

Gestures from artefacts within domestic rituals in the Neolithic: different attitudes to certain types of cult objects (Eszter Bánffy)

In the last few years I have been working with the problem of Neolithisation and the early periods of agricultural societies, the spread of popular groups and cultural impacts, the spread of technical inventions and ideas through contacts and long-term trade etc, in a broader sense: the Neolithic way of thinking. These all belonged to researching large-scale events. It has been a necessary step forward to turn to “micro-behaviour”, which, as I soon learnt can have a nonetheless strong and/or long-lasting impact on the formulation of the Neolithic society, than e.g. migration.

Meanwhile, some recent works deal with the question of fragmented objects in the Neolithic (e.g. Chapman 2000). This is, undoubtedly, a sign of human agency belonging to the micro-behaviour, i.e. the users’ attitude to accessories of domestic rites during and after the series of cultic events. The problem set in focus is whether it has a meaning that most neolithic cult objects are found in a fragmentary state, and if this can be assumed, whether any differences can be found within certain groups of finds.

The problem of fragmentary finds and their possible meaning has been considered as one of the crucial points in interpreting cultic material. Namely, it has always been assumed that this type of finds must have been handled by prehistoric people with a special care - and consequently, it has also been assumed that their breakage should be interpreted as part of an intentional action; as part of the ritual itself.

Certainly, we can distinguish between different types of cultic finds, and in the course of this, the main stream of analyses has been focused on anthro-

pomorphic figurines. As to the Carpathian basin and its surroundings, almost all of the neolithic and chalcolithic idols came to light in a fragmentary state. For example, there were only a handful of intact figurines among 1300 such finds recovered at Vinca-Belo Brdo, the eponymous site of the Vinca culture. It has also been observed, that the juxtaposed fragments practically never fit together. Moreover, there are some examples, e.g. besides the Vinca tell finds also in the case of the Lengyel-Moravian figurine from Hluboké Masufky, where the fragments of the same object came to light from the remotest corners of the settlement (Altgräfin-Vildomec 1936-37). In all probability this arrangement was deliberate. Such examples made some researchers, e.g. O. Höckmann to create his theory about intentional breakage (Höckmann 1965: 14-23). I myself also made an analysis some years ago, concerning neolithic figurines found within closed archaeological contexts. It came out that more than 300 of the 426 examined figurines were uncovered in a fragmented state. I also examined whether there are any differences between the fragmentary state of the find and its provenance: the archaeological context (Bánffy 1990-91). The findspot and position of a great majority of these 300 objects preclude the possibility that they were cast off useless by their original owners. In all probability, they were broken intentionally indeed, according to some cult events.

The position of another group of human figurines allows various interpretations: they can equally be the fragmented results of the end of a ritual, similarly to the first group, as merely the worn-out participants of a cult assemblage. Nevertheless, we can generally declare that most of ritually broken cult objects are figurines. Meanwhile, it is to be emphasised that in the case of house models, anthropomorphic vessels and small clay altarpieces this ritual breakage is far less probable.

In searching for the causes, I found a group of finds within the last mentioned cult object types which seem to be more coherent and thus, suitable for a more thorough analysis. All belong to a well-defined and well studied cultural formation. The late neolithic and early chalcolithic Lengyel culture covered not only Transdanubia (i.e. Western Hungary), but also a part of Eastern Austria, Slovakia, Moravia and the South Eastern edge of Poland, the Kraków district (*Fig.1*). What is more, quite many of this object type were found under well-observed circumstances, among them there are almost twenty pieces, which were found by myself in different West Transdanubian Lengyel settlements (*Fig.2*). Finally, I could collect more than one hundred rectangular clay objects belonging to this culture. In spite of some earlier, rather positivistic interpretations as „cubic hanging vessels” and also in spite of some opinions interpreting the objects as oil lamps I have shown that the objects could not serve any practical purposes (Bánffy 1997).

After the publication (Bánffy 1997) I made a new statistics on the basis of 103 Lengyel altarpieces, dividing fragments from intact finds. The result of a simple enumeration was convincingly 1:1; namely, 54 intact and 49 broken pieces were found. This outcome changes radically, however, if the two main types: geometric and zoomorphic altarpieces are considered. This time the numbers turn out to show an interesting change. Almost all of the intact pieces belong to the geometric group: 43 of 54. Thus, only 11 of the zoomorphic pieces were intact. Nevertheless, this number would be even smaller without a special assemblage of small, roughly elaborated zoomorphic pieces from Moravia. This means, almost all zoomorphic pieces were broken, and the majority of geometric altarpieces were left intact.

Late Neolithic, Lengyel culture altarpieces (statistics)

Intact: 54

Broken: 49

Intact geometric: 43

Intact zoomorphic: 11¹ (Fig.3)

What conclusion can be drawn from this phenomenon? The reason for this will be quite obvious if we consider the shape of the two types.

