



Mesolithic anthropomorphic sculptures from the Northern Europe

Tõnno Jonuks

Estonian Literary Museum, Vanemuise 42, 51003, Tartu, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses a small but distinctive group of anthropomorphic antler sculptures from Northern Europe. Five sculptures from two locations, dated to the late 7th – early 6th millennia cal BC, are included in this study. By contextualising this group with broader traditions of Mesolithic art in the Northern and Eastern European forest zone, the distinctive elements – a deliberate lack of bodily and facial details or a peculiar way of depicting faces – are demonstrated. A significant resemblance with these sculptures and wrapped corpses suggests that the sculptures depict either the dead members of these communities or persons capable of switching between different conditions. If this interpretation is correct, it suggests that the agency of the dead members at that time was perceived very differently from what we see in anthropological analogies or in the anthropomorphic figurines from the later archaeological record.

1. Introduction

Anthropomorphic figurines are one of the most favoured pieces of art in archaeology. There are many reasons for that, but the main attraction is undoubtedly the human essence itself – it is man in past societies whose behaviour and activities are the purpose of archaeological studies and thus the depictions of a person or human-like creatures are most essential. Or, as Douglass Bailey (2005, 13) has stated: *figurines just are important*. This is also the case in the archaeology of the Stone Ages of the Eastern European forest zone, although examples from there have never reached such an influential level as figurines from the Neolithic Balkan, Near East or Mediterranean countries, Mesoamerica, China or Japan (see, e.g., Bailey 2005, Lesure 2011, Insoll 2017 (ed.) and references therein). However, anthropomorphs are one of the most common elements in the art of the Baltic countries and in Northwestern Russia. Human-shaped figures are represented on rock carvings and decorations of ceramic vessels, carved out of wood, bone, and antler, knapped of flint and modelled of clay (see, e.g., Poikalainen and Ernits, 1998; Nuñez, 1986; Butrimas, 2000; Iršėnas, 2000, diag 1; Iršėnas, 2010; Kashina, 2006, 2009).

As compared to other, ‘major centres’ of anthropomorphic figurines, the Eastern European forest zone has its own characteristics and research problems – the number of figurines from one location is usually small, thus making it complicated to create broader patterns as an interpretative tool. Also interpretations are rather scarce and most publications are limited to descriptions, classifications, and distribution, while further interpretations, concerning questions ‘who’ and ‘why’ are rarely asked. If such questions are approached, interpretations are often

too mythological (e.g. Butrimas, 2000; Popova, 2001). Mythological interpretations in general have been characteristic of Eastern European archaeology (e.g. Gimbutas, 1991) contrary to the dominating ritual and semantic approaches in Western European archaeology (e.g. Insoll 2017 (ed.)). Largely due to the language of the publications, the entire Northern Eurasian collection of human figurines is often difficult to access and thus ignored in broader studies, even though examples of anthropomorphic representations from Eastern Europe are known from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age (see, e.g., Gurina, 1956; Abramova, 1966; Pitulko et al., 2012 and references therein).

This study focuses on a specific group of anthropomorphic antler sculptures from Northern Europe, dating from the end of the 7th and beginning of the 6th millennia cal BC. These figurines are rather small, some 10 cm tall, but still sculptures and not pendants. None of the objects has any signs of piercing or notches for hanging or attaching. All these sculptures are ultimately stylized and, despite being completed, none of the figures displays elaborated details or ornamentation. The group is not numerous but still distinctive from the rest of anthropomorphic representations of the region. All these examples are rather different at first sight but when looking at them in more detail, the individual pieces share significant similarities.

2. Anthropomorphic sculptures and pendants

There are two locations where anthropomorphic antler sculptures have been found in Northeastern Europe: a collection of figurines from a Mesolithic cemetery at Yuzhny Oleniy Ostrov (YOO) at Lake Onega, Russia, and two stray finds from the River Pärnu, Estonia. Fig. 1.

E-mail address: tonno@folklore.ee.

