacrificial altars. Based on these findings, the settlement is dated to the so-called “monochrome” phase of the early Neolithic (phase “Amzabegovo I b–c”), existing at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.<sup>1</sup>

During the excavations of the site conducted in 2018, in addition to other findings, there were also discovered parts of a ceramic object in the form of a hollow cubus complemented by anthropomorphic and possible zoomorphic elements (T. I: 3–5).<sup>2</sup> The find was discovered at a depth of about 0.50 m, several meters south of the Neolithic house marked as “object No. 1”. The parts of the cubus, the scattered plaster of the fallen walls

<sup>1</sup> General information about the site: Pyjak et al. 2022, 8–10.

<sup>2</sup> First publication of the find: Pyjak et al. 2022, 10. The object is housed in the museum collection of prehistoric objects at the National Institution “Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments and Museum” – Strumica (inventory number ZMS-A-0005740).

of the house, and the pieces of pottery found nearby indicate the possibility that it was part of the inventory of this building. Most of its fragments were found in situ – in their original position, but turned upside down, while the rest were scattered in the immediate vicinity (T. I: 1). Only the back side of the cubus was completely preserved, the other sides were broken in half, while three larger pieces were found from its top.

After the parts had been assembled, it turned out that the object had the shape of an irregular hollow cubus with an open bottom and a flat top, with dimensions of the base equaling 20 x 19 cm, a height of 17 cm, and walls between 2 and 2.5 cm thick (T. I). It is made of unrefined clay mixed with sand, chaff and small pebbles. Despite the tendency to even out the walls, their irregular contours and unevenly executed surface give the impression of modeling without particular skill or sufficient attention. The sides of the object were modeled by hand, some of them composed of two segments. Based on the consistency and color of the ceramic (with light orange and beige tones) it can be concluded that the object was not fired at an optimal extent.

Preserved on all its side walls are pictorial elements that were plastically modeled before the clay was fired. On one of them, certainly the frontal one, on the right side, a protruding curved rib is preserved, and below it there is a half of an almond-shaped protrusion (T. I: 3). Based on the preserved traces and the principle of bilateral symmetry applied in the design of the object, it is evident that these elements had their counterpart on the left side as well. Based on this, as well as numerous synchronic analogies from the region, it can be concluded that this was a depiction of a pair of stylized eyes and eyebrows. It is evident that the eyebrows were modeled from a twisted piece of clay that was subsequently applied onto the surface. They started at the side edges of the wall and then, forming an arch above the eyes, ended between them – in the middle and, judging by the preserved remains, separated from each other. The eyes were also modeled in an analogous way – in the form of strongly protruding almond-shaped segments applied to the base. This is indicated by the preserved half of the right eye and the remains of the left one (as well as the eyebrow) preserved in negative. During the conservation of the object, these parts were carefully restored, taking into account their justification, i.e. the reliance on the preserved elements. Although the central and lower parts of this wall are heavily damaged, there are indications that the nose was also plastically modeled here, but without any clues as to its shape and dimensions. As a result, the question remains open whether the mouth, chin and other elements from the lower part of the head were also represented.

Along the back and left wall of the cubus stretches a protruding horizontal rib with a wavy shape that, in some places, looks more like a zigzag

(T. I: 4, 5). Although it is not visible on the right wall, the traces preserved on its surface, as well as the application of the referred principle of symmetry, would indicate its very probable presence on this wall also (T. I: 2). The entire rib was probably formed from a twisted clay thread which was then applied in a wavy manner onto the surface of the three walls of the cubus. It seems that its two ends started at the lateral edge of the eyebrows of the anthropomorphic figure from the frontal wall, and that they even formed some kind of a unified whole with them. If we agree with the last statement, then it can be concluded that the wavy element somehow encircled the cubus from all four sides.

Summarizing the description of this find, it can be concluded that its iconography consists of seven pictorial elements, two of which have explicit meaning (eyes and eyebrows), two implicit (human face and head), and three abstract (square, cubus, and wavy, i.e. zigzag motif). The interpretation of the undefined elements depends on the context of their perception. If they are perceived from an anthropomorphic perspective, which is indicated by the eyes and eyebrows, then the square shape of the frontal wall takes on the meaning of a human face, while the cubic volume of the object – as the head of the same character. In such a case, the wavy motif going around it acquires the meaning of stylized hair or of some specific part of it (braid, lock, or some kind of hairstyle), which would be indirectly indicated by its connection with the eyebrows (the hair being their common component). It cannot be ruled out that this motif also denoted some element of clothing or jewelry that covered the head (wreath, ribbon or some kind of covering around it).

The cubic shape of the object and the quadrangular shape of its front wall (inconsistent with the real appearance of a human head and face), but also the character of the wavy motif, give reason to perceive the cubus from another, non-anthropomorphic, perspective, so the meaning of the debatable elements can also be sought elsewhere. Thus, for example, the wavy motif, based on numerous analogies, could be interpreted as a stylized snake, but also in other ways, which, in fact, will be analyzed in detail in the following chapters of this study.

In addition to the presented find, also discovered at the site were other ceramic objects with an obvious symbolic, i.e. cultic function. These consist of anthropomorphic figurines (with a columnar body, with an accentuated stomach and buttocks), zoomorphic figurines (of large livestock or caprids), as well as a ceramic altar (with the remains of a recipient, a stylized head, and “V” lines carved below it).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On these cult objects: Pyjak et al. 2022, 10.



## Analogies

### a) Prehistoric analogies

So far, we are not aware of objects from the indicated period that would have a shape identical to the one presented. However, several finds, close from a chronological perspective, have been discovered in the nearer vicinity of the site, which show certain similarities as regards their shape. The first, and geographically closest, such examples are the two Neolithic cubes from the village of Damjan, near Radovich, similar in terms of their contours, but different in terms of the side openings and the absence of a face and a wavy motif (T. II: 2).<sup>4</sup> Next are two ceramic objects discovered at the village of Izvor, near Veles, from the same period, preserved in fragments, similar to the previous ones, but this time with an arched segment on the upper side shaped like horns or a crescent moon (T. II: 3, 4).<sup>5</sup> As a third analogy, we can present a type of Neolithic anthropomorphic house models, ascertained in the Skopje and Polog plains, as well as in Pelagonia, the lower part of which is shaped similarly to the find from Kosturino – in the form of a hollow cubus, often without a bottom. In contrast to it, above the upper surface of these objects rises a hollow cylindrical part, usually shaped like a head (T. II: 8; T. III: 5; T. VI: 7) or a bust of a woman (T. III: 7), in some cases with hands placed on the lid of the cubus (T. II: 10; T. VI: 8), and not infrequently in the form of an aniconic cylinder (T. II: 5).<sup>6</sup> The main differences regarding our object are the recurring various openings in the cubic part, and the absence of eyes and eyebrows. However, they can be somewhat compensated by the not so small number of such examples in which the cubus is without openings (but with carved ornaments – T. II: 6, 9), or has a pair of almond-shaped perforations, similar in shape and position to the eyes from the Kosturino object (T. III: 2–7 compare with 1), in some cases even duplicated on the same or opposite wall of the cubus (T. III: 5–7).<sup>7</sup> If we take into account the identification of the cubus in the latter objects with the house, then these openings can be considered as symbolic representatives of the windows of some kind of an anthropomorphized house. This would also be indicated by the identification of the other elements of these objects with the openings of the human body (especially the female one), namely, the door with the mouth, the crotch and the genitals, and the inside of the cubus-house with the uterus.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Наумов, Чаусидис 2011, 15, 16, 86 (T. IX: 12, 13); Здравковски 2018, 148 – Cat. No. 91; Ружак et al. 2022, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Јовчевска 2008, 112 – T. IV, T. V.

<sup>6</sup> On these objects with additional bibliography: Чаусидис 2019; Чаусидис, Наумов 2019, 30 (Fig. 1) and further.

<sup>7</sup> Чаусидис, Наумов 2019, 88 (Fig. 31), 89 (Fig. 32); Čausidis 2009a.

<sup>8</sup> In detail about these meanings: Čausidis 2009a; Чаусидис 2009b; Чаусидис 2019.

