

An Early Iron Age Anthropomorphic Clay Figurine from Târgu Mureş

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Clay figurines are frequent finds in Early Iron Age sites. The information regarding these artefacts frequently is limited to their mentioning and/or illustration, however several syntheses, analytic and experimental studies have also been written. On the margin of a recent discovery from the fortress in Târgu Mureş the paper brings into discussion (again) the Early Iron Age anthropomorphic clay figurines.

Keywords: anthropomorphic figurine, Iron Age, Gáva–Holihady culture, Târgu Mureş, clothing

The archaeological investigations from the fortress in Târgu Mureş – focused mainly on the Franciscan friary and church – brought to light several prehistoric features and objects dating from the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Early Iron Age¹. Among these, the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic clay figurines, miniature pottery and clay altars can be remarked. Discovered in a pit with few pottery sherds, this is the single anthropomorphic representation from the Early Iron Age known so far from this site.

The figurine (Fig. 1) is fragmentary; the lower part below the chest is missing. The good quality firing was oxidizing, the surface was moderately smoothened, its colour is light brown and the inner core is dark grey. The clay was tempered with fine-grained sand. The object represents schematically a human figure, nonetheless the slightly embossed frontal and hollowed dorsal sides can be easily recognized. Both the frontal and dorsal side are ornamented. On the posterior the ornament is structured in two approximately equal parts by a median vertical shallow incision. On the upper part of the shoulders a horizontal shallow incised line edges the ornament. The execution of the incised chevrons in the two resulted registers on the back is slightly different: the obtuse angles from the left side are oriented upwards, while on the right side they are downwards. The execution itself is superficial, neither the subsequent incisions nor the ones on the two sides are symmetric, and also their depth differs. Particularly in the right register can be observed that the incisions are deeper close to the middle of the back and narrower on the other end. The ornament from the backside does not continue on the shoulder, it is not connected integrally to the frontal ornamentation. The latter is also divided into two parts, marked by the V-shaped incision which starts from the neck and points to the chest. The incision on the left side goes beneath the more oblique one from the right side, which also starts slightly above. Though the exterior of the left side is fragmented, on the edge of the right side a parallel incision can be observed. The division, the V-shaped incision as well as the other deeper incised lines might suggest the garment. The frontal ornamentation can be observed on the two sides, the pattern is similar, however not symmetrical: two lines of short, horizontal and deep incisions can be observed on each side. The neck of the anthropomorphic figurine is marked by an oversized, cylindrical part. On the globular head a horizontal shallow groove indicates that it was completed with a piece of clay. No anatomical details can be observed on the head. The figurine is asexual, there are no convincing details regarding its gender identity. Conditions of discovery: 2011/C38, G2,-180 cm. height: 39.75 mm; shoulder width: 30.27 mm; head width: 13.67 mm; thickness: 13.34 mm; length of the head and neck: 18.24 mm; height of the head: 12.58 mm., weight: 15 g.

Anthropomorphic figurines are less frequent discoveries in Early Iron Age sites than zoomorphic representations and also their manufacture is of inferior quality. Generally, they can be described as abstract and schematic representations², and due to the lack of details the figures are impersonal. The Early Iron Age figurines are flat³; nonetheless the narrow side of the objects usually is ornamented.

In the eastern European region the anthropomorphic figurines are more frequent in the Gáva–Holihady culture and Babadag–Pšenicevo culture, and appear less often in the Chişinău–Corlăteni and Cozia–Saharna–Solonceni cultures⁴. For the Babadag culture three types of anthropomorphic representations were defined: ‘en violon’ flat figurines, tubular or slightly flattened figurines and abstract

¹ Berecki 2012.

² László 1995, 92; Sana/Bejinariu 2010, 173.

³ Vasiliev 1986, 83; László 1995, 86; László 1996, 352; Lascu 2006, 136.

⁴ Sirbu 1999a, 48; Sirbu 1999b, 153.

figurines⁵. For the Gáva–Holihrad culture several typological variants can be observed, still two main categories can be defined. The best known and most often occurring are the violin-shaped-‘en violon’-representations⁶, in the case of the Early Iron Age also called Cahnauchy–Teleac or Krivce–Teleac type figurines⁷.