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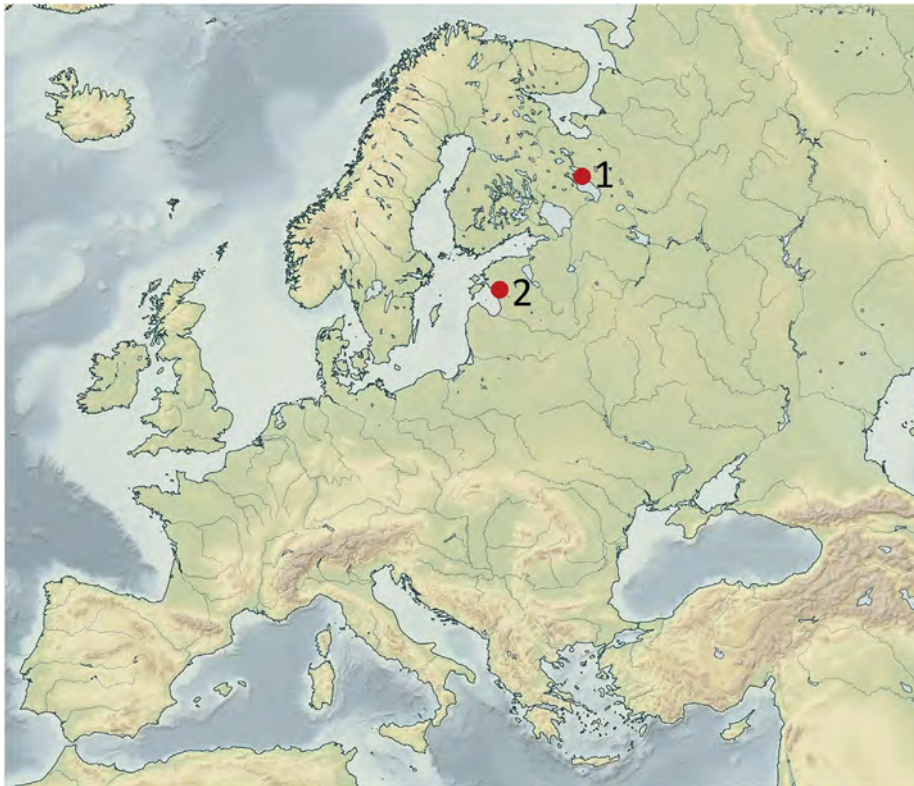


Fig. 1. The location of Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov (1) and the River Pärnu (2) in Europe.

2.1. Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov (YOO)

Three sculptures were found in this well-known Mesolithic cemetery. The cemetery is located on a small island in the northern part of Lake Onega, and has been extensively excavated in 1936–38 in the course of establishing a limestone quarry on the island (see Gurina, 1956 for more details). All figurines were found separately but in association with a grave. Due to the importance of the cemetery, a large collection of radiocarbon dates is available (Price and Jacobs, 1990; Oshibkina, 2008). However, the uneven methodology in interpreting C14 data leaves the chronology of the site still open. According to the most recent (and ongoing) dates, the cemetery seems to have been in use for a rather short period of time at the end of the 7th millennium cal BC (Mannermaa et al., 2017).

Grave 23 from the YOO cemetery was preserved rather poorly as the upper part of the skeleton had been removed in the course of limestone quarrying. In the pelvic area a collection of seven elk incisor pendants was found, together with a snake figurine made of bone. On the right side of the presumable head or shoulder, but outside the grave borders, a 6.5 cm tall anthropomorphic sculpture carved out of antler was found (see Gurina, 1956: 221–222, Fig. 12; 120:2). Fig. 2 Thus the actual location of the figurine in the grave and its precise association with the skeleton is not known. The sculpture has two clearly carved legs but no signs of arms. However, a ridge crosses the chest and according to Adomas Butrimas (2000, 10) this might mark the position of the hands. The most interesting element of this sculpture is its head as it has two faces – one, deciding according to the body position on the ventral side, is carved with all the details, with eyes, a nose, and a mouth; the other, on the other side of the head, is ultimately stylized, with only eyes depicted. According to Nina Gurina (1956, 221), this figurine served a “ritual function”, although she does not explain this statement any further. Undoubtedly, the most peculiar element of this figurine is its head with two faces. This is a reason for calling it ‘Janus-headed’ (Stoljar, 2001, 84) and quite apparently it represents two different identities. There are also other examples of sculptures encompassing



Fig. 2. Ventral and dorsal view of the anthropomorphic sculpture from Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov, grave 23. Note the difference in facial details (Kunstkamera, 5716: 78).

different identities found from YOO. For instance, three different species – a snake, a human, and an elk – were identified on one figure from the same grave, and the object was interpreted as a representation of a sacred elk (Popova, 2001, 130).

Another anthropomorphic sculpture, found at the right shoulder of burial 18 was interpreted as depicting a (young) female (Gurina, 1956, 221, 276; Fig. 120:1).¹ Fig. 3 A distinctive global tradition is followed: if clear male characters are not depicted, prehistoric figurines tend to be interpreted as females (Lesure, 2011, 12). The ultimate stylizing of this sculpture makes it difficult to identify the gender or any other human features. The body has been shaped by smoothing and no clear cut marks can be identified. The head is shaped conically, followed by three extensions. The upper one can be interpreted as shoulders or arms, but in the case of a female identification this is understood as a female breast. The lower one probably marks the hips and the lowest can be understood as feet or an extended bottom of the figure. The head and face of the figurine are not elaborated in detail and only a small bump that could be interpreted as a nose is distinctive on this sculpture. As all extensions are orientated towards the ventral side of the figurine, it leaves an impression of a quadruped creature, but the shape of the head still indicates an anthropomorphic figure.

