

## A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE ORNAMENTAL MOTIFS ON THE MATT-PAINTED ZHIVOJNO VESSEL<sup>1</sup>



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*Abstract.* – This paper focuses on a semiotic interpretation of the well-known matt-painted vessel found in 1956 at the Bel Kamen site near the village of Zhivojno, in the region of Bitola. It delves into the spiritual culture of the communities that inhabited the Central Balkans during the Early Iron Age. The parallels and conclusions drawn herewith reflect a clear and coherent religious and value system which connects a wider area: the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, i.e. the Near East. The analysis of the Zhivojno vessel ornamentation, logically, indicates the possible existence of a cult of a female deity resembling the *Great Mother Goddess, life-giver, who manages life cycles and warrants cosmic order*, someone with a status matching that of the Phrygian Cybele (Matar).

*Key words.* – matt-painted vessel, Zhivojno, Triple Goddess, Sun, Cybele (Matar).

### Circumstances of the Zhivojno Vessel discovery

In 1956, three partially damaged and looted cist graves were found on the micro-location referred to as *Grobot* (The Grave) at the Bel Kamen site (also known by the name of Beli Kamenja) in the village of Zhivojno, near Bitola, in Macedonia. They were made of stone slabs with a north-east-southwest orientation. Referred to as Grave I, II and III, only the first of these cists was scientifically excavated. At the site, there were multiple

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an adaptation of Chapter 10 of the author's master's thesis "The Ornamentation of Matt-Painted Pottery from the Iron Age from Macedonia with an Emphasis on the Finds from Ohrid" (orig. *Орнаментиката на мат сликаната керамика од железното време од Македонија со акцент на наодите од Охрид*), defended at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje on 14 July, 2023.

white stone piles, hence its name (Bel Kamen translates as White Stone).<sup>2</sup> It is believed that they belonged to the burial mound that could have covered the graves.<sup>3</sup>

According to the local population, several crumbled bones were found in Grave II, as well as a vessel and a little bronze bracelet. The vessel was matt-painted, with a characteristic shape, which the archaeologist in charge referred to as a Villanova urn type (Fig. 1.).<sup>4</sup> It had a high conical neck, an outward rim, a flattened bulging body, two horizontal and diametrical U-shaped handles, and an indistinguishable base. The pot was 29.5 cm tall, with a 13 cm rim diameter, and a 10 cm bottom diameter.



Fig. 1

This vessel type developed from a pottery shape which was most frequently found in the so-called Brnjica Culture (Kosovo and southern Serbia) during the Bronze Age. It appeared in the middle course of the Vardar, in Macedonia, in the transitional period from the Bronze to the Iron Age. It was used for keeping liquids in settlements, but more frequently in necropolises as a cremation urn.<sup>5</sup> It got its matt-painted version during the Early Iron Age.<sup>6</sup> In literature, this type of pot is referred to with various names. However, due to its dual purpose, as a vessel for keeping liquids on one hand, and as an urn, on the other hand, “amphora-urn” seems the most appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Јосифовска 1963, 287–289.

<sup>3</sup> Јосифовска 1963, 308.

<sup>4</sup> Јосифовска 1963, 300–301.

<sup>5</sup> Митревски 1997, 47–48; Папазовска Санев 2015, 102.

<sup>6</sup> For examples see Кипро 2023, 406–407.

## Semiotic Analysis of the Zhivojno Vessel

This interpretation of the Zhivojno vessel, as well as of the matt-painted pottery found in Macedonia in general, is based on the assumption that painted ornaments should be perceived as a continuous two-dimensional image which can not only be seen in profile, as it was commonly done, but also from a bird's-eye ("god's") view. Quite frequently, this solid unity is additionally emphasised through decorations on handles.<sup>7</sup>

Given that a three-dimensional medium was painted and not a flat surface, one might wonder whether the "artists" had a previously-developed and clearly-defined concept of what they would paint, in other words, whether they had a ready mental image of its final appearance or whether it perhaps resulted from a moment of instantaneous inspiration and improvisation. The latter seems improbable; on the contrary, all the elements indicate that they were deliberately chosen and combined, thus depicting and reflecting a clear and coherent religious and value system.<sup>8</sup>