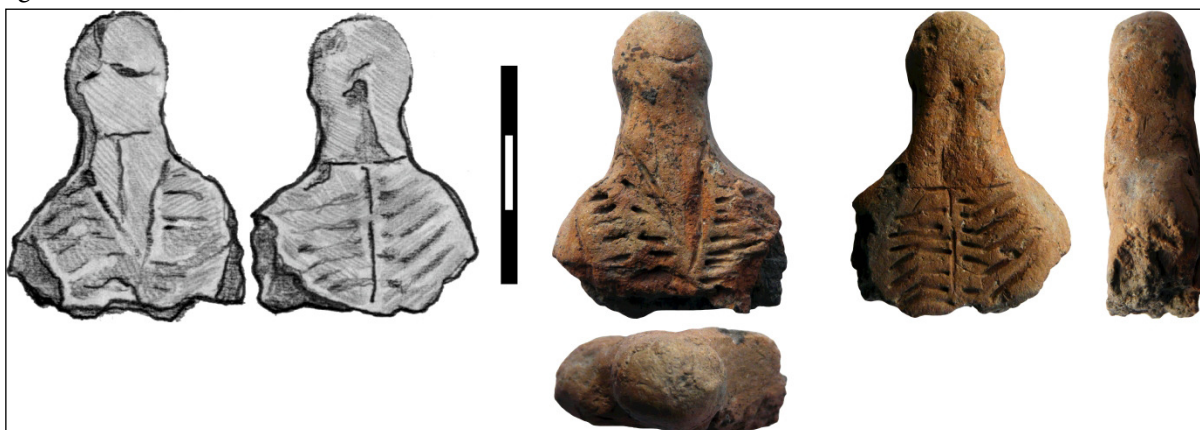


Fig. 1. The anthropomorphic clay figurine from Târgu Mureș (drawing: A. Pokorný).

Violin-shaped figurines have also been found in the settlements of the Cozia–Saharna–Solonceni culture, where a second type is represented by the elongated, oval representations⁸. They are believed to be of Cycladic origin, from where through the Balkans these objects might have reached the Great Hungarian Plain and the territory of the Gáva–Holihrad culture⁹. Other opinions consider these representations the genuine products of the Gáva–Holihrad culture, respectively of the HaA–B period (12/11–8/7 c. BC)¹⁰, – chronology extended to HaC according to the figurines from Teleac¹¹ – while on the territory of the Cozia–Saharna culture based on the shapes and ornamentation a particular variant of the anthropomorphic figurines can be observed which indicates local origins¹².

Even if similarities of shapes can be observed, generally it can be admitted that based on their details-ornamentation, technique, the ‘message’ of the symbols-they are all different, i.e. they were produced according to a schema or ‘archetype’ of the form, but each is ornamented differently, resulting individual items. Because of its fragmentation, the specimen from Târgu Mureș cannot be surely included in one of these types, probably constituting a special, apart and till now unique category of the Early Iron Age anthropomorphic representations. The clay figurine is unique in all details; its form (especially at the neck part) differs from the violin-shaped ones, while the ornamentation lacks the impressions, and only the chevron-like incisions are present on both types.

Generally, the Early Iron Age clay figurines are ornamented with incisions, impressions, in most of the cases forming different abstract patterns, interpreted as body parts (the arms, the neck or hips), jewellery (pearls, necklaces, maybe tattoos) and clothing elements or accessories (belts, sleeves or the neckline)¹³. The neckline of the Târgu Mureș figurine differs from the violin-shaped representations, since in the case of the latter one these are also suggesting ornamental details-necklace or the ornamentation of clothes-on the décolletage. In the case of the figurines from Siret–Dealul Ruina¹⁴ as well as other figurines from Ukraine and Transylvania¹⁵ the ornamentations were seen as pearl necklaces, trimmings or belt. The geometric patterns from some figurines at Teleac were also interpreted as the persistence of

⁵ Jugănaru 2003, 80-81.

