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Neolithic Decorative Objects from Osseous Materials from the Site Starčevo - Grad¹

Abstract: Bone industry, or the manufacture of objects from osseous materials, is less known part of prehistoric technologies. This paper will focus on one seament of the Starčevo culture industry from osseous materials, on objects used for decoration purposes. Total number of twenty pieces from eponymous site of Starčevo – Grad were analyzed from technological point of view – the choice of raw materials, techniques of production, final forms, use and discard. The analysis revealed a varied, but careful selection of raw materials, probably those bearing special significance, and the existence of local production by skillful craftsmen. As to the forms, some influences from Early Neolithic of the Near East and Greece may be observed, but there are also some original forms, characteristic for the Early and Middle Neolithic in the central Balkans and south Pannonia.

Key words: decorative objects, osseous materials, Spondylus, Dentalium, Early and Middle Neolithic, Starčevo culture bone technology

Introduction

The site Starčevo Grad is situated on the left bank of Danube, at the entrance of the modern village Starčevo, 8 km southeast from Pančevo. It was discovered at the beginning of the 20th century and first excavations were conducted in 1928. by M. Grbić and the National museum in Belgrade. Excavations continued in 1930's, 1969–1970, and small trench excavations also took place at the beginning of the 21st century (Aranđelović–Garašanin 1954: 7–8; Ehrich 1977: 60: Живковић 2008).

The most important finds were those of the Neolithic settlement and Starčevo represents the eponymous site for Early and Middle Neolithic in the central Balkan and south Pannonia region. First radiocarbon samples, taken mainly from the animal bones from 1969-70. excavation season, gave results that covered time span between 5700 and 5420 (Ehrich 1977: 66). Calibrated dates obtained by AMS method cover time span between 6975±60 and 6480±55 BP (Whittle et al. 2002: 113-114).

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Despite long tradition of excavations and research of the Starčevo – Grad site, some of the aspects of the material culture are still unknown. This is especially true for the bone industry, i. e. industry from osseous materials. About 250 objects from these raw materials are kept in the National museum in Belgrade and the National museum in Pančevo, most of them from excavations in 1920's and 1930's. Most interesting part of this collection are non-utilitarian objects, i. e. objects with decorative purpose, total number of twenty objects².

Methods of analysis

The term bone industry is used to label technology of producing artefacts from osseous materials (Averbouh 2000: 187). Osseous materials are all the animal hard tissue – bones, antlers, teeth and mollusc shells (Poplin 2004: 11). The objects were analyzed from technological point of view, meaning that not only finished objects and their typology were taken into consideration, but also the whole chain of technological choices was analyzed – starting with the choice among available raw materials, techniques of production, final forms, and also how objects were used and discarded.

Raw material identification was after Schmidt (1972). Traces of manufacture and use were observed with magnification of 5x–20x with a hand lens, and interpreted after Maigrot (2003), Christidou (2004) and Legrand and Sidéra (2006).

Acquiring and managing raw materials

Among the raw materials, mollusc shells are predominant. Also long bones were used, and it may be noted that mainly larger bones were taken, probably those of Bos species. To a lesser extent, teeth, antlers and other bones may occur.

Among mollusc, two species could have been recognized – Spondylus and Dentalium. Spondylus shells were used mainly for producing bracelets. Taken into consideration that these shells were not found locally and that objects made from them are encountered in a large area with minimal variations (Willms 1985, Dimitrijević and Tripković 2002; 2006), it may be assumed that Spondylus objects were imported as finished objects.

Denatalium, on the other hand, reveals a completely different picture. The fact that they may have been found in the surrounding areas (Dimitrijević 2010) raises possibility of local acquiring of raw materials and therefore a local production. However, these shells were turned into beads with minimal or no modification at all, so it is difficult to locate the original place of manufacture.

² I would like to thank to Andrej Starović for entrusting me with the osseous material from Starčevo-Grad, and also to all the colleagues from the National Museum who helped me during research.

It is very interesting to note that bones used for decorative purposes are mainly larger ones, probably all or majority from large ungulates such as Bos. Smaller bones, especially those from ovicaprids, were the main choice for tool production in Early and Middle Neolithic. Cattle bones, on the other hand, were reserved for special types of objects, such as spatulasspoons, which were highly valued objects, judging from manufacture with large labour and skill investment, as well as long use (traces of intense use and continued use even after breakage) (cf. Makkay 1990: 27; Beldiman 2007: 219–20).

