Figurative Representations in the North European Neolithic—Are They There?

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This article offers a comprehensive survey of figurative finds from Neolithic northern Europe. The survey shows that the immediate absence of figurative representation in the region is real and that the almost complete lack of figuration stands out from the previous Mesolithic and the contemporary northern and northeastern European Neolithic hunter-gatherer groups. Furthermore, the absence of figurative representations contrasts strongly with the thousands of clay figurines that characterize the southeastern European and Anatolian Neolithic. The survey provides a well-documented basis for discussing the significant differences between a figurative southeastern European Neolithic and an imageless northwestern European Neolithic. We suggest that the absence of figurative representations indicates that severe socio-cultural and religious/ideological changes took place within the Neolithic communities as agriculture spread from southeastern Europe via central Europe to northern and western Europe.

Introduction

Clay figurines are characteristic of the southeast European Neolithic, where they occur in thousands. In southeastern Europe and southwest Asia/Anatolia, figurines seem closely linked to the rise and spread of early agricultural communities from the tenth millennium BCE onwards, and they continue in use to a varying degree throughout the Neolithic and the succeeding Chalcolithic, *c.* 5000–3000 BCE (Bánffy 2017; Bilgi 2014; S. Hansen 2007; Monah 2016). Compared to the rich figurative material characterizing southeastern Europe, the north European Neolithic immediately appears empty (Fig. 1).

As Figure 1 shows, this decrease is stepwise, with both subtle and distinct drops. A first decline can be identified with the early agricultural western LBK communities, which, on first glance, feature more figurative representations than their eastern predecessor Starčevo. However, the western LBK was spread out over a vastly larger area, indicating that the overall use of figurative representations declined. A more drastic drop shows at the end of the LBK in the post-LBK cultures in the west (Table 1). When farming reached northern Europe, figuration has basically disappeared. Still, some areas, such as that of the southeast/central European Lengyel culture, saw an increased interest in figurines (V. Becker *et al.* in press), as did the Baden complex of the later fourth millennium BCE. This shows that we are not talking about a simple 'drop-off' curve, but a much more complex pattern where the lack of figuration cannot be explained away as a function of cultural transmission over time and space. Instead, our point of departure is that there is a correlation between the presence of figurines and settlement/population density. We hypothesize that figurines were ritually embedded, but also that they served a communicative function in the integration of complex and socially 'tense' societies occupying densely settled regions and sites, including tells, as has been proposed for Thessaly, Greece, with reference to ethnographic observations (Perlès 2001, 260–64; see also Bailey 2005, 177–8).

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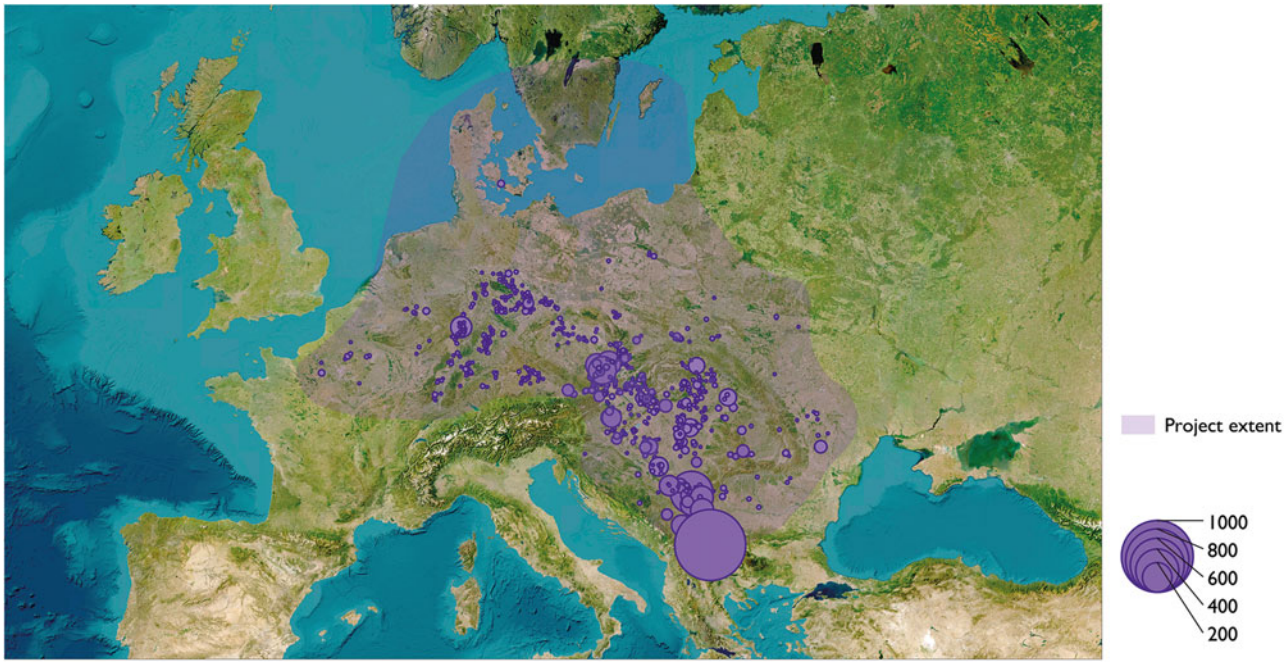

Figure 1. *Distribution and quantity of Neolithic/early agrarian figurines related to the main cultural complexes mentioned in the text,* c. *6200–3300* BCE *(cf. Table 1). Pitted Ware figurines not included. (Base map: ESRI 2023, drawn by Rebecca Bristow.)*

Hence, we suggest that the figurines themselves and the supposed rituals they were part of gradually lost meaning, finally becoming obsolete, in fact even taboo, as agriculture expanded northwards and Neolithic life became more dispersed. However, the first and fundamental question we will have to address is if the apparent absence of figurative representations is real, or if we are missing something.

The immediate absence of figurines in some areas, such as Neolithic northern and northwestern Europe, has of course been noted previously (Scarre 2007; 2017; J. Thomas 2005). Whereas extensive catalogues of Neolithic figurines have been published from central and southeast Europe (V. Becker 2011; S. Hansen 2007; Monah 2016), no joint data-based reviews of the north European imagery have been presented and no systematic attempts have hitherto been made to understand this absence in an interregional comparative perspective. The first step in doing so is to establish a firm overview of the

Table 1. *Chronological chart showing the main Neolithic/early agrarian cultural complexes mentioned in the text (c. 6200–3300* BCE*) with estimated number of figurative representations.*

Archaeological complex	Region	Date BCE	Figurative representations
Starcevo-Körös-Cris	Balkans/southeast Europe	6200–5500	~850
Linear Pottery culture (LBK): Eastern LBK Western LBK	 Southeast Europe Central Europe	 5500–4900 5500–4900	 ~350 ~1050
'Post LBK groups': Lengyel Hinkelstein-Grossgartach-Rössen Stroked Pottery (Stichband)	 Southeast/Central Europe West central Europe East Central Europe	 4800–4100 4900–4500 4900–4600	 ~2000 <15 <50
Michelsberg	West central Europe	4300–3400	<20
Funnel Beaker North Group	Southern Scandinavia	4000–3300 (Early Neolithic phase)	<20
Baden	Southeast/Central Europe	3600–2700	~500

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north European material and discuss its representativity within the archaeological record. Hence, the aim of this article is to either verify or reject the prevalent notion of the imageless north European Neolithic. We will do this by presenting a comprehensive survey and a critical review of the material and contexts at hand based on a great variety of published sources, and on this basis set out directions for succeeding qualified discussions on the use of figuration among northern Europe's first farmers.

