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# **The Aegean in the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age**

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# Some Finds of Balkan (or Anatolian) Type in the Neolithic Deposit of Theopetra Cave, Thessaly

Nina KYPARISSI - APOSTOLIKA

**ABSTRACT:** Among the finds of the Neolithic deposit of the Theopetra Cave in Thessaly, some are definitely not known from previous excavations in the same area, or they are sparse finds in settlements mainly from Northern Greece, which may be considered as a result of long distance connections. Among such finds are a gold ring-idol, a figurine, a stone pendant with zig-zag incisions and some pottery sherds of uncommon shapes. At the same time certain white on red painted pottery finds parallels in other sites of Thessaly, Northern Greece as well as in the Balkans and Anatolia. These finds, apart from being indicative of long distance connections, also pose a problem concerning the character of this cave during the Neolithic of the Thessalian plain, where a good number of excavated open air settlements have not produced for the moment similar finds.

Theopetra cave is located at the westernmost edge of the Thessaly plain (Fig. 1), very close to the Pindus mountains which separate Thessaly from Epirus. It's importance is focused to the end of Neolithic and Chalcolithic. <sup>14</sup>C dates of this sequence give a diagram that ranges between  $46,327 \pm 1590$  and  $4009 \pm 83$  B.P., for the prehistoric period, while even older dates are expected, since the limits of the <sup>14</sup>C method have already been reached. The cave was also used occasionally in the A.D. centuries, from which we also have <sup>14</sup>C dates. During the last millennia of the Pleistocene the climate changed repeatedly and these alterations are reflected in the stratigraphy of the deposits. Apparent also in the cave are the beginning of the use of fire and clay, while the presence of tools made of flint and quartz under the layer of the first fire confirms the use of the cave in even earlier times. Some human footprints, uncovered to the older layer of fire, are related to the people that occupied the cave at that time<sup>1</sup>. The upper deposit (1.50 – 2 m. thick) corresponds to the Neolithic period, with Early, Middle and Late phases represented - though usually disturbed-, as well as the end of the Neolithic.

This paper describes some specific finds of the Neolithic period that seem to have Balkan or Anatolian origin; a more detailed description of this deposit in the cave has already been given elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. The most striking of them are: a) a gold ring idol, b) a

stone pendant with incised decoration, c) a figurine and d) a bell shaped lid of a vase.

a- The gold ring-idol of Theopetra is a typical pendant of this category consisting of a circular lower part with large central hole and a thinner trapezoid apophysis at the top with one perforation at the end. Its dimensions are 3.5x2.2 cm and it weights 6,9 grams (Fig.2)<sup>3</sup>. Until recently it was only the fifth one ever found in Greece (though a whole treasure of 53 gold ring-idols of the same more or less type came to light by the Greek Police through smugglers' activity). Theopetra's ring-idol is only the second ever found by excavation, after one by Tsountas at Sesklo at the beginning of the century<sup>4</sup>, while the other three were surface finds from Aravissos in Western Macedonia<sup>5</sup> and Volos in Thessaly<sup>6</sup>. Two more silver ones were also found in excavations, one from the cave of Alepotrypa (Diros Bay, south Peloponnese)<sup>7</sup> and the other from the site of Poliochni on Lemnos island<sup>8</sup>, while in the same category should be included the silver pendant from Elytheia cave in Crete belonging to the Protominoan I-II layer, according to its

<sup>1</sup> Manolis et al., (in press)

<sup>2</sup> Kyparissi-Apostolika (in press)

<sup>3</sup> Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 63, fig. 57; Kyparissi-Apostolika (in press b), fig. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Tsountas 1908, 350.

<sup>5</sup> Grammenos 1991, 109, pl. 30.3,4; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 63, fig.58.

<sup>6</sup> Papanassopoulos (ed.) 1996, fig. 299; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 62, fig.56.

<sup>7</sup> Papanassopoulos 1996, 227, fig.43; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, fig.64.

<sup>8</sup> Bernabò Brea 1964, 359, 376, pl. CLXX 3 and CLXVII 25; Makkay 1985, 6, 11, fn.17, 4b, fig.2:5.

excavator<sup>9</sup>. Recently one more silver pendant of this type was found at the cave of Euripides in Salamis island near Athens<sup>10</sup>.

