

Little Cucuteni pots of hope: a challenge to the divine nature of figurines

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Abstract: Discussion of figurines is one of the most popular topics in the prehistory of Eastern Europe. They have been perceived as goddesses and gods, toys, individuals, comforting miniatures, embodying personhood and more recently as “teaching devices”. Their relationship to fecundity and fertility is over-exploited but a safe haven for the majority of East European archaeologists. Here, we take on exactly the opposite view and try to build a case in which a set of figurines and a number of accompanying objects are interpreted as infertility aid-kits. The sets from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru and Isaiia-Balta Popii are assessed in terms of recent tendencies in Western archaeological thought whereby representation and imposed meaning gives way to agency, action and performance.

Rezumat: Figurinele reprezintă unul dintre cele mai preferate subiecte din preistoria Europei de Est. Acestea au fost percepute ca zeițe și zei, jucării, indivizi, divizi, miniaturi aducătoare de confort – încorporând personalitatea, și mai recent ca “instrumente de învățare”. Relația lor cu fecunditatea și fertilitatea este supralicitată, dar se constituie într-un rai sigur pentru majoritatea arheologilor est-europeni. În textul de față, adoptăm o perspectivă exact opusă și încercăm să construim un caz în care un set de figurine și un număr de obiecte asociate sunt interpretate drept seturi-de-ajutor împotriva infertilității. Seturile de la Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru și Isaiia-Balta Popii sunt evaluate în termenii tendințelor recente din gândirea arheologică Apuseană, în care reprezentarea și impunerea de sens lasă locul agenței, acțiunii și performanței.

Keywords: figurines, Balkan prehistory, agency, infertility.

Cuvinte cheie: figurine, preistoria Balcanilor, agență, infertilitate.

◆ Introduction

A typical find on most sites from what is known as Old Europe (M. Gimbutas 1974) is a small clay replica of a human body. Thousands of such miniatures – mostly of clay but also of stone and bone, mostly female but also male, unsexed and androgynous, some decorated, others not – are known so far from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites across the Balkans, Hungary and Ukraine. Called “figurines”, “statuettes”, “idols” or “plastic art”, they are certainly not an uncommon find. And yet, such finds trigger unparalleled excitement when found on a hot sticky day and have the inexplicable power to motivate exhausted excavators, hoping that perhaps they may be lucky to find one. Sites are compared by the number of discovered figurines, the “uniqueness” of the finds context and the special meaning of certain assemblages in a tacit but nonetheless severe inter-site and inter-regional competition. In a word, figurines have been, still are and most probably will be a constant source of fascination for specialists and non-specialists alike.

Among the Neolithic communities preoccupied with the creation of figurines is the Cucuteni-Tripillyia group. The Cucuteni culture¹ comprises a dense network of predominantly settlement sites located in modern Romania, while its counterpart in neighbouring Ukraine is known as Tripillyia (Russian Tripolye) culture. The mid-fifth millennium BC saw the emergence of this Neolithic phenomenon, often described as the “last civilisation of Old Europe” (C.-M. Mantu et alii 1997), because its demise came more than 1000 years later². Contrary to the tell-dominated landscape to the south and west, the Cucuteni people chose to live in villages and farmsteads on previously unoccupied places. There is only one exception to this pattern – the multilayer tell-like site of Poduri (D. Monah et alii 2003). The size of settlements is mostly small to medium but some large settlements – up to 80 ha – are also known. Promontories appeared as the preferred place to settle but, in general, a variety of landscapes were inhabited and used for dwelling. Mixed farming and animal breeding formed the subsistence practices of these communities and extensive groups, together with small-scale exchange networks which assured the flow of utilitarian and exotic raw materials, products and stock. Apart

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¹ “Culture”, more or less following V.G. Childe’s (1929) definition, remains the preferred term in Eastern Europe.

² The Tripillya culture lasted till cca. 2800 BC.

from figurines, the Cucuteni culture is famous for its elaborate pottery, often compared to artisan production and betokening specialised production, perhaps at the village level (L. Ellis 1984).