Techniques of production

Not much can be said on manufacture techniques of shell objects. Spondylus artefacts, shaped probably by cutting, grinding and polishing, were imported as finished objects, while Dentalium beads show minimum traces of shaping.

On objects made of bones traces of manufacture were better preserved. Most of discs and buckles were obtained by transversal cutting of long bones. First a groove was made by abrasive fibre and then the remain of the bone was cut or broken. This preforms were than shaped by cutting with a flint tool and final form was obtained by grinding and polishing, probably by sandstones of different grain quality (coarser and finer one).

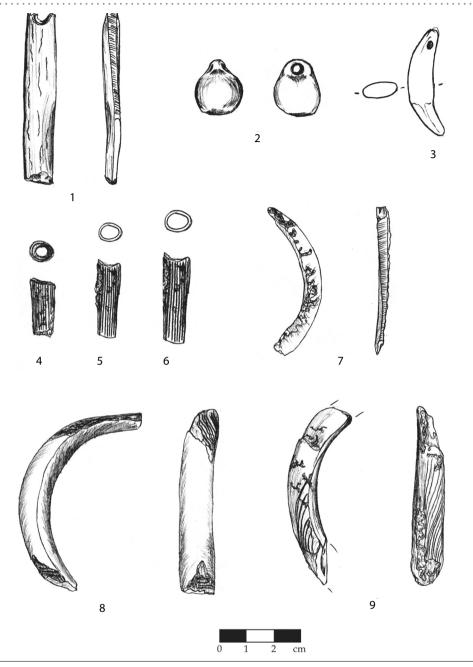
Labour and skill investment vary from minimally changed natural shapes of raw material to carefully worked objects, done by skillfull craftsmen.

Typo-technological analysis

Object from osseous materials were typologically classified into seven groups, mainly after functional criteria. First four groups encompass tools and weapons: pointed tools, tools for cutting, polishing and punching, fifth group are objects of special use, sixth group are decorative objects, and non-utilitarian objects such as figurines and incomplete objects (debris, indetermined pieces) form separate groups (Vitezović 2007: 62–5). Sixth group, which is analysed in this paper, encompasses objects of decorative purpose, which were part of personal adornment, clothing pieces or perhaps used to decorate interior of dwellings. They were not utilitarian in sensu tools or weapons, however, their use, except that of pure decoration, may have been as buckles for clothes, shoes or clasps for sacks and bags, as buttons, etc.

After their shape and probable mode of use, they are divided into five types, which are further divided into subtypes after shape and raw material. Main types are pendants, beads, bracelets, rings and buckles.

Pendants are pieces of different shapes, globular, rectangular, etc., which all have perforation for suspension in the upper part. Two subtypes were present, globular, rectangular pendants and probably also perforated teeth.



• • • PLATE I Type 1. Pendants: 1. Stč 096, rectangular pendant from antler; 2. Stč 174, globular pendant; 3. Stč 211, unfinished tooth pendant;

Type 2. Beads: 4. Stč 165; 5. Stč 142; 6. Stč 006, Dentalium beads; Type 3. Bracelets: 7. Stč 055; 8. Stč 022; 9. Stč 132, Spondylus bracelets.

ТАБЛА I Тип 1. Привесци: 1. Стч 096, правоугаони привезак од рога; 2. Стч 174, лоптасти привезак; 3. Стч 211, недовршени привезак од зуба;

Тип 2. Перле: 4. Стч 165; 5. Стч 142; 6. Стч 006, перле од денталијума;

Тип 3. Наруквице: 7. Стч 055; 8. Стч 022; 9. Стч 132; наруквице од спондилуса

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One peculiar pendant, Stč 174 (t. I/2), was made from bone, probably from a segment of a larger long bone. It has globular shape; lower part is in a form of a ball, while the upper part is slightly thinner and has a perforation. The diameter of the perforation is 4 mm, it has a regular circular shape and, judging from a slightly narrower interior, it was made by drilling from both sides with a flint borer. Object is entirely polished, and the traces of polishing are only slightly visible around the perforation. Other traces of manufacture were not visible. As to the traces of use, slight wear may be observed around the perforation and also entire object is slightly worn.