Southern Scandinavia constitutes the core area of our survey, defined here as present-day Denmark and southernmost Sweden. Chronologically, we focus on the Neolithic within this region, *c.* 4000–1700 BCE. However, in order to complement and contextualize the survey, we include finds and sites from a wider north and central European area and a resulting wider chronological range. For comparison, we primarily include references to Neolithic and Beaker groups on the north European plain and the British Isles in addition, but more peripheral, to the Neolithic hunter-gatherer populations living in central eastern Sweden and in the eastern Baltic region.

In this article, we employ a broad approach to figuration as we not only look for clay figurines but for all kinds of figurative representation on various materials. Whereas figurines in general terms can be defined as 'small, self-contained sculptures with no obvious functional attributes' (Lesure 2011, 73), we include all recognizable and naturalistic images of objects and features as well as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations in the form of plastic objects, sketches, incisions or sculpted attachments on e.g. pottery vessels. We apply this broad-spectrum approach in order to recognize that figuration might have taken other forms in northern Europe than the common use of clay figurines seen in southeastern Europe.

Setting the scene: figurative representations before the Neolithic

The creation of images, sculptures and paintings is rooted in a set of cognitive and motoric abilities generally ascribed among the things that set the human species apart from other animals. The creation of two- and three-dimensional figurative representations refers to abstract thinking and creativity and forms the basic concepts of art. These characteristics were fully unfolded around 40,000–35,000 years ago with the Upper Palaeolithic cave paintings centred in the non-glaciated areas of western and central Europe, in particular southwest France and northwest Spain (Bahn & Vertut 1988; Colman 2020; Leroi-Gourhan 1968; Lewis-Williams 2002). From this time onwards, the archaeological record shows a wide range of images and figurative depictions. Compared to the cave paintings, figurines are more widespread, covering a vast area of western, central and eastern Europe and stretching into Siberia. Even though the renowned buxom so-called 'Venus figurines' seem to concentrate in the period of the last glacial maximum, *c.* 25,000–15,000 BP, figurative representations are found in all major stages of the Upper Palaeolithic sequence from *c.* 40,000–11,500 years ago and come in varying degrees of schematization, including zoomorphic and anthropomorphic depictions in addition to humanoid combinations thereof, made from stone, bone, ivory, antler and even clay (Farbstein 2017; Gamble 1986; Lesure 2011; Pettitt 2017).

At the beginning of the Mesolithic, increasing temperatures and the resulting decreasing ice sheet had started to turn northern Europe into a forested landscape characteristic of the Pre-Boreal, Boreal and Atlantic climatic intervals. In southern Scandinavia, the Mesolithic dates from *c.* 9000–4000 BCE and includes the Maglemose (*c.* 9000–6400 BCE), Kongemose (*c.* 6400–5400 BCE) and Ertebølle (*c.* 5400–4000 BCE) periods (Jensen 2013, 50–126).

The south Scandinavian Mesolithic art is generally characterized by abstract geometric patterns but has also revealed a limited but conspicuous collection of figurative representations including incisions on bone, antler and amber (Fig. 2). Among these is the famous aurochs bone hammer from Ryemarksgård depicting five human beings (Fig. 3A). Two similar geometric-styled human figures are incised on an antler stick from Veksø Mose in northeastern Zealand whereas another antler stick recorded at Åmosen, western Zealand, depicts a deer-like animal and a human being, all dated to the Maglemose period (Jensen 2013, 70–73; Mathiassen 1941). Schematic human representations also appear on amber pendants and bone artefacts such as flint-edged spears and bone daggers (Müller 1896, 339–41, figs 18–20; 1918, 1–11; Toft & Petersen 2013) (Fig. 3B). Generally, figurative representations become rare in the later part of the south Scandinavian Mesolithic, but incisions depicting deer and humans are known from e.g. a Kongemose-period antler axe from Ystad, southern Sweden, and from Jordløse Mose, western Zealand. On another antler axe found in Bodal mose, western Zealand, we see a stylized 'dancing' human figure, whereas an amber pendant from the settlement at Ringkloster, eastern Jutland, shows a schematic anthropomorphic figure, both dating to the Ertebølle period (Jensen 2013, 82–4, 107–12; Liversage 1967).

