

Tracing symbols of life and symbols of death in Neolithic archaeological contexts

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ABSTRACT – *Since Early Neolithic several miscellaneous objects seem to have served for self-decoration keeping though a symbolic meaning as they are found in certain repeated types which must have been recognisable and accepted by all as "signifiers" of social and ideological information. This inventory was enriched during the following Middle Neolithic, while in the Late and Final Neolithic they seem to be, at least some of them, if not all, the result of systematic production for commercial purpose as they were made in Greece but destined mainly for the markets of Europe, where they were found usually in graves as symbols of social and financial gradations, and in this sense they also functioned symbolically as "signifiers".*

IZVLEČEK – *Verjetno so od zgodnjega neolitika naprej nekateri predmeti služili osebnemu krašenju, čeprav so ohranili simbolni pomen. Izbrani tipi predmetov, so bili prepoznani kot nosilci socialnih in ideoloških informacij. Ta inventar je postal bogatejši v srednjem neolitiku, v poznem neolitiku ter ob koncu neolitika pa so začeli nekatere, če že ne vseh, sistematično izdelovati v komercialne namene. Izdelovali so jih v Grčiji, vendar so bili večinoma namenjeni za evropski trg, kjer so jih kot simbole socialnega statusa pogosto našli v grobovih.*

KEY WORDS – *Neolithic; Greece; shelf decoration; symbols*

INTRODUCTION

When discussing symbols and symbolism we must refer to objects and behaviours that could function in the same way for all concerned, those who owned a particular object (or behaved in a certain way) and those who faced them. Thus we should emphasize certain items found in Neolithic contexts in Greece which we believe have a symbolic meaning. Symbolic objects are known since the Palaeolithic in Europe and in Greece and, though they form a very limited record in comparison to the Neolithic, they are very important for the history of symbolism. In the Neolithic, however, dozens of miscellaneous objects could be categorized as having a symbolic meaning. Facing them as isolated items of art only, we could not explain their presence in a total context. But if we have the opportunity to study a whole assemblage from one excavated site, or if we repeatedly

find rather similar objects from several sites in a geographical unit, then we can 'see' in them behaviours and symbolisms reflecting general beliefs, more or less common, among wide-ranging populations. Within a different environment the same kind of objects can have quite different meanings and symbolisms. In this paper we will indicate some such objects from Neolithic excavations in Thessaly which I believe must have functioned as part of a symbolic code of communication.

THE INVENTORY

Symbolism in Neolithic times seems to be expressed in several ways: among them, self-decoration was practiced by mobile items which have been preser-

ved today as beliefs and indications of life and of death that cannot be recognized in other ways.

Self-decoration would certainly not have been a basic need, in the sense of food gathering/producing or pottery making. Nevertheless, such objects are found as early as in the Upper Palaeolithic period. In the early stages, self-decoration objects were made of animal bone (usually teeth) and seashell – that is, of objects that were found in nature, and were processed by means of drilling a hole in them so as they could be hung.

During the Early Neolithic period in Greece, self-decoration objects were of clay or stone, usually in simple forms which sometimes were resumed under the same type, and appear to have remained in more or less the same forms into the Middle Neolithic. Their use became more widespread in the Late Neolithic, when there was extended use of the seashell *Spondylus gaederopus*, from which specific ‘types’ of self-decoration objects were made.

Neolithic self-decoration objects (Kyparissi-Apostolika 2001) exhibit a great variety of motifs and materials. The natural environment impressed the people of the Neolithic, and their objects depicted fruits

and crops and imitated the tools and artefacts by which they were surrounded. Neolithic people wore finger-rings, bracelets and necklaces that resemble those worn by primitive peoples today, and indeed also by civilized peoples; these were superbly crafted and demonstrate the technical knowledge and tools of the period. Although formal classification of these objects would do an injustice to its enormous formal variety, it may perhaps be divided on the basis of form into: anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, imitations of fruit, items of domestic furniture, bracelets, finger-rings, ‘earrings’, beads, ‘buttons’, plain objects, normally in natural or slightly sophisticated shapes, usually with one, and rarely with two or three holes, and also fibulae for fastening belts. Shells also seem to have been pierced and worn, mainly seashells, but also freshwater shells, which normally retained their natural form.

Most of the self-decoration objects have a hole which enabled them to be hung as pendants, while others, like bracelets, seem to have been worn on the body or sewn onto clothing. Some of them seem to have had profound meaning for the life of these people, as we find them repeatedly, and some of them share common features in rather long distances. In Greece, in contrast to the rest of Europe, these kinds of object are not found in graves, and hence are related to life rather than death. (Here we must stress that Neolithic grave finds are still very rare in Greece).

