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Editura *RENAISSANCE*

New data concerning the representation of human foot in the Gumelnița culture

Cristian Eduard ȘTEFAN*

Motto: To write better archaeology we need a better understanding and awareness of the role metaphor and metonymy plays in our reconstructions (C. Tilley 2003, p. 39).

Abstract: Starting from some unpublished pieces, the author analyses in this article the clay feet found in some settlements belonging to Gumelnița culture, in more or less clear contexts. The possible meanings of this type of item are presented, with an emphasis on the importance of context in any analysis of this kind and the symbolic duality of two major concepts of everyday life: the right and left.

Rezumat: Pornind de la niște piese inedite, autorul analizează în această contribuție problematica picioarelor de lut descoperite în unele așezări gumelnițene, în contexte mai mult sau mai puțin clare. Sunt prezentate posibilele semnificații ale acestui tip de piesă, punându-se accentul pe importanța deosebită a contextului în orice analiză de acest tip și pe dualitatea simbolică a două concepte majore din viața cotidiană: dreapta și stânga.

Keywords: clay feet, Gumelnița, Chalcolithic, context, right, left, symbol, pars pro toto.

Cuvinte cheie: picioare de lut, Gumelnița, eneolitic, context, dreapta, stânga, simbol, pars pro toto.

Human foot representations made of burnt clay were also found among various types of artifacts revealed by the archaeological excavations undertaken in several Gumelnița settlements. A few unpublished items from Căscioarele – “Ostrovel”¹ and Cunești settlements will be examined in the following:

1. **Căscioarele – “Ostrovel”** (pl. II/4²; pl. III/3), without inventory number, 12.3 cm length, 9 cm height; this brick-beige colored with gray spots piece is unbroken, with secondary burning traces and represents the left leg. It was discovered in 1967, at a 1.70 - 1.95 m depth (Gumelnița A2). The toes are not modeled.
2. **Căscioarele – “Ostrovel”** (pl. II/1, 5), I 21509 inventory number, 9 cm length, 7.5 cm height; the unbroken item is light brown colored with polishing marks and shows an oblique perforation located on the upper area's left side. It seems to suggest a shoed foot; the toes are not modeled. This piece represents the right foot and was found in the second dwelling from the Gumelnița B level, at 0.50 m depth.
3. **Căscioarele – “Ostrovel”** (pl. II/2; pl. III/1), without inventory number, actual length 5.8 cm, 6.2 cm height; the item is fragmentary, dark brown colored, almost black (shows secondary burning marks) and it is polished. It represents the left foot without modeled toes. It was discovered at a depth of 1.60 m, belonging to the Gumelnița A2 level.
4. **Cunești – “Măgura Cuneștilor”** (pl. II/3; pl. III/2), I 10965c inventory number, 5.6 cm length, 3.6 cm height; representing the right foot this piece is unbroken, light-brown colored and well smoothed. It has also a horizontal perforation in the upper part, parallel with the item's length. The toes are not underlined. The discovery's context remains unknown.

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¹ I thank again in this way to Mrs. Silvia Marinescu-Bîlcu who offered me the pieces from Căscioarele – “Ostrovel” to be published.

² The drawings in Pl. II/fig. 1-4 were made by Cristina Georgescu, restorer at the “Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest.

◆ The contexts of discoveries

Twenty-four items of this type are analyzed in this study, from among which eighteen were unbroken and six fragmentary. Most pieces have unknown discovery context or belong to certain settlements layers, without any further details (pl. V/1). However, a significant number of items come from dwellings (Căscioarele – “Ostrovel”, Gumelnița, Medgidia, Șeinoiu). We find interesting to point out the fact that in two cases (Cunești and Medgidia) pairs³ of clay feet have been discovered. At Medgidia we have a precise context of the pair's discovery, near the third dwelling's hearth. Over the time, the mail role of the hearth in different spatial and temporal contexts was outlined in several contributions. Thus, in the traditional folklore the hearth was the place of various spirits (fire demons, house spirits or the ancestors spirits) and was, therefore related with many cultic customs, such as offerings (I. Beilke-Voigt 2007, p. 122).

◆ Possible meanings

The simplest interpretation indicates us the fact that these pieces would simply suggest Eneolithic types of shoes but this explanation excludes pieces in which toes are not shown (E. Comșa 1992, p. 47). In this context we must point out that the piece from Plosca, published by I. Spiru (Pl. III/fig. 6) and mentioned by Eugen Comșa in his 1992 study (p. 46), does not represent a figurine foot. It belongs to the category of human foot representations discussed by us in this paper.

The first synthesis dedicated to the human foot representation in the Carpatho-Danubian Neo-Eneolithic appeared at the middle of last century. Two types of significances for this type of piece are mainly suggested, that is the representation of the divinity following the *pars pro toto* principle, and the use of the “clay feet” during *ex-voto healing, worshiping or divinity thanking rituals* (A. Nițu 1947-1949, p. 124-127).

The ethnographer Iulius E. Lips is supporting the same idea. He speaks about the custom of “bringing in front of the divinity a representation of the sick person or the respective part of the body, hoping that it will have compassion for the person itself. From this belief derive the offerings brought by the Catholics, according to the vows made. In order to heal the limbs and internal organs of the sick persons, various figures are brought in front of the saints or figurines representing hearts, feet, arms, etc. are placed on the altar” (I.E. Lips 1958, p. 460).