The third figurine, found by the right hip of a male burial from grave 130, represents a rather different style, with its head missing and limbs elaborated. Fig. 4 The hands are not preserved but little protrusive knobs indicate that both hands once existed. It is more complicated with the missing head, though. It seems likely that the head was already missing in the original design. Possibly the head was made of some other material and was attached to the sculpture, as the tradition of headless figurines is not known in the forest zone art. Due to the knob between the legs this figure is commonly understood as a male (Gurina, 1956, 220). Tatyana Popova (2001, 131) has also noticed mammal features here and interprets the feet of the figure as elk hooves, which makes this sculpture a figure that encompasses different identities. An analogy to this figurine with slightly thicker feet was found from Kubenino cemetery, grave 2, some 200 km eastwards (Oshibkina et al., 1992, Fig. 69). In both cases the feet are carved slightly wider, leaving an impression of an unusual human feet. But these are the only very few examples of Mesolithic carved anthropomorphic figures that demonstrate feet. Most examples represent either the head or upper parts of bodies and feet seem not to have been so important in perspective of the figurine to finalise.

2.2. Pärnu

Two very similar anthropomorphic sculptures have been found in the lower reaches of the River Pärnu, Southwestern Estonia. One of these, a 10-cm-tall human sculpture, made of an elk antler, was found around 1911–1912 (in more detail see Jonuks, 2016). Fig. 5 Two techniques can be distinguished in creating the sculpture: cutting to get sharper edges and smoothing to represent softer contours. With three wide grooves the knees, the waist, and the neck have been marked, and with a sharp cut the flat breast and the chin are shown. The face, together with the hooknose, has been designed by polishing and the mouth has been cut so that the round chin emerges. However, other details, both on the body and face, are missing and the lack of eyes is particularly notable.

The other figurine was published by Eduard Bliebernicht (1924, Fig. II:8) and it is not preserved. Fig. 6 Possibly it got lost during the fire in 1944 when a large part of the collections of the Pärnu Museum was destroyed. According to the photograph taken of it, this approximately 10-cm-tall figurine was also carved out of an antler with a design very similar to the previous one. However, this sculpture seems to have been rougher and the head is clearly wider than the body. This example is

¹ Grave 19, from the immediate vicinity of grave 18, has been dated to 5470 cal BC (6870 ± 200 BP (Oshibkina, 1990 : 403), calibrated using Oxcal v4.2.3. Bronk Ramsey 2013). This date should not be used as a direct data for grave 18 but still suggests a time span where burial 18 and thus also the anthropomorphic figurine belong.



Fig. 3. Side and front view of the anthropomorphic sculpture from Yuzhny Oleniy Ostrov, grave 18 (Kunstkamera 5716: 103a).



Fig. 4. An anthropomorphic sculpture from Yuzhny Oleniy Ostrov, grave 130 (Kunstkamera 5716: 619).



Fig. 5. Front and side view of the anthropomorphic sculpture from the River Pärnu, south-western Estonia (Pärnu Museum, PāMu 1 A 501).

also missing any other facial details except a massive nose. Due to the rough appearance Blieberecht (1924, 15) suggested that it is a preform of an idol but, when comparing it with the previous figurine, it seems that such a simple design and lack of details is purposeful and both sculptures can be considered as the final form of sculptures. Considering the remarkable similarities of these two sculptures, the possibility that both objects are made by the same craftsman cannot be ruled out. However, as the other sculpture is not available for a detailed study, this hypothesis cannot be proved any further.

The location of the finds is highly problematical – they were found in the riverbed in the course of quarrying sand and gravel. During a couple of decades in the early 20th century, a rich collection of nearly 2000 bone and antler objects was collected from this site but no *in situ* finds or occupation layer has been reported. Two objects from this assembly are directly dated to more or less the same period – a sculpture of a bird to 7040 ± 40 BP (6000–5840 cal BC) (Jonuks, 2013) and the preserved human figurine to 7180 ± 40 BP (6220–6020 cal BC) (Jonuks, 2016). In addition to these two dates, several objects were dated to the Mesolithic on typological grounds. It is very probable that several Mesolithic sites were originally founded on the banks of the River Pärnu but were inundated and buried under marine sediments by the rising transgressive Littorina Sea around 5500–5300 cal BC (Rosentau et al., 2011, Fig. 8.3, Nirgi et al., 2019). Fast inundation and covering with sediments is the reason why such a rich collection of organic material is preserved but it also makes it complicated to understand the site. According to reported human bones (Glück, 1906, 275) a cemetery could also have been buried under the sediments (Törnv, 2018, 242). Unfortunately, the human bones that were collected