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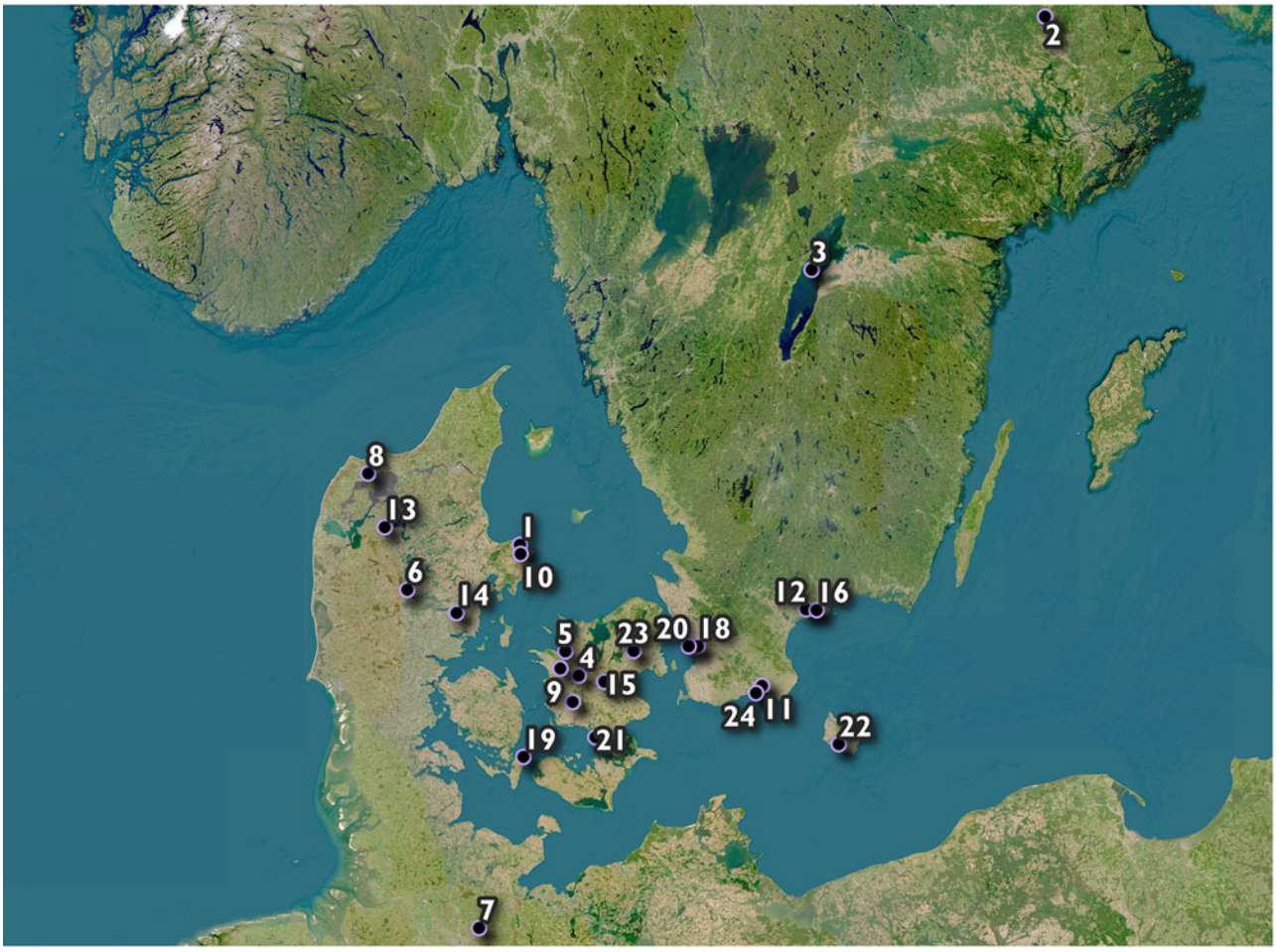

Figure 2. *South Scandinavian Mesolithic and Neolithic sites mentioned in the text. (Base map: ESRI 2023, drawn by Rebecca Bristow.) (1) Albæk I; (2) Åloppe; (3) Alvastra; (4) Åmosen/Bodal Mose; (5) Egemarke; (6) Engesvang Mose; (7) Hopfenbach; (8) Hov; (9) Jordløse Mose; (10) Kainsbakke; (11) Karlsfält; (12) Nymölla III; (13) Resen; (14) Ringkloster; (15) Ryemarksgård; (16) Siretorp; (17) Sørbylille II; (18 Stävie; (19) Stengade; (20) Storegården; (21) Svinø; (22) Vasagård; (23) Veksø Mose; (24) Ystad.*

In addition to incisions come a number of naturalistic amber figures in the form of animals such as bear, elk and waterfowl (Fig. 3B). Based on comparative stylistic analyses, they presumably date to the late Palaeolithic Allerød interstadial (*c.* 11,800–10,600 BCE) (Petersen 2013; Płonka 2003, 142–5). A schematic anthropomorphic representation made from a 3.5 m long wooden stick with an indication of a head at one end was recovered from Hopfenbach in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, and dates to the Mesolithic, mid fifth millennium BCE (Rust 1958, 124–9, 141–5, figs 54–5). Furthermore, a wide range of figurative representations depicting both humans and animals are known from Europe in general, including incisions on various material, figurines and rock art depicting naturalistic big game animals (Clark 1936, 162–89; Fuglestvedt 2010; Kozłowski 2009, 500–514; Płonka 2003).

As is evident from the short review above, figurative representations are present in the Mesolithic. However, the starkest contrast appears when the situation in Neolithic northern Europe is compared with that of southeastern Europe (see Figure 1). In the following section, we will elucidate the extent of this contrast by presenting the evidence from southern Scandinavia.

Figurative representations in the south Scandinavian and wider northwestern European Neolithic

When it comes to Neolithic figurines, these are almost completely absent in southern Scandinavia.

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Figure 3. *(A) Aurochs bone hammer, Ryemarksgård; (B) Amber animals and pendants. Top left: Ornamented bear figurine, Resen. Top right: Waterfowl figurine, Engesvang Mose. Bottom left: Ornamented elk head, Egemarke. Bottom right: Pendant with stylized human figures, Sindalgård, Åmosen (Maglemose period). (Photographs: Lennart Larsen, National Museum of Denmark (Licens: CC-BY-SA).)*

However, if we look at incisions and sculpted attachments on pottery vessels, some figurative elements do occur. Such features seem to make a brief appearance towards the end of the Funnel Beaker period, around 3000 BCE, but then the phenomenon seemingly dies out. From the succeeding Single Grave culture (*c.* 2850–2250 BCE), no obvious figurative representations have been recorded from graves, settlements, or depositions except for two plastic specimens in the form of squared and poorly fired clay lumps. These are hard to interpret, but suggestions include possible miniature bread and house models (see Seeberg 1969, 129, figs 14–15; Vellev 1972, 85, fig. 6). A similar lack of figurative representations applies for the succeeding Late Neolithic, *c.* 2350–1700 BCE (Iversen 2019, 148–53), but see P.V. Glob (1965) for a highly speculative interpretation of the wedge-shaped slate pendants as goddesses. Hence, the review below will focus on the first part of the south Scandinavian Neolithic from around 4000 until the end of the Funnel Beaker period (*c.* 2800/2600 BCE).

The Stengade figurines

The only site that has revealed certain figurines from the Danish Neolithic is Stengade situated on the island of Langeland (Figs 1 and 2) dated to the Early Neolithic (*c.* 4000–3300 BCE). Excavations carried out between 1968 and 1971 revealed two east–west-oriented features referred to as 'House I' and 'House II', located only 45 m apart on a sandy plateau. The two features measure 36 m and 33 m in length respectively; they were *c.* 5 m wide and made up of stone pavements situated in dark cultural layers containing pottery, flint and stone tools, flint debris, etc. In addition, 'House I' revealed an inhumation burial of a child (Skaarup 1975). The excavator considered the two features as houses in accordance with the interpretation at that time of two similar features recorded at Barkær on Djursland, eastern