Among the anthropomorphic pendants (Fig. 1), special mention should be made of the ring-idols, which are thought to have been representations of the human form. Their original shape should possibly be sought in the Aurignacian period (Arcy-sur-Cur, France, Marshack 1990.465, Fig. 17.4) In Greece, two stone ring-idols have been found in Thessaly, at Dimini (Fig. 1. a, b) (Chourmouziadis 1979), and one of terracotta at Pefkakia (Weisshaar 1989.Pl.XVII, 1). Four more stone ones were discovered elsewhere in Greece (one at the Kitsos cave in Attica (Vialou 1981.Pl. L-1), one at the lacustrine settlement of Dispilio in Kastoria (Chourmouziadis 1996. Fig. 14β), and recently two at the Neolithic settlement at Strofilas on

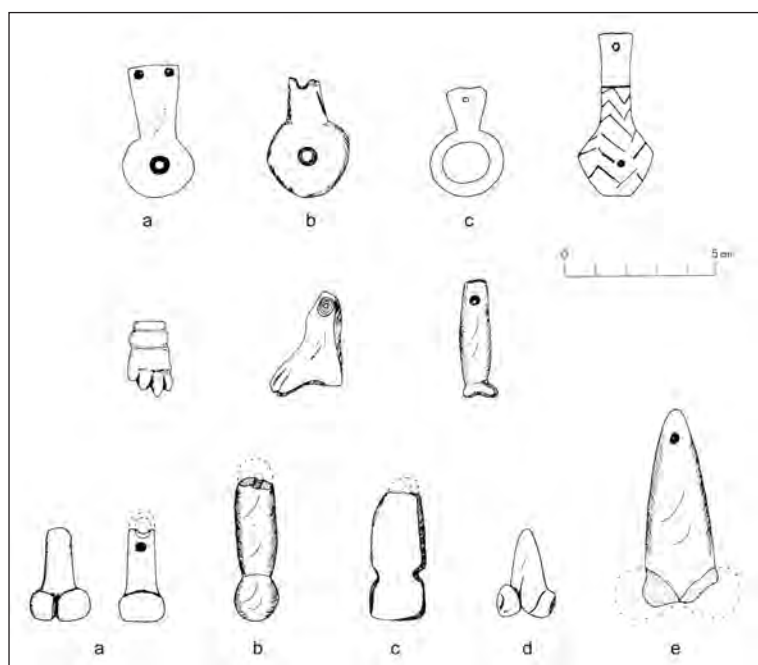


Fig. 1. Upper row: Anthropomorphic pendants: a, b, Stone ring-idols from Dimini; c, gold ring-idol from Theopetra cave. Middle row: Imitations of hand/leg (?) and two legs, from private collections in Thessaly (K. Theodoropoulos and St. Papanikolaou). Bottom row: Phallic representations: a, from Theopetra cave; b, d, from the above private collections; c, e, from the Museums of Almyros and Dimini respectively.

Andros *Televantou 2004.Fig. 20*). A few gold ring-idols have also been found: one at Sesklo (*Tsountas 1908.350, Fig. 291*), one in the Theopetra cave (Fig. 1. c) (*Kyparissi-Apostolika 2000.234, Fig. 14.20.3; 2001.Pl. 34.23*), two in the area of Aravissos, Yiannitsa, and one in the Thessalian Plain between Volos and Larissa (*Grammenos 1991.109, Pl. 30.3,4*). The latter two cases were chance surface finds. Four more silver rings of the same type have been discovered at various sites in Greece, mostly in caves: one at Alepotrypa in Diros (*Papathanassopoulos 1996.Fig. 299*), one at the cave of Euripides on Salamis (*Lolos 1998.64, no. 62; Mari 2003*), one from the cave of Eileithyia in Crete – although referred to as later, belonging to the proto-Minoan I-II period (*Marinatos 1932.98, Fig. 9; Makkay 1976.257–258, Fig. 21*), and one from Poliochni on Lemnos (*Bernabò-Brea 1964.359, 376, Pl. CLXX, 3, CLXXVII, 25*). Two similar ring idols made of copper were found at the Late Neolithic site of Makriyalos in Pieria (*Pappa et al. 1998*). These clearly recall similar gold jewelry from the Balkans (*Makkay 1985; 1989*), and large numbers of them have been found at the cemetery of Varna in Bulgaria (*Nikolov 1988.221, Figs. 22, 153, 163*). All the above-mentioned finds were from Final Neolithic layers in Greece.

The discovery of this type of object in Greece is significant, and points to trade with the Balkans. A whole treasure, though, of some dozens of such gold objects (*Dimakopoulou 1998*), was recently seized by the police in Athens, creating a new problem concerning their origin. In the relevant bibliography, there is a debate as to whether the stone and clay examples are earlier than the metal ones (*Makkay 1989.39*), or whether they are cheap imitations (*Kyparissi-Apostolika 2001.56*) like the clay bracelets of Anza in Serbia, which imitated the shell ones from the Aegean (*Gimbutas 1976.242–256, Figs. 215–16*).

The presence of this type of pendant from the Black Sea area to Crete, the southernmost part of Greece, and the Aegean islands as far as Anatolia, assumes that this represents a symbol easily recognisable those who saw and used it. Additionally, as it was found in a rich context in the Balkans (the graves at Varna) and made of precious material, usually gold, later less commonly of silver and bronze, it certainly reflects the high economic status of its owners. Moreover, the fact that assemblages of whole treasures of them are sometimes found together, strengthens even more the notion that they were symbols of wealth and power. In Greece, however, as they

are not grave goods we cannot confirm such a hypothesis. Additionally, apart from mobile objects, they are found as decorative motifs on the pottery from Dimini (*Hourmouziadis et al. 1982.80, Fig. 50*) and painted on the rocks in the Cycladic island of Andros (*Televantou 2004*), which reinforces our opinion that they were symbols comprehensible to everyone in this period.