This analysis of the Zhivojno vessel is based on the drawings of its ornamentation, both its unfolded front view (Fig. 2) and its stretched plan view (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup>

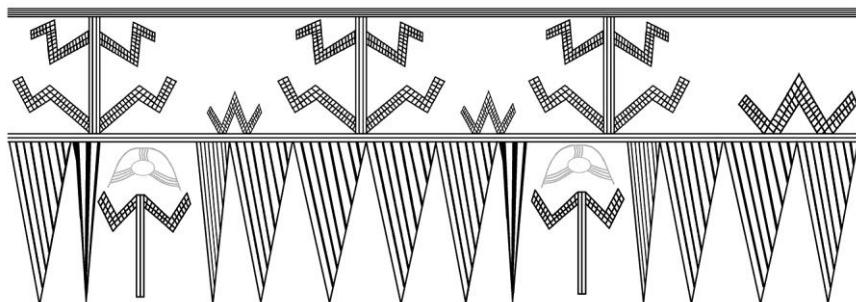


Fig. 2

The painted motifs shape two iconographic zones, the first on the neck of the vessel and the second on both its shoulders and belly (Fig. 2).

The first zone contains three geometrically stylised anthropomorphic figures, identically portrayed, one at the front of the vessel and two on its sides, approximately above the handles. These depictions resemble

<sup>7</sup> For examples see Кипро 2023, 326–327.

<sup>8</sup> For multiple examples see Кипро 2023, especially 287–327.

<sup>9</sup> This interpretation of the Zhivojno vessel is not unique; however, to the author's knowledge this is the first paper with an exclusive focus on its research. Certainly, this is the first attempt to analyse the ornamental motifs of the Zhivojno vessel as a composition rather than just as individual elements. For some other examples see: Часидис 2005, Том 1, 97 and Том 2, Б2, 17 и 18; Часидис 2017, 796, Е9: 1–3; Кукоч 2018, 241, 272 Figure 23b.

a fully stylised figure of a human with spread legs and bent knees, in addition to the spread arms and elevated forearms. The torso is shown as a vertical cord composed of four parallel lines, unlike the limbs, which have cross-hatched squares. The heads of the figures are not shown; however, the circular rim of the vessel might have indicated a common head for all three figures (Fig. 3).

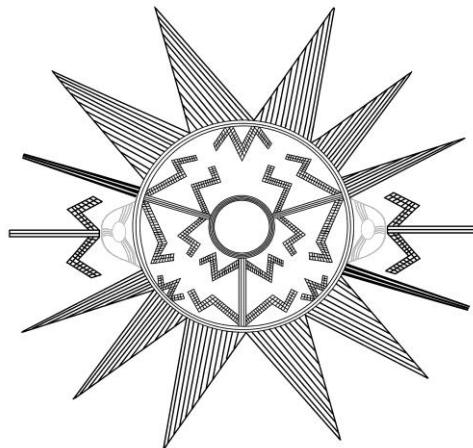


Fig. 3

Their peculiar pose could quite probably imply either labour or sexual intercourse. In addition, it reveals their female sex, thus pointing to their symbolic, i.e. mythic and religious character as they depict three separate female deities or a single triple goddess who gives birth (Fig. 3).

Between these three figures, three geometrical motifs are shown as a zigzag line that resembles the letter W. They are cross-hatched identically as the limbs, and the one at the rear of the vessel is bigger than the other two.

The plan view shows that all upper zone elements are actually drawn in a circular area separated from the second zone with a triple border line (Fig. 3).

Below the border line is a row of obliquely cross-hatched pendant triangles (their apices down) with various widths. At the handles, they are supplemented with a vertical ribbon of three full lines, which are mildly tapered at the bottom. In the same zone, two motifs also resembling a stylised human figure are shown below the two handles (Fig. 2). They are rendered in a similar fashion as the previous, however, unlike the former, these do not have legs. In this case, the semi-circular handles might have implied their missing heads, but that is highly unlikely, as it would be true

only if the vessel is seen from below (Fig. 2 and 3). Unlike the previous, these figures are standing in the *orans* posture.