The cubus or the square, supplemented with stylized eyes and even a mouth, is also present on another category of objects, specific to the pre-historic cultures from the territory of present-day Bulgaria. Of the three-dimensional ones, these are the miniature ceramic models of tables, found on several Chalcolithic sites, with stylized eyes depicted on the sides, while the arches that extend between their legs allude to an open mouth (examples from Karanovo and Stara Zagora T. IV: 7, 8).<sup>9</sup> Similar but older objects are also present among the Neolithic cultures from Macedonia, again with a flat upper part (without the usual recipient), even with eyes represented on all four sides, but this time executed in the form of perforations (example T. IV: 6).<sup>10</sup> In this case, we present them as secondary parallels because, unlike the Bulgarian specimens, their massive cubic volume is not so prominent. Of the two-dimensional analogies, we can take into account the square panel formed on the wall plaster of a Late Neolithic (or Chalcolithic) building in Dolnoslav, near Plovdiv (Bulgaria), which shows a pair of stylized eyes and two bundles of diagonal lines, the crossing of which forms a hatched rhombus (T. IV: 9, 10, reconstruction of the building in which it was discovered – 11).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, we can mention an analogy from the Pannonian region. It is a ceramic object from Hodmezovasarhely – Kekenjdomb (Hungary), dated to the late Neolithic, shaped similarly to the object from Kosturino – in the form of a hollow cubus without a bottom, with a flat upper surface, but this time with concave side walls supplemented by carved ornaments (T. VI: 9, compare with 1). On its front side there is a perforated opening above which the anthropomorphic element is denoted, but this time not only with a representation of the eyes, but also of the nose and mouth, all of them inscribed within a trapezoidal field. In the existing literature this object is usually treated as a sacrificial table, while we have included it in our previous studies as a schematic model of a house with a door that may have been identified with a mouth.<sup>12</sup>

Do the analogies put forward allow us to connect the presented object from Kosturino and the character depicted on it with their character and function, that is, with the house and the table? Of course not, because there are no elements on it that would directly refer to these meanings. Therefore, the reason for combining the cubus with a human face should be sought outside these objects, in some other spheres.

<sup>9</sup> On the finds (without the indicated interpretations): Николов 2007; Николов, 2006, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Темелкоски, Миткоски 2005, 52, 53; Наумов 2011, 25–27, Т. I: 6, similar samples but without “eyes” – Т. II: 7–12.

<sup>11</sup> On the find (without the indicated interpretations): Радунчева 2003, 250; Николов 2006, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Титов 1980, 357, 363 – Рис. 219; Čausidis 2009a, 116, 117, 121 – Т. IV: 6; Наумов, Чаусидис 2011, Т. X: 5.

### b) Votive objects from the ancient sanctuaries of Demeter

The combination “human face inscribed in a quadrilateral” can also be traced to a category of early antique finds with a cultic character. It represents a specific category of votive objects made of stone or precious metals that were deposited during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC in cult places dedicated to Demeter, so far ascertained in her sanctuaries in Eleusis (near Athens – T. IV: 4) and Zone (ancient Mesembria – T. IV: 2, 3). They are modeled in the form of a quadrangular plate or foil, on the front side of which depicted in relief are eyes, nose, eyebrows, and in some cases lips.

Of particular interest to us is the votive marble tablet from the sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis (5<sup>th</sup> century BC), on the lower edge of which is engraved the donor’s votive inscription: *Eukrates in honor of Demeter* (T. IV: 4).<sup>13</sup> In the quadrangular field there is a plastically executed human face that contains not only morphological but also certain stylistic similarities with the Kosturino find, regardless of the fact that it is at least five millennia younger (T. IV: 4 compare with 1). They relate in the shape of the eyes and, especially, the striking arched eyebrows depicted immediately above them, but possibly also in the absence of a mouth. In this case, the nose is also clearly denoted, joined in one unit with the eyebrows. It differs from the Kosturino find due to its two-dimensionality (square, not cubic shape), and the depiction of another (female) head, surrounded by a red-colored radiant halo, which seems to emerge from the square. It is indicative that a head in a similar position is also present in some of the previously-introduced analogies for the Kosturino find. We specifically refer to a subtype of the mentioned anthropomorphic models of houses in which the same constellation also appears – a head or bust of a woman who seems to emerge from the cubus-house (T. VI: 6 compare with 7 and with T. III: 5, 7).

An analogous composition is also present on the silver, gold, and silvered bronze votive plaques associated with the same goddess, this time from her sanctuary at Zone, despite being produced from a completely different material and technique (T. IV: 2, 3 compare with 1). In this case, as well, the elements of the face are represented, with the difference that here the lips are also shown, while the eyes are not almond-shaped, but droplike, i.e., rounded at the inner end and pointed at the outer one.<sup>14</sup>

In previous publications, the objects of both types have been associated with the cult of Demeter based on their presence in the sanctuaries of this goddess, but also on the inscription with her name engraved on the

<sup>13</sup> Kerényi 1967, 96–98, Fig. 34; Beschi 1988, 861, illustration (LIMC IV/2), 573: 161, catalogue information: 708 (No. 161); Petridou 2017, 100–102; Kiotsekoglou 2016, 5, 10 (Fig. 13); Theodossiev 1998, 357.

<sup>14</sup> Theodossiev 1998, 356 (Fig. 13), 357; Petridou 2017, 11106, 107; Kiotsekoglou 2016, 8, Fig. 1; Τα ιερά 2024.

specimen from Eleusis. Among the various researchers, the dominant view is that the faces shown in the square field indicate in some sense the people who deposited these objects due to medicinal reasons, specifically for an eye disease,<sup>15</sup> or they represent the worshippers of her cult who participated in various rituals performed in the sanctuaries.<sup>16</sup> A somewhat different opinion regarding them has been put forward by I. Marazov and G. Petridou, who associate them with one specific aspect of the ancient mystery cults. According to them, after the *mystes* (μύστης), i.e. the member of these cults had gone through the cycle of consecration, he received a new kind, i.e. a new and “real” ability to see, represented by the huge eyes, specifically as a sign of the final act of initiation (ἐποπτεία), i.e. the opening of his eyes and his joining in the “initiated” (τελετή).

It is quite indicative that, even in this case, the patron of such an act is Demeter, who also figures as a healer of the blind.<sup>17</sup> So far, there have been various opinions put forward regarding the presence of Demeter on the tablet from Eleusis (T. IV: 4). Since C. Kerényi thinks that the eyes on the quadrangular part are the cured eyes of the sick, he seeks the image of this goddess in the female head depicted above it, and feels that the rays in which she is surrounded represent the light in which she appears.<sup>18</sup> L. Beschi and G. Petridou do not rule out the possibility that, in addition to Demeter, she also depicted Kore.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, S. Kiotsekoglou thinks that the eyes in the quadrangular field belong to the goddess Demeter, while not commenting on the female figure depicted above it.<sup>20</sup>

### c) Stone stelae from the Bronze Age and Antiquity

A composition very similar to the previous ones can also be seen on the stone stelae in two cultural complexes that are chronologically and geographically very distant from each other. The first one consists of the Bronze Age cultures from the territory of France (T. V: 1–7; T. VIII: 1–3) and Spain (T. V: 8), among which there is one specific type with the same iconographic constellation – a human face inscribed in a quadrangle. In this

<sup>15</sup> Kerényi 1967, 96–98; Beschi 1988, 861; Petridou 2017, 96–110. In addition to the example mentioned, S. M. Oberhelman notes a larger number of stone votive tablets from the sanctuary of Asclepius at the Athenian Acropolis (T. IV: 5), which apparently specialized in the treatment of eye diseases. However, these objects only depict eyes, without other parts of the face (Oberhelman 2014, 52 – Fig. 3, 53 – Fig. 4).

<sup>16</sup> Theodossiev 1998, 357.

<sup>17</sup> Маразов 1999, 109; Petridou 2017, 95, 102–105, 109–111. This option is not ruled out by L. Beschi, as well (Beschi 1988, 861), while the same aspects of the cult of Demeter are also indicated by C. Kerényi (Kerényi 1967, 95–102).

<sup>18</sup> Kerényi 1967, 97; this view is also accepted by N. Theodossiev (Theodossiev 1998, 357).