Phallic representations (Fig. 1. bottom) as pendants are known in Greece from Late Neolithic layers (*Vialou 1981.Fig. 284; Sampson 1993.202, Fig. 199; Kyparissi-Apostolika 2001.58, Fig. 2:24, Fig. 33:24*), while in some cases they are surface finds, or come from private collections, and in these cases we cannot be sure about the layer of their origin. Phallic representations are very common throughout human history, the oldest dates from the Aurignacian period and is carved on a bison horn found in the rock shelter at Blanchard des Roches in Sergeac, Dordogne in France (*Art et Civilisations 1984, Fig. 23*). Still today, phallic representations are popular and certain festivals dedicated to them. In the Neolithic period, it seems more than certain that they also have functioned as sexual symbols.

Depicting arms and legs (Fig. 1. middle row), usually with some apparent health problem (e.g. fewer fingers than usual) recalls the *ex votos* dedicated in Christian churches and they certainly must be reckoned as functioning symbolically.

Zoomorphic

Among the various forms of zoomorphic pendants (Fig. 2), of special interest are those depicting the face of the animal, which is always the same (Fig. 3). These objects are circular, with one convex surface, at the centre of which there is invariably a low, nipple-like projection. They were suspended by means of two holes, normally pierced near the edge. In my opinion, the facial features could be those of a pig, since it has a totally distinct snout, which I believe is rendered by the protrusion, while the eyes are indicated by the two holes. This type is found all over Thessaly and also in other parts of Greece, such as Agios Petros in the Sporades (*Efstratiou 1985.46, Pl. 46b*), the Franchthi cave in the Peloponnese (*Jacobsen 1976.83*) and the Tharrounia cave on Euboea (*Sampson 1993.Fig. 216*). These objects come from excavations of all the Neolithic phases, from the Early, Middle and Late Neolithic, while in Thessaly a good number of them come from private collections and we cannot be sure about their strati-

graphic horizon (*Kyparissi-Apostolika* 2001.64–66). These pendants give the impression of a mask rather than a naturalistic representation of the animal, and they could work as amulets reflecting earlier times when hunters were metamorphosed into animals by means of and hides in order to trick animals and kill them. These imitations of old masks could have worked as amulets in Neolithic times, helping hunters in pursuit of wild pig.

Plant imitations

Plants have always played an important role in human nutrition, much greater than meat, as it was easier to collect them, and therefore the nutritional value they provide, than to hunt animals. Even today when there is no need to hunt for eat meat, in terms of diet plants are invaluable. Fig, almond, wild olive, apple, pear, blackberry, grape etc., are among the plants identified in Prehistoric Thessaly. But, seeing objects of personal adornment in this category (Fig. 4), one can assume that there certain species were selected for representation: gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*), having the property of floating (Fig. 4. c, d) and pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) (Fig. 4. a, b) are the commonest among them. Pomegranate has always been used as a symbol of life and death (*Muthmann 1982*), for its globular belly full of seeds is a symbol of women's fertility in marriage ceremonies in Greek villages. Another species found repeatedly in Thessaly as a portable object has a biconical shape with mastoid apophyses on the surface and a pierced axis along its length for hanging (Fig. 4, bottom). Plants of this form are not rare in Greece. But the most dominant, to my mind, is the prickly pear (*Opuntia ficus indica*) with quills on its surface, represented by mastoid apophyses in Neolithic imitations. The two edges of this plant also resemble the edges of the pierced axis of Neolithic pendants. This species, although not identified among the Neolithic plant finds in Greece (possibly because it was not burnt and therefore preserved like other species subject to heating), seems to be the most possible prototype of this imitation. The same qualifications are in effect for gourds, as imported later into Europe, but there seems to be no doubt that they represent this kind of plant (Fig. 4.

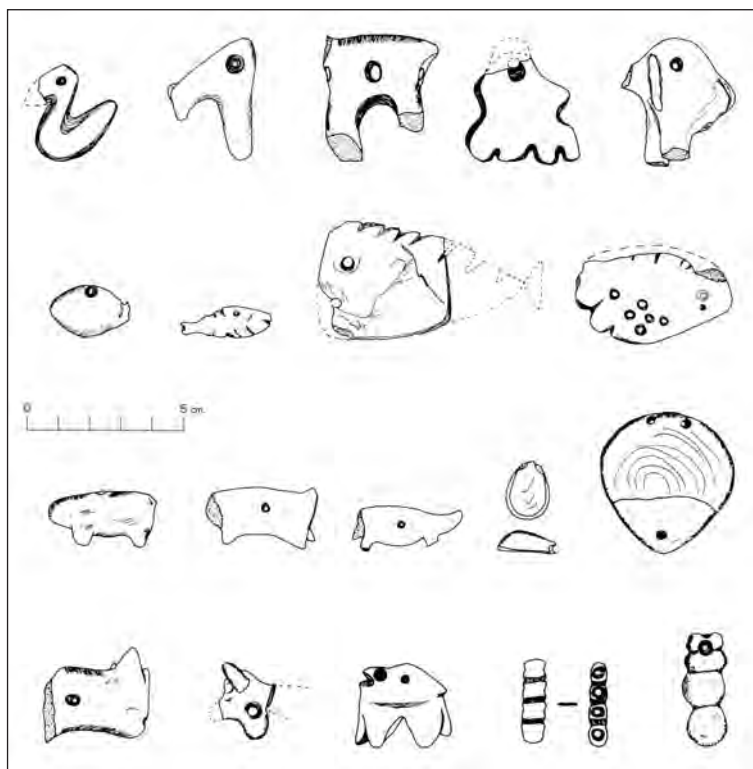


Fig. 2. Zoomorphic pendants of stone, clay and shell from the Museums of Volos, Larissa and Almyros and from the collections of K. Theodoropoulos and St. Papanikolaou.

c, d). All these objects are made of stone, very well worked, and seem to represent the earlier phases of the Neolithic and not the Late Neolithic.