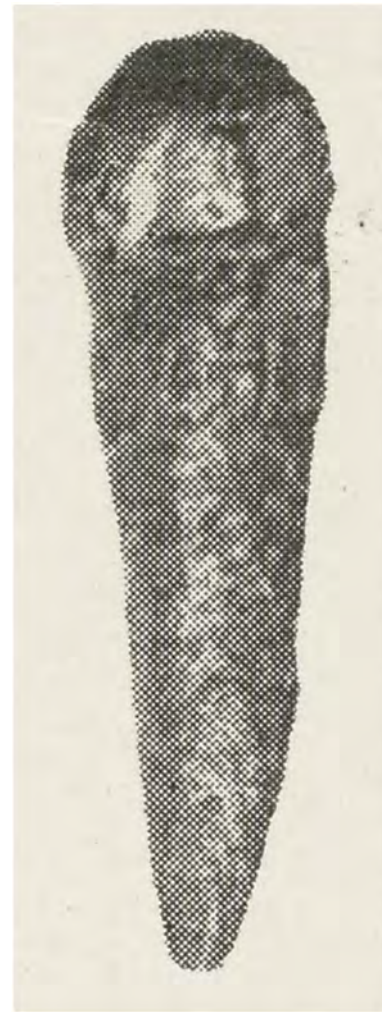


Fig. 6. Anthropomorphic sculpture from the River Pärnu (according to Blieberecht, 1924, Fig. II:8). Note the massive nose but otherwise missing details.

during the sand and gravel quarrying in the early 20th century are not preserved.

To conclude the description of this small group of anthropomorphic sculptures, it needs to be emphasized that despite the fact that all figurines look rather different, they manifest very characteristic features. All figurines seem to be associated with inhumations and they come from a rather short period of time, from the end of the 7th to the first half of the 6th millennia cal BC. The morphological similarities are even more striking: all figurines are independent sculptures and not suspended pendants; they are all of almost the same size, and most distinctively – ultimately stylized. As other art objects – carefully polished and detailed elk-headed staffs or richly decorated slotted points – have been found in the same context, the lack of skills or tools cannot be put forward as the reason. Nor can the lack of details be representative of the style of art of the period/region as such. Thus, it is taken as a point of departure here that the extreme stylizing is purposeful and meaningful and the lack of details should be considered as a key to further interpretations.

3. Anthropomorphic figurines in the north-eastern part of the Baltic region

What makes this group of sculptures distinguishable is most apparent when we compare it with the broader tradition of anthropomorphic representations from the Late Mesolithic and hunter-

gatherer Neolithic. Representations on other materials, such as decorations of ceramic vessels or rock carvings, have been left aside, and this study focuses on figures carved out of amber, bone or antler, and on ceramic figurines as these should form the closest comparable category of objects. Contrary to previous antler sculptures, the rest of the anthropomorphic representations are all pendant-like figurines made of a sheet of bone or antler, in a few cases also of amber; pierced allowing to use these as loose hanging pendants or to be attached to some clothing. Bone and antler are most preferred as both materials are relatively easy to process and they were available in large areas. As figurines are entirely polished, it is usually not possible to identify the species of the raw material by morphological features. In some rare cases, when the species could be identified, the figures are made of sturgeon bone (Iršėnas, 2010, 182) but it could be assumed that the majority of figures were made of the bone of the most common species, such as elk.

Two different forms of anthropomorphic figures are represented – either the full body or just the head/face. Even though the morphological characteristics allow dividing of figurines into two clearly distinguishable groups, their appearance and find contexts suggest that both kinds of figurines had similar semantics. The first group represents a full human in a very canonical manner (Butrimas, 2000; Kashina, 2009) – bodies are always in a static position without any reference to a move, always represented *en face*, standing, hands either straight or resting on hips. Fig. 7a Legs may be either close or slightly apart. Bodies are usually flat and only a small number of figurines have some sort of decoration. Faces, as a rule, present more details. In most cases the surface of the face is grinded down and higher ridges form a long nose and protruding eyebrows. Only very few samples miss those facial features. The mouth is rarely marked. Clear sexual characteristics are never emphasized, but despite of that some figures are interpreted as male, others as female (see Butrimas, 2000 for examples). However, most of such details – legs more or less apart, facial details, etc. – seem to be rather details of an individual craftsman than semantic features.

