

Anthropomorphic Flint Sculpture of the European Russian Forest Zone

Ekaterina KASHINA

Abstract

The repertoire of anthropomorphic flint figurines produced by the Late Neolithic hunter-gatherers of the European Russian forest zone contains a group of images representing not only human beings but also unreal and fantastic creatures, possessing human and animal features. Anthropomorphic sculpture was connected with several archaeological cultures of the 3rd millennium BC and the beginning of the next one and revealed the existence of some regional traditions in making flint sculpture. These figurines could be interpreted as representations of ancestors or mythical heroes, possessing human appearance but sometimes supplemented by fantastic details, according to the mentality of Late Neolithic people.

Keywords: hunter-gatherers, anthropomorphic flint sculpture, ancestor figurines, mythical heroes.

Résumé

Le répertoire des figurines anthropomorphes en silex des derniers chasseurs-cueilleurs de la zone des forêts de la Russie européenne comprend non seulement des figures anthropomorphes, mais aussi celles de créatures fantastiques et irréelles où sont mêlés des éléments humains et animaux. Cette sculpture apparaît dans plusieurs cultures archéologiques du 3^e et du début du 2^e millénaire avant notre ère. Les modes de fabrication trahissent plusieurs traditions régionales. Ces figurines peuvent être interprétées comme des représentations d'ancêtres ou de héros mythiques dont l'apparence humaine est parfois rehaussée de détails qui relèvent du fantastique, le tout révélant de la mentalité des derniers chasseurs-cueilleurs.

Mots-clefs : chasseurs-cueilleurs, sculpture anthropomorphe en silex, représentations d'ancêtre, héros mythiques.

1. INTRODUCTION

The anthropomorphic figurines of the Late Neolithic¹ of the European Russian forest zone are a significant element of routine and spiritual life. These products belong to the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. They are made of various materials: flint, burned clay, bone, antler, amber, wood and stone. For the same period, we know not only human sculptures but also animal ones made of the same raw materials.

Human imagery in the art of prehistoric societies reveals an important source of information related to their subsistence practices and their mentalities. The analysis of regional and chronological distributions of various anthropomorphic figurine types can help to reveal mental features which are specific for several groups of the forest zone. Such analysis may also find out some chronological and regional variants in the dispersion of the given mentalities.

In other respects, the wide extension of similar images, subjects and ideas on such a large territory as the European Russian forest zone in the Late Neolithic gives evidence for particular connections between individual regions.

This paper deals with the assemblage of anthropomorphic flint figurines. Today 68 pieces from different museum collections are known.

Their extensive distribution and evident associations with various archaeological cultures give rise to a lot of interest, as well as the intriguing fact of using flint as a raw material for sculpture. Before focusing on figurines themselves, the necessary information concerning territories and ways of life of those prehistoric societies which yielded flint sculpture should be presented.

The Russian forest zone is large (fig. 1): to the North its borderline is the White Sea, to the South the Ryazan region (approximately 200 km to the south-east of Moscow), to the West the Novgorod region (approximately 200 km to the south-east from the Finnish Gulf) and to the East the Middle Volga river region. During the Late Neolithic, this area was occupied by hunters and gatherers, but fishing was also important. The relative importance of these three types of

¹ Editor's note: The Russian Neolithic is defined only by the presence of pottery. Nevertheless, in this region the ceramic technology appears widely before the emergence of agriculture and farming. Therefore, the Late Neolithic of the European Russian forest zone must be understood as the period of the last societies depending on hunting and gathering but possessing ceramics.



Fig. 1 — Anthropomorphic flint figurines and areas of archaeological cultures.

activities depended on regional, seasonal and chronological circumstances.

Flint sculpture appears to be scarce but it is found as well as in dwelling-sites as in burials. The sites are located mostly along riverbanks or lake shores. The remains of dwellings (oval or rectangular) can sometimes be fixed on its

territory. Normally, the inventory is represented by flint tools and ceramics. Peat bog sites are notable for their well-preserved bone, antler and wooden tools. Burials are situated near or even within dwelling-sites. There are not only individual tombs, but also graveyards including from several to dozens of burials. Sometimes

graves contain several skeletons, buried with or without goods.