Bracelets. The bracelets found in Greece are generally made of the seashell *Spondylus gaederopus* (there are very few exceptions using other crustacea), which is commonly found in the Mediterranean (Fig. 5). It has been demonstrated that it was mainly the left valve of this shell, thinner and lighter, that was used for the manufacture of bracelets (*Tsuneki 1987*), and this can be an indication of specialization; the right one was used for the manufacture of beads, "buttons" and other objects. These bracelets are to be found in central Greece and further north, while they are rare in southern Greece. It has been proved that the Neolithic inhabitants of Greece supplied their northern neighbours with these as far distant as central Europe (*Williams 1985; Seferiadès 1995*), where they appear to have been highly valued and, because of their rarity, served as prestige items. Analyses with oxygen isotopes on bracelets from several sites in the Balkans and from the site of Sitagri in Greece have shown that they came from the Aegean, not the Black Sea (*Shackleton and Renfrew 1970*). The settlement at Anza in Serbia has yielded an abundance of clay bra-

celets, which, according to the excavator, Gimbutas (1976), seem to be cheap imitations of imports from Greece. Similar bracelets, made of jade, are also found in the Middle East (Mellaart 1970; 1974). In Greece, such shell bracelets are naturally found in settlements near the sea. A large number has been found at Dimini in Thessaly, and the view has been advanced (Tsuneki 1989) that in the Late Neolithic period, Dimini owed its power to the manufacture and trade of self-decoration objects made from these shells. Even when they broke, they were not thrown away: a hole was pierced in them, or a notch cut for a setting, and they were worn as amulets (Fig. 6). Parts of shell bracelets are reported too from East Europe (Comşa 1973), usually found in graves, which this means that they were highly valued, whether complete or not. In the cemetery at Varna they were found with gold jewelry having, consequently, an equal value with them. It is obvious that these decorative items, so precious in Europe because they came from a long distance, seem not to have had the same function in Greece, as they were not found in graves with the dead. As mentioned above, Neolithic graves are very rare in Greece, and actually no Neolithic cemetery has been found.

Earrings (ear-studs?). The interpretation of these tiny objects consisting of two parts, one bigger and one smaller separated by a channel (Fig. 7), are found over a long period from the Aurignacian Paleolithic in Europe (Kozłowski 1992.Fig. 89) to the Early Neolithic in Thessaly (Theocharis 1958; 1959; 1967; Rodden 1962) and have repeatedly concerned prehistorians. Tsountas (1908) thought they were lids for leather flasks, while others have suggested they were buttons, and yet others, earrings. Theocharis (1973.35) described them as the 'ultimate styliza-

tion of the human form', and compared them with Paleolithic models. This seems to be a realistic version, as roughly sculpted anthropomorphic figurines on natural pebbles at the Early Neolithic site of Regini in Pthiotis (*unpublished material: personal communication with the excavator, Sonia Dimaki*) resemble these objects. Their small size, moreover, probably precludes their having any practical function. We may regard them as items of self-decoration, set and either hung around the neck or worn in the hair, with a symbolic meaning, as their shape seems to refer to a certain prototype. All of those found in Greece are from Early Neolithic layers; however, their numbers are still limited. Recently, a good number of them were found in a new Early Neolithic site at 'Revenia' Korinou in Pieria, central Macedonia, Greece (Besios et al. 2005) and since they come from a well stratified excavation, they are expected to shed light on the role they could have played in the life of Early Neolithic populations. Similar objects are reported from Divostin, in central Serbia (McPherron and Srejović 1988.325 Fig. 11.1), from Hacilar in Turkey (Mellaart 1970.160; 1974.115), and from other Balkan sites (Budja 1998.223, 229, Figs. 2, 7). Budja calls them tokens, and relates them to works of earth cultivation having been used as units of measurement and exchange. In parallel, Budja (2003) observing the accumulation of such objects in certain geographical units, believes that there were social barriers that stopped the circulation of such goods over middle and long distances. This isolationism might be seen as a result of the powerful dominance of social and ideological continuity that slowed down the process of social and ideological restructuring of foraging and hunter-gathering communities. Here we must note that the same objects found elsewhere at long distances could express a

quite different symbolism according to the environment of the various locales and populations.

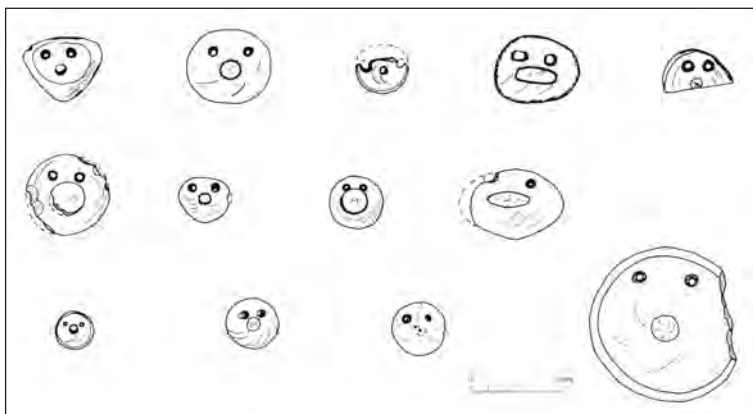


Fig. 3. Zoomorphic 'masks' mainly of stone and less frequently of clay (bottom, the three right ones). They come from the Museum of Volos and from the collections of A. Bastis, K. Theodoropoulos and T. Tloupas.