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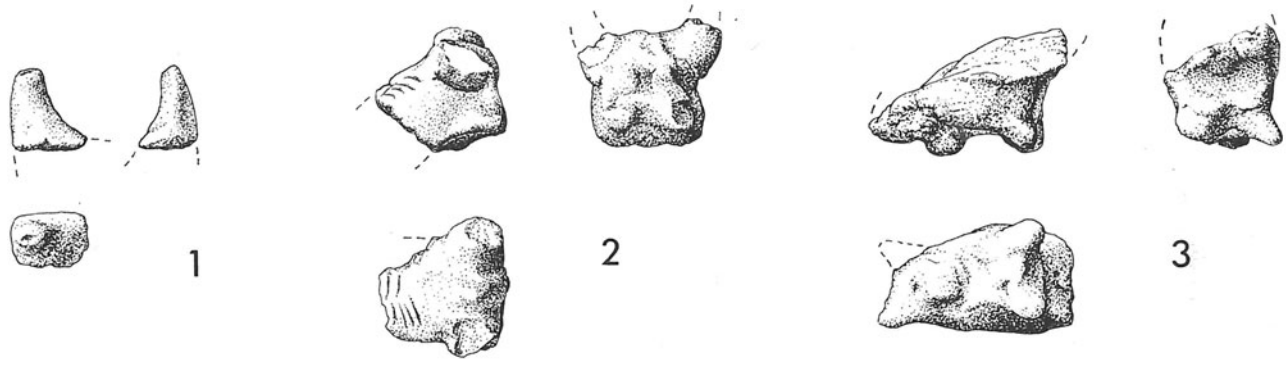

Figure 4. *A selection of animal figurines (2 and 3) including legs or horns (1) from Stengade 'House I'. (After Skaarup 1975, fig. 36.)*

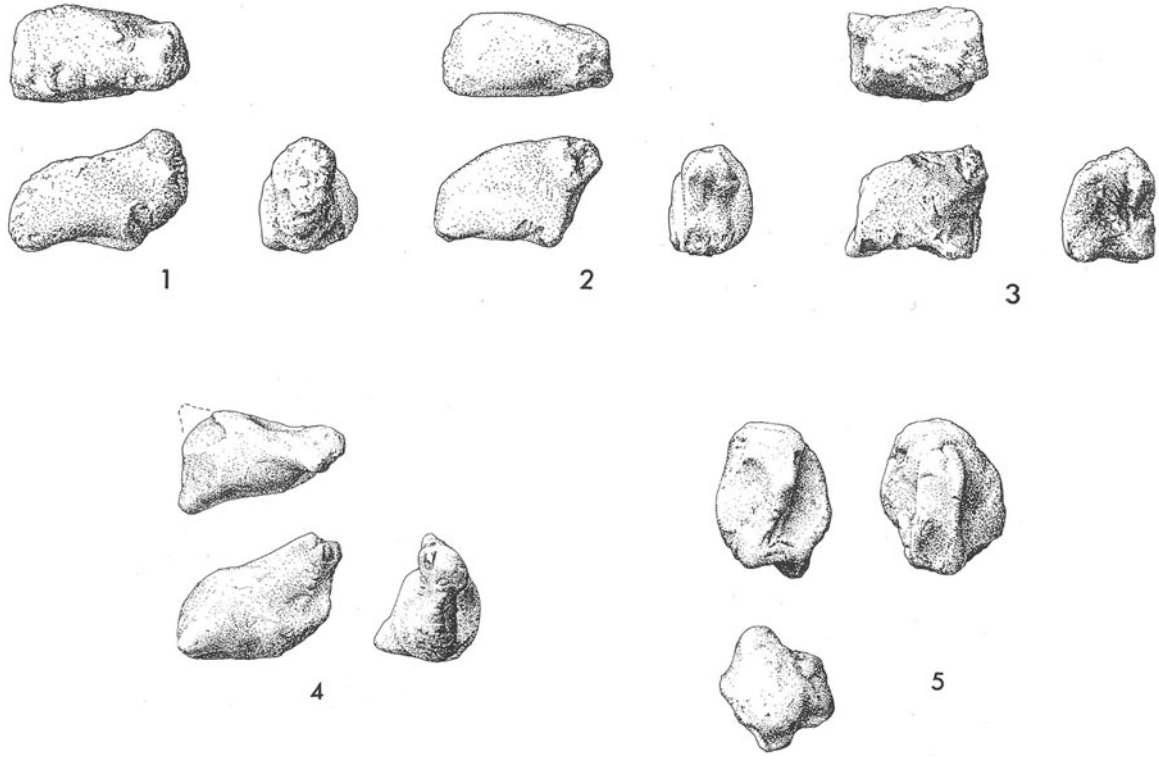

Figure 5. *Four animal figurines (1–4) and an anthropomorphic head (5) from Stengade 'House II'. (After Skaarup 1975, fig. 68.)*

Jutland (Glob 1949). However, these 'houses' must be considered the remains of non-megalithic long barrows constructed on an earlier settlement site, which provided material for the barrows (T. Madsen 1979, 308).

In addition to *c.* 9000 pottery sherds and *c.* 1000 flint tools, etc., the culture layer related to 'House I' at Stengade contained nine small plastic objects made of burned clay measuring only a few centimetres. Six of these plastic objects can be identified as fragments of small (up to 3 cm) crudely made animal figurines (Fig. 4). 'House II' contained a comparable number of artefacts, including 11 plastic objects measuring between 2 and 4.8 cm, all of which are made of burned clay. Six of these can be identified as fragmented figurines: one is a possible horn, four pieces are likely to represent animals (cattle? and a bird?) and one the head of an anthropomorphic figure made of a hollow lump of clay (Fig. 5). The remaining plastic objects from the two

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features at Stengade are mainly pieces of 'sausage-shaped' clay coils or slightly cone-shaped lumps (Skaarup 1975, 35–7, 89–90, 157).

The simple and stylistic nature of the Stengade figurines gives scope for various interpretations of what these plastic objects actually depict. One could even question if they are animal and human representations at all, given their simple design and the uniqueness of such finds in a south Scandinavian context. However, similar and equally crude figurines are well known from the northeast European Neolithic hunter-gatherers, but parallels can also be found in the contemporary central European Baden culture and the slightly older Lengyel culture (Furholt 2009, 124–7; Nunez 1986; Wyszomirska 1984; Zalai-Gaál 1998).

Plastic objects and sculptured attachments

Plastic objects without any immediate recognizable function like those recorded on Stengade are known from a range of Neolithic sites (Andersen 1999, 268–9, figs 5.93:5–6, 5.94; Winther 1926, 56, figs 127–9; 1928, 28, 31, 47; 1938, 12, fig. 16:6). Whereas various lumps and coils of clay probably represent raw material leftovers from pottery production, some fired clay cylinders might have been used for stacking up pots (Madsen & Fiedel 1988, 85–6, fig. 7:J).

The Early Neolithic site Nymölla III in northeastern Scania, southern Sweden, has revealed three cylindrical, pointed and tap-shaped fragments of plastic clay objects less than 3 cm in length, one with line ornaments. As opposed to the above-mentioned plastic objects, the Nymölla pieces have been interpreted as possible parts of figurines. The pieces probably belong to the early Funnel Beaker culture, even though earlier and later phases are present at the site (Wyszomirska 1988, 120, figs 68:d, 69: e–g). A few equivalent pieces of possible zoomorphic figures have been recorded at a Funnel Beaker/Pitted Ware causewayed enclosure at Stävie, Scania (Larsson 1982, 84, fig. 17), and at the Pitted Ware culture site Kainsbakke, east Jutland, a *c.* 5 cm long ornamented conical clay fragment with slightly flattened sides and punctate decoration was found in a large ritual pit (A47) dated *c.* 2800 BCE (Fig. 6). The piece has been interpreted as the lowermost tapered end of an idol or other plastic object with reference to northeastern European Neolithic hunter-gatherer groups (Wincentz 2020, 85, fig. 45; for comparison see Nunez 1986, 20, fig. 3).