The potential symbolic and mythical-religious significance of the aforementioned ornaments is discussed below, as based on an elementary identification of the pictorial elements and their analogies.

The stylised birth-giver shown on the neck of the vessel resembles a Phrygian ligature, which is believed to have represented the Phrygian Mother Goddess (Fig. 4, compare a to b).<sup>10</sup>

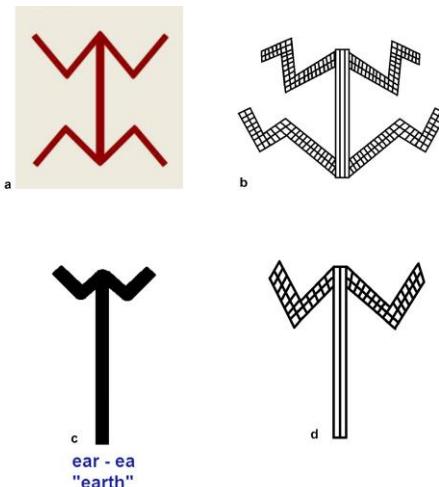


Fig. 4

Many of the goddesses who were mothers and life-givers (including the Phrygian Matar) were shown with their arms in the *orans* posture, which corresponds both with the aforementioned ligature and the two types of figures on the Zhivojno vessel (Fig. 5, compare i to d; j to a, c, d and h, respectively).

Interestingly, a pictorial motif identical to the one below the handles of the Zhivojno vessel could also be seen in the much later and apparently culturally unrelated Anglo-Saxon area: the *futhorc* (runic characters), more specifically, the symbol denoting *earth*, i.e. *ear*<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 4, compare c to d).

In this context, it is very important that not only the shape of this rune, but also its significance match the entire iconography and ornamentation of the Zhivojno vessel, as well as the symbolism of fertility and birth-giving it implies. Based on these analogies, it seems that the shown ornaments were actually geometrised images of certain mythic characters, i.e. the Mother Goddess identified with the earth, the source of life, but also

<sup>10</sup> Чausидис 2017, 797. On the ligature: Баюн, Орел 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Anglo-Saxon runes.