'Buttons'. Anyone who see will automatically call them buttons, since they genuinely resemble modern buttons (Fig. 8). In Thessaly they are usually made of shell or stone. They almost invariably have two convex surfaces, one plain, and the other with two holes connected to each other to form a V-shape. This particular feature of their manufacture is due to their thinness, since an object has to be very thick to allow a hole to be pierced through it. Objects of

this kind have been found over almost the whole of Europe, sometimes made from bone, sometimes of amber or stone. In Greece they have been reported from Pevkakia (Weisshaar 1989.Pl. 63.32) and Agia Sophia in Thessaly (Milojić *et al.* 1976. 12, Pl. 25:18), Saliagos in Antiparos (Evans-Renfrew 1968.65, Fig. 78.10, Pl.XIVI), the cave of Tharrounia in Eubia (Sampson 1993.220) the Late Neolithic site at Makriyalos in Pieria (Pappa *et al.* 1999). But it is at Dimini where a good quantity of them was found, at least 130 items, of which 119 were found in a single assemblage. Tsountas (1908.336, Pls. 43, 1, 2, 6) reports three more from Dimini. Comparative research among modern pre-industrial peoples suggests they were sewn into clothing as adornments, and perhaps had a symbolic significance, possibly as reflections of wild plants. This interpretation is supported by representations in figurines (Kyparissi-Apostolika 2001. Pl. 40). Amongst the many small buttons (diameter 1-1.5 cm) there are a few larger examples (the only large one from Dimini has a diameter of 3.2 cm). I believe that these belonged to the maker of such 'buttons' who wanted to consolidate their specialization in this way: for the difficulty of making them would have required specialists. If so, we are dealing with symbolic practice again.

Several other pendants, representational or otherwise, were used for self decoration in Neolithic Thessaly and Greece, but it is not known if they had a symbolic meaning. For this reason our inventory ends here.

INTERPRETATIONS

The present function of jewelry is decorative. Can we assert, however, that jewellery was worn purely for decorative purposes in prehistoric times?

It may be assumed that for the production programme of a settlement, some assessment was made of the needs that would have determined the priorities of production.

The manufacture of artefacts not designed to meet the immediate, pressing needs of the group proba-

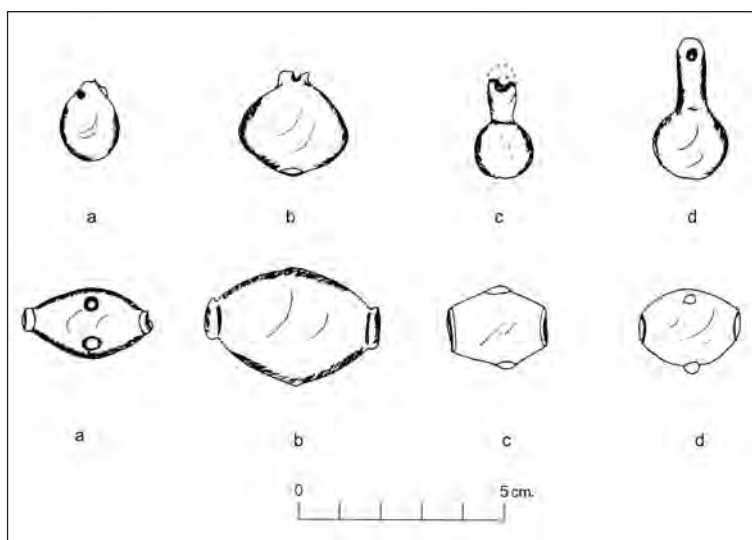


Fig. 4. Plant imitations: a, b, pomegranates, from the Museum of Volos, c, d, gourds from T. Tloupas's collection, the first and from the Museum of Volos. Bottom row: Prickly pears: a, from T. Tloupas' collection; b, from the Museum of Volos; c, d, from K. Theodoropoulos' collection.

bly implies either spare time, which could be made available for non-productive activities, or specialization, and the virtually exclusive engagement of some individuals in making items of this kind. In the latter case, the individuals in question must have lived at the expense of others, as far as the daily productive program of the individual and the group is concerned. For an unequal distribution of the workload of this kind to be acceptable, the manufacture of these items must have served some fairly serious purpose. It does not seem likely that everyone made them for their own use, for most of them were difficult to work. Such a thesis is only tenable in a few cases involving jewellery that was easily worked, such as pierced shells or pebbles.