One bone pendant of the same shape, and made in the same manner, only of somewhat smaller dimensions, was discovered in Early Neolithic layers of Divostin (McPherron, Rasson and Galdikas 1988: fig. 11/5k)³. Other objects of this type are not known in the Early and Middle Neolithic in the surrounding areas, so perhaps subtype of globular pendants may be characteristic for the Starčevo culture in the central Balkan and south Pannonia region.

Another fragmented pendant was discovered, Stč 096 (t. I/1). It is a rectangular plate made from antler cortex, with broken perforation, and fine, polished edges. Undecorated antler pendants are also known from Criş culture, although in small nubmer (Beldiman 2007: 133).

Pendants in the form of perforated teeth were not found on Starčevo, however, one tooth with unfinished perforation, Stč 211 (t. I/3), suggest that they must have been present on the site. Different animal teeht, modified by adding a perforation, were used throughout prehistory (Taborin 2004); several examples from Criş culture could be mentioned (Beldiman 2007: 129).

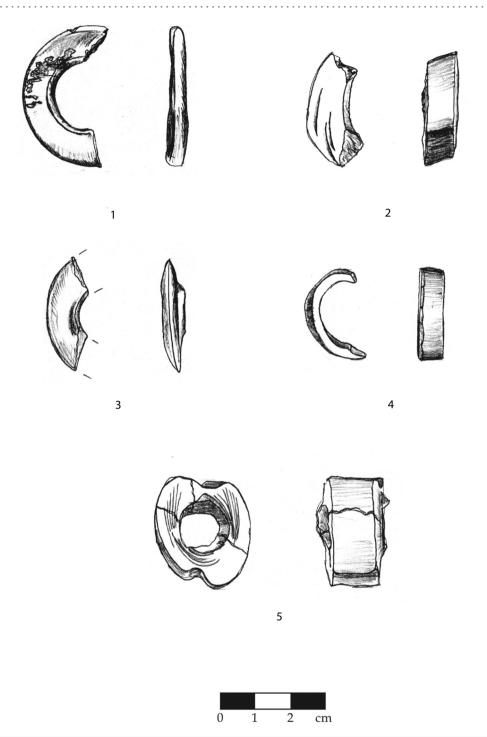
Pendants may have been worn as jewellery pieces, on the necklace, as single piece or part of a composite necklace, or perhaps they were sawn to the clothes.

Beads represent smaller objects, of different shapes and sizes, which had hollow positioned in such a way that it allowed them to be lined up on a string.

Three beads made from Dentalium shell were discovered, Stč 006, 142, 165 (t. I/6, 5, 4). They have a natural shape of elongated tubes; their edges were broken and they bear no traces of manufacture. It is interesting to note that they were of substantial size – their preserved length is about 2–3 cm and width circa 0.7 cm. Also, it is important that these are the first Dentalium beads known so far in Starčevo culture.

Dentalium beads were widespreaded in prehistory (Taborin 2004); as examples from Neolithic here could be mentioned several pieces from Dubova – Cuina Turcului in Romania (Beldiman 2007: 135).

³ In the catalogue, it is noted that this object was made from tusk (McPherron, Rasson and Galdikas 1988: 330, t. 11.10). However, personal inspection revealed that it was also made of bone. I would like to thank to prof. V. Dimittrijević for the help with distinguishing raw materials.



••• PLATE II Type 4. Discs and rings: 1. Stč 004, Spondylus disc; 2. Stč 056; 3. Stč 183; 4. Stč 122; 5. Stč 060, bone rings;

ТАБЛА II Тип 4. Дискови и прстење: Стч 004, диск од спондилуса; Стч 122, коштани прстен;

Similar to the pendants, these beads may have represented jewellery pieces, i. e. they were part of a composite necklace, or perhaps they were sawn to the clothes.

Artefacts in a shape of open or closed band or chain, with dimensions that allowed them to be worn on the wrist or arm, are classified into bracelets.

Three fragmented bracelets made of Spondylus shell were discovered, Stč 022, 055 and 132 (t. I/8, 7, 9). Due to fragmentation, it is difficult to say anything more regarding their shape or manufacture, however, fine lines from polishing may be observed on a bracelet Stč 055 (t. I/7). These bracelets may have been worn on hands, i. e. as true bracelets, judging from their form and size.