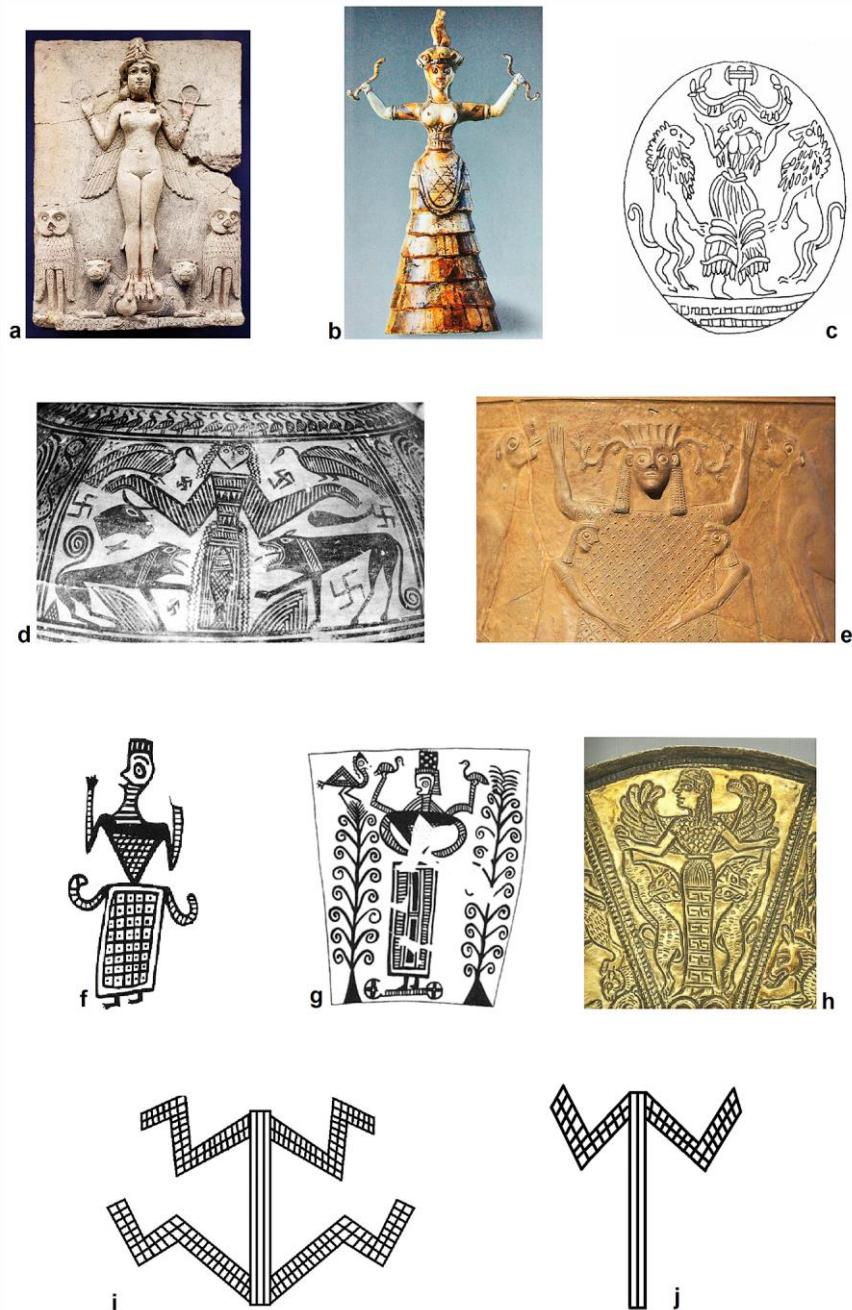


Fig. 5

in terms of rebirth, i.e. the resurrection of the deceased, since the vessel on which they were painted was found in a burial context.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to other more realistic depictions of women in the same pose (some even with an emerging baby shown) from various periods and places, the relation of the stylised depictions of the woman in labour on the neck of the Zhivojno vessel and the Phrygian ligature denoting Matar, the Mother Goddess, is even more credible.<sup>13</sup> Dated in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the rather realistic depiction of Gorgon Medusa on a chariot plaque bronze relief found in Perugia, Umbria (central Italy) (Fig. 6a)<sup>14</sup> is the most relevant to it, according to the pose, frequency, and the funerary context of the discovery of the vessel.

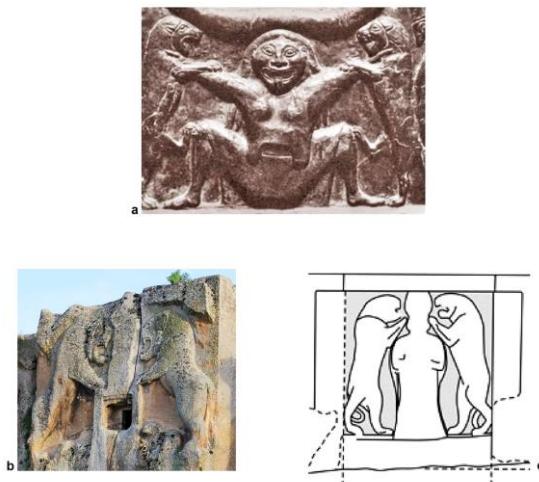


Fig. 6

In terms of the pose, the relation is obvious. Also important is the second component, i.e. the trinity, bearing in mind that Medusa is just one of the three fearsome Gorgon sisters, perhaps counterparts of the three Moirai, goddesses who spin the threads of human destiny. Hecate, whose chthonic character is certain, is also triple. The funerary aspect of all these examples is also obvious, especially in the context of Medusa, who is the eminent symbol of death, however, not less impressive in the context of the Moirai, especially Atropos (the Inevitable), as a metaphor of the inevitable death.

The goddess of Perugia is shown in labour, an identical pose to the Phrygian ligature (compare Fig. 6a to Fig. 4, a and b), additionally sugges-

<sup>12</sup> On the inclusion of the life-giving goddess in the funerary destiny of the deceased, see Чausidic 2017, 797.