<sup>19</sup> Beschi 1988, 861; Petridou 2017, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Kiotsekoglou 2016, 5.

case, the face is represented by the nose and eyes (without eyebrows), even more stylized, this time inscribed in a high rectangle marked by the contours of the stele or by an additional frame. In some cases this frame is empty, and, in others, it is filled with various bordures, meanders or with an ornamented field (zigzag or crossed lines, which, in some cases, form a complex of rhombuses or a chessboard pattern – T. V: 1–3, 6, 7). In some examples, its lower part is interrupted by an interval that alludes to some kind of “entrance” into the quadrangular field or the schematic hands of the depicted character (T. V: 1–6).<sup>21</sup>

The second complex is represented by the later grave stelae from the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula (Yemen), mainly dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, in the execution of which (mainly alabaster), despite the vast geographical and chronological distance, we may note solutions very similar to the previous ones (T. V: 10–12). Here, there is also a quadrilateral field, represented by the contours of the stele, often accentuated by an additional frame, in which a strongly stylized human face is inscribed with a depiction of the nose and eyes, often complemented by eyebrows and a small mouth. We can also add to this group the Nabataean stele from Petra (Jordan, clearly influenced by the previous ones), however, found not in a funerary context, but placed in a temple and incorporated into a classical aedicula (T. V: 9).<sup>22</sup>

### Interpretations

Our previous studies of the indicated ancient votive objects, based on detailed semiotic analyses and extensive comparative material, resulted in an interpretation that is different from the above-mentioned ones, and primarily in regard to the methodological approach. In doing so, we set off from the fact that behind the choice of the square contours of the mentioned objects, absolutely inappropriate to the real shape of the human face, i.e. head, there had to be some other paradigm that would correspond in some way to Demeter, in whose honor these finds were produced. We sought the answer in the two components that are essential for this goddess. On the one hand, it is the quadrangular field as a representation of the earth's plate with the four directions of its expansion (four sides of the world), and on the other – the female face that encodes its deification, i.e. the representation of this cosmic element as a divine being with the characteristics of a woman, t.e. a mother with the functions of birth-giver and nurturer. We concluded that the non-display of the rest of her body (not even the contours of her head) would be due to the non-anthropomorphic nature of this goddess, that is, the fusion (or rather the equation)

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<sup>21</sup> Müller-Karpe 1974, Taf. 603: 1–8, 21, 22, 23, example from Spain: Taf. 570: 14; Vierzig 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Roche 2011.

of her body with the unfathomable surface and mass of the Earth.<sup>23</sup> Although Demeter, according to the etymology of this theonym, cannot be reliably identified with the Earth, the functions of this goddess clearly indicate such a character, and primarily in relation to the agrarian aspects that are under her absolute patronage.<sup>24</sup>

According to this interpretation, the eyes and nose in the indicated ancient objects would originally denote the personality of the Earth Goddess represented in the image of Demeter, but, at the same time, her non-figurality. We think that this aspect can be most clearly recognized on the Eleusis tablet (T. IV: 4), where there are two entities present and depicted in a completely different way. On the one hand, it is the face inscribed in the rectangular field depicting Demeter – as a personalized Mother-Earth, without the contours of the head and without the human body (her body is the Earth itself, encoded through the square contours of the tablet). On the other hand, it is the head of a young woman formed above the rectangular field, which we believe depicts her daughter Persephone, i.e. Kore (corporeal, with a very realistically shaped head and neck), and specifically at the moment of her periodic exit from the earth, i.e. the underworld (that is, her mother's womb). The surrounding of the head with a red radiant halo can be understood as a symbolic representation of the cyclical resurrection of this goddess, apparently equated with the dawn, i.e. the birth of the sun from the underworld. At the same time, it must be emphasized that these proposed explanations do not exclude the other previously-mentioned interpretations. The presence of eyes due to the treatment of some eye disease of the donor, or his acquisition of some kind of special sacralized power of sight, could be considered as possible secondary reinterpretations of the proposed primary meaning of these objects. As an argument in favor of their secondary nature, we can take the presence on these tablets of not only the eyes, as is the case with the real votive objects deposited due to the treatment of eye diseases (T. IV: 5), but also the nose and mouth, and in the case of the stone specimen from Eleusis – the additional female character (T. IV: 2–4).

### **a) Components with an earthly meaning**

Taking into account the presented analyses and analogies, we can point to the following components that would support the assumption that our object from Kosturino also depicted the personified earth (T. I; T. IV: 1). The first component is the square (in our case, present in a three-dimensional form – as a cubus), which reflects the human notions regarding the shape of the earth as a surface, i.e. a plate that extends not only hori-

<sup>23</sup> In detail about these interpretations with appropriate argumentation: Чаусидис 2005, 148–160; Čausidis 2012, 7, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Burkert 1985, 159–161.

zonally – on all four sides, but also in depth, which implies its cubic shape. The second component is the material from which the object is made – the fired clay as a semiotic (and essential) equivalent of the earth, based on the similar appearance, color, consistency, and the place from which it is exploited. The third component is the combination of the quadrangle and the human face as a form of personification of the earth, while the fourth component could be the wavy motif that runs across the back and both sides of the cubus, especially if we allow for the possibility that it depicted a stylized snake.

The meaning of the snake as an eminent symbol (i.e. a zoomorphic classifier) of the earth and the underworld is based on the fact that this animal is actually in direct contact with this cosmic element, that is, it lives in the cavities of the earth (i.e. the underworld), and it constantly, even during movement, clings with its whole body to the soil. The mystical power of the serpent to cause death without the use of force may have also played a certain part in this, which resulted in it being treated as the lord of death and life, and, hence, as a zoomorphic equivalent of the earth itself, and a hypostasis or companion of the mythical characters that represent it.<sup>25</sup> On our object, the snake could have been possibly added precisely due to these two contexts – as a symbol of the earth (a sign that the presented cubus symbolizes this element, i.e. this zone of the universe), and as a companion, attribute and hypostasis of the Earth Goddess (T. I: 2–4; T. IV: 1).

Another phenomenon present in ancient and modern archaic cultures can be considered as a product of the same concept of the personification of the earth, which, at first glance, has nothing in common with the ones shown here. We are referring to the numerous examples of visually striking rock cliffs, where, by adding a pair of enormous carved eyes (and sometimes an open mouth) one would get a representation similar to the ones treated here, whereby the “earthly” element does not have to be present through the square field because it is represented factually – on a material level – through the rock itself as part of the earth, i.e. the lower zones of the universe (T. VI: 2–5 compare with 1 and with T. IV). The symbolic, i.e. mythical-religious character of these objects is clearly indicated by their sacralization, i.e. their treatment in past times as cult places, and, in more recent times, as bearers of Christianized meanings or as *topoi* associated with some half-forgotten traditions and rituals, often related to the reproductive functions of women. Such examples are especially common in the Aegean part of Thrace (T. VI: 2–4),<sup>26</sup> and it seems that one

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<sup>25</sup> On the indicated meanings of the snake: Чаусидис 1994, 62–65; Чаусидис 2005, 209–225.

<sup>26</sup> A region in which the sanctuary at Zone/Mesembria is also located (Kiotsetoglu 2016, Fig. 2 – Fig. 12).

example can also be referenced from the territory of Macedonia. It is the rock cliff under the Zrze monastery, near Prilep, which, over the centuries, on several occasions (from the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century onwards) was carved in order to place some kind of monastic cells or other rooms in the resulting cavities (T. VI: 5).<sup>27</sup> Although prior studies have confirmed only the Christian phase of use of these rooms, based on the other examples indicated previously, it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that some of them were also used in the pre-Christian period, most likely in relation to the mythical-religious paradigm discussed here. This is very explicitly suggested by the anthropomorphism of the entire rock, i.e. a cave whose regular shape (resembling a head with eyes, an open mouth, and, it seems, even with teeth) is obviously the result of an artificial refinement of its natural shape (T. VI: 5).

### **b) Components with an aquatic meaning**

In all of humanity, the snake functions as a symbol of water – another element key to human existence, based on several of their real common components that mythical thought took as a reason for their equation. These include the existence of some snakes in water, their cold body and smooth shiny skin that gives the impression of wetness. A particularly important reason for this identification is the way the snake moves, in the form of wavelike slithering, analogous to the flow of water in currents that meander according to the configuration of the surface, i.e. the terrain along which they flow. For these reasons, water as an element, and its specific manifestations (river, sea, rain, clouds), are often identified in myths as some kind of mythical snake,s or are placed under the patronage of mythical characters, i.e. deities who have a certain serpentine component in their appearance and behavior.<sup>28</sup> In that context, the extension of the wavy body of the stylized snake around the three sides of the cubus from Kosturino (T. I: 2–5; T. VII: 1) would be associated with a specific category of mythical representations that can be taken as another confirmation of its earthly symbolism and such meaning of the anthropomorphic character represented on it. These are the myths (also present on the whole planet and in different periods) according to which the earth's plate is surrounded by one or two huge snakes which, biting their own tails, form a ring around it (T. VII: 3, 4, 6, 7). Most often they are equated with the cosmic waters in which they swim. For example, in Norse mythology it is the dragon Jörmungandr that swims in the sea that encircles the earth, i.e. Midgard (T. VII: 3), while in Ancient Hellenic mythology – it is the river Ocean that surrounds the earth from all sides. On this occasion, the an-

<sup>27</sup> Ристески 2017.