In addition to the full-body figures, the eastern Baltic material also has figurines depicting only the head or face of a human. Fig. 7b Those objects do not have any signs of a body or evidence that face-figurines were supposed to be attached to a body. Similar to the previous group,

the face-figurines are also very similar and canonical. Only one side is polished, they all have a rounded triangular shape and by grinding down the surface a nose is depicted. As compulsory elements, the eyes and mouth are usually pierced, sometimes carved. In some cases, the figures are so simplified that it is difficult to interpret them at all. A good example is the grave 7 from Tamula, south-eastern Estonia, where three face-figurines were found on the knee of a female burial. Fig. 8 Two of them represent an apparent anthropomorphic head with a clearly carved nose, and the third, a very simple triangular object with three piercings possibly also represents a face. Sometimes even trapezoid-shaped objects with piercings have been associated with human heads (Indreko, 1957, 77; Lillios, 2003).

Figurines depicting either the full body or just the head/face occur mostly on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea – in modern-times Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belorussia, and Northwestern Russia, but single finds are also known from Sweden. The earliest one, dated to the pre-ceramic Mesolithic, comes from Besov Nos VI settlement (Lobanova, 1995) but the majority belongs to the hunter-gatherer communities of the Neolithic (approx. 4000–2000 cal BC). It is usually very difficult to date such tiny figures. Due to the small measurements, they cannot be dated directly and as many come from occupation layers, the range of dating is limited to a few millenniums. Only some objects have been found in contexts which have precise dates, like burials 7 and 10 from Tamula, both containing sheet pendants and dated to 5760 ± 45 BP (4170–3370 cal BC) and 4902 ± 52 BP (3620–2750 cal BC) respectively (Tõrv, 2018, 135). According to find locations, such sheet-figurines originate from very different contexts. The most well-known, Juodkrantė complex from the Nida Peninsula on the western Lithuanian coast, was collected from the sea bottom (Klebs, 1882) and is generally interpreted as an offering (e.g. Butrimas, 2000, 15). However, the majority of bone and antler figurines have been found in the Late Mesolithic-Neolithic hunter-gatherer settlements and cemeteries.

In rare cases figurines are three-dimensional and depict the full head. This is often the case when the object is made of amber or of a larger piece of antler. In these cases, the head is modelled as a sculpture and all sides are polished, although only facial features are marked. It is



Fig. 7. Two groups of anthropomorphic figurines from Tamula settlement and cemetery, south-eastern Estonia – (a) the full-body figurines and (b) the face-figurines.

