

ŐSRÉGÉSZETI TANULMÁNYOK / PREHISTORIC STUDIES

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MOMENTS IN TIME

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MOMENTS IN TIME

Papers Presented to Pál Raczky
on His 60th Birthday

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Utilitarian, Artistic, Ritual or Prestige Articles? The Possible Function of an Enigmatic Artefact

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The find material of the Late Copper Age Baden culture includes a small, cylindrical artefact, terminating in two flat discs (H. 4–6 cm). Artefacts of this type, known mainly from settlements and cemeteries of the early Baden period from the culture's entire distribution, are generally interpreted as spools or spindle whorls, i.e. as accessories of spinning and weaving. Were they indeed used as such?

This brief study offers an overview of the possible functions previously suggested for these artefacts (Figs 1–3), ranging from spools used in spinning and weaving, pestles for crushing salt, scale weights, grinders and polishers used by metalsmiths, to the headrest of Cycladic figurines, stands for vessels and hair braid clamps, alongside new possible interpretations (Figs 4–6). While the actual meaning attached to these artefacts remains enigmatic, the contexts in which these spools have been found (wagon model, vessel modelled in the shape of a female body, Bratislava type bowls, etc.) certainly support an interpretation as a ritual object. The Anatolian and Mesopotamian examples would rather reflect a special usage, perhaps as a symbolic artefact expressing prestige or as a ritual object. It therefore seems likely that these artefacts had a non-domestic, unusual meaning during the Late Copper Age.

A késő rézkori badeni kultúra leletanyagában létezik egy kis méretű, hengeres testű, a két végén lapított koronggal lezárt, általában 4–6 cm hosszú eszköz. A nagy területen megtalálható, telepen és temetőben egyaránt előforduló, elsősorban a kultúra korai időszakára jellemző tárgyat a kutatók döntő többsége spulninak vagy orsógombnak tartja, azaz a szövés-fonás egyik kellékeként értékeli. Vajon tényleg az volt?

E rövid tanulmányban bemutatom az ismert tárgyak (Figs 1–3) funkciójára vonatkozó elképzeléseket (szövés-fonás eszköze, sókészítés kelléke, mérlegsúly, mozsártörő, dörzsölőkő, polírozó eszköz, kükládikus idolk fej támasza, edénytartó eszközök, hajfonat rögzítő) és újabb lehetséges használati módokra hívom fel a figyelmet (Figs 4–6). Több lelőhelyen is olyan különleges funkciójú leletekkel fordul elő (pl. kocsimodell, kebles edény, bratislavai típusú tál, stb.), amelyeknek szakrális tartalma nem vitatható. Törött állapotában is sírba kerülhetett, ami ugyancsak ezt támasztja alá. Az anatóliai és közel-keleti példák is a különleges tartalmat vagy a kultikus funkciót bizonyítják, a „spulni”/guriga tehát nem hétköznapi eszköz volt, hanem különleges tartalom/státusz kifejezésére szolgált a késő rézkorban.

The find material of the Late Copper Age Baden culture includes a fairly neglected artefact type, whose function is rather enigmatic; these cylindrical artefacts terminating in two flat discs are variously described as spools, spindle-whorls or simply as cylindrical artefacts. Although occurring over an extensive area from the Late Copper Age to the Late Bronze Age, very few have been recovered from well-documented contexts.

Most of these small ceramic artefacts came to light on settlements. Finds of this type have been reported from Bulgaria (*Fig. 2. 4*),¹ Romania (*Fig. 1. 22–24*),² the former Yugoslavia (*Fig. 1. 18, Fig. 2. 2, Fig. 1. 19–21*),³ Austria (*Fig. 1. 25–27*),⁴ Slovakia (*Fig. 2. 3, 5, 7–9*),⁵ Moravia (*Fig. 2. 10–19*),⁶ and Bohemia (*Fig. 2. 6*),⁷ as well as from several Hungarian sites (*Fig. 1. 1–17*),⁸ from the Aegean, Anatolia and Mesopotamia (RAHMSTORF 2006, 73–81, Abb. 11, Anhang 5).