These metal objects have their parallels in ornaments made of other materials, like stone, represented by three pieces from Dimini in Thessaly<sup>11</sup>, one from the cave of Kitsos in Attica<sup>12</sup> and only one made of clay and found in the Chalcolithic settlement of Pevkakia near Volos in Thessaly<sup>13</sup>. Clay imitations are also referred by Makkay<sup>14</sup> from the Bodrogkerezur culture, as well as the Cucuteni culture. A bone specimen of the same type is published by Gaul<sup>15</sup> as coming from the Mound Culture in Bulgaria, while recently objects that seem to belong to this type were found in the Late Neolithic settlement of Makriyalos in South Macedonia made of the shell *Spondylus gaederopus*<sup>16</sup>. Makkay<sup>17</sup> based on the earlier appearance of these materials compared to gold, claims that “the origins of these particular pendants (ring-idols) should be sought in Greece”. But I believe that stone, clay or shell samples in Greece are very limited to support such claim and I find more likely that they represent imitations of the gold ones known from the Balkans of the same period. It is impressive that, apart from the pendants themselves, this shape is a decorative motive in Dimini pottery<sup>18</sup> and this means that it represents a familiar and recognizable object among the people. Because of their shape (with the lower part circular or oval and with large central holes for hanging) these pendants are often referred to as anthropomorphic figures, the circle representing the belly/body and the trapezoid apophysis the head with eyes. Despite their schematic shape, their anthropomorphic

character could be supported by the presence of them on a pair of plastic breasts<sup>19</sup> as well as the existence of vases with similar shape in Bulgaria<sup>20</sup>, to which clear human face characteristics are recognized on the apophysis, namely the neck of the vase.

This type of gold pendant, known mainly from the cemetery of Varna<sup>21</sup> and dated between 4600 and 3800 B.C. – while dates around 5000 to 4000 B.C. have also been proposed<sup>22</sup> are also known from the Karpathian Basin and the Lower Danube area as well as from Anatolia and the Eastern Aegean. For these latter areas the dates range between 3000 and 2000 B.C., setting the problem of the possible contemporaneity of these pendants with those known from Varna, which are extensively discussed by Makkay<sup>23</sup>. In Greece as they were mainly known as surface finds in the past, they were seen as isolated items with Balkan or Anatolian origin. Their presence recently as a whole treasure in Athens gives a new basis for the arguments about their origin and their function in the Greek prehistoric record.

According to Theopetra's dates, our ring idol should be dated at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C., but since the neolithic deposit of this cave is not securely stratified, because of its later use by shepherds, as well as because of geological factors (like water and rock falls) we can't say for the moment a more precise date. The archaeological context does not help more, but a phallus pendant found at the same depth of an adjoining trench is also considered as a Late Neolithic find. The dating of a quantity of burnt wheat in lower horizon is not resulted any burial function of the pendant and so it should likely be faced as all the other pendants, probably owned by some distinguished persons of the community.

b- Second object that we face as imported is also a pendant, made of black stone

<sup>9</sup> Marinatos 1932, 98, fig.9 top; Vassilakis 1996, 154, 160-162, 164-165, 231-232, fig.18, pl.69;

Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 64, fig.63.

<sup>10</sup> Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 64, fig.62.

<sup>11</sup> Chourmouziadis et al. 1982; Papathanossopoulos (ed.) 1996, 336, fig.290; Tsountas 1908, 337, pl.43.8.

<sup>12</sup> Vialou 1981, pl.L1; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 67, fig.74.

<sup>13</sup> Weißhaar 1989, 52, Tafel XVII,1; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 66, fig.70.

<sup>14</sup> Makkay 1989, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Gaul 1948, 95, pl.XXXV.7.

<sup>16</sup> Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 67, fig.72-73.

<sup>17</sup> Makkay 1989, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Chourmouziadis et al. 1982, fig.50.

<sup>19</sup> Makkay 1989, pl.8.1 and 9; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 51, fig.3, 52, fig.7.9, 54, fig.15, 57, fig.32.