Cucuteni-Tripillya figurines have captured the imagination of archaeologists, with a very clear gap between the interpretations of Eastern European specialists (D. Monah 2012; Gh. Lazarovici 2005; N. Burdo 2008) and their Western counterparts (D.W. Bailey 2005; B. Gaydarska 2012; D. Anthony 2010). In recent years, the expressive nature of two sets of figurines has inspired yet another and somewhat unconventional insight (R. Dumitrescu n.d.; 2008). In this paper, we intend to examine Dumitrescu's arguments, consider his reasoning and clarify our alternative viewpoint. By way of introduction, we offer a brief overview of past and current approaches to Balkan figurines.

◆ Influential views on figurines

By far the most famous commentator on figurines is the late Marija Gimbutas. Writing in the 1970s and early 1980s, she considered the huge amount of Neolithic and Chalcolithic Balkan figurines to be evidence of a matriarchal goddess religion, where the personification of the female form represented numerous female and animal deities, worshipped by polytheistic, gynocentric societies. M. Gimbutas believed that these figurines would have been ritual objects, required for the communal veneration of "super-natural powers" (1982, p. 11) controlling seasonal change and the lifecycles of plants, animals and humans. She introduced a fully developed pantheon, influenced by Lithuanian folklore and Ancient Greek Gods and Goddesses alike.

Marija Gimbutas certainly was not the first to recognize the significance of figurines (O. Höckmann 1968; P. Ucko 1968). Her approach, however, and more precisely the integration of these images of the human body into the grand narrative of the Neolithic and Copper age societies, appealed to local Eastern European archaeologists and has been very influential ever since (M. Gimbutas 1974; 1982). A lot of ink has been spilt to criticize M. Gimbutas' views (R. Tringham, M. Conkey 1998; L. Meskell 1995), while the reasons for her unwavering legacy in Eastern Europe remain largely unaddressed. Paradoxically, she is rarely acknowledged by Eastern European archaeologists as the initial inspiration for the divine tales that have littered Eastern European archaeology. In countless accounts of both human and non-human imagery, the concept of a sacred world and its ritual paraphernalia appears as given, as something that was always there, rather than as an ontological construct in need of arguments suggested by a female archaeologist with a particular personal and professional background (J. Chapman 1998). Against the general East European atheoretical framework of poorly understood and mechanistically recited Marxist principles, M. Gimbutas' ideas struck a chord and endured with some modifications mainly dressed up as a discussion of ideology, in this case seen as religion. Gender issues were unknown in the culture-history approach and to see the Mother-Goddess as an objectification of women would give credentials to this approach that it certainly did not have. A patronizing and patriarchal attitude to women (N. Palınca 2006) is more likely to have resulted in the creation of a female ideal but the embracing of those very same ideas by many women archaeologists still remains problematic. Detailed analysis of why Gimbutas' ideas enjoy such longevity is long overdue but it exceeds the scope of this article. The brief outline of her enduring legacy is meant to contextualize both the views of mainstream Romanian archaeologists as well as the views of amateur archaeologists, of the kind addressed critically below.

One of the most prolific Cucuteni scholar sees figurines exclusively intertwined with religious ideas, whereby the "duality of the Great Mother", "Great Mother....life and death divinity", etc. is the normal rhetoric (D. Monah 2012). In the same vein is the interpretation of C.-M. Lazarovici (2005). These views are broadly shared by Tripillya scholars such as N. Burdo (2008). Discussing Gumeni a figurines (found to the south-west of the Cucuteni area) R.-R. Andreescu is critical of the inconsistent imposition of religious concepts on prehistoric figurines (2002, p. 197) but his alternative viewpoint of figurines for worship and figurines for magical and initiation rites, remains broadly in the same framework. That the divine nature of the figurines is considered fundamentally unchallengeable till this very day is illustrated perfectly by a recent article. C. Pavel et alii (2013) claim that "post-processualist archaeology, [undermined] the importance of religion in the everyday life of prehistoric communities" (C. Pavel et alii 2013, p. 327), thus totally misunderstanding that, it is post-processualists who have brought these everyday practices to the fore. Ironically, the paper represents one of the worst legacies of post-processualism, that of "pick-n-mix" (J. Chapman n.d.), which, in this particular case, incorporates modern scientific method (x-ray tomography), selective quotes from M.