The geometric subtype, especially the cubic form is a steady shape that is not easy to break. What we can observe that in most cases the secondarily applied knobs break down from the edges or they fall down from the middle of the sides (Fig.4). The rest of the broken pieces shows traces of wear: the corners and/or, if any, the pedestals are damaged (Figs.5, 6). The subtype that stands on three or four feet shows similar kinds of damage: the legs are missing (Fig.7). A few pieces are broken in half along the hole, i.e. the weakest point of the clay object (Fig.8). Similarly, in cases where the small rectangular lids are found in a fragmentary state, usually an edge is missing, broken at the perforation (Fig.9).

Zoomorphic altarpieces, again, have a much more damageable shape. Protruding parts like heads and legs are easy-to-break, and indeed, missing heads and legs can be observed at most fragmentary zoomorphic altarpieces (Figs 10.15). This can be the reason why they very often come to light in a fragmentary state.

From all these follows that the broken parts almost always have an exclusive correlation with the shape, i.e. the more damageable, protruding parts, and none of other, non-practical causes. This means, that these neolithic altarpieces were most probably not broken after some cult events intentionally, „ritually”, but they were damaged - so-to-say- in a natural way.

¹ Source: E. Bánffy 1997

However, it becomes clear that this observation on neolithic altarpieces stand in sharp contrast with the result analysing coeval female figurines, although I assumed both types to belong to the cult inventory! In my opinion, this contradiction can be solved by two keywords, both revealing gestures by expressing different attitudes: 1. use and 2. sacred power.

As it has been said, the case of figurines, their breaking after using them must have belonged to the essence of the cult. On the other hand, the contextual analysis of Lengyel and also of other neolithic altarpieces reflects similarities with figurines. Furthermore, on the basis of the archaeological context analysis about altarpieces I have not found any relations between the provenance of intact and fragmentary altarpieces. As to my excavations: two pieces were lying near the fireplace of a house, obviously not yet being cast off, one of them was fragmented. The finest altarpiece, however, with red painting on its whole surface was thrown into a refuse pit. The missing parts on many pieces typically show traces of use.

This is a common point with figurines. It is apparent that altarpieces, like figurines were not made for hiding them or ornamenting the internal part of the house with them, but they were kept in use, as active participating objects in some series of action in the cult corner.

The phenomenon of demolishing/breaking of the figurines prompted researchers to create different interpretations. Briefly and generally, it is assumed that the prehistoric people must have been frightened by the idol's residual power (Ecsedy 1976: 51, with further literature).

However, altarpieces, contrasted to figurines, might not have possessed the high sacred power of figurines mentioned above. This might be the main reason why they were not broken during or at the end of a ritual ceremony. They can rather be considered important requisites for domestic cult events, without carrying the ritual power of human representations. After some events they are apparently thrown away, even in an intact form, which shows that altarpieces were not worth damaging before getting rid of them. In some cases, however, as mentioned above in the case of the fragmented finds lying at a fireplace, slightly damaged broken pieces were still used on. It is thus possible, that the main function of altarpieces were to contain something that was really important.

Now looking at the altarpieces from a broader aspect, the above consequences can also be seen in the case of early and middle neolithic altarpieces in the Carpathian Basin and around - reflecting the extremely conservative nature of this find group. Speaking about canonized, traditional types, it is also interesting to discuss whether it has any importance that the typological features of altarpieces remained fairly stable through different cultures and centuries, although during these periods all other kinds of pottery, being only typical for one single culture, underwent a definite change.

This may sound as a small contradiction to the assumption that altarpieces themselves were of secondary importance as compared to what they contained, and especially compared to anthropomorphic representations. Certainly, through thousands of miles and through several centuries each archaeological culture changed the building technique, house forms. Furthermore, on the basis of the colour, levigation, or surface of ceramic remains we can tell what culture a single sherd belongs to, not to speak of vessel types. Even cult objects can be ranged to their cultural background. One culture

uses linear decoration or barbotine, others use crusted painted motives, black polished or red burnished ware - all typical for the culture they are made in. Nevertheless, on altarpieces similar distinctions can be made i.e. a stray find can almost perfectly range in time and space. Still, the typological features like the hole, the geometric form, the four perforations on the edges, the small round knobs live on from the Early Neolithic.

Searching for the reason of this long-lasting tradition, the comparison with very functional objects cannot be avoided here. A spatula made of a rib bone, a storage vessel, a filtering vessel or a cremation urn must show similarities simply on the basis of its common, practical function. Can we assume that similar strict functional regulations may have made altarpieces of different periods alike? May the explanation be functional one or of another nature, belonging to a cultic custom unknown as yet? One thing is apparent: in each case, the traditional form of altarpieces seems to be very important.