It is clear from depictions in figurines that Neolithic people wore jewellery, although no example has been found in Greece accompanying a burial, which suggests that they were not yet used as grave goods (last summer a pendant accompanying a Neolithic burial was found at Paliambela in Pieria, Northern Greece – *personal communication with K. Kotsakis*). Jewellery was thus worn during a person's lifetime: had it been purely decorative, it might also have accompanied its owner after death, as a form of movable property. The fact that jewellery was worn during a person's lifetime suggests that wearing it indicated something, symbolised something. Even today, jewellery, despite its decorative function, is an indicator of social status and distinction: the cross, for example, denotes a Christian, and is

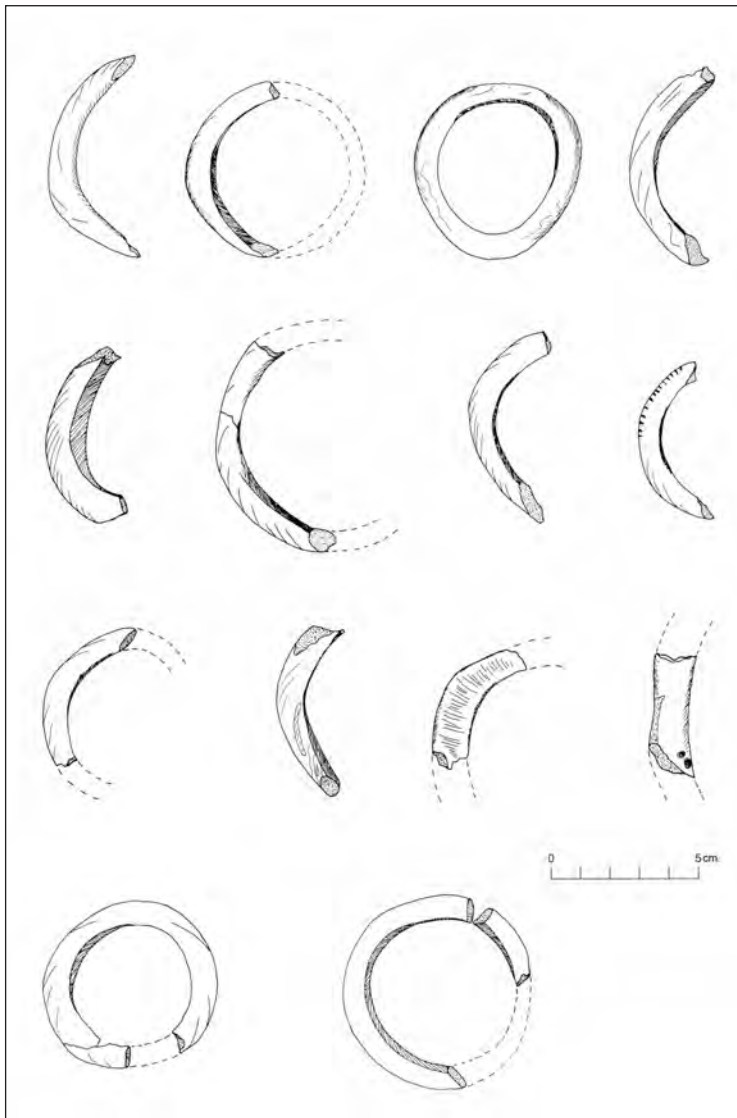


Fig. 5. Bracelets made of the shell *Spondylus gaederopus*, all from Dimini.

not worn by non-Christians. A ring indicates the bonds of marriage, and gold and diamonds reveal the wealth of their owner. Contemporary primitive peoples, moreover, adorn themselves for special occasions and events, and only rarely for decorative purposes. In Mount Hagen, New Guinea, for example, special jewellery is made for war, some of it indicating the strength of the warrior and their desire for victory, and some denoting the evil of war. Special local plants are used by women to attract the opposite sex, while the use of the same plants by both sexes in certain cases denotes their equality (Strathern 1971).

What was this jewellery then? I believe that its decorative function should be considered of only secondary importance. I take it as beyond dispute that people had an inclination to adorn themselves. This

must have begun at an early date, well before the Neolithic, when we can first speak of organized social life. The inclination will have found its first expression in adornments of the head and hair, with flowers or feathers, or possibly by painting the exposed parts of the body, on the occasion of certain events, that is, symbolically again. Why should people begin by hanging an object around the neck? This was probably first done in order to secure the possession of an object that was considered valuable. Hanging it from the neck was tantamount to declaring that it could be taken away only by first cutting off the head. This, I believe, is the origin of the custom of hanging objects around the neck.

At the beginning of human history, art had little to do with beauty and no connection at all with the aesthetic need for beauty. It was a magic weapon used by the human group in its struggle to survive (Fischer 1966). Jewellery in this early period was thus the product of work, a social artefact that was directly linked with its function. The working of a shell or a stone to create a piece of jewellery was the expression of a social purpose.

Through various forms of 'art' prehistoric people provided us with information about their way of life. Art provided the symbolism through which they communicated with each other people and the means by which they tamed the wilderness, fears, and mysteries that were difficult to comprehend. They coincided with their representations, whether fixed or portable, they should dominate them, and finally defeat them. In order to defeat them in the real life, they had first to be defeated them in the mind and soul. And it is wrong to judge the 'art' of those periods by the criteria that we use to judge today's art, because prehistoric 'artists' did not make art for art's sake; they tamed nature and its mysteries with representations which finally bring us information about the period's social structures and their functions.

