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Original article

Научная статья

Art in Slovakia in Prehistoric Times

Искусство Словакии в доисторические времена

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Abstract. Archaeological research in the territory of today's Slovakia has revealed rare artifacts from the oldest period in human history, from prehistory. Two unique female figures of Venus represent them. This article presents a statuette from the Paleolithic Era — the Venus of Moravany, which is made from a mammoth tusk and is an artistic expression of fertility in the matriarchy. The article also describes a gem from the Neolithic period, the Venus of Hrádok, *Magna Mater*, as the goddess of harvest, success, the giver of life and well-being.

Аннотация. Археологические исследования на территории современной Словакии выявили редкие артефакты древнейшего в истории человечества периода, доисторического времени.

Это две уникальные женские фигуры Венеры. В статье представлена статуэтка эпохи палеолита из бивня мамонта Венера Моравская — художественный символ плодородия времён матриархата. Также описывается «жемчужина» эпохи неолита Венера Градоцкая, *Magna Mater*, как богиня урожая, успеха, дарительница жизни и благоденствия.

Keywords:

Prehistory, art, artifact, Venus

Ключевые слова:

доисторическое время, искусство, артефакт, Венера

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Although Slovakia is a small country in the middle of Europe important settlement zones were created on its present territory already at the dawn of human history. Far-back history has left its distinct traces hidden in the present valleys around rivers, in the basins of mountain ranges, in travertine mounds, and in old geological layers below the fertile lowlands. Archaeological research gradually reveals messages immersed in the depths of time, and modern science seeks to reconstruct the life of prehistoric man; not only his way of hunting, living, or thinking, but also his cult ideas, art, culture... The only factual historical source for learning about our ancient ancestors are material bases provided by the archaeological research; both — ecofacts created by nature without human intervention, and artifacts that are the result of human activity.

In further text, we will try to approach unique prehistoric artifacts included in a huge range of archaeological findings in Slovakia. We will focus on mobile artifacts that meet the criteria of artistic creation, although we emphasize that the exact definition of prehistoric art has not yet been strictly resolved. We focus on the oldest art manifestations that do not require, from the point of view of contemporary art science, the intervention of experimental archeology (such as musical instruments), and “*we can reciprocate them in the most possible original form even today.*” [1, p. 101] Therefore, we will present two representative objects from the oldest period in human history, from prehistory. The first one originated in the Slovak Paleolithic (from the Latin words *palaeo* = old, *lithos* = stone), and the second one in the Neolithic. The artifacts presented have long had the status of an art work, and they are in perfect accord even with the latest Slovak proposal of the prehistoric art definition by L. Makky. This young scientist created a sophisticated cluster-disjunctive definition based on 13 unambiguous criteria [Ibid., pp. 110–111].

The results of archaeological research confirm that the territory of today’s Slovakia “*has been, from the oldest times, intersected by trade routes connecting Southeastern Europe with Western, Northern and Eastern Europe.*” [2, p. 230] The prehistoric “crossroad” fulfilled its primary trade mission, but it has naturally become also a crossroad of cultures. Ethnic groups of near and far territories met, interacted with each other and, in addition to material trade products, passed on their own specific customs, traditions, rituals, conventions, opinions, norms, etc. Cultural transfer took place between integrated communities and cultural omnis. In one direction, local peculiarities were enriched by foreign influences in the form of imports, and in the opposite direction, they influenced foreign cultures as exports. Several Slovak artifacts from the prehistoric period provide a picture of the foreign elements implication, sometimes even the foreign influences assimilation, which is a confirmation of both — intensive movement along major cultural roads, and intercultural communication of our prehistoric ancestors. Interculturation does not mean a loss or a reduction of local originality, but it implies creativity. According to Piaček, “*culture can many of other cultures re-create, create over again, and form in a living context of itself.*” [3, p. 78]

Venus of Moravany nad Váhom

The popular Slovak historian and the author of non-fiction Pavel Dvořák, poetically named this small statuette “*The First Lady of Slovak Prehistory.*” [4, p. 52] Justifiably, because it is the first and the oldest find of female figure in Slovakia. Its origin is, based on the principle of the C14 carbon method, estimated to 22,860 (± 400) years.

The small human figure has a size of 7.5 cm. It is made of a mammoth tusk and its surface is smoothed. It depicts a woman with highlighted features of a woman’s body (wide hips, large breasts, massive thighs, voluminous abdomen). It symbolizes the