Burial goods vary greatly and include flint, bone and antler tools, as well as pendants made of animal teeth. Sometimes amber pendants and ceramics are present.

Today scholars attribute the known flint sculpture to several archaeological cultures (fig. 1):

- 1) Kargopol (to the east of Onega Lake, 3rd millennium BC);
- 2) Msta (Valdai region, 3rd millennium BC);
- 3) Volosovo (Upper and Middle Volga river region, 2nd half of the 3rd millennium – beginning of the 2nd millennium BC);
- 4a) Asbestos Ware (southern Karelia, end of the 3rd millennium BC);
- 4b) Belomor (southern shore of the White Sea, approximately the 2nd millennium BC).

It should be emphasized that the borderlines of particular cultures and especially their chronological aspects are not well known. The main point is that a certain common way of life is registered on this huge territory, characterized by similar tools and the extensive use of similar ceramic forms. As a rule, the definition of archaeological cultures of the forest zone is based on their ceramic productions.

2. STUDYING FLINT SCULPTURE

The first occasional finds of flint sculpture (end of the 19th century) occurred on the southern shore of the White Sea, at Volosovo (approximately 300 km to the east from Moscow) and in the Kazan city region (Middle Volga river). During the first half of the 20th century, the quantity of finds increased (unfortunately, most are lost). The outstanding Russian scholar Sergey Zamyatnin was the first to collect many specimens of anthropomorphic flint figurines and to present their classification (Zamyatnin, 1948). During the last fifty years, a large amount of material has been yielded by excavations of sites and burials. Recent research indicated that the number of figurines increased no less than three times (Utkin & Kostyleva, 1996) and their number continues to grow almost every year. Nevertheless, lost findings formed and continue to form a significant part of the whole collection (about 1/3).

In Russian papers no uniform system of flint figurine description is presented. Researches

deal with limited amounts of information, which are insufficient for a comprehensive analysis. The quality of the illustrations is not always satisfactory. In some cases, there are no indication of figurine dimensions. Thus, the study of such heterogeneous materials is apparently difficult. So the formulation of assertions requires a particular accuracy.

3. FIGURINES

Figurines are rather small, from 1.7 to 8 cm high and human bodies are schematically represented because of the raw material nature. Flint used for both tools and sculptures was widely spread and accessible almost throughout the forest zone. Its deposits extended as a wide area stretching from the Moscow region to the eastern shore of the Onega Lake (Kovnurko, 1973).

Sculpture is worked out of flint blades and flakes, retouched along the edge or the whole surface. The bifacial or unifacial work is steep or flat. The figurines are flat, sometimes rather thin. Most of them are symmetrical and represented in front-view. Only two profile figurines are known. All sculptures (fig. 2–3) have variously modeled heads and oblong torsos. Arms and legs are made as ledges; the first ones, not systematically represented, are short and spread out; the second ones are longer, either spread out, parallel or arched.

4. MAIN PROBLEMS

4.1. Origins and Spreading

The theme of anthropomorphic flint sculpture has been discussed in Russia for more than fifty years. Nevertheless, some problems still wait to be solved. For instance an accurate definition of the chronology or of the ways of spreading is still lacking. The territory of diffusion is extremely wide, however it is necessary to find out where the figurines appeared for the first time and the ways of their dispersal.

This task is extremely difficult due to several reasons. Firstly, most sites contain not only Neolithic but also Mesolithic, Bronze and even Early Iron Age layers. Thus, it explains why Late Neolithic levels are usually poorly preserved. Dating flint sculpture is an additional difficulty. Secondly, it is impossible to obtain direct