Very few comparable finds are known from the Baden distribution, and it is quite possible that some were not published owing to their seeming insignificance. Artefacts of this type, known mainly from settlements and cemeteries of the early Baden period from the culture's entire distri-

bution, are generally interpreted as spindle whorls, i.e. as accessories of spinning and weaving.

However, an alternative interpretation is also possible. While studying the wagon model from Szigetszentmárton, on which the axle and the wheel are combined in one, it occurred to me that these small objects had perhaps been parts of similar wagon models (BONDÁR 2004, 15–16, Fig. 1. 3b). Assuming that the axle was not fixed through the wagon box, several rectangular objects, which can perhaps be interpreted as wagon boxes, can be added to the corpus of currently known Late Copper Age wagon models (BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 2. 1–3, Fig. 3, Fig. 4. 1–2). In this case, the combination of the axle and the wheels meant the creation of rollers onto which the rectangular wagon box was placed. While a technical solution of this kind would hardly have been too practical in the case of real-life wagons, it may have been used in the case of their clay replicas. Most scholars agree that wagon models were part of the paraphernalia of rituals and in this context, a separate wagon box placed on top of an axle-with-wheels element would have been a simple and ingenious combination.

One case in point is the wagon model from Szigetszentmárton (*Fig. 3. 2*), which instead of individual solid wheels, clearly has two rollers on a longish axle on which the rectangular wagon box was placed (BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 1. 3b). Similar wheels can be seen on a Mesopotamian wagon model too (*Fig. 3. 1*) (BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 13. 4), which has a covered wagon box placed on a clay axle with two wheels, and on a bronze model from Anatolia, which has the wagon box likewise placed on the axles fitted with a pair of wheels (*Fig. 3. 3*) (BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 14. 2b). The underside of another bronze wagon model from Anatolia (*Fig. 3. 4*) provides an excellent illustration of this technical solution (BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 14. 3b). The creation of wagon models from their two main components (a separate wagon box and the wheels fixed to it together with axles) would explain why the axles are not marked on the vessel-like, rectangular wagon models without wheels. It would also provide an explanation for the enigmatic spool-like artefacts coming in various sizes found on Boleráz sites, which have generally been regarded as a relic of household crafts (spinning and weaving). Accepting the above interpretation of the wagon models from Szigetszentmárton and Anatolia, the possible function of these hitherto neglected spools can be

¹ Slatino: ČOCHADŽIEV 1986, Abb. 2. XI, cylindrical artefacts decorated with black, red or white encrustation from the Early Copper Age.

² Cîlnik: ROMAN 1977a, Pl. 52. 27; 1977b, Taf. 39. 10; Bocea Montană: ROMAN 1977a, Pl. 52. 30; Dubova-Cuina-Turcului: ROMAN 1977a, Pl. 52. 36, all finds of the Cotofeni culture.

³ Brza Vrba: MEDOVIĆ 1976a, Taf. 5. 19, Taf. 11. 14; 1976b, Taf. VI. 5, finds of the Cernavodă culture; Sarvaš: BALEN 2006, Tab. 58. 220–222, from the Copper Age.

⁴ Mödling-Jennyberg: RUTTKAY 1995, Abb. 16. 8; Pleissing: RUTTKAY 2000, Taf. 6. 66; Schwechat: RUTTKAY 1971, Taf. A. 11, all finds of the Boleráz group.

⁵ Malá nad Hronom/Kicsind: NĚMEJCOVÁ-PAVÚKOVÁ 1974, Abb. 54. 22–23; Nevidzany/Néved: NĚMEJCOVÁ-PAVÚKOVÁ 1974, Abb. 42. 22; Bratislava/Pozsony: BAXÁ-KAMINSKÁ 1984, Tab. 2. 2; Mužla/Muzsla: KUZMA 1995, Obr. 80. 2; Nižný Žipov/Magyarizsép: DAŇO-JUHAS-MUSIL 1996, Obr. 20. 3, all finds of the Boleráz group and the Baden culture.