<sup>28</sup> On the relation snake – water: Чаусидис 1994, 62–65; about the cosmological aspects of this relation: Чаусидис 2005, 209–225.



ent Egyptian Apep/Apophis is also interesting to us, who, in visual representations, contains two eminently aquatic features – on the one hand, it is his wavelike curved body, and, on the other hand, his placement in the part of the visual compositions that signifies water (T. VII: 13, compare with 1).<sup>29</sup>

Although according to the finds known so far, we cannot be sure whether the apostrophized cosmological aspect of the snake was already formed in the Balkan Neolithic cultures, the cubus from Kosturino can be taken as one of the oldest potential indicators in support of this. In Macedonia there is another find where this animal could have been represented in the same context. It is a fragment of a Neolithic ceramic vessel from Suvodol, along the neck of which stretches a plastically modeled snake which, alone or accompanied by another one, curls in a wavelike manner around the entire neck of the vessel. The symbolic and mythical character of this representation is clearly indicated by the horns that complement the snake's head (T. VII: 2 compare with 1).<sup>30</sup>

In our previous studies of the geometric symbols of the earth in the form of a square, rhombus, triangle or circle, combined with a human head or face, we pointed out their frequent supplementation with various hatchings, bordures and ornaments. Hatching seems to have been done especially often, whereby a field of rhombuses or squares was formed within the indicated geometric symbols, which, over time and by themselves, acquired the character of symbols and ideograms of the earth, and of some categories related to it (water, fertility, abundance, life). The most evident such examples come from the Far East, in which rhombic signs (within hieroglyphic scripts or the local symbolic systems) bear the meaning of *field*, *fertility* or *prosperity*. They also include the "chessboard" pattern (T. V: 7, 13, 14), which, to this day, has retained its earthly meaning in the design of the chessboard (as a field on which a battle is fought between two armies).<sup>31</sup> The geometric symbols of the earth are often surrounded by zigzags, wavy lines, meanders and braids, as regards which there are indications that they denoted the cosmic waters that encircle the earth's plate. In this case, too, the best evidence comes from the ancient hieroglyphic scripts (Egyptian and Sumerian-Elamite), in which these signs (zigzag and wavy line) bear the explicit meaning of *water* (T. VII: 8–10).<sup>32</sup> From the analogies presented so far, these components are most strikingly expressed in some of the presented Bronze Age stelae from France (T. V: 1–3, 6, 7; T. VIII: 1, 3), and their elementary (or possibly zoomor-

<sup>29</sup> Other examples (with corresponding illustrations): Чаусидис 2005, 213–215.

<sup>30</sup> On the object (without the indicated meanings): Симоска, Санев 1976, 42 (Сл. 149); other examples of vessels supplemented by snakes: Чаусидис, 2017а, 71–74 (А34; А35).

<sup>31</sup> On the meanings of the motifs: Чаусидис 2005, 102–104; about the chessboard: Акимова 1988.

<sup>32</sup> Чаусидис 2025.

phized) version can also be recognized on the cubus from Kosturino (T. I: 2–5; T. VII: 1).

### Concluding remarks

Summarizing these observations, we can conclude that on all the objects discussed above, including the one from Kosturino, the combination “human face inscribed in a quadrilateral” (with all the additional geometric ornaments and the representation of a snake) depicted the earth personified in the form of a female being, probably with the character of a mythical creature, i.e. a deity, who incarnates this cosmic element, and is the patron of everything connected with it (fertility, nutrition, and probably also death). Her representation only through the face, without the other parts of the body (not even the head, and not even those that are essential for her basic function – the genitals as birth and creation, and the breasts as nourishment) can be justified by the tendency to identify her not with some corporeal, i.e. anthropomorphic figure, but to retain her aniconic character – simply as a representation of the earth understood as material, i.e. a table and a plate with an unfathomable surface.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the presence of essential prosopomorphic elements can be justified not only by the desire to present the earth as a living entity, but also by the innate human urge to emotionally connect and worship the face of the one who provides your existence. Taking into account the strong expression of this drive in early childhood, as a paradigm of this concept we can take this kind of relationship of the child to the mother, which will grow into a religious phenomenon on a global level – as veneration of the goddess Mother Earth, but also with a similar anthropomorphization of another cosmic element, the Sky – in relation to the Father.<sup>34</sup>

The eminence of the object from Kosturino lies in the fact that it is shaped as an extremely simple three-dimensional object in which, apart from horizontality, there are also hints to its verticality, which, for its part, can indicate not only the actualization of the earth, but also the other parts of the universe – the underworld, the sky, and the middle zone, i.e. the empty space between them in which humans exists.

The question remains open whether the character on the stelae from France and Spain also had a similar nature, because their purpose has not yet been confirmed for certain, i.e. whether they had a funerary or some other function (T. V: 1–8; T. VIII: 1–3). If we accept the possibility that these were grave stelae, then the presence of the anthropomorphic face in them could be justified by the desire to depict the deified earth to which the deceased is surrendered, which, in itself, implies some expectati-

<sup>33</sup> Чаусидис 2005, 148–160; Čausidis 2012, 7, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Neumann 1963.

ons that she participates in the positive outcome of his posthumous destiny (his revival, rebirth and/or incarnation into another being). This concept of the entering and the exiting of the deceased from the womb of Mother Earth could have been encoded in the discontinuation, i.e. the break at the lower edge of the square field of these stelae, which could possibly indicate the opening (=grave?) through which the deceased had to enter her, and perhaps then come out of there – reborn by the goddess (T. V: 1–6).

Does that rule out the possibility that the face of these objects denoted the deceased, which is understood a priori in relation to the characters from the later grave stelae? We will consider this question in the following chapters, while discussing another category of funerary objects conceptualized similarly to the presented prehistoric stelae – with a depiction of a human face inscribed in an ornamented frame. Thereby, we have in mind the golden funerary masks found in the rich Late Archaic graves from the territory of Macedonia (T. VIII: 4–10 compare with 1–3).

### **Mask of the Earth Goddess**

At several necropolises in Macedonia, dated in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, there have been discoveries of approximately 20 gold masks, which were placed on the faces of the elite deceased during their funeral ceremonies (T. VIII: 4–10). In some cases, this position was maintained even when they were placed in their graves, which was ascertained in situ by archaeological excavations. Judging by this purpose, it seems indisputable that these masks depicted the face of the deceased themselves or, at the very least – their idealized, i.e. heroized personality equated with a mythologized ancestor or some other character from local mythologies. However, the presence in some specimens (mainly those from the Ohrid region) of a rich circular frame filled with ornaments in the form of double interlacing (T. VIII: 4, 5, 10, 11) or zigzag (T. VIII: 6, 9), observed in relation to the characters on the stelae from France (compare with T. VIII: 1–3; T. V: 1–3, 6), also points to another possibility – that in their cases, also, such masks denoted the image of the Earth Goddess. At the same time, this interpretation would not mean the complete exclusion of the figure of the deceased from these objects, but only their identification with this goddess. In addition to both assumptions, we can point to a particularly significant written source that shows that in the ancient Balkan cultures the mask was an important attribute and symbol of the goddess that was the representative and patron of the earth and the chthonic zones of the universe in general.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Чаусидис 2025, Chapter “B”.