⁶ László 1995, 89; László 1996, 357.

⁷ Boroffka 1994, 76.

⁸ Nicic/Băț 2009, 90.

⁹ Maleev 1992, 20.

¹⁰ László 1995, 95; Koós 2011, 156.

¹¹ Vasiliev 1986, 83.

¹² Nicic/Băț 2009, 92.

¹³ Vasiliev 1986, 83; László 1995, 86; László 1996, 352; Sîrbu 1999a, 51; Sîrbu 1999b, 156; Némethi 2000, 58; Nicic/Băț 2009, 88, 91.

¹⁴ Mareș *et al.* 2008, 99-100, fig. 8.

¹⁵ László 1995, 86-87; László 1996, 352, 354.

the traditions of earlier times¹⁶. The details of the clothes are represented by chevron-like incisions and the modelling of the clay. In this respect, the elements of the clothing on the figurine from Târgu Mureş are more detailed and realistic than those on the violin-shaped ones.

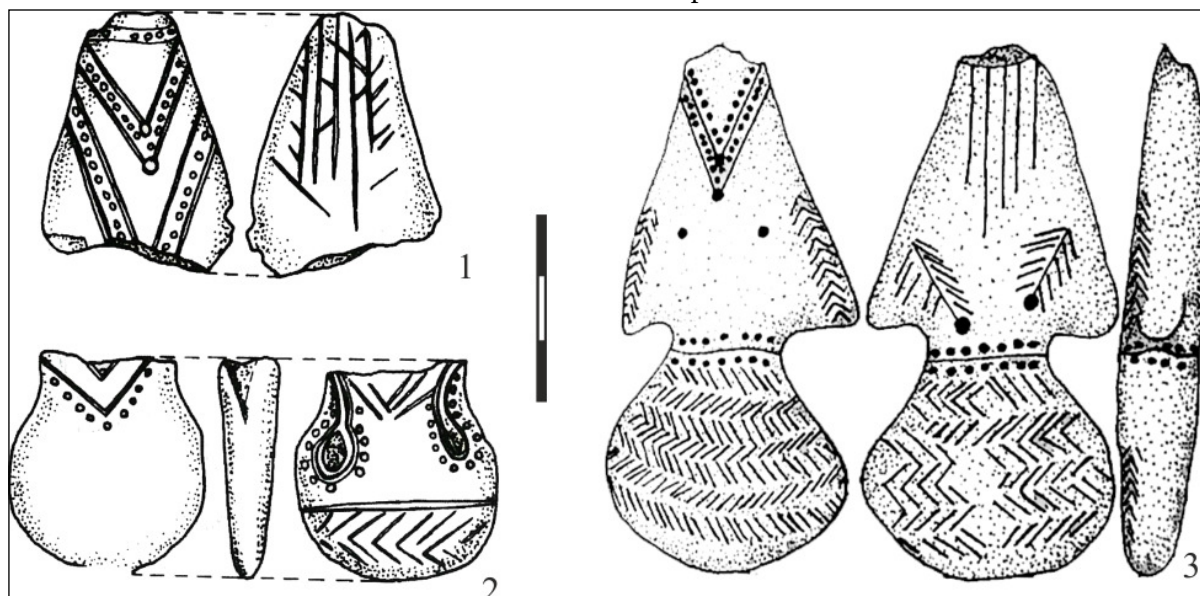


Fig. 2. Violin-shaped Early Iron Age anthropomorphic clay figurines. 1-2. Teleac (after Vasiliev 1986); 3. Krivče (after Maleev 1992).

The incisions from the upper dorsal part of some of the violin-shaped figurines were considered the representation of the long hair¹⁷; however this interpretation seems unlikely if taking into consideration the lack of any other comparable 'anatomical' detail, as well as the appearance of such incision on the lower part of the figurines¹⁸. Furthermore, in some cases this part was ornamented by chevron-like incisions, which according to the artefact from Târgu Mureş might also suggest some kind of textile, maybe a head-kerchief.