When at the end of the Pleistocene the climate became milder and the cultivation of plants had be-

gun, new rituals and feasts appeared: for harvesting at the beginning of autumn, feasts for the slaughtering of hogs in winter, and others in spring for the rebirth of nature and life, and others after the ripping if the year had been good for the farmers, customs still found today in agricultural communities in Greece. Furthermore, there were probably rites of passage for boys and girls into early adulthood, and can still be found in many parts of the world today in different forms among civilized and natural societies always in respect to their cultural aspects. The presence of jewellery and idolized symbols probably played a role in those celebrations. For if the ornaments that prehistoric people wore had only decorative purposes it would have been easier for them to use plain and simple jewellery without specific shapes that imitate natural prototypes; therefore, their goal was to state their cultural identities.

Those symbols are not easy to approach for every representation separately, as in order to conceptualize the meaning and the symbolism of a form it is necessary to be familiar with the social context in which it was created, as well as with the reasons that might have influenced its creation, because the same object or form may have different meanings in different places and periods, depending on the social structures and natural environment in which it was created (Hodder 1982 a.173; 1982b.85, 121).

A symbol is a spiritual rather than a physical category, even though symbols might have physical prototypes, because they help us conceptualize the idea that it represents (Firth 1975.56). It is the concept of an object – and not the object itself – that provides power (Hodder 1990.281). Humans show a natural tendency towards the creation of symbols (Zaffé 1964.232). Symbolic representation is a basic function of human consciousness (Firth 1975.57). The objects through which symbolism is materialized become meaningful, and thus the sphere of objects becomes the historical product of human practice. The objective form of artefacts is always connected with the sum of the relationships that constitute social formations (Shanks and Tilley 1982.130), which is

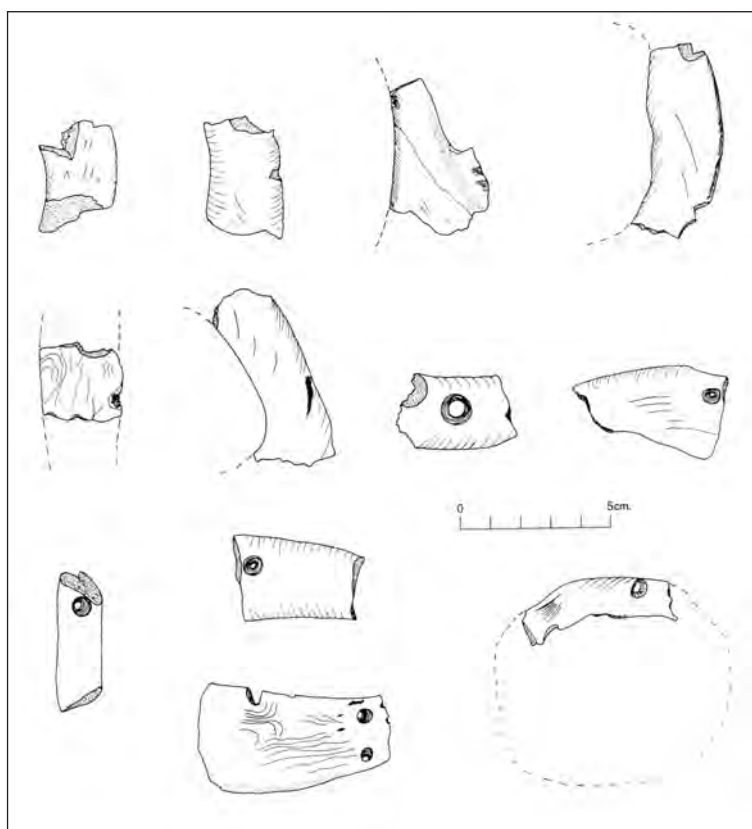


Fig. 6. Parts of bracelets, perhaps broken on purpose, made of the right valve of the shell. On some of them holes were made, possibly for hanging. The pierced ones come mainly from the area of Almyros, the rest from Dimini

to say that they become ideological mirrors. Objects become the origin of ideology. An object is defined by its social status, the ideas that it represents are displayed in the object itself, and its meaning lies in the fields of interpretation that separate it from others with criteria socially defined. In this sense, the meaning of an object can never be static, and its interpretation never-ending, and always open to new definitions (Hodder 1988.68).

Through people's activities, ideological representations are embodied in the material products of those practices and become at the same time creators and creations. Furthermore, since social relationships entail symbolism, ideological and symbolic characters are inseparable (Bourdieu 1979a.81).

However, as Binford (1962) has put it, "we cannot excavate a social system or an ideology". However, prehistoric archaeologists have to try to put into a context and interpret the objects that are found disconnected from the functions that they served in the cultural and social matrix where they originally belonged; they have to produce social interpretations of archaeological objects.