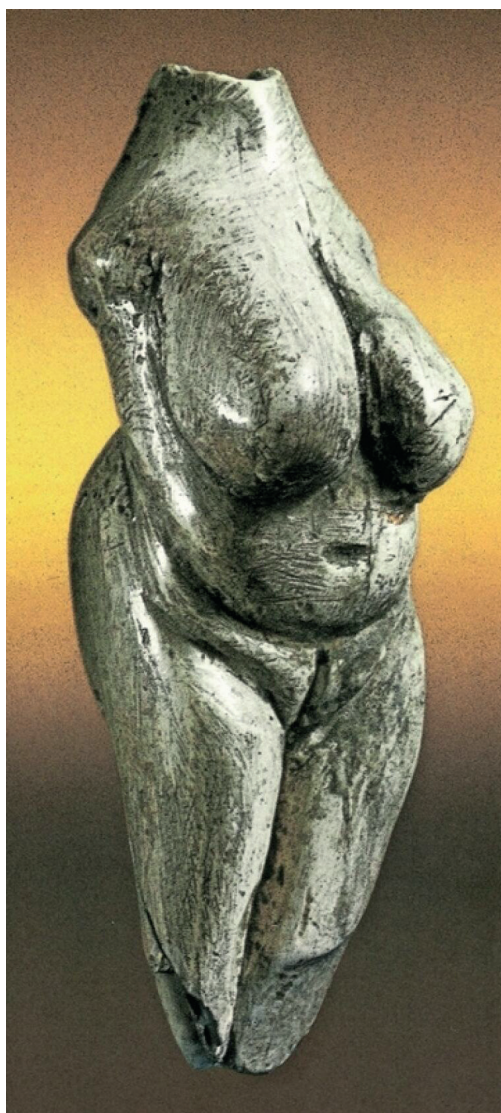


Photo 1. Venus of Moravany¹

mother cult, the power of fertility, the preservation of the genus, which were the main attributes of the Paleolithic matrilineal filial system. Figures of a woman — a mother who was given the designation of Venus after the Roman goddess of beauty, became the artistic expressions of the matriarchy [5, p. 18]. Their mission is not completely clarified, but most experts believe that *“the predecessors of later priests, so-called shamans, used them for magical ceremonies to conjure up the power of fertility.”* [6]

An international research team from the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus has published an interesting theory about the disproportionality of the Venus

body. The researchers applied the knowledge of anthropology, archeology and medicine and, based on exact measurements of the body of Venus, came to the theory that the proportions of figures correlate with climatic conditions and the alternation of ice ages during prehistory. The falling temperatures brought a lack of food and nutritional stress, and at that time, “obese” figures, which gave hope that the mother would survive and the family would be preserved were created. At a time of global warming and better food availability, the body size of the Venus was shrinking [7].

A Paleolithic gem, the Venus of Moravany is still fabled by a number of mysteries and ambiguities. It is said that the statuette was ploughed by Štefan Hullman-Petrech in 1925 in Moravany nad Váhom (Slovak town). He donated it to Bernhard Germann, a guest in the nearby spa in Piešťany. Germann was a layman, so he asked the German archaeologist prof. Lothar Zotz to make an expertise, and he forwarded him the statuette. The further fate of Venus is already historically documented: Germann committed suicide; the statuette became the property of Zotz, who sent it to the Musée de l’Homme (Museum of a Man) in Paris, where it was given to the renowned scientist abbot Henri Breuil to confirm authenticity. The authenticity was confirmed, and the original was returned to Zotz in Germany. However, prof. Zotz did not respond to the calls of Slovak archaeologists. It was not until 1966 that Zotz accepted the invitation to meet the Slovak scientist Juraj Bárta, and after the Archaeological Congress in Prague finished, he visited Slovakia. J. Bárta recalls: *“In the family environment in the afternoon, we presented him ... a confirmation from the new director of the Museum of a Man, that the original Moravian Venus was returned to him. Finally, we agreed to return her to Slovakia”* [6]. The fate of Venus continued to be complicated: prof. Zotz died unexpectedly. However, in 1967, his assistant and collaborator personally handed over the Venus of Moravany to the

Archaeological Institute in Nitra, where it is preserved to this day.

Venus of Nitriansky Hrádok

During the final Stone Age period, in the Neolithic, about 5,000 years ago, the first human community settled in Nitriansky Hrádok in southern Slovakia. It gradually changed the face of the countryside. Our ancestors concentrated all their waste in one place. From pot-sherds, bones, debris of clay houses and other waste, a hill “grew” — a terrain formation, the tell. In analogy with Schliemann’s Troy, which appeared in the tell Hisarlik, the tell in Nitriansky Hrádok was given the name Slovak Troy. It was hiding tens of

thousands of objects and fragments, and among them a gem, a statue of a woman. In 1950, Vendelín Laco, a student who assisted in archaeological research, discovered it. To this day, he remembers his rare find: *“At first, we discovered only the big butt of the statue, but when we showed it to our leader, he immediately called to Nitra, and they came in four cars from there. Based on the contour lines of the soil, they estimated that this was a finding from a period several thousand years before Christ.”* [8] The expertise dates the age of the finding back to 4,800–3,500 BC.

The statuette of a sitting woman is 27 cm high; it is made of clay fired to a dark red color. It is the first Neolithic finding of female plastic in Slovakia.



Photo 2. Monument to the Venus of Nitriansky Hrádok in Nitriansky Hrádok²



Photo 3. Slovak coin³

Venus sits on a specially preserved seat [9, p. 76], she is slimmer than her Paleolithic predecessors, but with massive thighs and only symbolically shaped feet. According to Vladár, it symbolizes the goddess of harvest, success, the giver of life and well-being [10, p. 19]. Her hands, in an adoration gesture,

point to prayer, pray during ceremonies [5, p. 36]. These are the attributes for which the figure was named Magna Mater — the Great Mother. Its modern glory was ensured by its depiction on a coin worth 2 Slovak crowns, which was officially used as currency in Slovakia in the years 1993–2008.

Slovak scientists are aware that research in any historical epoch cannot be definitively completed, because it is always necessary to take into account the possibility of new findings and the discovery of new connections. Perhaps the mysteries and enigmas fabling the Venus of Moravia and the Magna Mater will be solved. According to L. Novotný, prehistoric art cannot be understood “as an archive of looking at the world of a certain culture, which is waiting to be read.” [9, p. 67]

NOTES

¹ Photo taken from open sources. URL: https://www.moravany.sk/e_download.php?file=data/editor/16sk_1.pdf&original=Venusa.pdf.

² Photo by Pogány Péter, https://www.moravany.sk/e_download.php?file=data/editor/16sk_1.pdf&original=Venusa.pdf.

³ Photo by L. Malinovský, http://coins.lmsystem.sk/index.php?p=SR2_2K.

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