The south Swedish Pitted Ware site of Siretorp in Blekinge, Sweden, has revealed several fragments of crude figurative representations not unlike those

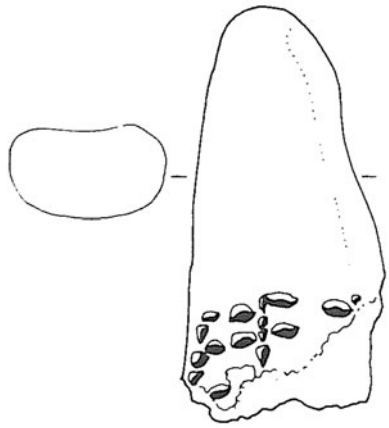

Figure 6. *Potential figurine fragment from Kainsbakke, pit A47. (After Wincentz 2020, fig. 45. Drawing: Elsebet Morville.)*

recovered at Stengade, including an anthropomorphic face, a piece of an animal figurine and a possible arm fragment. In addition, two pieces of clay miniature double-edged battles axes were found at Siretorp (Bagge & Kjellmark 1939, 97–100, figs 42–43, pl. 28) and at the Funnel Beaker site of Karlsfält in Scania (Larsson 1985, 26, fig. 20:8). A somewhat similar piece is known from the east Swedish Pitted Ware site of Åloppe in Uppland, which also holds animal figurines (Almgren 1906, 111–12, figs 42-43). Furthermore, a miniature double-edged battle axe made of claystone was recovered during excavation of a megalithic tomb on southwest Funen, Denmark, dated to around 3000 BCE (Andersen 1997) and amber beads of similar shape are not uncommon in megalithic tombs and hoards (Ebbesen 1995; 2011, 327–9).

An indisputable figurative representation was recovered from a finds-rich Funnel Beaker culture settlement layer at Albæk I on Djursland, dating between c. 3300 and 3000 BCE. The find consists of a small clay spoon with a handle terminating in a presumed cattle (or horse?) head with zigzag lines along the neck (Fig. 7). This distinctive figurative sculptured attachment is unique in a Danish and south Scandinavian context (Boas 2019, 241, fig. 7) and immediate parallels are hard to find, but a somewhat similar clay spoon with an animal-shaped handle has been recorded at the eponymous Hungarian Lengyel site (Zalai-Gaál 1998, 61, fig. 19:2).

A limited collection of plastic objects has been recorded in the British Isles including some stone phalli (Teather 2007) and a good handful of crude figurines from Orkney dating to the late fourth–early third millennium BCE. These include four

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Figure 7. *Clay spoon with animal head from Albæk I. (After Boas 2019, fig. 7. Photograph: Museum Østjylland.)*

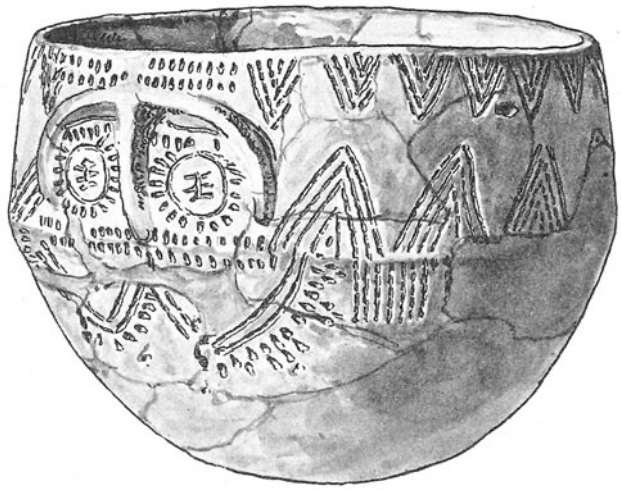

Figure 8. *Face pot from a passage grave at Svinø, southern Zealand, Denmark. Height* c. *11 cm. (After S. Müller 1918, no. 164.)*

stone figurines from Links of Noltland, Westray, one of which is known as the 'Orkney Venus' or the 'Westray Wifie', in addition to a ceramic figurine named 'the headless husband' (Jones & Díaz-Guardamino 2019; Moore & Wilson 2011; 2013). Another clay figurine, the 'Brodgar boy', comes from the Ness of Brodgar and is made from a clay sausage with a series of pinched grooves and two dotted eye impressions. From Skara Brae comes a whalebone figurine nicknamed the 'Skara Brae Buddo' and from Pool a sculptured anthropomorphic stone dated to the mid third millennium BCE (Jones & Díaz-Guardamino 2019; A. Thomas 2016).

Face pots and sun-eyes

Some of the most elaborately decorated and aesthetically finest pottery from northern Europe's prehistory dates to the early Middle Neolithic Funnel Beaker period, i.e. the period *c.* 3300–3000 BCE. It is characterized by complex and strictly executed geometric compositions showing great artistic skills, and only in extremely rare cases are recognizable features indicated. Among these are some stylized 'rayed *sun* eyes' accompanied with eyebrows, which appear on a certain group of Middle Neolithic 'face pots' (Fig. 8). The Funnel Beaker face pots seem to be a delimited phenomenon as regards chronological range, geographical distribution and archaeological context. Stylistically, they belong to the Bundsø-Lindø pottery style dated to around 3000 BCE and are restricted to eastern Denmark (Zealand and adjacent islands) even though there are some finds from Funen and northern Germany, particularly Mecklenburg–West Pomerania, in addition to a couple of very stylized examples from eastern Holstein (cf. Brozio 2016, pls 174–175, 213). In 1979, Klaus Ebbesen counted 110 face pots, which in all cases with available find information derive from megalithic tombs (Ebbesen 1979). From the Storegården passage grave in Scania, Sweden, a shouldered cup carries two circular motifs placed on either side of the pot handle resembling a face, but without the characteristic eyebrows (Tilley 1996, 273, fig. 6.27). Pottery with circular motifs (eyes?) with or without sun rays has a wider distribution and is also known from the Swedish megalithic tombs (e.g. Bagge & Kaelas 1950, pls XLV, LXVI; F. Hansen 1918, 85–8; Janzon 2009, 79). Sun motifs also occur on e.g. some late Funnel Beaker, early third-millennium BCE clay discs with two closely spaced holes, which in themselves can illustrate suns (sun-eyes?) with rays emanating from them (Kaul *et al.* 2002, fig. 7b).