Here we mean the description by Pausanias of a ritual that the Phe-neatians performed at the heroon of the sanctuary of Demeter, called “Eleusinian”, because of the similarity of the rituals held there with those at the famous Eleusinian sanctuary near Athens. It took place in front of a rock made up of two large stones placed next to each other, and it consisted in their opening, taking some initiatory writings from there, and reading them to the initiates. On top of the rock there was a sphere in which the mask (προσωπον – literally the *face*) of Demetra Cidaria was kept, which the priest put on his face and then performed certain ritual actions.<sup>36</sup> Based on this information, V. Fol concludes that by putting the mask on his face, the priest, in a way, took on the characteristics and functions of the goddess, transforming himself into her son, servant and deputy (*paredros*), and even into a figure equal to her. It seems that the author includes this example in her research to show that ritual masks were an important part of the mystery rites and that their eyes were pierced (analogous to one of the gold funerary masks from Thrace) so that the priest could, wearing it on his face, perform the specified actions.<sup>37</sup>

We feel that the described ritual offers opportunities for the interpretation of some other (in our opinion, even more essential) aspects of the Balkan funerary masks, i.e. their function as a representative, i.e. the “face”/“semblance” of the chthonic deity. In support of this, see the above presented votive objects deposited in the sanctuaries of Demeter, made from the same materials, and in the same technique – embossed in gold, silver or silvered foil (T. IV: 2, 3 cf. T. VIII: 4–10). One such mask even indicates the unification of both aspects of its wearer – the funerary and the priestly. It is the gold mask from the female grave 458 from the necropolis at Archontiko (near Pella, Greece) which, due to the many other extremely rich items, is treated as the grave of a priestess (T. VIII: 7, 8).<sup>38</sup>

The comparison of the mask from the mentioned ritual of the Phe-neatians (concerning which, incidentally, we do not know what material it was made of) with the paradigmatic mask from the indicated grave points to several of their common components. Both masks are associated with female characters on the one hand - with the goddess Demeter, and, on the other – with the deceased from this grave, whereby their relations become even more immediate if we take into account the assumption that the latter, judging by the character of the grave goods, may have had the status of some kind of priestess (T. VIII: 7). Our semiotic and comparative analyses indicated that the mask and the numerous other golden appliquéés found on her body were intended to portray her as a macrocosmic being.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Paus. 8.15.1–4.

<sup>37</sup> Fol 2018, 92, 93.

<sup>38</sup> On the mask and other grave goods (without the indicated interpretations): Chrysostomou, Chrysostomou 2012; Чаусидис 2025, Chapter “A”.

<sup>39</sup> Чаусидис 2025, Chapter “A”.

This component would correspond to the cosmological character of Demeter, although she, at least within the prism of ancient Hellenic culture, was treated as a representative of only the lower zones of the universe (in contrast to other Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures where the body of the main female goddesses often embodied the entire cosmos). The last two common components would refer to the initiation and mysterial character of the described ritual of the Pheneatians, taking into account that the rich graves with gold masks from Macedonian necropolises are often associated with mystery cults and with initiation as an obligatory act of ritual introduction of new members into these religious communities.<sup>40</sup>

Based on the indicated source and the proposed interpretations, it can be assumed that by putting this mask on her face, the deceased from grave 458 of Archontiko was transformed into a priestess and a representative of the Earth Goddess (actually, her equivalent), thus also providing the positive outcome of her own post-mortal destiny (immortality, resurrection).<sup>41</sup>

All this leads to the conclusion that the symbolic paradigm of the funeral masks from Macedonia could have been the face of the Earth Goddess, of some chthonic goddess similar to her, or of some male equivalent of theirs. This hypothesis seems quite logical due to the fact that the objects were placed on the face of the deceased who, at least in one of the stages of their afterlife, became part of the underground kingdom ruled by the indicated deities. Arguments in favor of this can be found in the identification of the deceased with the god of the dead who, in certain cultures, was actually considered the “first deceased” and the “paradigm of all subsequent deceased”. According to the logic of mythical thought, there is no essential difference between them because they are both the embodiment of death: the wearer of the mask is dead – i.e. equated with death, just as the deity of death is actually a personification of death itself.<sup>42</sup> This would also be a justification for the depiction of this image on our masks (T. VIII: 4–10), as well as on the mentioned funerary monuments (T. VIII: 1–3; T. V). As the most explicit such case, we can take the ancient Egyptian funeral masks, the placement of which on the face of the deceased meant that they were equated with Osiris (the god of the underworld) and with the Sun God, as well as, in some cases, with the separate elements of the face of other deities.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Blečić Kavur 2024; Маразов 2021, 516–519.

<sup>41</sup> Чаусидис 2025, Chapter “A”.

<sup>42</sup> Чаусидис 2025, Chapter “B”; on the identification of the deceased with the god of death: Chausidis 2009c, 75–80; Чаусидис 2018, 234–239. The same concept (depiction in the form of a “mask”) was also applied in the representation of river gods, who also bear an accentuated chthonic character (Ostrowski 1991, 18–21, 26–29).

<sup>43</sup> Cool Root 1979, 5; Taylour 1994.

In support of this proposed interpretation, we can also point to a more distant example from the pre-Hispanic cultures of America that could not have had any connection with the European prehistoric and ancient cultures, which is why we reference it only as an archetypal parallel. It is a pictorial representation preserved in the “Aztec Codices”, whose complex iconography, filled with many figures and symbols, consists of two basic elements that are also present on most of the objects presented here (T. IX: 4). They are the square field (= earth), which is framed by a double interlaced border (= cosmic waters surrounding it), and the monstrous head depicted in its center, representing the chthonic mythical figure symbolizing death and the world of the dead. In this case, too, the surrounding frame has a break, indicating the entrance that leads to the chthonic figure, where the same meaning (as an entrance to the underworld) is also borne by its terrible gaping mouth (T. IX: 4 compare with T. V: 1–6).<sup>44</sup> Similar cosmological compositions, this time with the head of the Gorgon Medusa in the center, are present on mosaics and other types of objects created in the circle of ancient Mediterranean cultures, also depicted on various gold applications from the indicated Macedonian graves, intended to cover the mouth (example T. IX: 1, 2) and other body parts of the deceased. It is often surrounded by snakes or other elongated and twisted motifs, which show that in these cases, too, it represents the same image of the personified Earth Goddess (this time represented by the head of Medusa), surrounded by the cosmic waters (T. IX: 5, 6).<sup>45</sup> Hence, we think that the same iconographic and semiotic paradigm was also behind the appearance of the funerary masks from these necropolises, especially those in which the face of the deceased, identified with the personalized Mother Earth, is surrounded by similar wavy or zigzag bordures, with the meaning of the cosmic waters that encircle her, or the snake as their symbol (T. VIII: 4–6, 9–11 compare with T. IV: 2, 3, and with T. IX: 3 – an idealized model of this iconographic paradigm).

In the character of Medusa (in our opinion, a half-forgotten ancient personification of the Earth Goddess or the Macrocosmic Goddess), one can also resolve the dilemma about the meaning of the wavy motif that encircles the cubus from Kosturino (T. I; T. VII), i.e. whether its meaning was related to the hair of the depicted character or with the snake. Here we have in mind the snakes that surround the head of Medusa, often equated with the locks of her hair (T. IX: 1, 2, 5, 6). Based on this relation, we can assume that even in the case of our much older object, the indicated motif had several meanings: on a figurative level, it represented the hair of the depicted character, and on a cosmological level – the snake

<sup>44</sup> Neumann 1963, 192, 193 (Fig. 46), 288.

<sup>45</sup> In detail, with numerous other examples: Чаусидис 2025, B34, B46–B49; Krauskopf 1988.

as a symbol of the earth and the cosmic waters that surround it from all sides. At the same time, the relations between hair and water would also have a real visual justification – the stretching of both in elongated, wavy and, in principle, very dynamic and impermanent shapes.

One piece of information related to the aspects discussed here brings us back to the goddess Demeter, but this time, it seems, as the patroness of the dead. Namely, according to the written sources, the Athenians had a custom to ritually sow grain over graves, calling their closely related deceased “*Demetreioi*”.<sup>46</sup> Observed from our point of view, this title, together with the ritual context in which it was evoked, may indicate the identification of the deceased with the goddess, either directly with her or indirectly with her children, in the latter case perhaps equated with grains of wheat that come to life again after sprouting in her womb.