⁶ Finds from Layers C, C1 and C2 of the Jevišovice settlement: MEDUNOVÁ-BENEŠOVÁ 1981, Taf. 48. 1, 3, Taf. 49. 9, 11–13, Taf. 113. 6–7, Taf. 146. 7–9. Layer C1 is contemporaneous with the Baden period.

⁷ Cimburk: ZÁPOTOCKÝ 2000, Taf. 4. 20.

⁸ Pilismarót-Basaharc (István Torma, personal communication); Nagykanizsa-Billa: P. BARNA 2003, Fig. 23. 13; Nagyút-Göböljárás: BONDÁR 2002, Fig. 6. 3; Balatonőszöd-Temetődűlő: HORVÁTH 2006, 105, note 38 and Fig. 12, all sites of the Boleráz group and the Baden culture. Grave 403 of the Budakalász cemetery yielded one broken and four intact spools; however, only two of these were later inventoried and nothing is known about what happened to the other pieces.

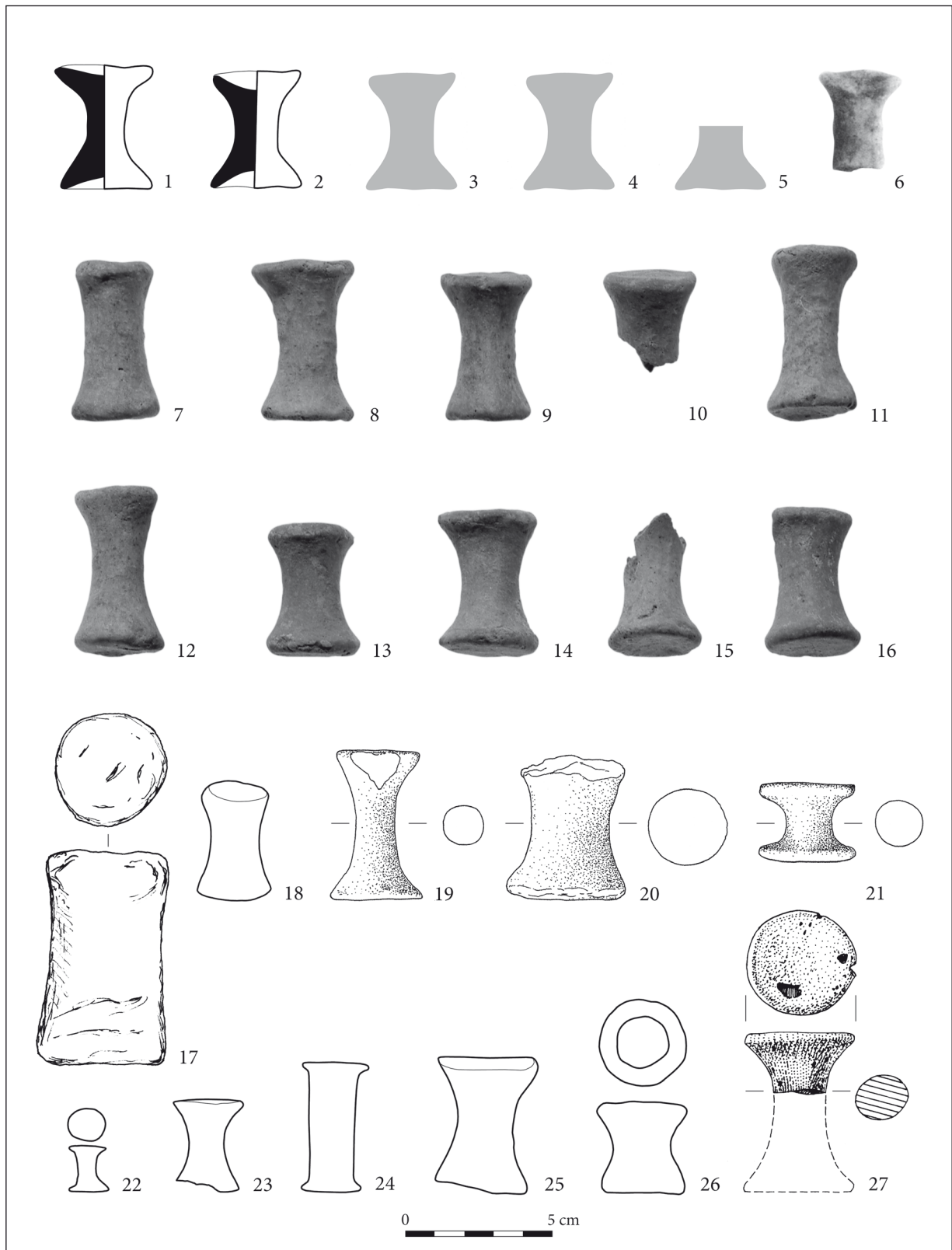


Fig. 1. 1–5: Budakalász – Grave 403, 6: Nagykanizsa (after P. BARNÁK 2003, Fig. 23. 13), 7–12: Pilismarót-Basaharc – Grave 401, 13–16: Pilismarót-Basaharc – Grave 411, 17: Nagyút (after BONDÁR 2002, Fig. 6. 3), 18: Brza Vrba (after MEDOVIĆ 1976a, Taf. 5. 19), 19–21: Sarvaš (after BALEN 2006, Tab. 58. 220–222), 22: Dubova (after ROMAN 1977a, Pl. 52. 36), 23: Bočša Montană (after ROMAN 1977a, Pl. 52. 30), 24: Cilnik (after ROMAN 1977a, Pl. 52. 27), 25: Schwechat (after RUTTKAY 1971, Taf. A. 11), 26: Mödling (after RUTTKAY 1995, Abb. 16. 8), 27: Pleissing (after RUTTKAY 2000, Taf. 6. 66)