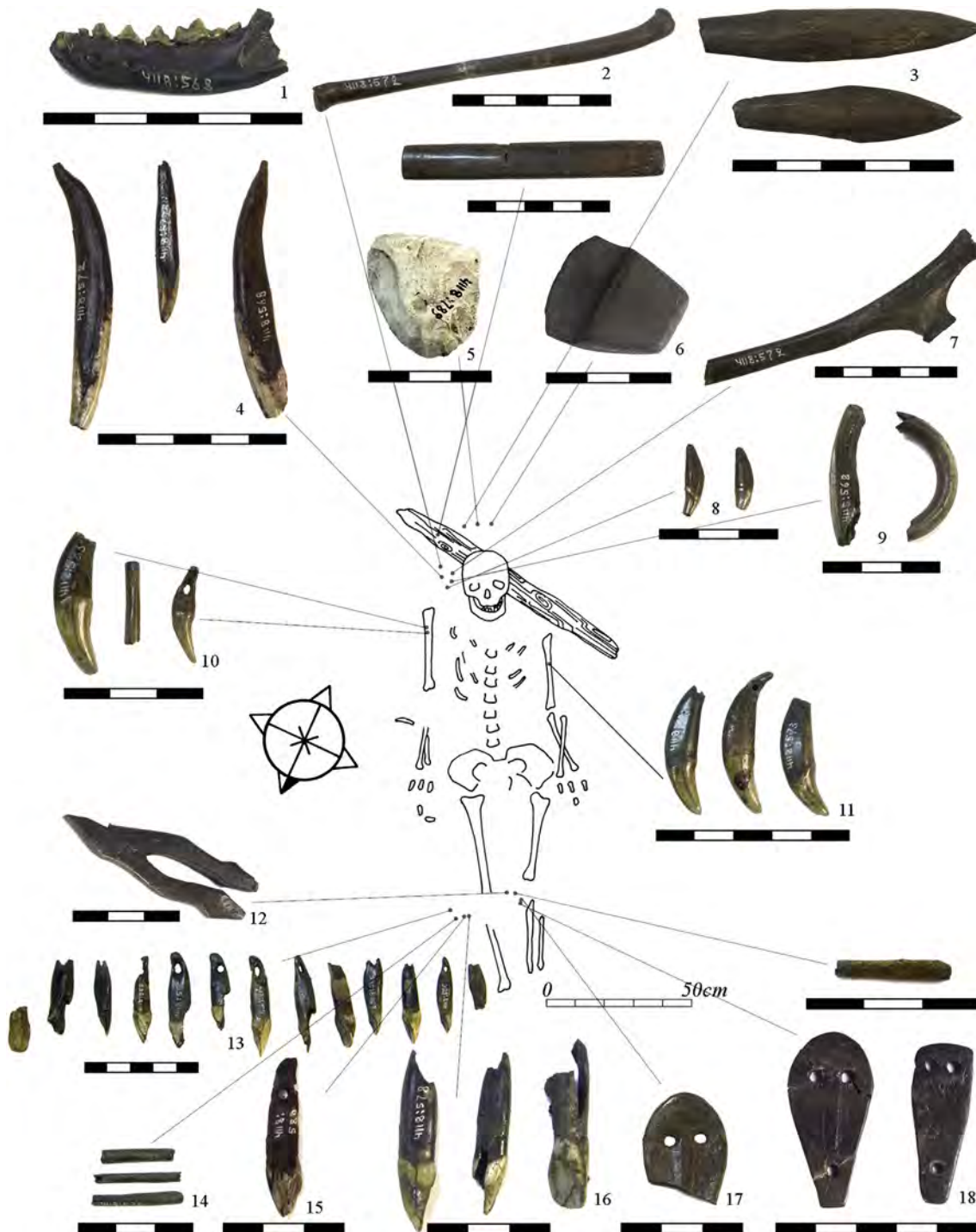


Fig. 8. A female inhumation 7 from Tamula cemetery, south-eastern Estonia. Note the location of face-figurines at the knee, most probably once attached to some clothing.

also distinctive that in these cases piercing is always on the lower part of the figurine, at the neck. This means that if the head was suspended, it had to hang upside down. There exist multiple other possible ways of using those figurines. For instance, the heads could have been attached to bodies made of some other material (like to the figurine from Oleniy Ostrov, grave 130, see above), although no evidence exists so far to support this interpretation.

All those carved anthropomorphic representations, either the full body or just the head/face, have usually been labelled as 'pendant'. 'Pendant' is commonly understood as a loosely hanging object for decorative or symbolic purposes (see Kurisoo, 2018 and references

therein). When studying the exact location of these objects in graves, we can see that these are hardly associated with locations that are suggestive of a loosely hanging object. None of them are found in the chest area and thus an interpretation of a loosely suspended pendant at the neck seems unlikely. Instead, it is more plausible that such figures have been attached to some soft surface, for example skin or leather, and are thus permanently fixed (see, e.g., Olsson et al., 1994; Gerhards et al., 2003, 559; Jonuks, 2009, 123, see also Fig. 8). It is also highly unlikely that these figures were used primarily for decorative purposes and thus the term 'pendant' is avoided here and instead the concept of 'figurine' is used.

A group morphologically closer to the antler sculptures is ceramic anthropomorphic figurines. Comparably, the ceramic figurines depict the human body only in a very stylized way, and only the face is represented in full detail. The lack of limbs and any other bodily details has guided Liv Nilsson Stutz (2006, 232) to interpret these as dead corpses wrapped in fur. Ceramic figurines, as a rule, are richly decorated. Faces have clearly modelled eyes and nose and usually the body is covered with patterns of lines and notches (see Nuñez, 1986). Rich decoration makes ceramic figurines different from the bone and antler figurines. However, the differences derive more from the different material (soft clay is easier to model than a hard antler) and dominating style (ceramic figurines are usually associated with comb ceramic tradition (ca 4200–1800 cal BC) where vessels were richly decorated) but the overall appearance seems to follow a similar tradition.

In addition to portable art, also wooden anthropomorphic sculptures are dated to the Late Mesolithic – Early Neolithic in the eastern Baltic. All known examples have been recovered from wetlands which has provided suitable conditions for preservation (Gurina, 1956: 245f; Butrimas, 2000; Iršėnas, 2010). The sculptures are or have been rather tall, measuring to a few meters. The bodies are usually not elaborated and only the facial features are carved (see Butrimas, 2000, 11ff in more detail). The latter show morphological similarities to sheet-figurines, like a nose in relief and eyebrows, seldom also a mouth is marked. No detailed discussion has been held on these attractive finds and most often they are considered as idols or figures of ancestors/gods. It has been suggested, based on the find location, that tall wooden figurines may have marked special sites, like a holy place or a good fishing site, with a deity (Butrimas, 2000, 13). The dating of wooden figures across Eurasia varies significantly. The earliest, like the famous Shigir idol from West Siberia, is dated to 9600 cal BC (Zhilin et al., 2018) but the eastern Baltic examples are younger, dated to the timespan 4000–2000 cal BC (Butrimas, 2000, 13).