While the ornamentations of the upper part were considered representations of anatomical details – although it is more probable that they illustrate clothing decorative elements and only thereby body parts in itself, such as arms, the head, etc. – the interpretation of the also ornamented lower, disk-shaped part (and because of its form considered sometimes the upper side of the figurines) is more difficult. While the frequent incised chevrons on this part might indicate textiles as in the case of the figurine from Târgu Mureş, there is no explanation for the disk-shaped form.

Attempting the reconstruction of the clothes seen on the figurine from Târgu Mureş few possibilities should be taken into consideration. The clothing elements kept from the fragmentary upper body-such as the neckline and the incision on the right shoulder-indicate a tunic or cloak or stole with maybe V-shaped but rather crossover neckline (Fig. 3). A crossover neckline necessitates a waist tie or other type of fastening above the hips, whose presence can be supposed based on the ornamentation of the violin-shaped figurines. However one should remark that in the case of the other figurines known

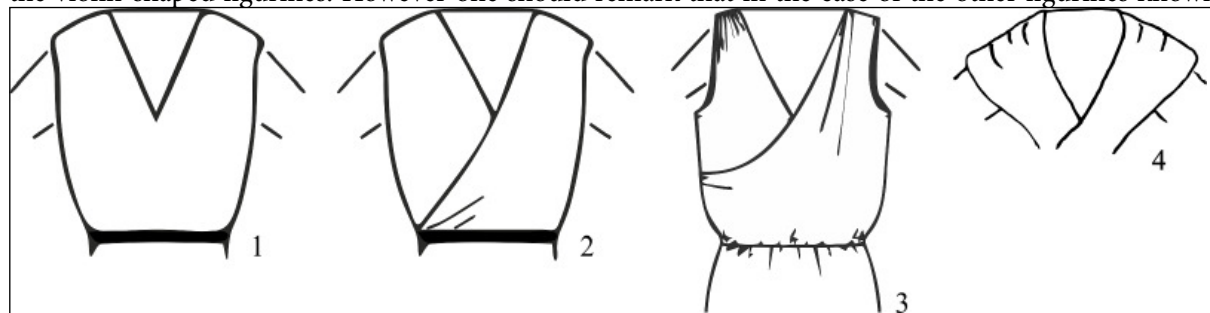


Fig. 3. Presumed reconstructions of the clothes on the anthropomorphic figurine from Târgu Mureş.

¹⁶ Vasiliev *et al.* 1991, 146.

¹⁷ László 1995, 86; László 1996, 352; Sîrbu 1999a, 51; Némethi 2000, 59; Koós 2002, 79; Nicic/Băţ 2009, 91.

¹⁸ See: Sîrbu 1999a and 1999b, fig. 2/2 and 4.

till now the neckline is almost exclusively V-shaped.

The real number or the distribution map of these objects is hard to define, since the former attempts in this direction are very controversial. While a paper in 1987 mentions about 10–12 anthropomorphic figurines, another study from 1999 knows about 280 such finds from 50 sites in “the region inhabited by Thracians” (according to the map this region would be between the Balkan Mountains, the Tisza and the Dniester Rivers) between the 12th and 5th centuries BC¹⁹. Another recent distribution map²⁰ of the anthropomorphic figurines of the Cozia–Saharna and Gáva–Holihady cultures in Transylvania shows only the discoveries from Teleac, while the core region of both cultures is given north-east of the Carpathian Mountains. The map should be completed with the previously published figurine from Râpa²¹, the two figurines from Racoș²², the figurine from Căuaș²³, and the five figurines from Alba Iulia–Dealul furcilor–Monolit²⁴, as well as with the highly fragmented five new finds from Șimleu Silvaniei–Observator, dated to the Gáva culture from the HaB period²⁵. Yet unpublished artefacts from Lazuri (two figurines) and Dobolț (one figurine) dated to the Gáva culture are kept in the Baia Mare Museum²⁶. A recent PhD thesis focusing on the cultic discoveries of the intra-Carpathian Early Iron Age mentions 19 anthropomorphic figurines from 8 sites. Along with the already noted 13 artefacts from Alba Iulia, Căuaș, Racoș, Râpa and Teleac further discoveries from Rapoltu Mare, Iernut and Bernadea (two figurines) are mentioned²⁷.