<sup>13</sup> Чausidic 2017, 795 – E8.

<sup>14</sup> Чausidic 2017, 797.

ted by a pair of lions that accompany her (Fig. 6a), which corresponds to the iconography of the stone monuments in Phrygia dedicated to Matar, i.e. Cybele (compare Fig. 6a to b and c). From quite early, the ancient Greeks were acquainted with the cult of the Phrygian goddess Cybele and her depiction with lions,<sup>15</sup> quite probable in both Magna Graecia and Etruria.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the depiction on the Peru-gia chariot could have been inspired by a Phrygian prototype.

As for the analysis of the other ornaments of this vessel, as previously mentioned, the three elements resembling the letter W are shown in the first zone, between the three figures in labour (Fig. 2 and 3). This motif can be elaborated with several hypotheses.

Considering that these ornaments are drawn in an identical fashion as the other anthropomorphic depictions in the same zone, they, too, could be interpreted as ligatures or ideograms. Their shape is reminiscent of a grapheme found in ancient Phrygian inscriptions, denoting the phone-me *s*, which corresponds to *sigma* in the early Hellenic script.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that similar ornaments have been identified on matt-painted pottery fragments found at Plaoshnik, in Ohrid, Macedonia, which were categorised as logograms-ideograms<sup>17</sup> (compare Fig. 7a to b, c, d and e).

In addition, in favour of this last hypothesis is the dating of the Zhivojno vessel at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, or the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, approximately the same as the earliest Phrygian and ancient Greek written records.

Though less convincing, these ornaments could be related to the animals that flank the goddess in labour in a heraldic pose (compare Fig. 7a to Fig. 6 and Fig. 5d).

Having in mind that the zigzag motif is shown on the upper zone of the vessel, perhaps its significance should be sought for in the *divine waters*, which are absolutely compatible to the female mythic characters associated with fertility. Though less probable still, their relation to thunder, or more specifically, lightning, cannot be fully ruled out, as the zigzag shape is common for both,<sup>18</sup> as well as the position of the entire zone in the upper segment of the vessel, which might have represented the sky.

Seen from this point of view, could the three zigzag motifs be identified with the three key phases of sun motion? If analysed carefully, two of them are equal in size, while the third is slightly bigger and placed at the rear of the vessel, opposite from the front, where the “main” woman that gives birth is shown (Fig. 3). Bearing in mind the different dimensions of

<sup>15</sup> Срејовић, Џермановић-Кузмановић 1992, 203.

<sup>16</sup> For additional information see Кипро 2023, 352, Fig. 80 and 353, Fig. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Кипро 2023, 301–302.

<sup>18</sup> Чаусидис 2017, 771–772.

these motifs, it can be assumed that they represented the cyclic growth and decline of processes in nature, including birth (sunrise), zenith (noon, when the sun is the strongest and largest), and decline (sunset).

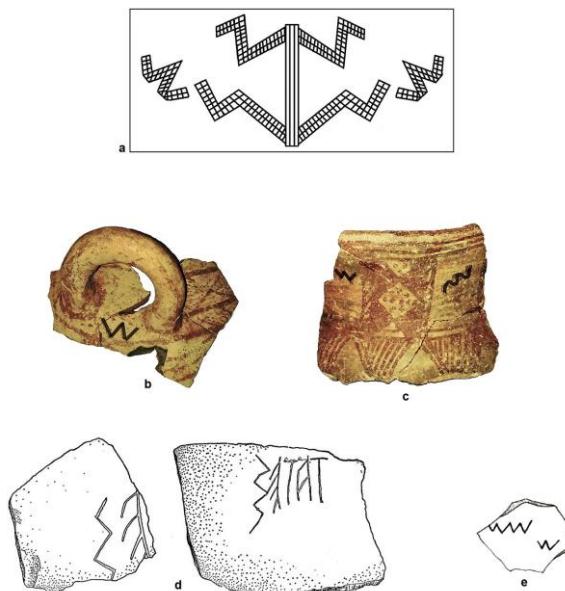


Fig. 7

At first glance, this hypothesis is not convincing at all, due to the discrepancy of the W-motif and the appearance of the sun and its symbols. However, it becomes more probable if we take into account the relation of this motif and the graphemes denoting *s*.<sup>19</sup> In addition, there is the well-known fact that in many Indo-European languages the words that stand for sun begin with *s*, mostly with *sol-* or *soln-*, which originate from the common Proto-Indo-European root *sāwel-* or *\*s(u)wen-*.<sup>20</sup>