Eliade, Jung's views on transubstantiation, together with traditional Romanian figurine interpretations in an eclectic and unconvincing attempt to rehabilitate "the sacred" in prehistoric lifeways.

A relatively recent tendency in modern Western scholarship, most eloquently argued by A. Jones (2012), is to move away from the study of representation. In terms of figurines, it means that explanations of what figurines were and what their meaning was represents the imposition of yet another explanatory framework over mute and passive objects, a framework neither better nor worse than M. Gimbutas's... only more fashionable. Instead, a more helpful way to view figurines is to highlight what they did. A starting point in this approach is to consider these miniature human bodies made of bone, stone and clay as embodying the principles of personhood – the perception, creation and re-production of self. John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska have been the most vocal advocates of re-thinking Balkan figurines in terms of personhood (2006). Adopting a biographical (life of a figurine) instead of functional (use of a figurine) approach, J. Chapman and B. Gaydarska see the "birth" of the androgynous Hamangia figurines as containing both genders. Breakage causes the remnant fragments to have a "life" as either male or female. Androgyny is reinstated again in "death", since most known complete figurines are found in graves. Thus, figurines are perceived as means to negotiate gender relations and personhood. An alternative world view appears to be materialised in the figurines of the Late Chalcolithic community in Dolnoslav. There, gender – male or female and gender neuter – is retained through birth, life (even after up to 8 breaks) and death and the emphasis seems to be on age. In the Dolnoslav assemblage, the sidedness of deposited fragments attests to a priority given to the sense of belonging to wider communities or networks, broadly associated with (but not opposed to) left and right (B. Gaydarska 2012).

This short synopsis of figurine interpretations would not be complete without the post-modern take on human imagery (D.W. Bailey 2005; D.W. Bailey et alii 2010). For D.W. Bailey, the key to understand the enigma of figurines is their small size that evokes alternative realities through abstraction and compression. Thus, they constitute intimate and safe objects with a tactile representation to oneself; they also provoke us to think again about what it means to be human. Figurines are anchored in local knowledge, spaces and places and can be viewed as a measure of social coherence. Dwelling more on the visual power of images, D.W. Bailey argues that they help fashion identities by providing reflections of the Self and goes on to introduce the concept of "corporeality of being". Central to this concept is the human body – precarious, needing construction, maintenance, ordering and management. In a word, bodies are performative but also political, social and cultural objects. Thus, in D.W. Bailey's view, the elaborate decoration on Cucuteni/Tripyllia figurines and their changing forms through time can be explained in terms of the dynamics of Neolithic politics and changing concepts of representations of being.

In this paper we are inspired by the plea to go beyond meaning and representation (A. Jones 2012) and the possibility to experience different worlds through engagement with small comforting clay figures (D.W. Bailey 2005). Compelled by the extraordinary nature of the finds discussed below and their refreshing interpretation by an amateur archaeologist, we are trying to view the link between figurines and fertility from a different perspective and arguing that human agency and the performative qualities of the figurines resulted in the creation of these amazing sets.

◆ The Cucuteni sets

At four sites in the Balkans, unusual "sets" of anthropomorphic figurines and furniture have been discovered. This article will refer to two of the sets – those from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru and Isaiia-Balta Popii, two villages approximately 200 km away from one another, both in North East Romania (figures 1 and 2). These "sets" comprise 21 miniature female figurines, twelve larger and nine smaller, along with thirteen small chairs. The Poduri set is dated to the Pre-Cucuteni II period, 4900-4750 BC and the Isaiia set to 4700-4500 BC (Pre-Cucuteni III).



Fig. 1. The Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru figurine set (courtesy of D.W. Bailey 2010, p. 114-115).
Setul de figurine de la Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru (cu permisiunea D.W. Bailey 2010, p. 114-115).