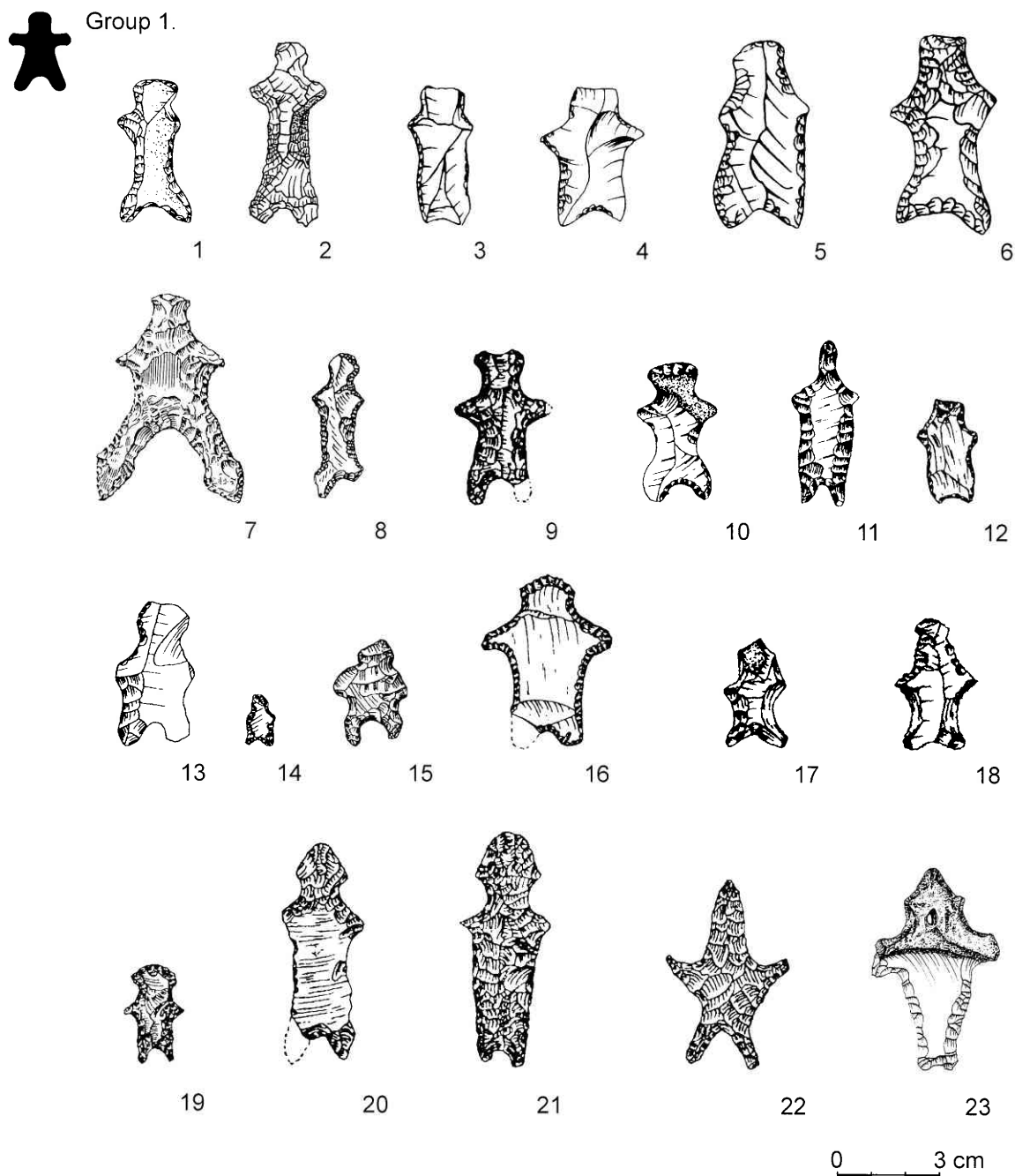


Fig. 2 — 1–6: Zimina, 1992; 7: Studzitskaya, 1994; 8–16: Utkin & Kostyleva, 1996; 17–18: Raushenbach, 1969; 19–22: Zamyatnin, 1948; 23: Illustration by N. Nestratova.

radiocarbon dates for the available material and a lot of finds were lost. Such finds are usually dated by the known analogues or by the date of the nearest site. Ceramics of this period are the main base for dating. According to these conditions, the dating of most anthropomorphic flint figurines is estimated to the second half of the third millennium BC (Utkin & Kostyleva, 1996). A minority of finds, which came from northern territories, is estimated to the end of the third millennium BC (Zhulnikov, 1993)

and to the second millennium BC (Oshibkina, 1992). Thus, the anthropomorphic flint figurines seem to have been carved during more or less 1,000 years.