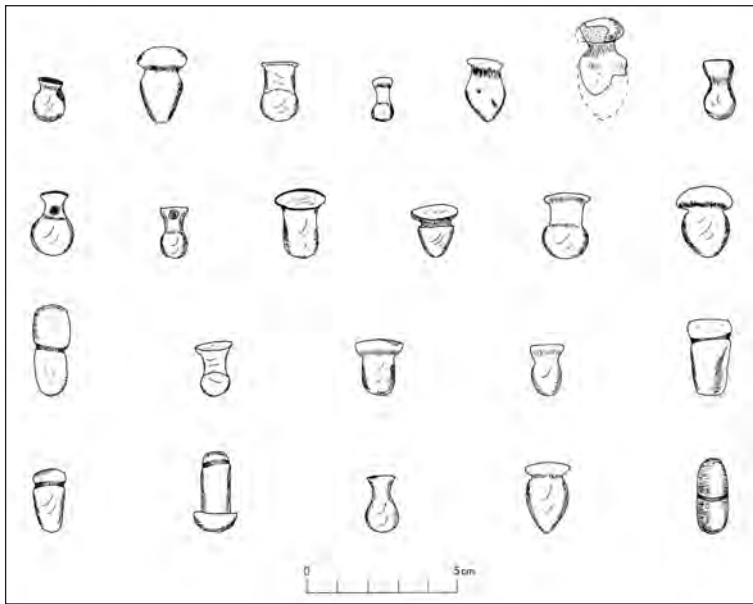


Fig. 7 'Earrings' from the Museums of Volos, Almyros and Larissa and from private collections. Made mainly from stone and rarely from clay (second row, the two right ones) and shell (bottom, left).

In this sense, every form of art refers to the time that it was made, and its interpretation should always be drawn in the respective cultural context. Anything conceptualized is a symbol, and a concept is anything that can be symbolised. A piece of pottery in the context of an excavation can give us information about its owner's social status as well as the cultural level of the group that made it, according to its shape, quality of raw materials, and ornamentation. On the other hand, if this piece of pottery is found outside its context, none of this information could be available to us. A prehistoric stone tool gives us information about how it was made and from what, as well as about the period's social relations, which actually transformed raw material into an actual cultural form via a unique technological mode (Edmonds 1995.9-19). In this sense, a stone implement shaped to look like a natural prototype, transforms and becomes the prototype itself, and material culture is turned into shapes, names and concepts. The concepts of such objects are embedded not only in the maker's mind, but also in the rest of the group. Every spiritual aspect that goes beyond the limits of consciousness becomes a sign, due to our ability to regulate

information. In the group's consciousness it coincides with specific concepts which have been defined by the inherent subjectivity that the members of the group share through the same experiences. The makers to the group and vice versa are transmitting a concept. It is used as a medium among members of the group and can be comprehended from the transmitter and the receiver equally well.

Thus the objects mentioned above should be regarded as symbols of social differentiation (Faris 1983. 105). The fact that the material that forms the subject of this study contains groups of similar pieces indicates that each type must have had some meaning. By wearing it, the owner not only secured ownership

of the object itself, but also protected some special occupation, expertise or privilege, or symbolised special conditions, like pregnancy, searching for a partner, etc.

The making of jewellery that served specific purposes and had been given a specific shape, constituted

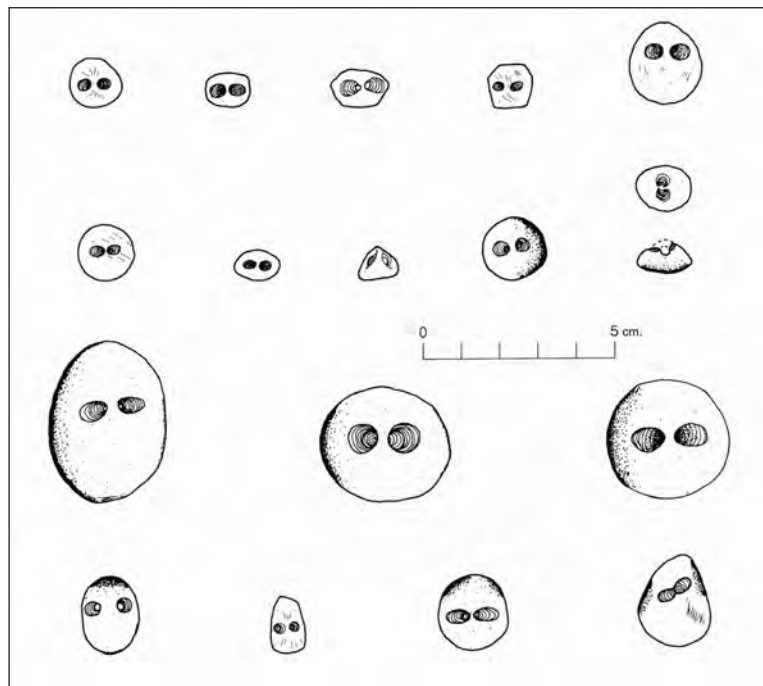


Fig. 8 'Buttons', made of shell and stone. They come from Dimini, and from the private collections of A. Bastis and St. Papanikolaou. The large ones, all made of stone, come from A. Bastis' collection (the two left) and from Dimini the other.

the coding of already existing ideas, a coding that aimed at the recognition of these objects not only by the catechized, but also by the rest of society, since they were inspired by natural phenomena. Therefore, these objects constituted symbols of specific concepts that made co-operation and communication easier between individuals and groups during a period when verbal communication was still very poor.

This is the philosophy which I believe should be used when studying jewellery that seems to be imitating a prototype or seems to form a symbol. How-

ever, the same philosophy should be used to study the more “commercial” jewellery of the Later Neolithic, which seems to have been produced mainly for economic reasons, but keeps nevertheless its status as the incarnation of social relationships between peoples from remote geographical locations who were engaged in trade and exchange. Through this exchange of exotic goods, social differentiations emerged, not only inside settlements, but in the trading whole network. This is also apparent from the rising trend for economic control of such goods by the ‘ruling class’ that evolved gradually along with the evolution of trade.

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