Fig. 2. The Isaiia-Balta Popii figurine set, at the Archaeology Museum Piatra Neamț (courtesy of ookaboo.com).
Setul de figurine de la Isaiia-Balta Popii, la Muzeul de Arheologie din Piatra Neamț (cu permisiunea ookaboo.com).

These sets were found by their excavators, Monah and Ursulescu/Merlan, respectively, inside clay vessels. At Isaiia, 42 tiny balls and 21 “cones” were also discovered.

The figurines are quite similar to one another and each has some sort of incision to denote facial characteristics. They all take the female form, with wide, large hips and thighs, narrow waists, very thin heads and necks, and few discernable arms. The bodies are bent slightly at the waist, as though lounging on a comfortable chair, some with their legs together and others with them noticeably apart. Ten of the Poduri figurines have breasts, whereas only seven have breasts in the Isaiia assemblage. At Isaiia, four of the figurines have their legs apart with spot- or dot-incisions on their thighs and three others have spots/dots on their stomachs (R. Dumitrescu n.d, slide 12).

At Poduri, each of the larger figurines is completely decorated with red paint and/or incisions. The schematic decorations take the shape of straight or curvilinear lines, in parallel, diagonal, triangular or circular form, with emphasis on the chest, stomach, hip and thigh areas on the torso. Yet, the smaller figurines have very little decoration at all.

The chairs appear to be more crudely fashioned than the figurines. At Isaiia, some, although not all, are decorated with red paint and/or incised lines and all are slightly different sizes. At Poduri, there are differences in chair shape but none of them are coloured or incised. However, one of the

chairs is two-pronged, which may account for the “Council of the Goddess” cult complex view of this set of figurines (C.-M. Mantu et alii 1997). As the chairs have rounded bases, Bailey considers them unsuitable for the smaller figurines to sit on (2010, p. 115) and therefore deliberately shaped for the larger figurines (D.W. Bailey 2005, p. 113).

Bailey has described the Poduri set as “one of the world’s most extraordinary assemblages of prehistoric artefacts” (2010, p. 113). Yet, he is the first to admit the difficulties in interpreting the meanings of these figurines, while disputing the excavators’ view that the set was part of a religious pantheon (D.W. Bailey 2010, p. 116), as well as the fertility cult and goddess view introduced by M. Gimbutas.

◆ R. Dumitrescu’s viewpoint

Romeo Dumitrescu recently released a “meditative essay” on a new “para-archaeological” and “para-medical” way of looking at these “sets” of Cucuteni figurines (R. Dumitrescu n.d.; 2008). His presentation threw up some interesting concepts on the meaning of the unusual grouping of the 21 Cucuteni figurines, with their seats, acorns and balls, found grouped together in “boxes” during the Isalia excavations, Romania.

In his presentation, he particularly considered as enlightening the Cucuteni Culture’s focus on statuesque female representations, which far outweigh those of males (i.e. 50:1). Another very revealing feature is the schematic way the females were represented as figurines, that is, with a sole focus on their sexual features. R. Dumitrescu therefore reintroduced the concept of fertility, with the Cucuteni women experiencing a 21-day menstruation cycle in the past. Although he accepted that this much shorter menstruation cycle, which would normally be around 28 days, was unusual, he used his own gynaecological training as well as ethnographic parallels with Guyana in Central Africa to back up his arguments. As can be seen from figure 3, he attributed a figurine (with or without chairs) to each day of the 21-day menstrual cycle, suggesting groupings in the following order:

4 statuettes with open legs on chairs



9 simple statuettes on chairs



7 figurines with breasts



3 statues with incisions on the abdomen of which two belong to the seven with breasts.