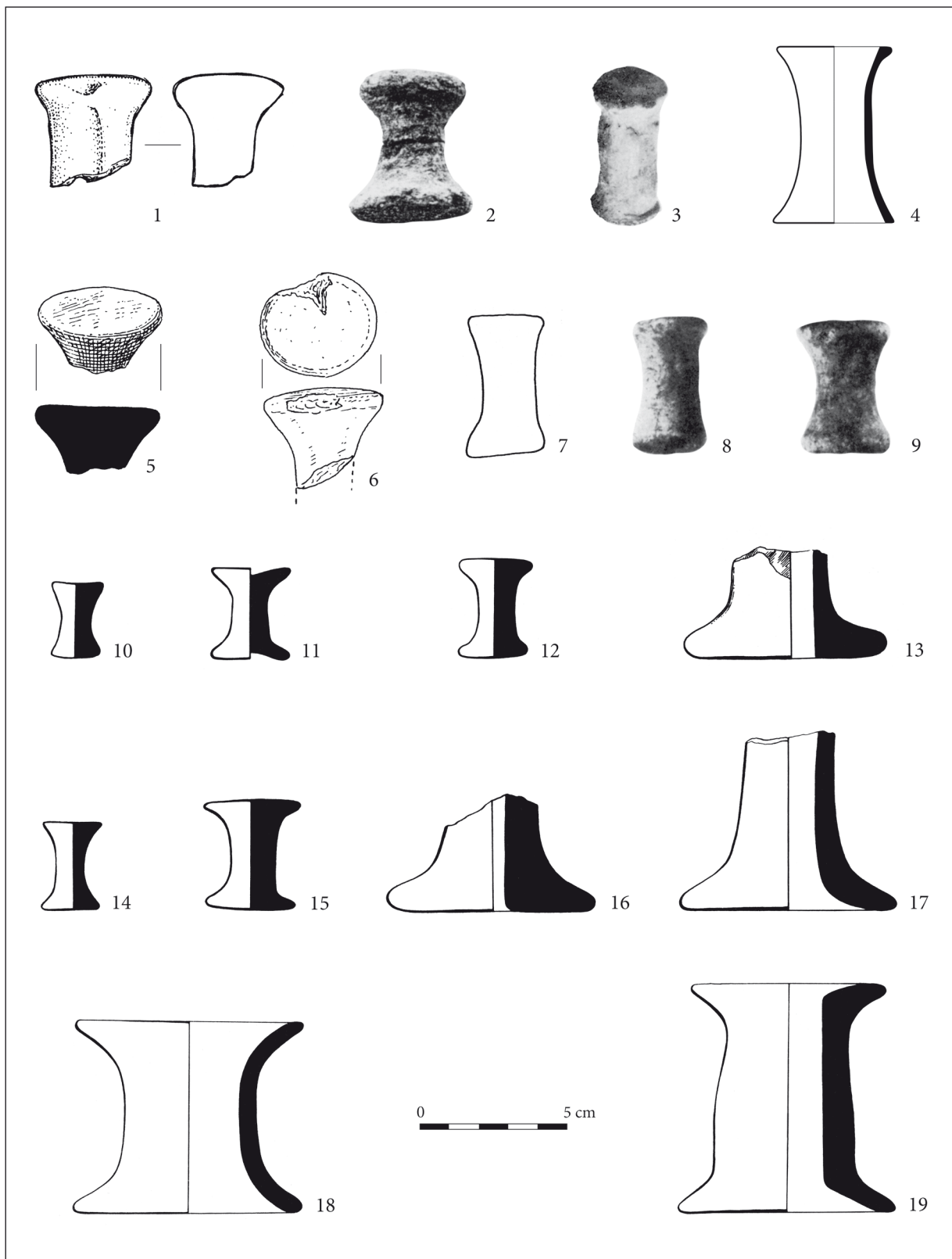


Fig. 2. 1: Mužla/Muzsla (after KUZMA 1995, Obr. 80. 2), 2: Brza Vrba (after MEDOVIĆ 1976b, Taf. VI. 5), 3: Nevidzany/Néved (after NĚMEJCOVÁ-PAVÚKOVÁ 1974, Abb. 42. 22), 4: Slatino (after ČOCHADŽIEV 1986, Abb. 2. XI), 5: Bratislava/Pozsony (after BAXÁ-KAMINSKÁ 1984, Tab. 2. 2), 6: Cimburk (after ZÁPOTOCKÝ 2000, Taf. 4. 20), 7: Nižný Žipov/Magyarizsép (after DAŇO-JUHÁS-MUSIL 1996, Obr. 20. 3), 8–9: Malá nad Hronom/Kicsind (after NĚMEJCOVÁ-PAVÚKOVÁ 1974, Abb. 54. 22–23), 10–19: Jevišovice C (after MEDUNOVÁ-BENEŠOVÁ 1981, Taf. 113. 6–7, Taf. 146. 7–9, Taf. 48. 1, Taf. 49. 3, 9, 11–13)