### **The cubus from Kosturino and the anthropomorphic house models and miniature table models**

We feel that the Neolithic object from Kosturino cannot be understood without a comparative analysis with the above-mentioned anthropomorphic house models typical for the Neolithic sites in Macedonia. But, on the other hand, it also offers opportunities for a better understanding of their genesis and meaning (T. II; T. III). Considering their various typological variants, in our previous studies we came to the conclusion that the ideal paradigm of these objects is the anthropomorphized house or, more specifically, the symbolic union of the house (represented through the lower part in the form of a hollow cubic segment) and the woman (represented through the upper part in the form of a hollow anthropomorphic cylinder). In that context, as the most authentic and, perhaps, the oldest specimens, we determined those from Pelagonia, where the house is represented in a rather realistic form, with a clearly depicted two-sloped roof (T. II: 8), in the form of a vault or calotte (T. II: 7), complemented by side openings that allude to doors and windows. On the other hand, there are also types with a simplified cubus, more typical of the Skopje (T. II: 6, 9, 10; T. III: 5; T. VI: 7) and Polog valleys (T. II: 5; such an example from Pelagonia – T. III: 6, 7). Preserved in their case, of the indicated features, are only the openings on the four sides, and sometimes not even those (T. II: 6, 9). We interpreted them as versions in which the house entered a process of stylization, perhaps due to the shift of focus towards the anthropomorphic cylinder which, in some of these types, will develop into a fairly realistically shaped upper part of the female body (T. II: 10; T. VI: 9).

The cubus from Kosturino and the conclusions of this study have offered us another iconographic and symbolic paradigm for these objects,

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<sup>46</sup> Burkert 1985, 161 (sources: Plut. *De fac.* 934b; Demetrios of Phaleron Fr. 135).

in which one could seek the second reason for the transformation of their house-like lower part into an ordinary cubus that bears little or no resemblance to a house (T. I). It is the representation of the anthropomorphized earth where the ceramic cubus, with its material and shape, but also the snake as a zoomorphic classifier of the earth and the earth's waters, encodes the notions regarding it as a surface, i.e. a plate that extends on all four sides, while the prosopomorphic elements depicted on its front side symbolize her personality, i.e. the Earth as a living entity. This observation gives us the reason to divide the indicated ceramic models into two sub-groups, in one of which (more typical of Pelagonia) the cubic part is conceptualized according to the paradigm of the house (T. II: 7, 8), while in the second (more typical of the Skopje and Polog valleys) – it was formed under the influence of the paradigm about the quadrangular or cubic earth (T. II: 6, 9, 10; T. III: 5–7; T. VI: 7, 8).

The alternation of these two paradigms also actualizes the question of the reasons that led to their equation and fusion. We have previously indicated that this may be due to the recognition in the house of the following components of the earth: both occupy the position below; they are equivalent on a material level (Neolithic houses were mainly built of mud, i.e. earth, whereby their floor was also earthen, meaning that it was actually a part of the earth's mass); they denote and define the human living space, regardless of the fact that one is much bigger than the other. However, the reverse influence is also possible – that the house served as a paradigm in the understanding and conceptualization of the earth as a separate cosmic element, i.e. its differentiation (in a spatial, morphological and material sense) in relation to the rest of the cosmic elements.<sup>47</sup>

In our previous observations as regards the reasons why the earth in ancient cultures was usually represented as having four sides, we took as the main factor the fourfold constitution of the human body and its system of orientation: forward is the side towards which our senses are turned, which allows insight into what lies before us. The back is the side we have no insight into, due to the absence of senses in that part of the body. On the left and right sides are our arms and legs and some other organs. In that context, the foursidedness of the earth can be understood as a sub-conscious tendency of man to project the foursidedness of his own body onto the surrounding space.<sup>48</sup> But the relations between the indicated house models and the object from Kosturino also favor another possibility – not only of the fourfoldness of the body, but also that such a structure of the house could have served as a paradigm in the conception and determination of the fourfoldness of the earth's plate, and, through it, also in the foursidedness of the entire universe. As one of the indicators of these rela-

<sup>47</sup> Чаусидис, 2017b, 69–77; Чаусидис 2005, 3–15, A1.

<sup>48</sup> Чаусидис 2005, 5, 6, 17–20, A3; Чаусидис 2017a, 447–457.



tions, one can take the ornamentation of some Neolithic and later models of houses with the motif of a chessboard, whose eminently earthly character we pointed out previously (examples from Thessaly – T. V: 13, 14).

Similar common components can also be recognized in the relations between the earth and the table – another artifact whose form and functions contain the essential features of the earth (T. IV: 6–8, compare with 1). Namely, it is an object that serves as a horizontal surface on which other things stand, i.e. an object which, like the earth, is the base that bears them onto itself. This object is additionally connected to the earth by some other essential features – staticity, stability, and horizontality, provided to it by the usual four legs that, through their direct contact with the earth, transfer to it the essential properties, functions and meanings of this cosmic element. This time, too, the indicated relation is supported by the “chessboard” ornament by which the surface of the miniature table models was often covered.<sup>49</sup>

### **Purpose of the cubus from Kosturino**

The analyses and observations presented in this study also offer opportunities for putting forward certain assumptions regarding the purpose of the cubus from Kosturino, i.e. in what way, within its obvious symbolic function, it was used. In doing so, as a starting point we can once again take the anthropomorphic house models, the use of which, according to existing assumptions, could have consisted of two basic procedures. On the one hand, it would be the placement within them, through the various openings, of certain elements as symbols of abundance, fertility and general well-being (for example, grain, milk, oil, other foodstuffs, blood, etc.) (T. II: 5–10; T. III: 2–7; T. VI: 7, 8). On the other hand, it would be the lighting within them of a fire or the censing of certain substances in order, through the presence of fire, heat, light, smoke and smells, to stimulate the life and duration of the house, i.e. the family that existed within it, or due to their protection from negative external factors.<sup>50</sup> However, these assumptions cannot apply to our object because there are no openings found on its walls through which the indicated elements could have been placed within the cubus, whereby one would also have visual insight into their presence inside of it (T. I). Hence, it seems more likely to us that it could have been used similarly to the cultic miniature tables which are supposed to have served for the performance of the same procedures, but on their upper surface, which in some cases was modeled in the form of a shallow recipient, and in others – as completely flat, analogous to the cubus from Kosturino (T. IV: 6–8 compare with 1).<sup>51</sup> If we accept the suggested

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<sup>49</sup> Николов 2006, 60–65; Николов 2007, 107, 111.

<sup>50</sup> Чаусидис, Наумов 2019, 18, 19, Т. XII: 1–3.

<sup>51</sup> Николов 2007; on the Macedonian examples: Наумов 2011.

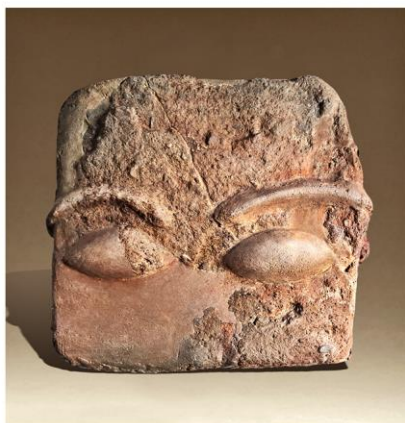
interpretations that it represented the deified Earth, then these actions would be aimed at magically stimulating fertility, birth-giving, abundance and other functions and categories related to this cosmic element, key to the existence of Neolithic communities.

In contemporary historical sciences, epochs are often treated as “separate worlds”, disconnected from each other by insurmountable boundaries. Therefore, it is considered undesirable to directly compare them in any given way – and even more so – to mutually connect some of their specific phenomena. The examples discussed in this article show that, in some cases, these concepts are too restrictive, as the actual material shows that certain traditions within ancient and contemporary archaic cultures are extremely tenacious and resilient. They managed to survive for millennia, without significant changes, and not only on some general level, but also in the most subtle levels related to the iconography and the way (conditionally speaking, the “style”) of their performance. These unexpected and apparently undiscovered “transmillennial relations” can be rationally justified in only one way – through the continuous duration and maintenance of these phenomena in the medium of organic materials that are, most of the time, completely invisible to archaeology.