The simple but very visual facial representations that appear on the face pots are far from unique in the European Neolithic (Schwarzberg & Becker 2017). However, close chronological and geographical parallels are hard to find. The resemblance to the early third-millennium BCE *occulado* vases of the Chalcolithic Los Millares culture, Spain, has been pointed at (Ebbesen 1979, 108–9; Recchia-Quiniou 2017, 91). However, no direct connections are conceivable. The same applies for the eye motifs, usually

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formed as large 'owl-like' rayed eyes with radial lines and sometimes eyebrows, seen on the Iberian 'eyed-idols' (*ídolos oculados*) and engraved stone plaques, *c.* 3500–2000 BCE, some of which also show rayed eyes, noses, 'whiskers' or tattoos (Hurtado 2008; Lillios 2008; Scarre 2017).

Stylized eyes and eyebrows (though not 'sun-eyes') are also known from Britain appearing on two of three chalk cylinders, known as the 'Folkton drums', recovered from a burial mound in Folkton, North Yorkshire (Longworth 1999; J. Thomas 2005). The Folkton drums date to 3000 BCE and are contemporary with the Danish face pots. Even though the similarities are striking, the design is simple and direct connections are hard to demonstrate.

Stick figures and engravings

Simple inscribed stick figures on pottery vessels represent a limited but distinct category of figurative representations within the Pitted Ware culture. From Denmark one example is known from Kainsbakke, pit A47, whereas several similar pieces have been recorded from Pitted Ware sites in southern Sweden (Leffler 2015, 41, fig. 2; Lidén 1940, 174, fig. 66:7–8; Wincentz 2020, 75–6, figs 42–43; Wyszomirska 1975) and the eastern Baltic (Rimantienė 1992, 132, fig. 16; 2005, 113–14, figs 51, 121; Wyszomirska 1984, 54–5). Stick figures on pottery are also known from e.g. the contemporary late fourth–early third-millennium BCE Horgen culture in Switzerland (Vogt 1952, 159, fig. 1:1–2), the late fourth-millennium BCE Salzmünde culture in central Germany (Friederich 2013, fig. 3; Schunke 2013, 254, fig. 8) and from the earlier central European LBK (V. Becker 2011, 139–43, plates 101–106) as well as from the following Stroked Pottery and Hinkelstein cultural phenomena (Spatz 2002) and the Italian Neolithic (V. Becker 2017).

Contemporary unique engravings are known from two late Funnel Beaker enclosures on southern Bornholm, Rispebjerg and Vasagård, where recent excavations have revealed several hundred early third-millennium BCE small engraved shale plaques referred to as 'sun-stones' due to the rayed images characterizing many of them (Fig. 9). However, incisions mainly form geometrical patterns in addition to a limited number of supposed plant/crop signatures indicating that stylistic fields or landscapes are depicted (Kaul *et al.* 2016). Only in one case has a *possible* highly stylized anthropomorphic figure been identified.

In a few rare cases, figurative engravings have been recorded in northwest European Neolithic flint mines, which date back to the earliest Neolithic *c.* 4200/4000 BCE. Flint mine art or 'chalk art' usually consists of abstracts markings on flint mine walls or chalk blocks and can be compared to the widespread abstract scratch marks frequently occurring on stones in Neolithic Orkney (Teather & Sørensen 2021, 243; A. Thomas 2016). However, at Cissbury in Sussex, UK, and Hov in northen Jutland, Denmark, figurative engravings have been identified showing deer heads, and at Cissbury also a possible fish. Both sites date to the Early Neolithic as radiocarbon dates cluster between 3800 and 3300 BCE. The depictions of deer might be related to the common use of red deer antler picks in the mining process (Teather 2011; Teather & Sørensen 2021).

Figure 9. *Engraved shale plaque with sun motif from Vasagård, Bornholm, Denmark,* c. *3 cm diameter. (Photograph: John Lee, the National Museum of Denmark (License: CC-BY-SA).)*

Wooden figurines?

When discussing the absence of figurines in the north European Neolithic, you will often face the argument that figurines might have been made of wood and therefore not preserved. The same goes for potential figurines made of unfired clay or idols made of twigs, leaves, feathers, textiles or other organic material or any combination thereof. The potential use of organic figurines in the Neolithic is not

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immediately possible to qualify, but at present only very few examples are known from northwestern Europe, which makes it less probable that such figurines were widely used; at least not to an extent that could match the large number of clay figurines seen in southeastern Europe. If a rich tradition of wooden figurines existed, we would expect to find representatives of these in the extraordinarily good preservation conditions characterizing e.g. the wooden wells of the Linear Pottery culture and the pile dwellings in the circum-alpine region; however, this does not seem to be the case (but see Pétrequin 2016, fig. 137, for a zoomorphic wooden handle). Furthermore, if the northern European Neolithic societies had continued a figurative tradition, replacing clay figurines with organic ones, we claim that the recovered number would have been significantly higher than it is due to extensive investigations of bogs and wetland areas, which mostly have revealed wooden images from the late Bronze Age and Iron Age (Capelle 1995; B. Coles 1990).

Only two highly questionable Neolithic wooden figures have been recorded in Denmark. They were found together with an early Neolithic funnel bowl in a bog at Sørbylille II in southwestern Zealand. The two potential 'idols' were made from carefully debarked and lopped forked trunks measuring 187 and 182 cm in length, respectively (Fig. 10). Both pieces have slightly pointed ends and one is missing the outermost ends of the branches. The two wooden artefacts were found during peat cutting and were placed obliquely with the fork-ends ('legs') upwards. They stood close together pressed down through the peat *c.* 1 m from the vessel (C.J. Becker 1947, 38–9; Koch 1998, 378–9; Sanden & Capelle 2001, 46). As no specific anthropomorphic modifications have been made such as marking of heads, eyes, etc., the only thing that hints at an interpretation as idols is the presence of similar forked branches from the northwestern European late Bronze Age and Iron Age forming a 'torso' and two 'legs' with or without details such a heads and genitals (Capelle 1995). Seen in a wider chronological northwestern European context, the Sørbylille bifurcate trunks are potential early representatives of such very basic, almost indistinguishable, human representations.