Spondylus bracelets are more common in Vinča culture (cf. Dimitrijević and Tripković 2002; 2006), than on Starčevo culture sites; however, this may not reflect the real picture, but more the state of research. So far, three fragmented pieces were discovered at Starčevo layers at Drenovac in central Pomoravlje region (Vitezović 2007: 163–4). Also Spondylus ornaments are mentioned in Early Neolithic layers of Divostin (McPherron, Rasson and Galdikas 1988: 330).

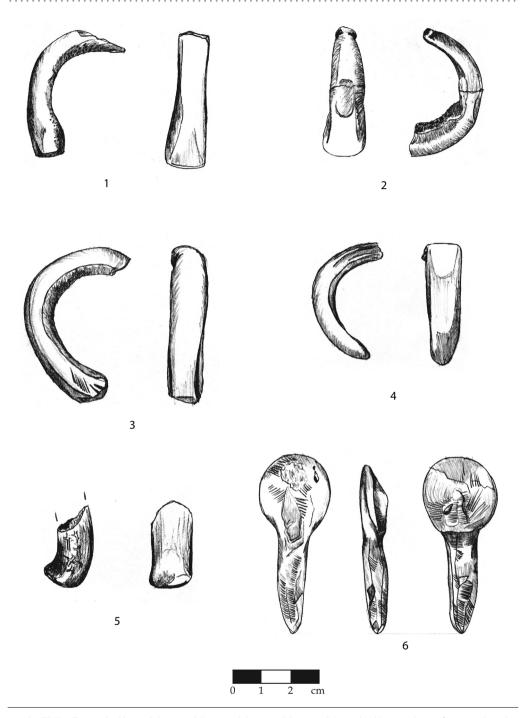
Smaller rings and objects similar to them, in a form of a disc or oval plate with larger hole in the centre were classified into fourth type of decorative objects.

Total number of five objects in the shape of disc or ring were discovered (t. II). Except for Stč 004, made from Spondylus shell, all the others (Stč 056, 060, 122, 183 – t. II/2, 5, 4, 3) were made of bones. Larger long bones were transversally cut into pieces of different dimensions. To cut thick bone walls, it was necessary first to make a groove. The line of the groove may have been marked with a flint tool and the groove itself was made with an abrasive fibre, and finally the inner diameter of bone was cut with an axe or broken by flexion. Some of the objects were also polished with some fine-grained abrasive stone.

Only one of these objects, Stč 122 (t. II/4), could have actually been worn as a ring, on a finger. All the others were more in a disc shape, and their thickness made them impossible to be rings sensu stricto. They were probably worn as part of necklaces, sawn to the clothes etc. Traces of use observed on them consist of slightly worn surfaces.

Objects made in the same fashion, also appear on sites of Körös and Criş culture (Makkay 1990: 45; Beldiman 2007: 138), but also on other Neolithic sites in Europe (e. g. Pascual Benito 1998: 152–6).

Similar type of artefacts, in a shape of rectangular or oval plate with hole in the centre, is known at some Early Neolithic sites (e. g. Stratouli 1998: taf. 27/ 9; 32/ 4, 5). These objects were made in a completely different way – piece was cut from the wall of the long bone and then a larger hole was made. It is interesting to note that debris from such large perforation was discovered at Starčevo, but matching pieces are unknown.



••• PLATE III. Type 5. Buckles: 1. Stč 061; 2. Stč 017; 3. Stč 059; 4. Stč 095; 5. Stč 178, buckles in a shape of an open bracelet; 6. Stč 074, clasp or button in a shape of thin rod with rounded head.

ТАБЛА **III**. Тип 5. Копче: 1. Стч 061; 2. Стч 017; 3. Стч 059; 4. Стч 095; 5. Стч 178, копче у виду отворене наруквице; 6. Стч 074; копча или дугме у виду танког штапића са кружном главом.

Artefacts of different shapes and sizes, presumably used as some sort of clasps, belt buckles, or fasteners for clothes, are classified into this type. Two subtypes can be recognized.

Five unusual objects, all fragmented, in the shape of an open bracelet, were discovered, Stč 017, 059, 061, 095 and 178 (t. III/ 2, 3, 1, 4, 5). They were all made from long bones of considerable size, from large ungulates, probably Bos. Bones were cut transversally and the chosen segment of the bone was part of diaphysis closest to the epiphysis (judging by its interior tissue), where the bone has the largest diameter.