Thus the Northern European group of five small anthropomorphic antler sculptures forms a very specific collection; it belongs to outset of a broader tradition of portable sculptures in the 7th and 6th millennia cal BC; spreads in a rather limited geographic area in Northern Europe; and despite being all different, they share basic similarities of lacking bodily and facial details. This suggests that the group might carry a specific meaning and function as compared to other anthropomorphic figurines.

4. Sculptured man – ancestor figures, spiritual creatures or a man in transformation?

Interpretations of Stone Age anthropomorphic figurines are traditionally not favoured in Eastern European archaeology. If interpretations are suggested at all, they seem to derive from historical sources, contemporary anthropology or ethnographic descriptions from the recent past (Palaguta, 2017, 25). It is often the case that Stone Age hunter-gatherer groups are interpreted on an economical basis and thus a direct link between the contemporary and Mesolithic hunters emerges. Such an approach assumes that hunters' societies have preserved the basics of their culture and worldview for thousands of years and anthropological descriptions can be used for interpretations irrespective of time. It is true indeed that archaeological material alone is mute and analogies from multiple sources are necessary as an inspiration for creating interpretations (Kaliff and Oestigaard, 2004, 83). What seems to be a problem in the Eastern European perspective is that human culture is almost seen as unchanged, allowing to draw direct analogies (or rather parallels) from different periods and cultures. Instead, this article suggests that past archaeological cultures are unique and should be interpreted based on its own sources. This distinctive, although not numerous group of anthropomorphic sculptures is a good example for that. Depicted clearly as passive and static, these figurines oppose to other anthropomorphic figurine traditions both in anthropological and archaeological contexts. Particularly on rock carvings and

pottery decorations from similar economical contexts, anthropomorphic figurines are depicted in motion, with hands raised, holding objects, even skiing or in other actions (e.g. Poikalainen and Ernits, 1998; Kashina, 2017). From anthropological contexts, either figurines depict a dead ancestor, a spiritual being or even a most ordinary doll, some basic features are marked to stress the agency and capabilities of figurines. As Peter Jordan, 2003 (2003, Fig. 6.13) has concluded, the domestic idols were with „eyes and ears to see and hear all“. The figurines discussed in this article do not seem to have any of these abilities. So, how to interpret finds which contrast with anthropological analogies?

As it has been demonstrated above, the most distinctive characteristic of these figurines is the lack of details – the limbs are missing, faces are pale or depicted in a peculiar way. Beautifully polished figurines of animals from the same period (see, e.g., Kashina and Zhulnikov, 2011) demonstrate that craftsmen had the skills and eye for creating detailed and naturalistic sculptures. True indeed, the material of sculptures, most often elk antler, sets certain limits to shaping anthropomorphic figurines and to depict limbs in motion is complicated. However, it does not exclude carving or marking of limbs, facial features or any other details to make sculptures to look more “alive“. We can also follow the same idea of depicting anthropomorphic figures without any bodily details in a somewhat younger tradition of ceramic figurines (Nuñez, 1986). All this leaves the impression that the bodies of the figurines are depicted as covered, and it seems most likely that the sculptures represent a human who has been wrapped into something, most likely a dead body, wrapped, for example, in fur (cf. also Nilsson Stutz, 2006). I have previously suggested the same interpretation for the figurine from Pärnu (Jonuks, 2016), but wrapping and covering looks even more likely on the double-faced figurine from YOO grave 23 where a ridge on the chest has been interpreted as hands (Butrimas, 2000, 10) and the whole composition looks like a human body wrapped in fur.

Although the wrapping of dead bodies is common in archaeological interpretations, proof of this has survived only rarely (Nilsson Stutz, 2003: 296). Nevertheless, examples of wrapping can be found in different contexts, based on different arguments. For example, bear claws found among Iron Age cremation remains have been interpreted as a body wrapped into bearskin for burning (Petré, 1980; Sigvallius, 1994: 76; Formisto, 1996: 85). On the basis of significant markers of bone positions, Liv Nilsson Stutz has referred to some possibly wrapped Mesolithic burials from Skateholm I and II and Vedbæk-Bøgebakken in southern Scandinavia (Nilsson Stutz, 2003: 298ff). A specific study on the YOO cemetery is still lacking but examples of wrapped burials from Zvejnieki Mesolithic cemetery in northern Latvia (Nilsson Stutz, 2006) and from hunter-gatherer Neolithic in Estonia (Tõrv, 2018, 187ff) suggest that wrapping was also known in the eastern Baltic region.