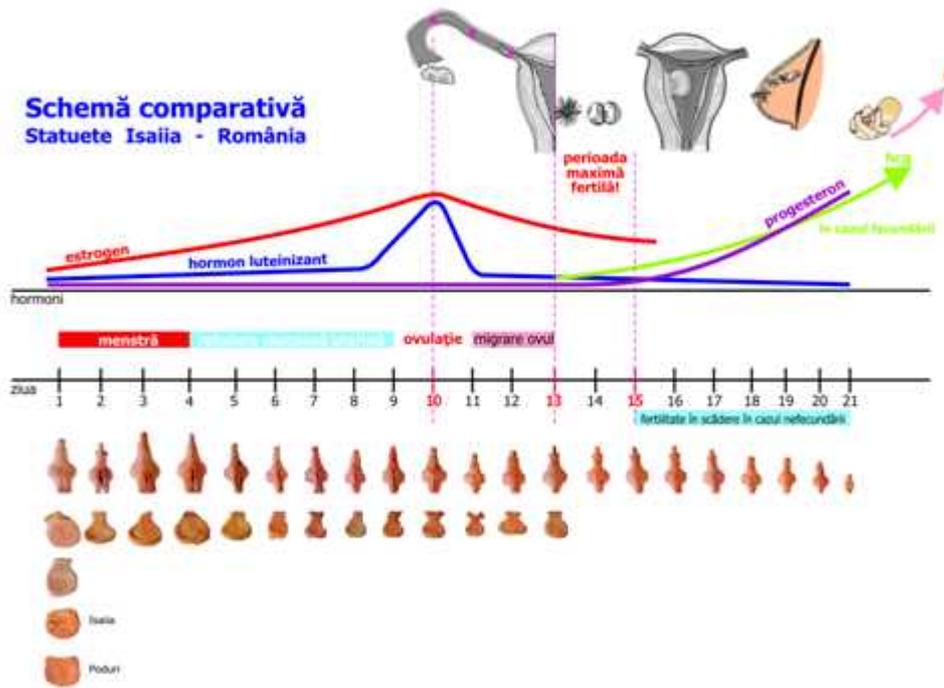


Fig. 3. R. Dumitrescu's figurine and female ovulation cycle association. Asocierea între figurine și ciclul ovulației la femei, în opinia lui R. Dumitrescu.

◆ Our re-interpretation

While R. Dumitrescu's idea certainly holds merit, we believe that his fervent attempt to understand the complex association of these artefacts fails to take into account the obvious and undeniable common-sense fact that female menstruation is based on the 28-day lunar cycle, and most likely, this was the case in the past too. Therefore, although theoretically not impossible that Cucuteni women had a 21-day cycle, it would be much more likely that they all had normal menstrual cycles of roughly 28 days.

We propose a slightly different view of the figurines, still based on R. Dumitrescu's general concept, that is, that these figurines were linked to the female menstruation cycle. Whereas R. Dumitrescu saw them as prehistoric fertility aids, we would like, instead, to put forward the proposition that they were actually prehistoric infertility aids. Their rarity in the archaeological record would concur with the fact that they might only have been offered if the female had failed to fall pregnant naturally. Hence, as 95% of our current female population falls pregnant within 2 years of trying, only the minority would require extra help.

Reproduction is an instinctive part of nature, accomplished by every species, plants and animals alike. The natural joining together of man and woman and the creation of new life has been achieved since time immemorial. The long existence of the Cucuteni group suggests that procreation was a norm in Cucuteni life. Yet, for those precious few who had not conceived naturally and who failed to create new life, an element of doubt, uncertainty and even fear, might have started to pervade every aspect of their existence. At such a time, help and advice may have been sought from a medical guru, from older family or clan members. In 5th millennium BC Romania, a possible solution was provided by the little pots of hope found in Cucuteni domestic contexts. This might also explain why these sets are so rare, as most people would not have required them.

Our re-interpretation is shown in figure 4. The women would have their "period" as normal, usually 7 days, and their last day would equate to the first figurine, the tiny one. Each day thereafter, the figurines would increase in size, until, as R. Dumitrescu points out, the ovulation stage. Here would be placed the 4 open-legged figurines, indicating sexual intercourse on those days. From day 16 onwards, the female would need to rest and keep relaxed, so the seats would help her to do this, as it is clear from numerous studies that this can aid implantation and therefore more likely result in a

pregnancy. Obviously, certain chairs may have been demarcated for particular days, but we have used R. Dumitrescu's order for simplification.