4.2. The Figurines and their use

The functional role and the interpretation of anthropomorphic flint sculpture are unknown. There are two types of figurines: humans (male and female) and fantastic anthropomorphic

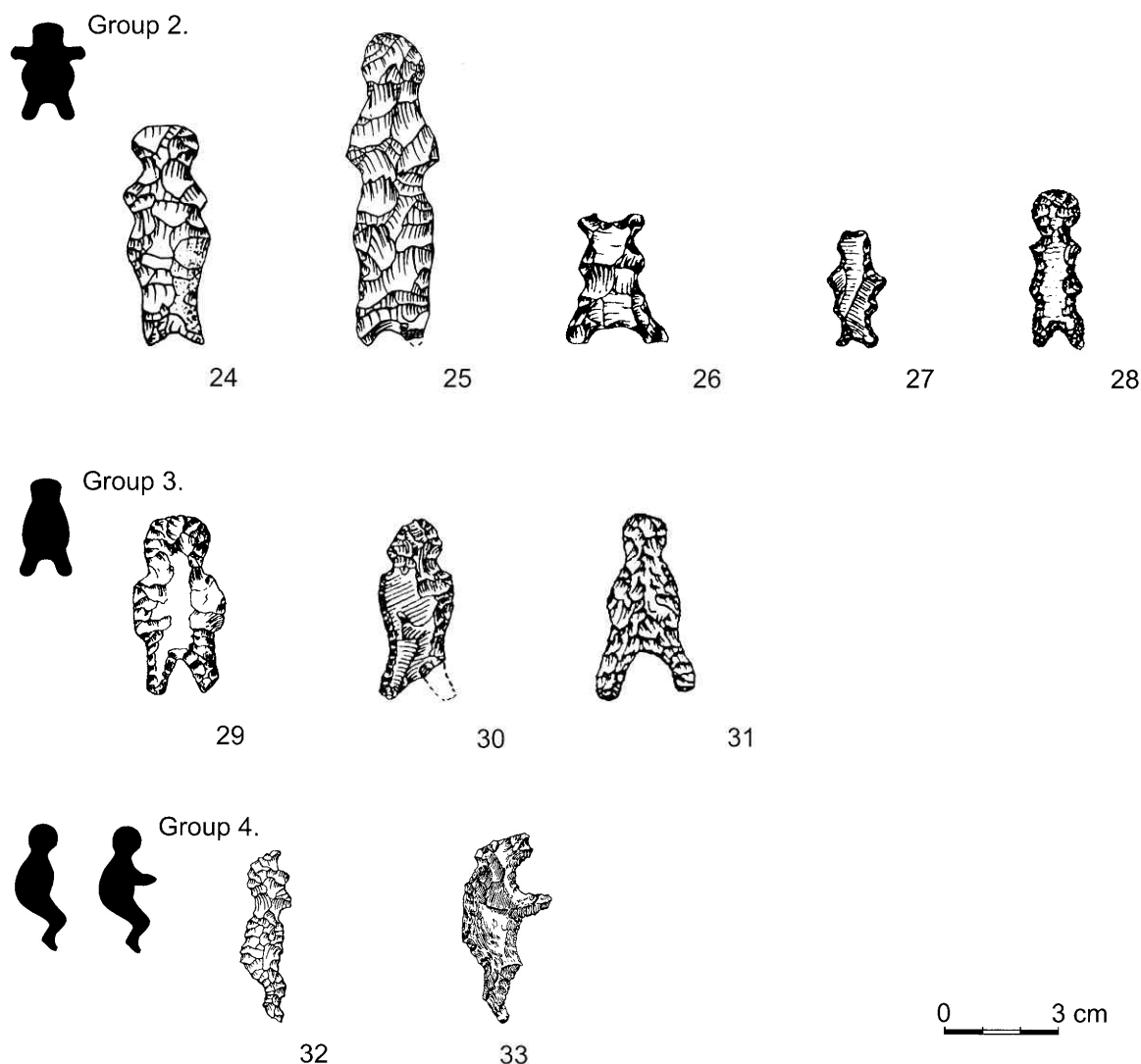


Fig. 3 — 24–25: Zimina, 1992; 26–29: Utkin & Kostyleva, 1996; 30: Zamyatnin, 1948; 31: Ovchinnikova, 2000; 32: Oshibkina, 1992; 33: Repman, 1957.

creatures. Human images can be identified by their round heads and fantastic ones by their unusual or unrealistic heads. Female representations possess a pair of protuberances near the arms and also a big abdomen as a pregnant woman (Zamyatnin, 1948; Utkin & Kostyleva 1996).

There are many hypotheses, usually close to fantasy, on the meaning of these figurines. For example, some pieces with rectangular heads and arched legs were interpreted as the images of a bear or a human-bear. Only two assertions are somewhat convincing:

- 1) flint sculpture was connected with the cult of ancestors;
- 2) flint sculpture illustrates a group of mythical heroes.

It is obvious that both problems (spreading and interpretation of figurines) have to be solved. To obtain a comprehensive approach of the figurines, I tried to classify the different groups of figurines according to their morphological features, to determine their territorial spreading and correlation, eventually to reveal some regional features. This way, I hoped to find some explanations about the functionality of the figurines and about their symbolic meaning.

Nine morphological elements have been selected to obtain a complex classification. These elements and their meaning appear in table 1. According to this description, four main groups of sculpture can be recognized (see fig. 2–3):

- 1) full-faced figurines with arms (53 pieces);
- 2) full-faced figurines with arms and a pair of protuberances (9 pieces);

Main elements	Main technique Symmetry Arms Pair of protuberances Legs	Retouch Full-face / Profile Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No