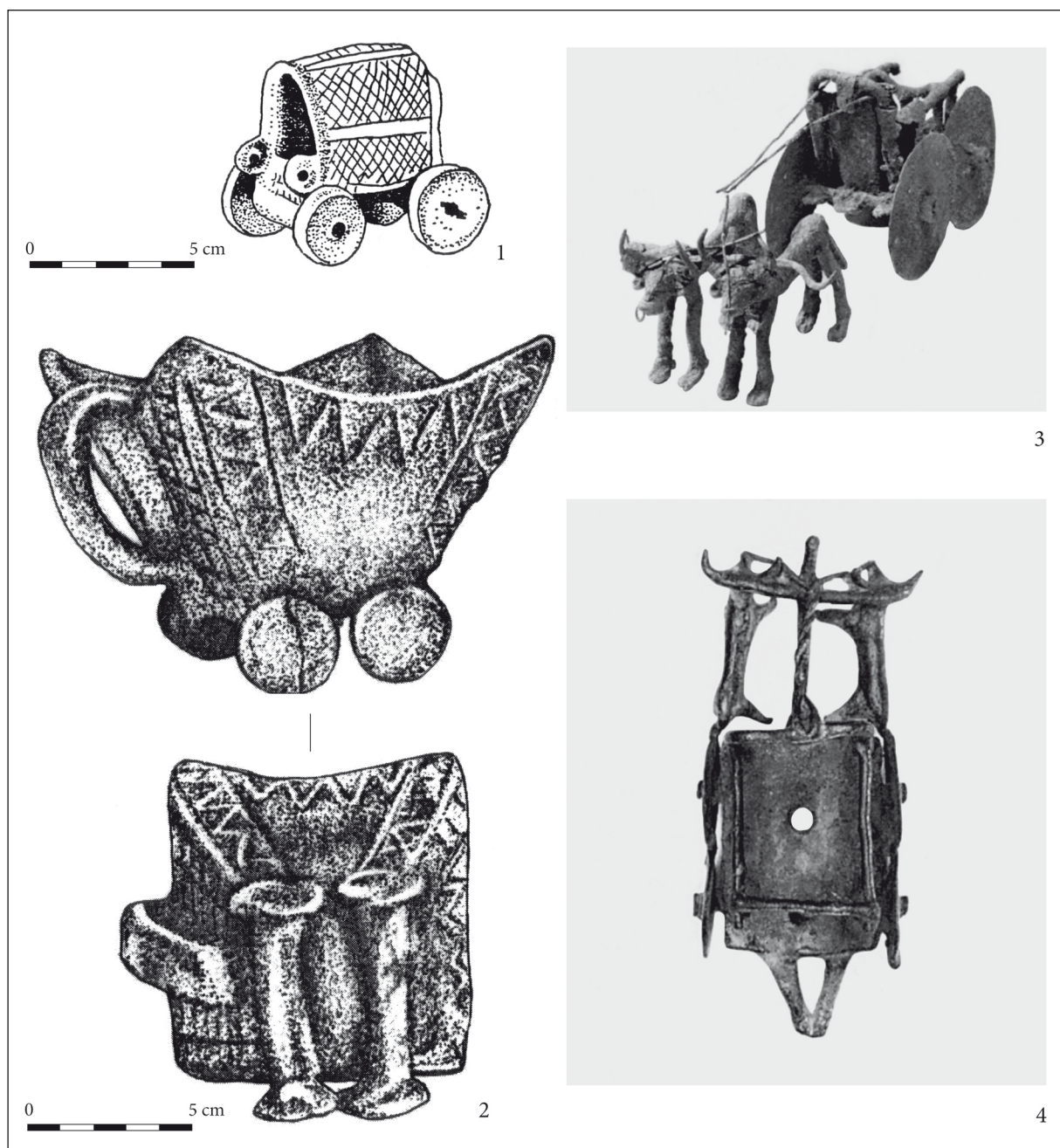


Fig. 3. 1: Tepe Gavra (after BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 13. 4), 2: Szigetszentmárton (after BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 1. 3a–b), 3: Anatolia (after BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 14. 2b), 4: Anatolia (after BONDÁR 2004, Fig. 14. 3b)

set in a new perspective. Obviously, the currently known spool finds must be rigorously examined in order to determine whether they had indeed functioned as roller-like wheels based on their form, size and traces of use-wear.

Spool-like artefacts of this type have been found together with wagon models on the Baden sites at Pilismarót-Basaharc and Budakalász. The finds from Mödling-Jennyberg too include both spools and a wagon model, again providing ad-

ditional evidence in favour of the interpretation proposed in the above.