Bones were cut in the same manner as for ring production, by making a groove with abrasive fibre; however, traces of cutting were not preserved due to intensive burnishing and polishing in later phases of manufacture. All these objects have carefully shaped heads, made by cutting and whittling with a flint tool, and all the surfaces were carefully polished with some fine-grained stone.

The diameter of these objects is between 3 and 5 cm, however, as they are all broken in the middle, their original shape is unknown – whether they were in a shape of a half-circle or almost full circle. This breakage is probably due to use – these peculiar artefacts may have been used as some sort of belt buckles or clasps for clothing pieces (for cloaks, for example), but also as hooks used to hold together several bags or something similar.

Although sometimes considered to be fish hooks, the thickness of the broken part does not support such an interpretation, i. e. the broken part is too thick to end as sharp point, and the preserved part differs from unbroken fish hooks. Also careful polishing suggests decorative purpose.

Similar artefacts, sometimes highly decorated, are known from near eastern Neolithic sites – from Çatal Hüyük (Mellart 1963: pl. XXVII and 1964: 102), and also in Greece (Stratouli 1998) and in Körös culture (Makkay 1990: 40).

Another probable clothing piece was found, Stč 074 (t. III/6), in the shape of a thin rod with rounded head. The object was made from a piece cut out from a long bone, and has traces of grinding and polishing. Intense polish from use is visible on all surfaces, suggesting that piece was in long contact with soft materials, such as textile or leather. It may have been used as some sort of button or decorative needle. This polish is even on all surfaces, therefore the head could not have been active part of a tool, because it does not stand out from the rest of the object by polish quality and intensity. Also the head is convex, and therefore it could not have been used as a tool (it would became flat from use).

One similar object was discovered at Crnokalačka Bara (cf. Tasić and Tomić 1969, t. XVII/2), and also in Romania, on the site Carcea–Viaduct (Beldiman 2007: pl. 197).

Use and discard

The use of all these objects was partly or entirely decorative, they were worn as jewellery or as clothing pieces. All of them, except for unfinished tooth pendant, were in the use, and many of them show polish and worn surface from use, and some even breakage due to use. Long use and small number of specimen suggest that these were valued objects and most of them were discarded when it was no longer possible to use them due to breakage.

Chronological and geographical position

Decorative objects from osseous materials in Starčevo–Körös–Criş complex are too few in number to show any variations in time, therefore it is not possible to determine whether some types are typical for only one phase or were they used throughout longer time span. For example, globular pendants were found at Starčevo but also at Divostin, in Protostarčevo layers (see above).

Geographically, decorative objects from Starčevo show both connections with southern and northern Early and Middle Neolithic sites, as well as some traits of near eastern origin. Within Starčevo–Körös–Criş complex, globular pendants may be considered as typical for Starčevo, while rings and decorative plates made from long bones were found on sites in use in wider area. Also specific for Starčevo site were Dentalium beads, which, although present in different prehistoric cultures, are not found often and rarely in large numbers.

Symbolical meaning of decorative objects from Starčevo

Objects used as jewellery have not only aesthetic, but also symbolic significance and they played a role in expressing social status and/or identity of one individual or of a whole group (Taborin 2004). Exact meaning, of course, is not possible to determine, however, certain observations can be made. First observation regards the very choice of raw materials. The reason for choosing osseous materials for decorative objects may be in their white colour, especially when it comes to shells. It is interesting to note that some other decorative objects found at Early Neolithic layers at Divostin were made of white stones (cf. McPherron, Rasson and Galdikas 1988) - they may have been chosen because their colour was imitation for shell/bone artefacts, or the white colour was important for both classes of objects. Also the very origin of osseous materials from different living beings may be the source for their symbolic meaning. The choice of predominantly large ungulate bones, probably all cattle, is especially significant. As noted above, majority of tools were produced from small ungulate bones and from antlers, while cattle bones were predominant or exclusive raw materials for several very special types and subtypes of objects. This may suggest that the symbolic meaning of these objects was augmented or underlined by use of cattle bones and that the cattle itself held special significance.