Additional elements	Form of legs Form of head Proportion (width/height) Height	Spread / Parallel / Arched / Profiled Round / Rectangular / Triangular / Unusual (1/2, 1/3, ...) Small (< 3 cm) / Middle (< 6 cm) / Large (> 6 cm)

Table 1 — Morphological traits of flint figurines.

- 3) full-faced figurines without arms (4 pieces);
4a) profile figurines without arm(s) [1 piece];
4b) profile figurines with arm(s) [1 piece].

5. REGIONAL CORRELATION

Regional correlation of flint sculpture groups is shown on fig. 1. Obviously, these groups cannot be associated with particular regions or archaeological cultures. Specimens of different groups are uniformly spread throughout the territory. Thus, these traditions of making multi-form flint sculpture could be similar everywhere and they could be related to different contemporaneous archaeological cultures.

Group 4 (a,b) includes only 2 specimens which possess a unique set of elements (unusual head, legs seen in profile and one arm). So, this group is rather special and should be discussed separately.

6. ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS IN GROUPS

Despite the assertion about the lack of direct relations between a particular set of elements and specific regions, the spread of additional elements (such as form of legs and head, proportions and height) will be carefully analyzed anyway.

Various forms of legs and considerable difference in height are common for the figurines of groups 1–3. Apparently, there were no special “favorite” forms or height variants, either in the groups or in the regions.

The figurine heads arouse deep interest and the almost carefulness of their modelling has already been stressed by scholars (Zamyatnin, 1948). It is mainly the head that defines the essence of the whole image. Of the four head

forms mentioned above, only the round one prevails in groups 1–3.

The prevailing of the rounded head and spread legs appears to be the most typical feature of group 1 (more than 2/3 of all figurines). These figurines possess the following set of elements:

- 1) spread out legs, round head, 1:3 proportion (7 pieces);
- 2) spread out legs, round head, 1:2 proportion (9 pieces).