Even though a variety of wooden constructions dating to the Neolithic have been recorded in bogs and wetland areas from Scandinavia (C.J. Becker 1947, 53–8; Browall 2011, 377–80; Sørensen 1998) only one additional find has been interpreted as a figurative representation. It comes from the Alvastra pile dwelling (*c.* 3350–2750 BCE) located in a mire in Östergötland, just east of Lake Vättern, in central

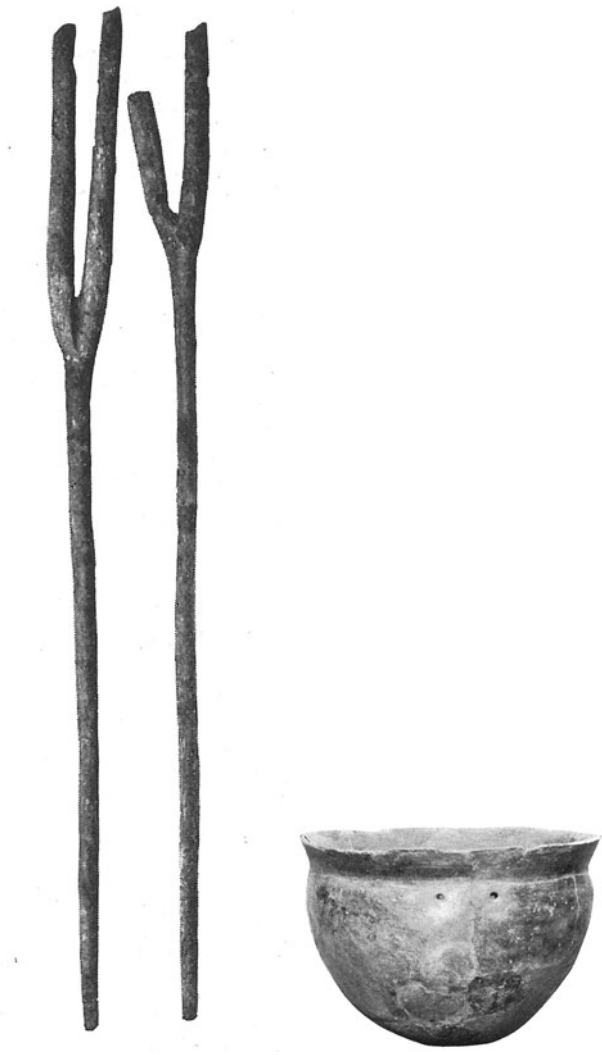

Figure 10. *Forked-branch idols (?) and funnel bowl (height:* c. *20 cm) from Sørbylille II. Not to scale. (After C.J. Becker 1947, fig. 8 & pl. XX:1.)*

southern Sweden. The wooden item in question is made from a 37 cm long wedge-shaped piece of oak with a branch. In one end is a transverse recess, while the other end terminates in a knob. The wooden piece was found wedged into a long log. Even though the wooden piece to some extent resembles an anthropomorphic figure (Janzon 2009, 92–3; Oldeberg 1957, 247–8) it seems more likely, however, that we are dealing with a wedge with a 'steering' handle formed by the branch. Maybe the recess was supposed to hold a chisel/axe head while one would hit the knob-end with a wooden club to split wooden logs, as originally suggested by the excavator (Browall 2011, 353–6). Positive wooden anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures have

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been recorded further to the east where they are related to various Neolithic hunter-gatherer cultures in e.g. Finland and the eastern Baltic (Chairkina 2014; Rimantienė 1992, 111–14, figs 8, 10; 2005, 102–5, 328, 354, figs 46, 202, 347).

Anthropomorphic wooden figurines are also known from the British Isles; however, only two date to the Neolithic/Beaker period. One of these is the so-called 'God dolly', a 16 cm tall ash-wood figurine displaying both male and female features, which was recovered between two stratigraphically related trackways (Bell A and B) at Somerset Levels in southwest Britain. The figurine is indirectly dated by association with the Bell A track to the period *c.* 3350–2300 cal. BCE. The other wooden figure is also from southern Britain and is known as 'the Dagenham figurine'. It is made of pine-wood and dates to the Beaker period, *c.* 2450–2050 cal. BCE (Bond 2010; B. Coles 1990; J. Coles 1968).

As appears from the review above, there are in fact very few figurative representations within the southern Scandinavian and northwestern European Neolithic. A distinctive, but chronologically and geographically very limited, exception is the face pots occurring around 3000 BCE. When figurines and figurative incisions on pottery do occur, they are most often related to the Pitted Ware culture and what we here refer to as the 'eastern Baltic hunter-gatherer tradition'. Hence, in order to put the lack of figurines in southern Scandinavia into perspective, it is worthwhile to contextualize briefly the Pitted Ware culture and its use of figurines.

Some notes on the Pitted Ware culture and the 'eastern Baltic hunter-gatherer tradition'

In northeastern Europe, we see a rich figurative tradition not related to the emergence of agricultural communities but expressed in Neolithic hunter, fisher and gatherer groups who made pottery and used polished stone tools but did not rely on farming or husbandry, even though domesticates are known, especially from the Corded Ware period (Pääkkönen *et al.* 2020; Piličiauskas *et al.* 2017; Rimantienė 1992; Vanhanen *et al.* 2019). It is in this context that we should see the emergence of the Scandinavian Pitted Ware culture.

The Neolithic expansion reached large parts of northwestern Europe around 4000 BCE, including northernmost Germany, Scandinavia and the British Isles. However, in Scandinavia the expansion of agriculture and Neolithic life only included around a third of the Scandinavian peninsula, roughly extending to the 60th parallel north and with varying impact in the different regions (Cummings *et al.* 2022; Iversen & Solheim in press; Nyland *et al.* 2023). While Early Neolithic Funnel Beaker communities impacted parts of the Scandinavian peninsula including southern Norway, western and eastern Sweden, the Middle Neolithic (from *c.* 3300 BCE) was characterized by an economic 'de-Neolithization' process materialized in the Pitted Ware culture (Iversen 2013).

The Pitted Ware culture is a widespread and rather heterogeneous phenomenon occupying the later Scandinavian Neolithic, *c.* 3400-2200 BCE. It is distributed from the Åland Islands to the northeast and extends westwards to southwestern Norway. To the south, Pitted Ware sites are found in northeastern Denmark and in Scania. Large sites with good preservation, including inhumation burials, are primarily known from eastern central Sweden and the Baltic Sea islands Gotland and Öland. Isotopic data from graves show that people buried in Pitted Ware contexts had a distinct diet based on seal and other marine protein sources (Eriksson 2004; Eriksson *et al.* 2008; Fornander *et al.* 2008). In southern Scandinavia we face a rather different, culturally blurred and mixed subsistence economic situation. In Denmark, larger settlements with traces of all-year occupation are almost exclusively found in eastern Jutland, including Kainsbakke, Kirial Bro and Ginnerup, which have revealed preserved flora and fauna remains showing a broad-spectrum economy consisting of agriculture, husbandry, hunting, fishing and gathering with a certain importance attached to marine resources (including seal, fish and shellfish). From radiocarbon-dated sites and a limited number of contact finds relating the Pitted Ware culture to other cultural groups, the Pitted Ware horizon in southern Scandinavia extends from *c.* 3100 to 2700/(2450) BCE (Andreasen 2020; Iversen 2010; Iversen *et al.* 2021; Klassen *et al.* 2023; Makarewicz & Pleuger 2020; Philippsen *et al.* 2020; Pleuger & Makarewicz 2020; Price *et al.* 2021).