Objects from Spondylus shells are usually considered to be luxury, exotic items, evidence of large-scale exchange and trade in prehistoric Europe. Finds from Starčevo are important for mapping exchange and trade routes in this period.

The other important thing to consider when it comes to manufacture of decorative objects is large labour and skill investment. Numerous stages in manufacture process, including careful polishing as final stage, and lack of ad hoc or less carefully made specimens suggest that the skill itself was important, as prerogative for production and/or as one of the factors for increasing the value.

Conclusion

Although relatively small, collection of decorative objects from Starčevo shows interesting variety. All the osseous materials used in Starčevo culture were also used for decorative objects – bones, teeth, antler and shells. Most common, however, were shells and large ungulate bones. Shaping techniques vary also, and cover a range from objects that have minimally changed natural shape to elaborated and carefully worked pieces.

As to the forms of decorative objects, it may be noted that some of them show near eastern influences (such as belt buckles in a shape of an open bracelet), some of them fit into Starčevo–Körös–Criş complex (such as rings, oval plates and buttons in a shape of a thin rod with circular head), while some may be characteristic of central Balkan – south Pannonia region (such as globular pendants).

Translated by Selena M. Vitezović

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Неолитски украсни предмети од коштаних сировина са локалитета Старчево-Град

У раду су анализирани украси од коштаних сировина са локалитета Старчево–Град, један сегмент иначе слабо познате коштане индустрије старчевачке културе. Укупно двадесет предмета углавном потиче са ископавања са почетка 20. века, и чувају се у Народном музеју у Београду и Народном музеју у Панчеву.

Од коштаних сировина заступљене су љуштуре шкољки, кости, рогови и зуби. Љуштуре шкољки су најбројније и присутне су две врсте – спондилус и денталијум (Spondylus, Dentalium sp.). Од костију, углавном се користе кости крупних унгулата, вероватно од говечета, док се остале кости, рогови и зуби, користе спорадично.

Технолошки посматрано, присутни су предмети код којих је првобитном комаду сировине мало или нимало измењен облик, као и предмети код којих је сировина дуготрајно обрађивана и на којима је видљиво велико улагање времена и велика вештина мајстора.

Од типова предмета заступљени су привесци, перле, наруквице, кружни дискови и прстење, као необични предмети, који су вероватно служили као нека врста копче.

Међу привесцима, посебно се издваја један лоптасти привезак са перфорацијом у горњем делу, израђен од кости. Још је нађен један оштећени правоугаони привезак од кортекса рога, као и недовршени привезак, зуб са започетом перфорацијом. Од перли, познате су само перле од денталијум шкољки, минимално или нимало промењеног природног облика. Од наруквица, нађена су три фрагментована примерка од спондилус шкољки.

Нађен је један предмет који је могао представљати прави прстен, израђен од кости, као и неколико предмета сличне форме, у виду диска или кружне плочице са рупом у средини, који, међутим, нису могли бити ношени као право прстење. Неколико је израђено од костију, тако што су веће дуге кости трансверзално дељене на комаде, али је један израђен од спондилус шкољке.

Пета група предмета обухвата два подтипа. Први је подтип копчи у виду отворене наруквице. Сви су предмети фрагментовани, тако да је тешко реконструисати њихов првобитни облик. Сви су израђени од већих дугих костију, вероватно од говечета, и имају пажљиво обликоване главе и исполиране површине. Други подтип представљен је необичним предметом у виду танког штапића са кружном главом, од кости, који је не само пажљиво исполиран, већ има и интензивно углачане површине од употребе, што указује да је био у дугом контакту са меким материјалима, као што су тканина и кожа.

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Ови су предмети могли бити ношени као појединачни или комбиновани украсни предмети (део огрлице, наруквице и сл.), пришивени на одећу, или су имали функцију копче или дугмета.

Изузев предмета од спондилуса, остали су вероватно израђени локално, чему у прилог говори и полуфабрикат од зуба. Опет изузев предмета од спондилуса, форме показују како блискоисточне утицаје, тако и одређене локалне специфичности, односно одлике старчевачке културе.

Симболичко значење ових предмета могло би бити везано за саме сировине од којих су направљени, односно, могло је бити повезано са белом бојом, или са пореклом од живих животиња, што је посебно упадљиво у случају предмета који су израђени искључиво од костију крупних унгулата.