Now let us consider the scattering of these two variants in the forest zone (fig. 4). They form two separate areas. “Round/spread/1:3” figurines are only met in the northern zone (Valdai, eastern shore of the Onega Lake); “Round/spread/1:2” figurines, in the southern one (from Valdai to Middle Volga river region). It is impossible to affirm whether this distribution is accidental or not, because the amount of material is too small. It only suggests that the local interpretation of a particular image represented by figurines of group 1 differed in northern and southern territories. Scholars had already emphasized that “stretched” (or 1:3 proportion) figurines prevailed in the northern region (Zamyatnin, 1948; Oshibkina, 1978). Today, with a larger amount of material, this assertion can be related to the “round-head/spread-legs” sculpture.

Apparently, full-faced images with arms and legs (group 1, round-headed variant) were the most frequent, commonly used and often described for all Late Neolithic societies on this large territory. Probably, that is the main reason of their maximum quantities among all anthropomorphic flint sculptures. Groups 2–4 are less significant because of the small number of specimens. This fact allows to suggest that these figurines were less used and where

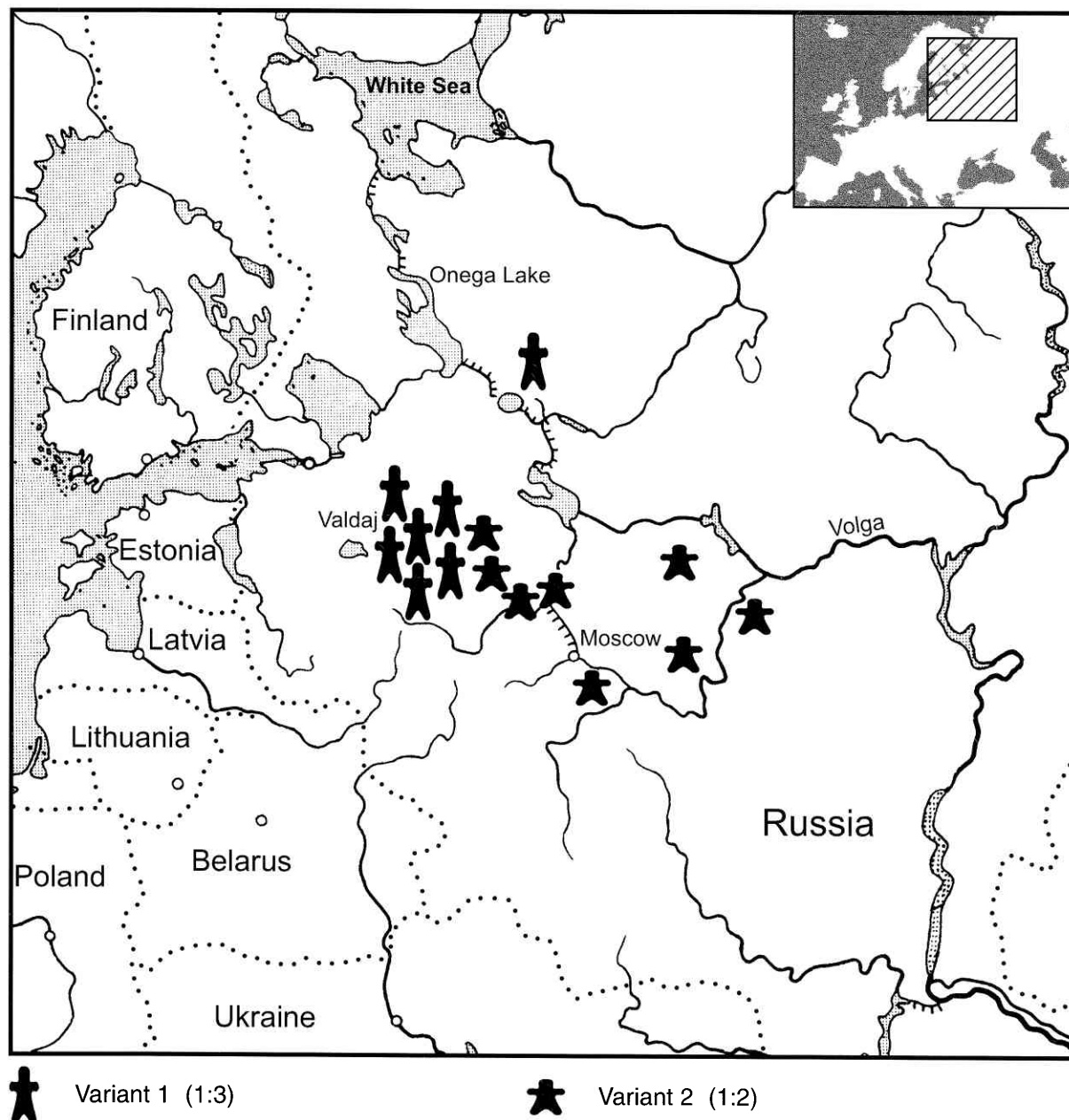


Fig. 4 — Group 1: “rounded head/spread legs” variants.

either unimportant or reserved to exceptional circumstances.

Thus, the analysis demonstrates and confirms the availability of numerous variants of body forms, proportions and heights of anthropomorphic flint sculptures. The location of the four groups in the European Russian forest zone (fig. 1) suggests that the figurines belonged to several contemporaneous archaeological cultures sharing a common territory or border regions.

Numerous variants of anthropomorphic flint sculptures can possibly be explained by the

existence of different chronological traditions or, maybe, by functional or symbolic characters even within one site. Some series of figurines, found in the same site, display notable morphological differences, for example pieces from Repische (fig. 2/1-6; fig. 3/24-25), Sachtysh 1 (fig. 2/10-12), Sachtysh 2 (fig. 2/13-14; fig. 3/29), Sachtysh 2a (fig. 2/15-16), Nikolo-Perevoz 2 (fig. 2/17-18 and another one which is not represented here) and Volosovo (fig. 2/19-22; fig. 3/27, 30). Nevertheless, various differences in combination of the main elements offer the