<sup>20</sup> Todorova 1993, fig.73.

<sup>21</sup> Ivanov 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Makkay 1985, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Makkay 1985.

(Fig.3)<sup>24</sup> with an almost amphiconical body, from which sprouts a cylindrical column ending in a rather flat and perforated edge. The whole body, as well as the lower half part of the cylindrical column, is decorated with zig-zag incisions. This object, totally unknown to my knowledge from other Greek prehistoric sites, could be interpreted as a representation either of a schematic human body or of a vase. Compared to the above mentioned gold ring-idol, a remarkable similarity in the shape can be observed, if we keep in mind that the perspective is totally absent in the metal object. And if the amphiconical stone body would be replaced by the circular gold belly, and the cylindrical stone column by the gold apophysis, we actually see the same model in these two objects. A shallow hole at the center of the periphery in the one side of the body is possible to symbolize a navel, if it is not accidental. In this case this element supports the anthropomorphic version. From the other hand a similarity in shape with vases could not be excluded, though we do not usually see vase-representations among pendants. Vases with such long neck are not known from Neolithic Greece. The only comparable case could be that of a vase from Paradimi in Thrace<sup>25</sup>, but without such a long neck and with a handle, missing from our pendant. A more prominent similarity could be seen in an earless vase from Eastern Thrace published by M. Özdoğan<sup>26</sup> with similar zig-zag incised decoration. As far as I know, this pendant has its parallels only in Albania<sup>27</sup>, where they are characterised as vase representations. From Neolithic Bulgaria<sup>28</sup> are known vases of this type with indisputable anthropomorphic characteristics and so one could not say definitely which one of the two was really the model for this object.

The zig-zag incised decoration is also typical among the Balkan figurines<sup>29</sup> but it is rather unknown in Greece, except for the settlement of Sitagroi in Northeast Greece, where one could see this type of decoration in

figurines<sup>30</sup>. This settlement is geographically closer to Bulgaria than to Central Greece, where Theopetra cave belongs.

And if we have to put our pendant in time – since the upper deposit of Theopetra doesn't guarantee any such security – comparing it to their parallels from Albania, we should date it to the Chalcolithic period, since Maliq II of Albania, where they belong, corresponds to this period. And if so, they are contemporaneous with the gold ring idols, with which I claim they share the same model. At the same period belongs the characteristic incised decoration of pottery from Rachmani, Pevkakia and Petromagoula in Thessaly, with which this zig-zag incised decoration could be compared.

c- The third object is a sexless figurine of a totally unknown type among Greek figurines (Fig.4)<sup>31</sup>. It stands on a flat base, its body is almost spherical and the head triangular and flat with two deep holes at the place of eyes. Two rectangular perforated apophyses replace the hands. All the body and the head at the back have shallow small holes. It is made of light brown clay. A soft clinking sound from its empty interior belly is heard at any movement recalling baby rattles.

This figurine type is a variance of the characteristic for Vinča culture figurines. The most striking characteristics of these figurines are their hands – always extended as apophyses at the sides and perforated- their heads usually with pinched-out noses, a feature missing from our figurine. Holes as a rule, mark the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the hands and sometimes the waist. Their base is almost always flat, even when legs are formed. They are spread all over the Vinča culture region<sup>32</sup> in several regional variances and they belong to the Late or Classical Vinča period (4900 – 4300 B.C.).

Sometimes they are interpreted as anthropomorphic and some others as zoomorphic. Some of them have definite human

<sup>24</sup> Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 69, fig.81; Kyparissi-Apostolika (in press b) fig.4.

<sup>25</sup> Theocharis 1973, fig. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Özdoğan 1987, fig. 9a.

<sup>27</sup> Korkuti 1995, 219-220, Tafel 94, 19-20.

<sup>28</sup> Todorova 1993, fig. 203, 204 and photo 29, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Todorova 1993, fig. 110 2a-b.

<sup>30</sup> Renfrew et al. 1986, pl.A(4).

<sup>31</sup> Papathanassopoulos (ed.) 1996, 214, fig.10; Dimakopoulou (ed.) 1998, 82, fig.127; Kyparissi-Apostolika (in press b) fig.3.