T.I



1



3



2



0 10 20 30 cm

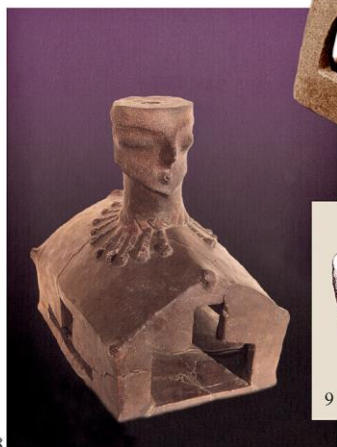
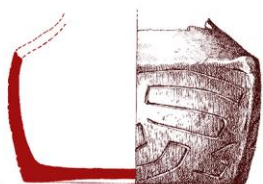


4

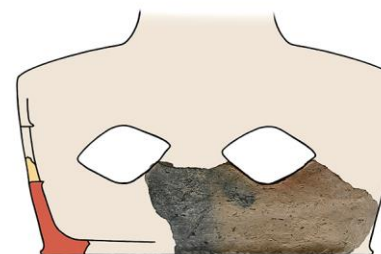
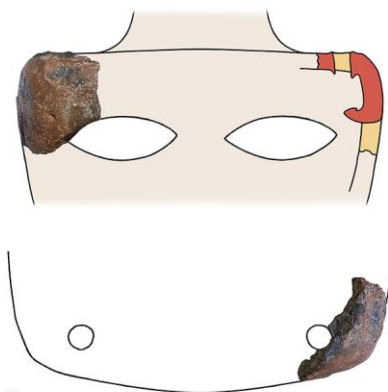
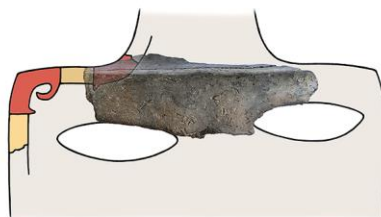


5

T.II

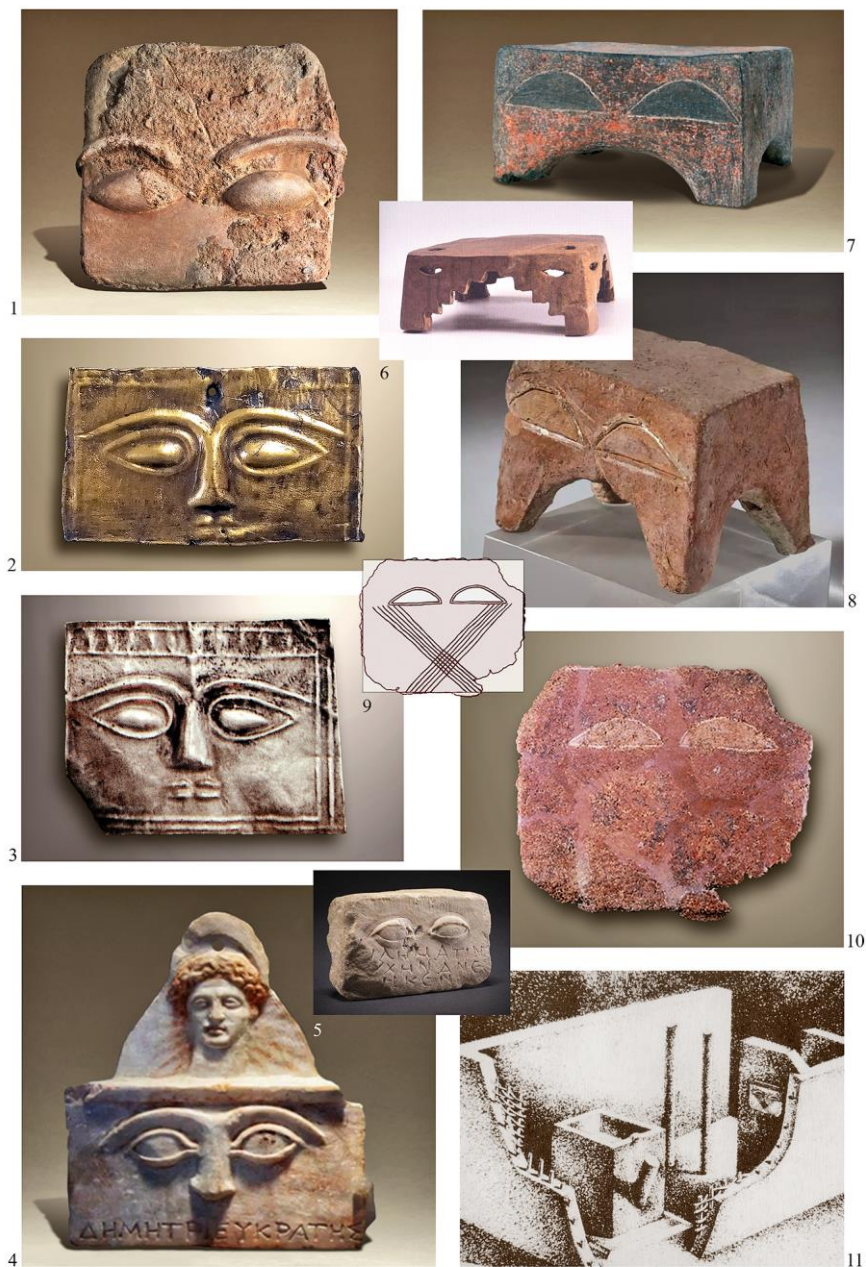


T.III

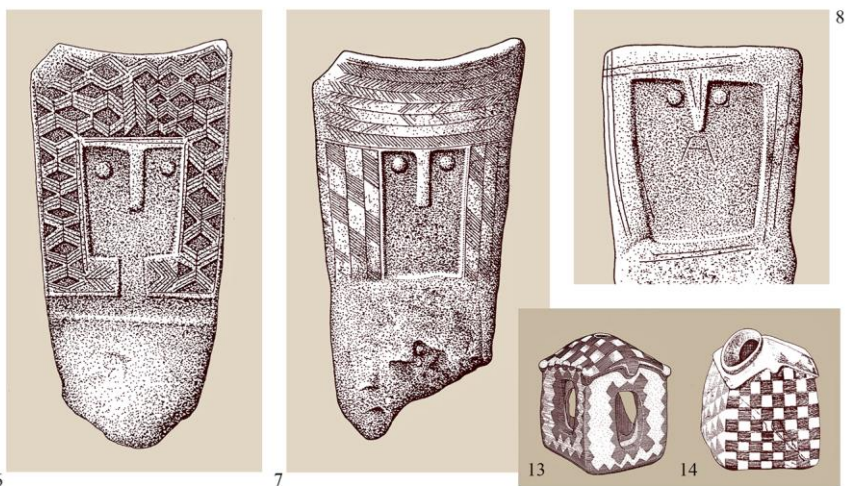
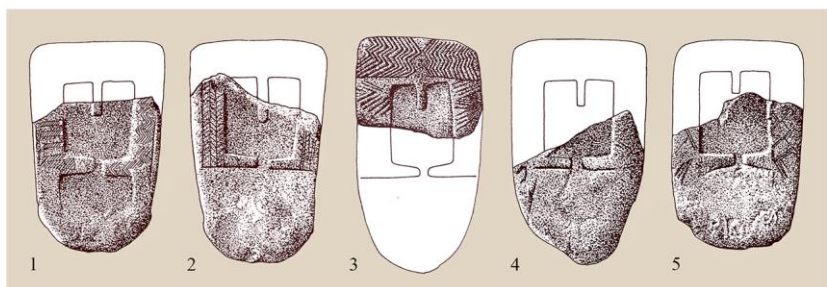