The interpretation of the statues as a depiction of a corpse could explain why eyes are not marked. Eyes are fundamental elements in depicting a face (Watson, 2011) and they are expressively marked in the eastern Baltic anthropomorphic figurine tradition as well (see, e.g., Butrimas, 2000; Iršėnas, 2010). The two sculptures from Pärnu and the one from the YOO grave 18 are missing any signs of attempts to make eyes and thus the avoiding of eyes seems to be deliberate, with the most likely purpose to show a face without eyes – a dead face. Open eyes are the most vivid part of a human face while glazed eyes are the most distinctive element of a dead person. Dangerous beliefs about the look of a dead person are known worldwide and can be regarded as universally human. There are also several cases of a specific treatment of eyes in Stone Age burials in the Baltic region, which confirm this interpretation. In Zvejnieki cemetery amber discs covered the eyes of several skulls (Zagorskis, 1987; Zagorska, 2008: 122) and in Finland clay or slate discs were used to cover the eyes of the dead (Edgren, 2006).

At this point the human figurine from burial 23 at the YOO cemetery should be recalled. Contrary to the lack of face in other examples, this figurine has two faces: a human face with eyes and other details and an



Fig. 9. The devil of Besov Nos rock carving at Lake Onega, north-western Russia. Orange marks the original rock carving, grey indicates natural cracks and blue marks 16th-century additions. Drawing by Väino Poikalainen. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

ultimately stylized face on the other side of the head. Could that depict the transformation from life to death? Or is this a representation of somebody with two identities, referring to the capability of soul wanderings and trance rituals? During a trance human eyes change and the face acquires a death-like appearance as the performer of the ritual goes through near-death experiences (Green, 2001). This could mean that the figurine from burial 23 may symbolize a person who has two faces (resp. identities) – one alive and the other dead. There is another example of ‘switched’ identities from the region – the famous idol carved on rock at Besov Nos on the eastern coast of Lake Onega. It is a large anthropomorphic figure with spread legs and raised arms. Fig. 9 The most interesting is the head which is divided in two, the left eye depicted as a ring-and-dot and the right one as an empty circle. Like the small sculpture from grave 23, the vertically divided face with two different eyes leaves an impression of different faces. Moreover, the body is also divided in half by a major natural crack in the rock which, according to the study of microerosion by Robert Bednarik, predates the figure (Bednarik, 1993, 451). Thus this particular place was deliberately chosen for carving the figure and the carver considered the natural crack when planning the carving. Thus it can be assumed that the natural crack, which extends to the face as the carved line, is part of the figure and it was actually meant to divide this human into two parts. The figure has usually been interpreted as depicting the master of nature, a guardian or a denizen of the Lower World, assuming that the crack could have been understood as an entrance (Lahelma, 2008, 156 and references therein). But the whole composition can also be interpreted as a depiction of somebody who incorporated different conditions or was able to switch between different identities that are expressed by different sides of the figure. The age of the rock carvings on

the eastern shore of the lake is still much younger than the sculpture from the grave. Although no direct date is available, the rock carving has been suggested to date from the 5th–3rd millennium cal BC (Bednarik, 1993, 459; Devlet, 2008, 133 and references therein).

The find contexts as grave goods for the three sculptures from the YOO cemetery and the possible provenance of the Pärnu figurines from a cemetery seem to confirm the interpretation of those sculptures as depicting a corpse. However, it is more likely that all the figurines were used during the lifetime of those deceased and not made specifically for the funeral purposes. As none of the figurines has any sign of suspension (piercings, notches, etc.), it is possible that the figurines were used as mobile sculptures. Such portable sculptures apparently had a close connection with their owners and, as a result, were deposited in the grave together with the deceased. In this respect it is interesting to note that the lower parts – the feet – of all the figurines are slightly pointed. This may indicate that the figurines have been used as standing, when stuck into the soil, in the groove of a piece of wood or any other suitable fixture. However, no unambiguously interpreted use-wear traces on figurines can be used to support this interpretation.

The depictions of the possible dead bodies and in one case a person with peculiar details, who could move between different conditions, suggest that those small sculptures depict some specific persons – a dead member of a group, some influential ancestor, somebody skilful in trance rituals, etc. Thus, instead of interpreting these as depictions of an abstract Mesolithic man or a spiritual being, we should rather see these as naturalistic depictions of persons that once existed. Accepting such interpretation means that the agency of dead ancestors was perceived very differently in the Mesolithic, compared to contemporary anthropological examples. In most cases of the latter, the dead ancestors are depicted as active: they have eyes, ears and mouth – all that an individual needs to be an active member of society and to take care of their living relatives (see, e.g., Insoll 2017 (ed.) for examples). Instead, in this Mesolithic case, we can follow a more naturalistic approach to dead people – they are passive and depicted as buried, but probably still influential in the living community, or certain members of society and thus worth sculpturing and possibly also carrying along as a personal object.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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