If interpreted as sun rays, the pendant triangles could also be related to this hypothesis. From a vessel's plan view, pendant triangles shown in a row could also represent sun rays (Fig. 3). This interpretation is directly related to the hypothesis that the hierogamy of the Heaven or Sun

<sup>19</sup> The possibility of identifying this ornament with the graphemes denoting *s*, as well as the idea that those who made the matt-painted vessels in Macedonia were familiar with the concept of the phonetic script are based on the author's research of matt-painted pottery in Macedonia, with an emphasis on the finds from Ohrid. Some of the ornaments identified on matt-painted fragments found at Plaoshnik in Ohrid could be written signs, graphemes used for phonetic transcription. There are direct analogies with their synchronous Phrygian phonetic notation and partly with the earliest Greek alphabet. For additional information see Кипро 2023, 351–358.

<sup>20</sup> *\*sāwel-*, *\*s(u)wen-*.

and the Earth was coded through the ornaments on the matt-painted pottery in Macedonia, whereas the triangles that descend on the belly of the vessel represent the fertile rays of the God-Sun, which penetrate the womb of Mother-Earth.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, the pendant triangles shown on matt-painted vessels are almost exclusively isosceles. It is, therefore, not insignificant to note that the isosceles triangle is symbolically identified with fire.<sup>22</sup>

Used as early as the Palaeolithic, the triangle is one of the most universal symbols. It is associated with women (specifically, the pubic area), the *Great Mother Goddess*, as well as with water, i.e. the lower spheres of the universe.<sup>23</sup> This especially refers to the triangle with the apex pointing down, i.e. the pendant triangle, which has been confirmed as a typical feminine symbol with multiple examples worldwide. On the other hand, the triangle with the apex pointing up is usually perceived as symbolising both the male sex and fire.<sup>24</sup> The latter has its exceptions, depending on the context in which this geometric symbol is used.

At a first glance, the suggested interpretation of pendant triangles as sun rays is contradictory and fully opposes the aforementioned significance. Based on the author's interpretation, triangles bear two completely different significances at the same time: on one hand, they symbolise earth in all its feminine aspects, while on the other hand, they symbolise sun rays in their eminently masculine context.

These significances are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, and fully fit within the suggested interpretation of ornamentation.<sup>25</sup> In the context of this dichotomy, there is an example chronologically and culturally unrelated to matt-painted pottery. In the Mayan culture of Mesoamerica, the triangle was a sign (glyph) which denoted a sunbeam, but it was also associated with maize.<sup>26</sup> It is well-known that maize was the most important crop in the pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas, and it was believed that the first human was made of corn.<sup>27</sup> Relating the triangle to both the sun and maize, it actually becomes a dual symbol of fertility.<sup>28</sup>

To identify triangles with sun rays would be in favour of the hypothesis that the three women in labour in the upper zone (or perhaps just one of them?) evoke the mythic *sun birth*, even more so considering that this vessel was made in a metal era, when, besides the earthly aspects of

<sup>21</sup> For additional information see Кипро 2023, 506–511.

<sup>22</sup> Шевалие, Гербран 2005, 1034.

<sup>23</sup> Часидис 2005, Том I, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Шевалие, Гербран 2005, 1033, Biderman 2004, 407.

<sup>25</sup> For additional information see Кипро 2023, 515–516.

<sup>26</sup> Шевалие, Гербран 2005, 1033.

<sup>27</sup> Шевалие, Гербран 2005, 839.