opportunity to define four groups of representations. A particular group of well-defined anthropomorphic images probably existed during the Late Neolithic, widely known by the inhabitants in different parts of this large territory, often located very far from each other. It can be proved by the layout of finds (fig. 1).

7. FUNCTIONAL USE AND SYMBOLIC MEANING

The list of questions, connected with cult, always rises a lot of contradictories, faulty and fantastic ideas. Only the most credible data are presented here because, as it was mentioned earlier, the study of this material is connected with many difficulties.

The most common opinion is that anthropomorphic flint figurines should be interpreted as pendants and amulets which were worn on a string (around the neck?) or were sewn to the clothes (Ozols, 1974). However, this opinion does not seem to be irreproachable. So far, only one figurine is supposed to be used as a pendant, or could be sewn on some clothes (fig. 2/23). It has a natural hole in the pre-form and was deliberately made out of this very piece. So the cord could be passed through it. The mentioned figurine and another one (fig. 3/31) were found on the floor of a house.

Zamyatnin proposed a curious suggestion about the figurine functional use. The similarity of form between sculptures and points, as well as the use of the techniques and raw materials, could explain the use of flint points as pre-forms for the figurines. More over, figurines could have been used as points in some special cases, for example, to sacrifice animals (Zamyatnin, 1948). Though stimulating, this idea cannot be proved.

One more opinion should be mentioned. Generally, the functional use of figurines could have been different in various regions and periods (Studzitskaya, 1971). This opinion about the different ways of use is sustained by the fact that seven anthropomorphic figurines are found in graves and were possibly used in burial rites (fig. 2/2, 8, 13–14; fig. 3/25–26, 29). Unfortunately, there are no accurate data concerning the exact location of flint sculpture in graves.