Concluding the traces of use and the „natural” breakage of altarpieces: contrasted to conservative typological features, the quality, the intact or fragmented state of altarpieces may not have been important for neolithic man. Certainly, it can still not be excluded that finely and coarsely elaborated pieces, and also intact and worn, battered objects were made for different occasions, different cult events. Namely, most probably, for a more profane period between two feasts used and worn anthropomorphic figurines were not suitable, but e.g. such altarpieces could still be used on. This would well correlate with the assumption of making the altarpieces for different events of the year cycle, a hypothesis drawn from the large number of garbage pit finds. Further on, this hypothesis would extraordinarily well fit to some basic theses about the sacred and profane time periods, assumed by some historians of religion (Otto 1963, Eliade 1969: Chapter 3,4,7; 1976, 1978: Chapter

1-8). However, even the description of published altarpieces is too sketchy as yet, (not to speak about the huge amount of unpublished pieces) to verify the chances of this idea. All what we can state for sure is that besides the form of altarpieces the content of the hole on their surface might have played the main role.

And finally, the size and form of the shallow hole in the surface of altarpieces as well as the fact that they could be covered by lids that were fixed to the hole with strings, offers some assumptions for possible contents. The action of burning is fairly improbable, as discussed above. A small amount of some solid or liquid material comes to question. Although it cannot be excluded, fluids seem to be somewhat less probable. Namely, in many neolithic and chalcolithic cultures we do know some rectangular or boat-formed vessels which have several perforations on one side and sometimes even channels leading to the holes (E.g. Rakamaz, Buj, Öcsöd, Tiszadob - Jóna 1899, Istvánovits-Lőrinczy 1986: site Nr. 30, Pl. XI, Raczky 1987: Fig. 21). According to analogies from later periods they very probably may have served for libation. Thus, it seems more plausible that the depression on the surface of altarpieces may have rather been made for a small amount of spices, herbs or some grains of cereals. In any of the cases the amount does not allow any practical interpretations. Whatever it was put in the holes and covered by the lids, was not used by mortal beings for every-day-purposes any more. It must have been offered, given to some forces standing outside of the family but still imagined to be present on the settlement. In this way, the votive, offering function of altarpieces is probable. According to the number of altarpieces and lids occurring in most settlements, these offerings did not last for long. They had to be replaced by new altarpieces with new contents regularly. The old cult object, nevertheless whether it was still intact or broken

and worn by use, ended up after a festival, i.e. sacred or a profane period of time in refuse pits of the settlement.

I do not want to say that I touched upon the most crucial problem of human agency in the Neolithic. Still, I hope, such a case study as *pars pro toto* may help setting the whole mechanism into new light. I interpreted two types of cult objects used in Neolithic domestic rituals – but not as distinct, passive finds, but as two elements of a once vivid communication system, in which these reflect different, but equally remarkable small pieces of information. It is essential for us to understand first: *how* and secondly *what for* these objects were used. A mechanism, through which we can understand something about human gestures in a prehistoric period, which is, to say at least, extremely poor in any hints about gestures, thoughts and social relations. This is certainly not yet an understanding of the essence of this symbolic language, but hopefully, a step forward in this direction.

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Abstract

The abundant presence of Neolithic fragmented cult objects undoubtedly can be interpreted as signs of human agency belonging to the micro-behaviour, i.e. the users' attitude to accessoires of domestic rites during and after the series of cultic events. The problem set in focus is whether it has a meaning that most neolithic cult objects are found in a fragmentary state, and if this can be assumed, whether any differences can be found within certain groups of finds.

While analysing different types of cult objects, a significant difference can be observed between anthropomorphic figurines and - e.g. altarpieces, which stay in the focus of the present paper. Namely, almost all figurines come to light in a fragmented state, often showing traces of intentional demolishing. Their breakage should be interpreted as an intentional action; as part of the ritual itself. Contrasted to this, the analysis of a large group of altarpieces, more than one hundred finds belonging to the late neolithic Central European Lengyel culture, brought a fairly different result. The statistical ratio between intact and fragmented pieces is here 1:1. This ratio only changes when the same pieces within the steady geometric shaped group and the zoomorphic group, having protruding parts like head and legs, are considered. These parts are namely most frequently missing. Thus, the breakage seems to be a result of practical, natural processes in the case of these altarpieces.

In my opinion, the contradiction between the different fragmentation of anthropomorphic representations and altarpieces can be solved by regarding

and analysing two essential points: the permanent use and the sacred power of the cult objects. The two types may have had distinct significances in the world of gestures. In the course of the cult events practised within neolithic dwelling houses both figurines and cult objects were used regularly and continually. The difference between their demolishing after the ritual most probably depended on their differing importance in the cult, their sacred power.