<sup>28</sup> Шевалие, Гербран 2005, 1033.

the universe, the sun was the dominant symbol and took the central place in the value system of people.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, the three phases of the sun, as well as the three women in labour, could represent the three life stages, i.e. the eternal life cycle of birth and death, which is probable, considering that this vessel was found in a burial context. Bearing in mind all the aforementioned hypotheses, the women in labour on the Zhivojno vessel could quite probably be interpreted as three hypostases of the *Great Mother Goddess*, however, with a far greater role than a mere mundane patron of fertility.<sup>30</sup> Both the place and the context of her depiction advance her to those deities who manage cosmic cycles. In the context of the Phrygian Matar (Cybele), she could be compared to later traditions in which, accompanied by Attis, she was perceived as a guardian of the cosmic order.<sup>31</sup>

#### CATALOGUE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Amphora-urn from Grave II, Bel Kamen site, Zhivojno, Macedonia. (After Часидис 2017, 798, E9: 2–3).

Fig. 2. Unfolded front view of the Zhivojno vessel ornamentation. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)

Fig. 3. Stretched plan view of the Zhivojno vessel ornamentation. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)

Fig. 4.

a. Phrygian ligature signifying the *Mother Goddess*. (After Часидис 2017, 798, E9: 14).

b. Motif painted on the neck of the Zhivojno vessel. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)

c. Anglo-Saxon rune denoting *earth*. (Source: <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Runes>> 29. 12. 2022)

d. Motif painted below the handles of the Zhivojno vessel. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)

Fig. 5.

a. Queen of the Night, terracotta most probably depicting Ishtar, 19<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century BC, British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

(Source: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burney\\_Relief](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burney_Relief)> 24. 01. 2023).

b. Snake Goddess from the Temple Repositories, Knossos, Archaeological Museum, Heraklion, Crete, Greece. (After Vasilakis 84–85).

c. Mycenaean seal, Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (After Vermaseren 1977, 12, Fig. 3).

d. Detail of a Late Geometric Boeotian amphora, Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (After Kahane 1973, Taf. 27–3).

e. Relief on a neck of a pithos, Thebes, beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potnia\\_Theron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potnia_Theron)> 19. 12. 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Часидис 1994, 216.

<sup>30</sup> For more examples in favour of the connections between the ornamental motifs of the matt-painted pottery from Macedonia and the concept of the Great Mother Goddess see: Кипро 2023, 511–514, 527–535 and 545–555.

<sup>31</sup> Alvar 2008, 72.

- f. Motif from a Proto-Geometric pithos from Knossos, Crete, Greece. (After Boardman 1998, 78–142.2).
- g. Motif from a Proto-Geometric B pithos from Knossos, Crete, Greece. (After Coldstream 2003, 367, Fig. 119).
- h. Bronze mirror, reverse detail, second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, Northwest Caucasus, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. (After Summer 2018, 32, Fig. 34).
- i. Motif painted on the neck of the Zhivojno vessel. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)
- j. Motif painted below the handles of the Zhivojno vessel. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)

Fig. 6.

- a. Chariot plaque bronze relief, 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Perugia, Umbria, central Italy. (After Чаусидис 2017, 795–E8, 11).
- b. Rock monument, 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Aslankaya, İhsaniye, Afyonkarahisar, Turkey. (Source: <<https://phrygianmonuments.com/aslankaya/>> 18. 1. 2023)
- c. Rock monument (detail), 6th century BC, Aslankaya, İhsaniye, Afyonkarahisar, Turkey. (Source: <<https://phrygianmonuments.com/aslankaya/>> 18. 1. 2023)

Fig. 7.

- a. Detail of the Zhivojno vessel. (Drawing by Atanas Kipro)
- b. Vessel fragment, Plaoshnik, Ohrid, Macedonia. (Photo by Atanas Kipro)
- c. Vessel fragment, Plaoshnik, Ohrid, Macedonia. (Photo by Atanas Kipro)
- d. Ceramic vessel fragments with graffiti, Gordion, Turkey. (After Pamuk 2021, 501, Levha 205: a, b).
- e. Ceramic vessel fragments with graffiti, Seyitömer Höyük, Kütahya, Turkey. (After Pamuk 2021, 527, Levha 231: Lev. 104).

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\*sāwel-, \*s(u)wen-.  
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