The grooved cylinders on house models from Azor (Fig. 4. 1) suggest another possible function, namely a decorative use as gable ornaments on houses of the Late Copper Age. Spool-like decorative elements of this type occur on various depictions from the Ancient Near East, for example on house shaped urns (PERROT 1979, Fig. 73; SEIPEL 1998, cat. no. 31). Several buildings of the Late

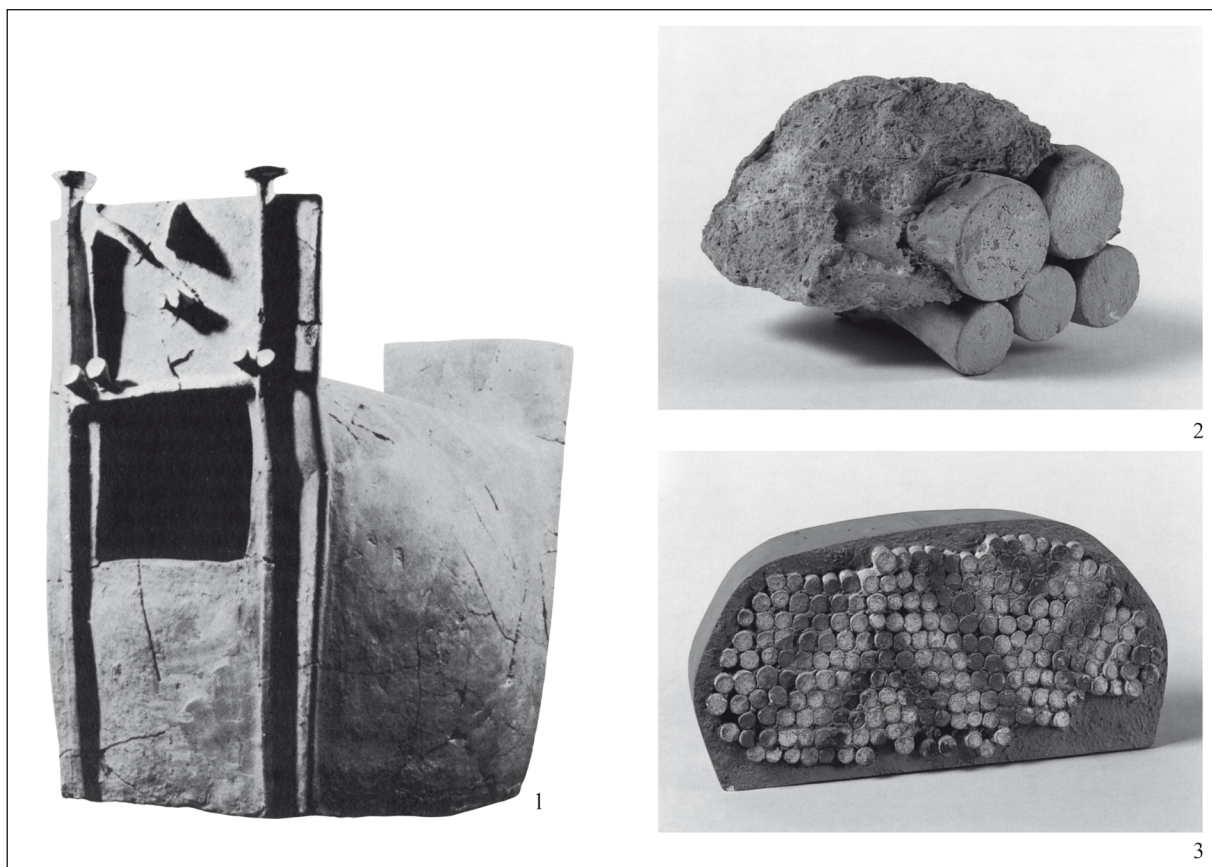


Fig. 4. 1: Azor (after PERROT 1979, Fig. 73), 2–3: Uruk (after SEIPEL–WIECZOREK 1999, cat. nos 239–240)

Uruk period in Mesopotamia, contemporaneous with the Baden period, were decorated with colourful mosaics created from black, red and white painted stone cones driven into the wall of temples (Fig. 4. 2–3), distinguishing thereby sacred buildings from profane ones (SEIPEL–WIECZOREK 1999, cat. nos 239–240). Temples of this type are called stone-cone temples.

Another possible function is illustrated by a clay figurine found in Gilat, dating from 4500–3800 BC, portraying a woman sitting on a biconical stool, holding a two-handled vessel resembling the pans of the Baden culture under her right arm and a spool-like object under her left (Fig. 5) (SEIPEL 1998, cat. no. 19). However, the possible symbolic meaning of the joint occurrence of these two artefacts remains elusive.