8. DISCUSSION

The interpretation is believed to be the most intriguing issue in the study of flint sculpture. Zamyatnin suggested that Late Neolithic societies worshipped flint and even created a particular cult of flint, expressed in the process of making flint sculpture. The present study allows to suggest that flint in the mentality of the Late Neolithic people was linked with earth and the particular set of goods that they received from the environment. For example, it could be the possibility to get raw material for making flint tools. Even more, there could exist an idea of flint animism, as well as an environmental animism. Zamyatnin (his paper was published in 1940's, when the study of the period considered here only began) even supposed that at this epoch metal tools had already appeared and begun to force out the flint ones. That is why, at that time, flint became the main raw material for cult objects (flint sculpture). Even today, we do not have, however, any clear evidence of metalwork during the Late Neolithic of the European Russian forest zone. Therefore, his suggestion seems to be erroneous.

A few years ago, another hypothesis appeared. According to it, the color of the flint could be particularly important for the symbolic meaning of the figurines. Actually, the color shades of the flint of the European Russian region are bright and multiple. But the mentioned connection between color and meaning should be documented by the origin of the raw materials. It will be the subject of a special study.

A particular accuracy is necessary to understand the figurine meanings. It should be based on wide but realistic comparisons of flint sculpture with anthropomorphic figurines of the European Russian forest zone made of other materials, and with the rock art human representations (in the north of European Russia).

Some figurines may well be interpreted as "human-bear" or "upright standing bear" (fig. 2/9; fig. 3/26, 33) or even as "costumed participant of a rite", like some scholars propose (Utkin & Kostyleva, 1996), but such conclusions do not seem to be satisfactory.

Following the present analysis, it is possible to speak only about four different types of anthropomorphic images during the Late Neolithic.

1) "Figures with arms and legs" ("normal" figure) were the most popular and the most

required images, as it was mentioned earlier. They probably represent a real man, alive or dead, or maybe an ancestor;

- 2) "Figures with arms and a pair of protuberances": such figurines were interpreted by Zamyatnin as representations of women with a big abdomen, demonstrating pregnancy. It could be an image of a real woman or of a female-ancestor. Some "figures without arms" with a "bent" abdomen possibly reflect a similar image and can be interpreted as a fantastic female-ancestor. Such female images may be compared with the well known Upper Paleolithic female imagery;
- 3) "Figures without arms" probably show unreal creatures or maybe ancestors whose body, by its constitution, was different from an ordinary human body. Such images, lacking some body elements, are quite known in world mythology;
- 4) "Profile figures": their position with legs slightly bent in knees could demonstrate a sitting or moving (dancing) pose. The unusual image aspect, the neat and refined treatment of all the surfaces of these figurines (fig. 3/32–33) suggest that these two pieces were the chronological latest ones. A group of similar human figures is also known in the Northern European Russian rock art (Onega Lake, White Sea). Regrettably, these two figurines are lost and, therefore, we can only suggest that they belong to the same period as the rock art ones.

Thus, the discussed images may be interpreted as representation of mythical heroes. Some of them could represent human-animals and hybrid creatures. Let us consider, for example, the various figurines with unusual heads (fig. 2/9, 23; fig. 3/26). These heads could be interpreted as mammal heads with horns, ears or oblong muzzles. One representation probably has hooves (fig. 2/7; for more information see Kashina, 2001).

9. CONCLUSION

Despite of all its peculiarities, Late Neolithic anthropomorphic flint sculpture of the European Russian forest zone is not the unique group of that kind. The art of making not

only flint, but also jade and obsidian sculpture, representing humans, animals and abstract symbolic objects is well known in different epochs and parts of the world. Pre-dynastic Egypt, Eskimos (Alaska), American Indians of the Pacific and Atlantic shores or Maya culture are the most obvious examples.

Nevertheless, the Russian scholar Zamyatnin suggested that the appearance of figurines made of flint could be correlated with a particular stage of social and cultural development, namely the beginning of metalwork. However, we cannot agree with the assertion that the use of metal appeared in the considered region during the Late Neolithic. That is why the main stimulus of flint sculpture still remains unknown.

It should also be recognized that hunter-gatherers of the European Russian region possessed a highly developed ideology, reflected in diverse human imageries. More, they probably knew various mythical heroes with partial or complete human appearance.

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Author's address:

Ekaterina KASHINA
State Historical Museum
Archaeological Department
Krasnaya Square, 1/2
RU-103012 Moscow (Russia)