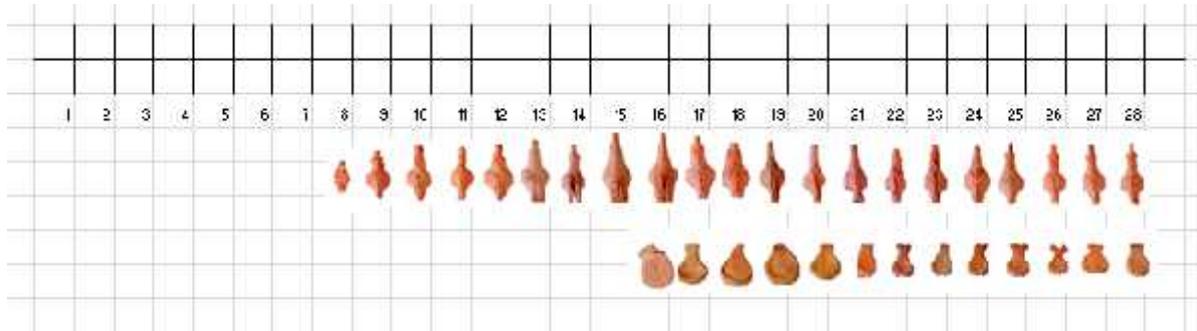


Fig. 4. Our re-interpretation of the 21 figurines and 13 seats.
Re-interpretarea noastră asupra celor 21 de figurine și 13 scunele.

R. Dumitrescu was also puzzled by the high percentage of broken pieces of this set and wondered why they were found both inside and outside dwellings. Could it be that the people who required these "kits" were already feeling vulnerable and scared, as infertile couples do today? If they followed the routine of the "kits" for several months and yet remained infertile, it is clear that the "box" might have been thrown down or kicked out of the door in disgust.

We concur with R. Dumitrescu that these "sets" seem to refer to both "sexuality" and "conception" and are grateful to him for reintroducing the concept of fertility into the modern forum. He sees the sets as material vehicles for training young couples about their fertility, whereas we perceive them as infertility "kits".

◆ Discussion

One of the consequences of the unquestioned embracing of M. Gimbutas' ideas is that fertility is almost exclusively related to divine power in the majority of the Eastern European writings. This deprives humans of the agency and the ability to deal with their own life and destiny. To see this misplaced agency as a result of theologically and anthropologically informed discourse about the relationship between Goddesses and humans is to give the culture-history approach theoretical substance that it does not possess. The abundant claims in Eastern European archaeological literature relating figurines to gods and goddesses, which seek to make a case for prehistoric religion, consist of descriptions, vague or selective ethnographic parallels and unsubstantiated statements, rather than analytically presented arguments. If we strip figurines of their divine skin, then we are liberated and can see that important issues like birth, life and death may or may not be related to almighty power and that figurines may or may not take part in the negotiation of any of these issues. We believe that the Cucuteni figurine sets discussed above present a very strong case for statuettes being intended to aid a key moment in human life. Instead of seeing them as "divine" devices, we perceive these miniatures of female bodies as the product of human agency aimed at resolving a potentially devastating social and personal problem – the problem of infertility.

Infertility in the past has been largely overlooked in both gender archaeology and archaeology of personhood. Two are the main reasons for this disparity. The first relates to the Gimbutasian legacy, whereby the severe criticism of her literate equation of figurines, goddesses and fertility has seriously hampered modern scholarship of insightful discussions of figurines that might have been inspired by fertility issues. The second reason lies in the priorities dominating discourses in social archaeology where issues of power, ideology, status, prestige and indeed mundane practices crowd out issues such as infertility. This short article is an attempt to redress this imbalance.