T.IV



T.V





T.VI



1



4



2



5



3



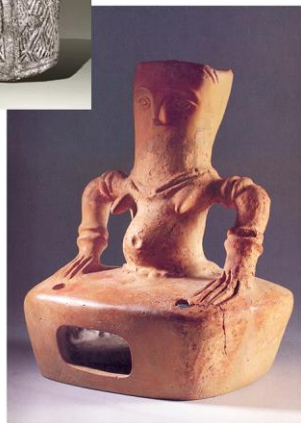
9



6



7



8



# T.VII



T.VIII



1



2



3



4



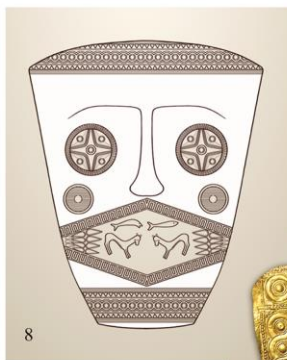
5



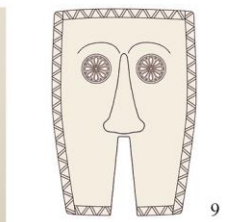
6



7



8



9



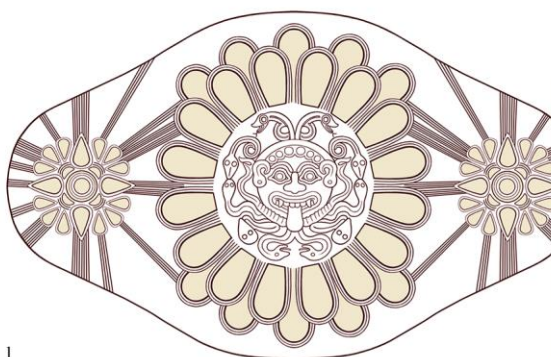
11



10



# T.IX



1



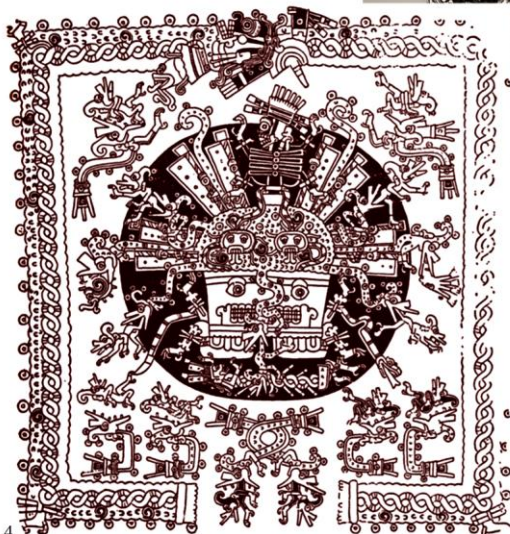
2



3



5



4



6

## CATALOGUE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### T. I

Ceramic object, Neolithic, “Orniche” – Kosturino, Strumica, Macedonia, collection of prehistoric objects in the NI “Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments and Museum” – Strumica, inventory number ZMS-A-0005740 (photo: Z. Rujak). 1. Situation in situ during the discovery; 2. Appearance of the object from all sides; 3. Front side; 4. Left side; 5. Back side.

### T. II

Ceramic objects, Neolithic, Macedonia. 1. Kosturino, Strumica (photo: Z. Rujak); 2. Damjan, Radovish (Čausidis 2019, 108 – Fig. 2: d); 3, 4. Izvor, Veles (Јовчевска 2008, 112 – T. IV, T. V); 5. Stenche, Tetovo (Zdravkovski 2008, 220, 221); 6, 9. Zelenikovo, Skopje (Garašanin 1979, T. XXXVII: 7, 8); 7. Dobromiri, Bitola (photo of the cubus: Здравковски 2018, 79 – Сл. 56: б; photomontage: N. Čausidis); 8. Porodin, Bitola (Колиштркоска-Настева 2005, 59 – кат. бр. 43); 9. Madzari, Skopje (Čausidis 1995, 15).

### T. III

Ceramic objects, Neolithic, Macedonia. 1. Kosturino, Strumica (photo: Z. Rujak); 2, 3, 4. Govrlevo, Skopje (Čausidis, Наумов 2019, 88 – Fig. 31); 5. Madzari, Skopje (Колиштркоска-Настева 2005, 60 – кат. бр. 44); 6, 7. Suvodol, Bitola (Здравковски 2018, 78 – Сл. 55: в; Колиштркоска-Настева 2005, 61 – кат. бр. 45).

### T. IV

1. Ceramic object, Neolithic, Kosturino, Strumica (photo: Z. Rujak); 2, 3. Metal foils, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Zone, ancient Mesembria, Greece (Та џра 2024); 4. Marble tablet, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Eleusis, Greece (Oberhelman 2014, 53 – Fig. 4); 5. Marble tablet, Antiquity, Athenian Acropolis (Oberhelman 2014, 52 – Fig. 3). Ceramic cult miniature tables. 6. Neolithic, Slavej, Prilep, Macedonia (Zdravkovski 2008, 238, 239); 7. Chalcolithic, Karanovo, Bulgaria (Николов 2006, 129); 8. Chalcolithic, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria (Богатствата 2024); 9, 10, 11. Panel of wall plaster, Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic, Dolnoslav, Plovdiv, Bulgaria (photo: Николов 2006, 137; drawing and reconstruction: Радунчева 2003, 250, 255).

### T. V

Stone stelae, Bronze Age. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Oregon Sénas, France (Müller-Karpe 1974, Taf. 603: 1, 4, 5, 6, 7); 6, 7. Puyvert, France (Müller-Karpe 1974, Taf. 603: 22, 23); 8. Asquerosa, Granada, Spain (Müller-Karpe 1974, Taf. 570: 14). Stone stelae, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. 9. Petra, Jordan (*The Nabataean* 2024); 10. South Arabian Peninsula (*Stele carved* 2024); 11. Wadi Bayhan, Yemen (*Face stela* 2024, Acc. Nr. S2013.2.165); 12. Timna, Yemen (*Stele Timna* 2024, Acc. Nr. LTS1992.6.41). Ceramic models of buildings, Neolithic, Thessaly, Greece. 13. Crannon; 14. Mirrini (Mantu Lazarovici 2004, 58 – Fig. 51, 59 – Fig. 52).

## T. VI

1. Ceramic object, Neolithic, Kosturino, Strumica (photo: Z. Rujak); Artificially modified rock cliffs, Aegean part of Thrace (Greece). 2. Potamos; 3. Provatonas; 4. Kirki (Kiotsekoglou 2016, 8, 9 – Fig. 2, 5, 6). 6. Marble tablet, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Eleusis, Greece (Oberhelman 2014, 53 – Fig. 4). Ceramic objects, Neolithic, Macedonia. 7. Chair, Skopje (Чаусидис 2017b, 86 – Fig. 15: 6); 8. Govrlevo, Skopje (Čausidis 1995, 33); 9. Ceramic object, Late Neolithic, Hodmezovasarhely-Kekenjdomb, Hungary (Титов 1980, 363 – Рис. 219).

## T. VII

1. Ceramic object, Neolithic, Kosturino, Strumica (photo: Z. Rujak); 2. Fragment of a ceramic vessel, Neolithic, Suvodol, Bitola, Macedonia (Микулчиќ 1984, 21); 3. Stone with engravings, Middle Ages, Ockelbo, Sweden (*Rune stone* 2024); 4. Ritual bread, ethnography, Ochusha, Samokov, Bulgaria (Маринов 1994, Обр. 106); 5. Stone relief, Sumerian Civilization (Parrot 1960, 237: 290); 6. Composition carved on the bottom of a plate, Phoenician product, Praeneste, Italy (Parcinger 1991, 16 – Abb. 7); 7. Drawing on leather, ethnography, Udege people, Siberia (Иванов 1954, 383 – Рис. 232a); 8, 9. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic signs for water (mav); 10. Sumerian-Elamite hieroglyphic sign for water; 11. Stone seal motif, Early Dynastic period of Mesopotamia (Антонова 1983, 145 – Т. III: 2); 12. Bronze belt applique, 3<sup>rd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Kokoreva, Siberia (Дэвлет 1976, 223 – Рис. 4: 2); 13. Polychrome painting on papyrus ("Book of the Dead"): Seth kills Apophis, Ancient Egyptian culture, 11<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century BC (Апер 2024).

## T. VIII

Stone stelae, Bronze Age. 1, 2. Puyvert, France (photo: *Stèle de Lauris* 2024; drawings: Müller-Karpe 1974, Taf. 603: 22, 23); 3. Oregon Sénas, France (Müller-Karpe 1974, Taf. 603: 21). Golden masks, 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Macedonia. 4, 5. Trebenishte, Ohrid (Ardjanliev et al. 2018, 226 – Cat. No. 1, 295 – Cat. No. 139 ); 6. Beranci, Bitola (reconstruction: Чаусидис 2025, B2: 6); 8, 9. Archontiko, Pella, Greece (drawings: Чаусидис 2025, A1; B5: 8); 10, 11. Golden mask and detail of the encircling bordure, Gorna Porta – Ohrid (Ardjanliev et al. 2018, 363 – Cat. No. 332). 7. Mask and other gold appliques from Grave 458, Archontiko, Pella, Greece (*Gold grave* 2024).

## T. IX

1, 2. Gold mouth applique (epistomion), 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Archontiko, Pella, Greece (drawing: Чаусидис 2025, B47; photo of the detail: Sommer Travels 2024); 3. An idealized model of the iconographic paradigm of the golden funeral masks: "the face of the Earth Goddess surrounded by the earthly waters" (photomontage: Чаусидис 2025, B31); 4. Pictorial representation from the "Aztec Codices", Middle Ages (Neumann 1963, 193 – Fig. 46); 5. Bronze lamp, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Cortona, Italy (Bouke van der Meer 2014, 302 – Fig. 1); 6. Mosaic with the head of the Gorgon Medusa, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Sikyon, Greece (Krauskopf 1988, 296 – No. 98).

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