<sup>32</sup> Gimbutas 1991; Tringham et al 1984; Mc Pherronn & Srejovic 1988.

and sex features, usually marked by incisions, while some others are simpler. Because of their pinched-out noses Gimbutas<sup>33</sup> calls them bird-shaped, while Trighan<sup>34</sup> claims a bear like form, judging from the figurines found at Opovo (north of Danube, Yugoslavia), which resemble more Theopetra's figurine, apart from the nose, which doesn't exist in ours.

d- The fourth object is a part of a bell-shaped lid of a vase (Fig.5) made of red-brown clay. Thanks to the parts presented, its shape can be reconstructed. Its outer surface was decorated with four vertical rows of plastic studs (three in each row) with four holes around the stud. (Now only one row and a stud of a second row are saved). These studs start near the top of the lid and end at the periphery. On the top there is a small handle. Its diameter is around 10,5 cm and its height 7,5 cm. It was found in an ash layer of the Upper Neolithic deposit. This bell-shaped lid is known in Greece only from Sitagroi in Northeast Greece, where it is represented by two pieces<sup>35</sup> which have more than twice the size of ours. They are graphite painted without the plastic studs of ours. They are dated to the Final Neolithic (4500 – 3200 B.C.)

Lids with plastic studs are thought to relate to the Classical Tisza culture by Gimbutas<sup>36</sup>. In that case the shape is quite similar to ours with two vertical rows of plastic studs and a bird-headed handle on the top. It is decorated in panels of incised nets, zigzags and lozenges. The plastic studs are interpreted by Gimbutas<sup>37</sup> as handles. It's height is 19,7 cm and it resembles the ones found at Sitagroi. It was found among other vases and pits on a table-like altar and is interpreted by Gimbutas as related to ritual activities. Theopetra's lid has one-third of the dimensions of the others, but it is not in doubt that it belongs to the same category of utensils, whatever function they have.

### Conclusions:

The presence in the Neolithic deposit of Theopetra cave these Balkan (or Anatolian) type objects is a definite indication of the existence of a system of exchange that took place at the end of Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic between people of Greece and Balkans or Anatolia.

The most familiar of these objects is the gold ring widely diffused all over the Balkans and Anatolia at that time. Its limited presence in Greece indicates that they were imported as isolated and finished items rather than that they were fabricated there. Their small number is at the same time an indication that they could be very precious objects and their owners persons of high status in their societies. In this way the exceptional presence of such a find in Theopetra cave, at the western frontiers of the Thessalian plain, could lead to the hypothesis that this was a flourishing Neolithic community, a picture that is supported by other "rich" finds (like pendants and pottery of high quality) in the cave as well.

The same hypothesis also holds for the other three objects, through their types are less diffused compared to the gold ring-idols. But this is the most striking feature at Theopetra as having indeed an exceptional character, since here are found imported objects not known from other settlements of the same period in Greece. This could possibly mean straight relations between Theopetra's community and the Balkans or Anatolia, possibly based on difference in Theopetra's economic and social structure and could be seen as some of the main characteristics distinguishing Theopetra from other open air Neolithic settlements in Thessaly.

<sup>33</sup> Gimbutas 1991.

<sup>34</sup> Trighan 1984.

<sup>35</sup> Renfrew et al 1986, 400, pl.41:1; Papathanassopoulou (ed.) 1996, 250, fig.87.

<sup>36</sup> Gimbutas 1991, fig.3.27, (early 5<sup>th</sup> millennium).

<sup>37</sup> Gimbutas 1991.

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**Fig. 4:** The sexless figurine from Theopetra cave.