Until very recently, women have been blamed for infertility (L.M. Brown n.d.). We have no evidence to suggest how far back in time such a claim was valid, although the issue was materialised through the pagan fertility symbols of "green men" found in Medieval church stained-glass windows (M. Aston 1997, p. 52). It is perhaps safer to state that there were infertile couples in the past, as there are now (J. Walker 1797, p. 7). From the 1600s onwards, women would suffer suspicion and

stigma if they had not produced children (S. Smith 1999, Part 1), and it was not until the 1920s that scientists began to realise the responsibility of males in biological reproduction (S. Smith 1999, Part 5). It is difficult to assess the build-up of personal psychological tension deriving from the physical inability to achieve something that most contemporaries were capable of – an achievement widely recognised as personally and socially valuable. However, diminishing self-esteem and the feeling that the infertile woman is a lesser person do not perhaps constitute overstatements. Today, couples are prepared to undergo costly, invasive and time-consuming medical treatments, in order to resolve their infertility issues. It is therefore not unreasonable to accept that infertile women in the past would have needed support.

Miniatures as comforting and pleasurable objects and creators of a different mind-set (D.W. Bailey 2005) would perfectly suit the intimate, yet very public, problem of infertility that required a response. Female figurines of different sizes and shapes and a less overtly obvious male presence were called upon to perform a mission. The two-pronged chair, mentioned in the Poduri excavation reports (D.W. Bailey 2010, p. 115) as the symbol of a bull and therefore of the cult of fertility, might instead have represented the male requirement to perform on the most fertile day in the female cycle – usually day 15, the ovulation day.

The creation of a set that would help the potential mother to go through the 28-day lunar cycle endorses the power of figurines to change biological perceptions and to ensure successful fertilization. One can speculate how the set was compiled, whether it was specially made for the occasion, or was already in possession of a shaman(?)/mid-wife(?) or whether it was assembled by members of the community in which each household contributed an item. The differences in style and execution of the figurines support the latter; however, the suggested choreography (see above) advocates design and forward planning more consistent with an ad hoc act. In the first instance, that would imply some sort of community mobilization, while the second relies on specialized knowledge. The evidence is too patchy to be able to support either claim; nonetheless, in both cases, the active role of the figurines remains the same.

◆ Conclusions

The inspiration for this short article has come from an unlikely source – the medical professional and amateur archaeologist Romeo Dumitrescu – who introduced the concept of fertility into discussions of figurines. His assessment of the “boxes” found at the Poduri and Isaiia excavations has reopened the debate into the reasons why such a group of figurines and associated paraphernalia should be found together. It is clear that these little pots of hope certainly provide a new insight into the lives of the Cucuteni people, hitherto unknown from excavations. They demonstrate an empathetic, considerate side to groups of people living in a much larger/wider, linked and bounded landscape than previously known. Yet, they also stimulate more questions: who made them?; why were “sets” found 200 km away from one another and why were there so few sets at all? Did these figurines carry their own biographies and have social identities? Instead of taking the comfortable and well-trodden path of answering these questions (J. Chapman, B. Gaydarska 2006; B. Gaydarska et alii 2007), we have embarked on a more dangerous journey by introducing the problem of infertility in the past, expressed in this case through the creation of figurine sets. We concur with D. W. Bailey’s viewpoint (2005, p. 122) that the miniaturistic concept of these figurines could have altered the mindset of the people who held them. Certainly, the mind-alteration needed when one is faced with an ongoing infertility issue, is the ability to forget oneself and enjoy living again. Maybe these little pots of hope supplied just that: a re-awakening of the inner child and a new focus for the couple. We would appreciate comments regarding our re-interpretation.

Judging by the amount and zeal of modern research they have inspired, anthropomorphic figurines were powerful beings. In this short article, we extend the agency of the figurines in the past by seeing them not only as a great motivator for modern research but also as active participants in the worldview of past societies. In times of hardship and despair, in times of joy and celebration, in everyday routine or in special ceremonies, figurines were part of the making of current events. They had diverse roles and, in the cases discussed above, they are seen as empowering women to take the destiny in their own hands and to break the deadlock of infertility.

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