Culturally and genetically, the eastern Swedish Pitted Ware individuals differ from preceding and contemporary Funnel Beaker populations. Whereas the people buried in Pitted Ware graves on Gotland and Öland were genetically related to Mesolithic hunter-gatherers from Scandinavia, Funnel Beaker individuals descend from contemporaneous central European Middle Neolithic farmers (Allentoft *et al.* 2024a,b; Fraser *et al.* 2018; Malmström *et al.* 2009; 2015; Mittnik *et al.* 2018; Skoglund *et al.* 2012; 2014). The cultural relationship between the Scandinavian Pitted Ware culture and the eastern Baltic, including the Comb Ware tradition in Fennoscandia, is visible in the pottery (e.g. Hallgren 2011; Skandfer 2011)

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and the subsistence economic focus as well as in presumed applied animistic concepts (Artursson *et al.* 2023, 138–41 with references; Klassen *et al.* 2020, 455–64). Hence, the use of figurines within the Pitted Ware culture must be seen as part of a wider eastern Baltic hunter-gatherer tradition that includes figurative representations such as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic clay and antler figurines, elk-head staffs, animal-head battle axes and rock-art depictions of big game animals (Antanaitis 1998; Artursson *et al.* 2023, 129–33; Götherström *et al.* 2002; Iršėnas 2006; Kashina 2009; Loze 2010; Nunez 1986; Rimantienė 1992; 2005; Wyszomirska 1984).

Discussion and wider perspectives—the abandonment of figuration

Overall, we are facing two chronologically overlapping but very different, independent and geographically distinct figurative traditions within Neolithic Europe: the 'southeastern agricultural tradition' and 'the eastern Baltic hunter-gatherer tradition'. From the present study, we are now able to confirm that neither of these general traditions impacted the material and visual repertoire of the northern and northwestern European Neolithic to any larger extent and that the apparent absence of figurative representations within the south Scandinavian Neolithic is real. The southeastern agricultural tradition did impact the LBK, but turned out to be much stronger in the east than in the west (V. Becker 2011), which becomes evident after LBK's demise. Very few figurines are known from the centuries following the LBK in central Europe (including the Rössen, Stroked Pottery and Michelsberg cultures, *c.* 4900–3400 BCE) (V. Becker 2011, 285–92; S. Hansen 2007, 303–13; Pyzel 2017) whereas the central and southeastern European Lengyel (*c.* 4800–4100 BCE) and Baden (3600–2700 BCE) cultures in addition to the Cucuteni-Trypillia complex found in Ukraine, Moldavia and Romania (*c.* 4800–2950 BCE) display a large number of figurative representations (cf. Table 1) (Bánffy 2017; V. Becker 2011, 293–8; Furholt 2009, 124–8 with references; Monah 2016).

For the overall Funnel Beaker complex (*c.* 4100–2800/2600 BCE), figurative representations are few but include some depictions of wheeled vehicles, harnessed animals and zoomorphic and anthropomorphic decorations on vessels. However, these representations appear more frequent within the southeastern/eastern groups and the associated Salzmünde culture (*c.* 3400–3100 BCE) (Bagniewski 1970, 63–6; Midgley 1992, 74–6, 378–80; Piggott 1983, 39–44; Skaarup 1975, 183, n. 136; Szmyt 2017, 438). In comparison, the western Funnel Beaker group (for a few exceptions, see Bakker 1979, 60; Menne 2018, 310, pls 4:9, 44:8) and the northern group (cf. above) almost completely lack figurines and other kinds of figurative representations. Even when they do occur, they are schematic and subtle, almost hidden, and their appearance is ambiguous (cf. J. Thomas 2005, for the British material). This is clearly illustrated by the face pots, which are created with a minimum of detail to only just hint at a facial representation—are they meant to represent faces at all? This ambiguity must be a deliberate choice made by the potters, probably governed by underlying socio-ritual conventions. Seen in a wider perspective, the significant absence of figurative representation within the north Funnel Beaker group is hard to explain as just simple indifference towards figurines whose original social communicative and integrating functions had become obsolete as settlements became more dispersed. This, we think, is part of the explanation for the lack of figurines in northern Europe. But there seems to be more at stake, as the avoidance of unambiguous figuration is so pronounced that it appears as if it was a deliberate choice, which hints at a widespread ritually and socially embedded tabooed approach towards figurative imagery. Even though the face pots most probably are facial representations, their chronological and geographical limited distribution and the fact that they are closely connected with highly ritualized burial rites within passage tombs supports the interpretation that figuration was a tabooed, dangerous and prohibited phenomenon, as these tombs are characterized by restricted accessibility and associated with ritual knowledge facilitating social control (cf. J. Thomas 1999, 48–51; Tilley 1996, 216–21, 333–5).

We suggest that the absence of figuration within the northwestern European Neolithic can best be described and understood within the context of aniconism. Aniconism is a well-known concept within the broader field of religious studies, but was originally introduced by the German classical archaeologist Johannes Adolph Overbeck (1864) when describing the earliest history of Greek art. The concept is traditionally used to address the absence of depictions of divine beings, especially in humanized forms (Gladigow 1988; Mettinger 1995, 19). However, Milette Gaifman (2017) suggests that aniconism is applied more broadly to describe non-figural or abstract art. Thereby it is not only useful within the context of a religious/cult practice, but also in the general description of visual imagery. Mikael Aktor (2017) stresses the great variation and degree of

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aniconicity within different traditions and argues that the phenomenon can best be described within a floating spectrum ranging from pure aniconic (no recognizable forms) over iconic/pictorial to representations of animal and human-like beings—the so-called aniconism–iconism–anthropomorphism spectrum. The situation observed within the northern Funnel Beaker culture, where we only sporadically see the contours of nearly unrecognizable schematized anthropomorphic forms, fits the first part of this spectrum, whereas the situation changes towards the iconic/pictorial and anthropomorphic end of the spectrum the further southeast and northeast you go.

With Gaifman's and Aktor's developed definitions of aniconism, we are able to apply the concept to a broader field of prehistory and to describe situations in which figurative representations are lacking, whether the reason is strictly religious (images of the deity/deities are prohibited) or the absence has wider socio-cultural/ideological causes. In the case of the absence of figurines in northwestern Europe, we find it difficult immediately to explain this phenomenon solely in terms of religious beliefs, as we have very limited knowledge of what such beliefs were. Consequently, wider socio-cultural factors must be considered. If the abandonment of figuration can be seen as a 'proxy' for socio-religious transformations, we must expect severe social and religious changes to have taken place as agriculture spread from southeastern Europe via central Europe to northern and western Europe (cf. Bánffy 2019). A full justification of the sketched approach to the absence of figuration and the suggested correlation between abandonment of figuration and wider socio-religious changes, including becoming taboo, will require thorough studies of other and coinciding features that can be related to such changes in areas where the abandonment of figurative representation took place. Here we have only just begun to approach these investigations and paved the way for future enquiries.

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