**Fig. 5:** The bell-shaped lid of a vase from Theopetra cave.

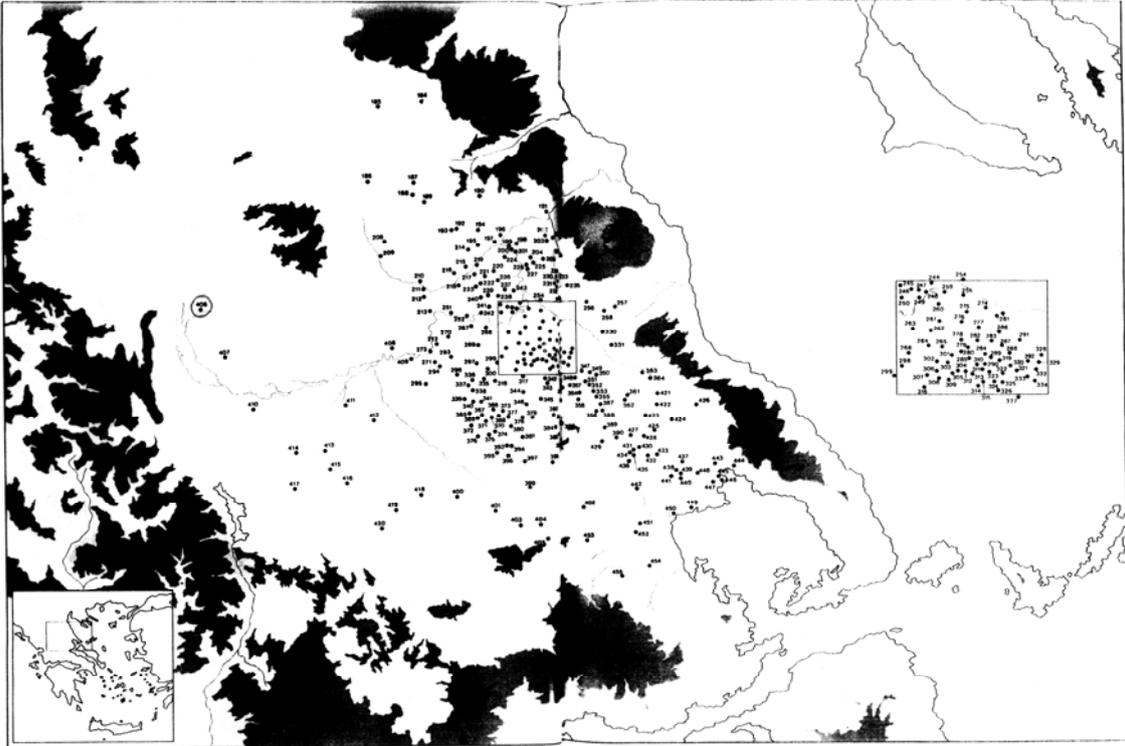


Fig. 1



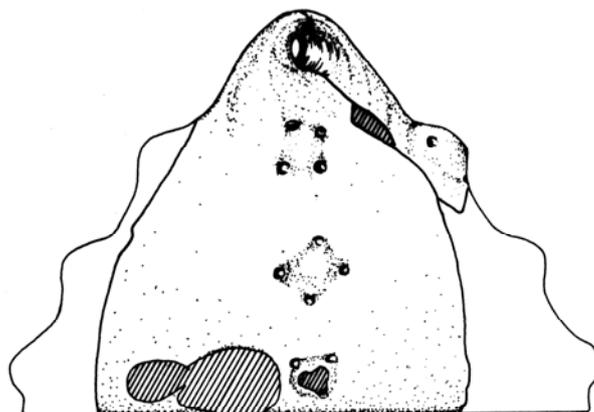
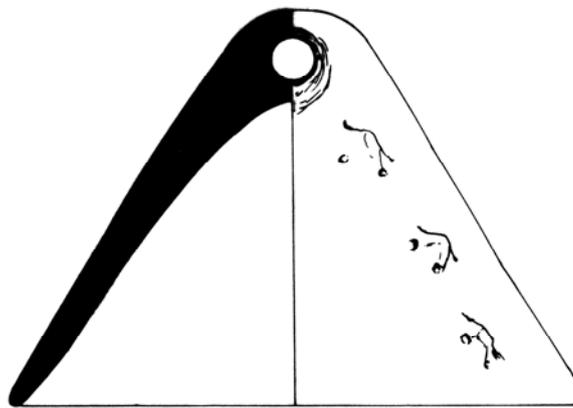
Fig. 2



**Fig. 3**



**Fig. 4**



**Fig. 5**