Regarding their conditions of discovery one can observe that all pieces were found in archaeological features (dwellings and pits) and layers of the settlements, and no anthropomorphic representation was found in funerary context, at least till now, therefore they should be connected to lifetime and not to the afterlife. Regarding their functionality several interpretations and hypotheses were formulated. To the artefacts discovered in houses domestic employments were conferred, while the ones unearthed in pits were seen as ritual artefacts or offerings²⁸. Most frequently they are discovered fragmentary, therefore – as in the case of the Late Iron Age figurines or the animal representations²⁹ – the act of deliberate mutilation was presumed during ritual or magical ceremonies, incantations, or sorceries³⁰. At least in the case of the artefacts from the Early Iron Age, due to the lack of further arguments, on-site observations and finding contexts, this idea cannot be demonstrated. At the same time, the question of their apotropaic character or usage as talismans was argued with the lack of perforations³¹; however these could have been worn tied with leather strings or simply in a leather or textile pouch. The anthropomorphic figurines were also seen as representations of gods, interpretation excluded for the zoomorphic figurines³². These objects were considered objects of aesthetic pleasure, art objects in the broader context of symbolic material culture³³, while others read these figurines as representations of prehistoric individuals³⁴. They were interpreted as accessories of rituals serving the lands’ and herds’ fertility or the prosperity of the community³⁵. Fertility and prosperity was also argued by the vegetal patterns (?)³⁶ and chevron-like ornamentation³⁷ of the

¹⁹ Sirbu 1987, 108; Sirbu 1999a, 47, fig. 20; Sirbu 1999b, 153, fig. 14.

²⁰ Nicic/Băț 2009, 88, fig. 1.

²¹ Dumitrașcu 1974, fig. 3.

²² Sirbu 1999a, fig. 2; Sirbu 1999b, fig. 2.

²³ Némethi 2000.

²⁴ Lascu 2006.

²⁵ Sana/Bejinariu 2010, 172–173, 175.

²⁶ Koós 2002, 79, informed by K. Kacsó.

²⁷ Damian 2009, 2, 6. The author mentions two further anthropomorphic figurines from Căuaș (information from Sirbu 1999a and 1999b), which represent in fact another type of clay artefact (for these objects see: Metzner/Nebelsick 1997).

²⁸ Vasiliev 1986, 83; László 1995, 92; László 1996, 358; László 2001, 307; Lascu 2006, 136.

²⁹ Berecki 2012, 49.

³⁰ László 1995, 93; László 1996, 358; Lascu 2006, 138; Sirbu 2009a, 56; Sirbu 1999b, 158; Sana/Bejinariu 2010, 174; Koós 2011, 155.

³¹ Sirbu 1999a, 55; Sirbu 1999b, 159.

³² Vasiliev 1986, 84.

³³ Mina 2007, 264–266.

³⁴ Bailey 1994, 321.

³⁵ Vasiliev 1986, 84; Vasiliev *et al.* 1991, 149; László 1996, 358; László 2001, 307; Jugănar 2003, 75; Damian 2009, 7; Nicic/Băț 2009, 91; Koós 2011, 157–159.

³⁶ László 1995, 92.

³⁷ Lascu 2006, 137.

violin-shaped figurines, while others excluded such a use referring to the lack of anatomical details characteristic for female or Mother Goddess representations³⁸.

These anthropomorphic figurines were seen till now as predominantly³⁹ or exclusively⁴⁰ feminine idols, mainly based on the body forms, hairstyles and tresses, jewellery and clothing.⁴¹ Since we do not have relevant information about hairstyle and clothing fashions or customs, one cannot exclude that men also wore long hair and tresses (if the incisions from the figurines should be interpreted as such at all), decorated dresses and jewels. The breasts or genitals can be accepted as feminine 'signs' or symbols. Their absence does not necessarily indicate men, but also asexual figurines. The abstract character of the Early Iron Age figurines does not make possible in all cases the identification of their gender; e.g. in the case of the anthropomorphic figurines from Carei-Bobald⁴² and Râpa not only that the gender definition was not attempted, but one could not even tell which is the front and which is the rear⁴³.