In his discussion of the distribution of various commodities and innovations of the Early Bronze Age (*depas amphikypellon*, Syrian flasks, decorated bone cylinders, cylinder seals, weights, spools, scales, etc.), Lorenz Rahmstorf noted that the wares and innovations of Mesopotamia and Anatolia rapidly spread to the eastern Aegean at

the time of the so-called second urban revolution. He suggested that the rapid spread of these commodities could be attributed to the fact that the Aegean communities had reached a similar level of civilisation and were therefore ready to absorb new consumer goods. Spools represented one of the many new innovations: one particular variant of spools perhaps functioned as scale weights, reflecting an advanced mathematical knowledge (RAHMSTORF 2006, 76). Spools made from marble and *Spondylus* were probably prestige items. Discussing the functions of spools, L. Rahmstorf raised the possibility that they were used as pestles or rubbing stones, or that they functioned as polishers used by metalsmiths, or as the headrest of Cycladic figurines (RAHMSTORF 2006, 74).

Quoting comparable finds from Germany and their reconstruction, Tünde Horváth recently proposed another possible interpretation of these spool-like objects, suggesting that these small artefacts, made from either clay or stone, had been used as pestles for crushing salt (HORVÁTH 2006, 105, note 38 and Fig. 12). In a more recent study, she suggests six possible functions for these ar-

tefacts. She quotes evidence that they may have been thread spools used in spinning and weaving (HORVÁTH 2008, Fig. 5), or stands for vessels during cooking or pottery firing (HORVÁTH 2008, Fig. 4). In her view, these cylindrical artefacts may equally well have been used as hair braid clamps (HORVÁTH 2008, Fig. 6), or as back-rests and head-rests (HORVÁTH 2008, Fig. 7). It seems to me that of the possible uses suggested by T. Horváth, spools could hardly have been suitable for crushing salt or for use as back-rests owing to their size and fragility.

While spools and spool-like objects appear to be artefacts occurring over an extensive area and during many periods, the number of published finds is surprisingly low. It is possible that these seemingly insignificant objects were not published or, alternately, that their number is indeed low. In the latter case, they could hardly have been used for everyday activities since in that case considerably more pieces would be known. If the number of these finds is indeed as low as it appears to be, it confirms their rare, unusual function. While the function of these small ceramic objects continues to elude us, the above overview of their possible uses will perhaps stimulate interest in these objects.

The examples quoted above tend to belie the everyday utilitarian use of these artefacts. The Anatolian and Mesopotamian examples would rather reflect a special usage, perhaps as a symbolic artefact expressing prestige or as a ritual object. While the actual meaning attached to these artefacts remains enigmatic, the contexts in which these spools have been found (wagon model + spools,⁹ vessel modelled in the shape of a female body + spools,¹⁰ Bratislava type bowl + spools,¹¹ etc.) certainly support an interpretation as a ritual object. It is certainly noteworthy that spools were deposited in several graves of the Pilis-



Fig. 5. Gilat (after SEIPEL 1998, cat. no. 19)

marót-Basaharc and Budakalász cemeteries.¹² At Balatonőszöd, one of the most remarkable sites of the Baden culture, the features containing spools yielded a number of other less than common finds: a mask, a stamp, a footed goblet, a bipartite bowl and the wheel of a wagon model (HORVÁTH 2008, Tab. 1a). It therefore seems likely that these artefacts had a non-domestic, unusual meaning during the Late Copper Age.

⁹ Pleissing, Pilismarót-Basaharc, Budakalász.

¹⁰ Balatonőszöd, Bratislava, Brza Vrba, Jevišovice, Pilismarót-Basaharc.

¹¹ Bratislava, Brza Vrba, Jevišovice.

¹² Pilismarót-Basaharc: six spools from Grave 401 and four spools from Grave 411; Budakalász: one broken and four intact spools from Grave 403.

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