Even if the piece was ornamented in detail, the gender determination of the figurine from Târgu Mureş is ambiguous, too. On the chest there is no visible contour of breasts, which, as mentioned earlier does not mean that the figurine is a male one. It is conceivable that the author consciously sought to leave out sexual elements, creating deliberately an asexual or sexless figurine. For the figurines from the Aegean Neolithic it was presumed that they represented genderless stages of life-childhood, but also period of maturity⁴⁴. The artefacts from the Copper Age in the Balkans were seen as representations of individuals, reflecting a society which was not limited to a simple male-female division, but included individuals who were neither male nor female⁴⁵.

The lack of sexual details in the portrayal of these figurines is one of the arguments for the interpretation of these figurines as toys, often made by the children themselves⁴⁶. The rattle Blišťanka⁴⁷ can be probably interpreted as a toy. Zoomorphic figurines beside toys were also considered the 'first finger practices' of craftsmen; while their sacral or ceremonial use in order to influence the fertility or fecundity of lands and herds was excluded because of their rudimentary execution contrary to the high level quality pottery of the epoch⁴⁸. Yet, both in the case of the Early Iron Age zoomorphic and the also rudimentary anthropomorphic figurines, whose execution certainly does not require great knowledge, the wide geographical region over which these artefacts of similar shapes (e.g. the violin-shaped figurines) are spread makes their use as toys or finger practice improbable.

It is not likely indeed that in a society whose potters were capable to produce exceptional ceramics and the smiths forged spectacular metal objects, such relatively poorly executed objects would have been accessories for ceremonies, statuettes of gods or votive offerings. Based on the typological similarities in such a wide geographical region it is also improbable that these were toys of children or finger practices of craftsmen. The most acceptable assumption is their use as apotropaic objects or amulets, but they could also be player pieces of a game, a social act part of the collective knowledge and world of custom of the Early Iron Age communities.

The asexuality of the anthropomorphic figurines also might indicate game pieces; like in the case of several board games such as the ancient Egyptian Senet or the later Indian chaturanga, where the asexual figurines (e.g. the king, queen, bishop or the pawn in chess) are easily recognized by those who are familiar with the game, without the need to portray the 'gender' characteristics. In the case of these games the design of figurines follows certain schemes, but countless variations are known. Also, the workmanship and design of the game pieces can be very different depending on the ability of the maker or the requirements of the "customer". Furthermore, while zoomorphic figurines can be placed in upright position almost everywhere, the violin-shaped anthropomorphic figurines do not end with feet,

³⁸ Sirbu 1999a, 56; Sirbu 1999b, 160.

³⁹ László 1995, 92; László 1996, 358; Sirbu 1999a, 52; Sirbu 1999b, 157; László 2001, 307; Nicic/Băţ 2009, 91.

⁴⁰ Lascu 2006, 137.

⁴¹ Sirbu 1999a, 52, fig. 19; Sirbu 1999b, 157.

⁴² Koós 2011, 155.

⁴³ Dumitraşcu 1974, 131.

⁴⁴ Mina 2007, 280–281.

⁴⁵ Bailey 1994, 329.

⁴⁶ Ucko 1962, 44–45.

⁴⁷ Sirbu 1999a, 55; Sirbu 1999b, 159.

⁴⁸ Tarbay 2012.

but with a disk-shaped part. Thus, they could be placed only in a lying position, while because of their ornamentation they keep their three dimensional character.

Nevertheless, due to the lack of convincing circumstances of discovery in all cases, it is impossible to firmly determine if these objects ornamented on both sides were ceremonial accessories, gods, toys, apotropaic figurines or game pieces. It is likely, however, that they narrate about people or the mythological /divine sphere of the epoch. In this sense the interpretation of the abstract ornamental patterns as clothing should be brought into relief. Still, it would be hard to specify the exact social category which is rendered by these figurines, although it seems plausible to perceive in them the spiritual / religious or community leaders of the Early Iron Age.

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