Lips draws our attention also (p. 460) to a fragment of Heinrich Heine's poem “Pilgrimage at Kevlaar” in which this ritual is described⁴:

...Who offers her a wax-hand,
His wound heals for him on the hand;
And who a wax-foot offers,
Once more on the foot can stand.

According to M. Șimon and D. Șerbănescu, human foot representations in the Gumelnița area are related to the symbols of purity, power and divinity presence. Their presence inside the dwellings, as well as their perforation (which allowed them to be suspended in various places) could suggest a divinity which had the role of protecting the house (M. Șimon, D. Șerbănescu 1987, p. 33). For C. Schuster the relation between foot and foot print - ground, foot and foot print - divinity, foot - coming and leaving, beginning and end is relevant, the presence of the clay made, wooden or stone-made human foot is noticed on all continents (C. Schuster 2000, p. 267).

As a walking organ, the foot is also a social relationships symbol. It allows vicinity, permits contacts, suppresses distances; for West African Bambara populations (on the territory of nowadays Mali) the foot is considered alike sex, nose or tongue, organs capable in their turn to do and undo worlds. In Bambara culture these four organs have a great importance: they are active in society assuring cohesion or inducing the lack of cohesion in the community (J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant 1993, p. 88-89).

³ It is possible that pairs of clay feet of this type could have existed also in other settlements, but they have not been registered as such by the researchers or have not been noticed because of the reduced nature of the archaeological excavations. The excavation methods used in Romania do not allow the registration in its precise context of each artifact found in the settlements.

⁴ A similar custom, with a silver foot, is described by Zaharia Stancu in his novel “Descult” (1973, p. 302).

A very interesting study from the 80's of the last century tries to explain the fragmentary figurines feet identified in settlements belonging to Middle Neolithic in Northern Peloponnesus as being symbols identifying the messengers between those settlements (especially during crisis periods), guaranties of future obligations among groups or individuals, emblems of belonging to a certain society, as signs of non-residential family ties or as marks of marital relationships between settlements (L.E. Talalay 1987, p. 169). We can assume such functions also for the piece types discussed by us in this paper, especially because some of them were found in pairs, suggesting transactions of the type already mentioned above⁵. This idea is sustained by the observations regarding the communities from Eastern Sumba, Indonesia. Thus, an important concept in social relations is expressed by the word *papa* which means counterparty, "*what one hand represents for the other hand*". Holding palms one towards the other, the two hands are seen as a symbol of the negotiation between clans (M.J. Adams 1973, p. 273).

Another very important older contribution analyses Greeks' strange custom of wearing a single sandal. It seems that this practice existed when confronting with infernal or chthonian powers, especially for entering in contact with them. The left foot was considered to be underworld's most fit agent, the strong relationship between the foot and the foot wear being pointed out, the latter taking over all the qualities of the former (A. Brelich 1955-1957, p. 471-472)⁶.

If we examine all the 24 pieces mentioned in this paper we may see that 12 of them represent the right foot, 10 the left foot, and for two of the pieces it could not be established if they represent the right or the left foot (pl. V/fig. 2). This observation leads us to a very interesting theme respectively the report between right and left in traditional archaic societies. Ethnographic researches carried out in Romanian traditional villages points out the prevalence of right over left, from daily activities until sacred related gestures (making the sign of the cross with the right hand) of stepping with the right foot inside the church on the occasion of several events such as weddings or baptisms (E. Bernea 2005, p. 55-65).

A very interesting collection of studies from the 70's of the last century analyses exactly such reports between right and left in various traditional societies, including practically all continents (R. Needham 1974). Being extremely complex, the issue cannot be approached here. We shall content ourselves with several of its aspects. With Nuer populations from Africa, for example, if a man stumbles with the "good foot" it is a good sign, and if he stumbles with the "bad foot" it means bad luck. Individual experiences decide which is the good and the bad foot, but as a principle if the first born is a boy is a boy the good foot is the right one, and if it is a girl, the left one (E. Evans-Pritchard 1974, p. 95).

Ethnographic researches carried out on the African continent led to a series of seven great themes regarding the right-left report: 1) the right is associated with men and the left with women; 2) the right equivalent with good and the left with bad (inferior); 3) the right associated with good-luck, the left with bad-luck; 4) the left represents good-luck, and the right bad-luck; 5) the preference for the right side, the left being considered inferior; 6) various colors associated with right and left; 7) right and left indicating space orientation (H.A. Wiesschoff 1974, p. 59-73).

In China things are even more complicated, a multitude of rules indicating us the right and the left alternatively prevailing. M. Granet (1974, p. 58) exemplifies extraordinarily the above mentioned by describing the fish serving ritual: "*...How fish should be served? According to whether the fish is fresh or dried, matters are entirely different. If it is dried fish, the head must be turned towards the guest. But if it is fresh fish, it is the tail which must be turned towards the guest. Nor this is all: the season must be taken into account also. If it is summertime, the belly of the fish must be turned to the left; if it is winter, to the right. This is why: winter is the reign of Yin, and Yin, as we have seen, corresponds to the Bellow; the belly (even though it forms part of the front) is the underneath of the fish; therefore it is yin. During winter, in which Yin reigns, the belly should be the best-nourished part, the fattest and most succulent. The fish is placed with his belly to the right in winter because one has to eat with the right hand, and one begins by eating the good parts. The most succulent morsel must therefore be to the right. In summer, when Yang reigns, everything changes...*"

The human body can represent society, and therefore, its various component parts may represent different segments of the same society, such as political, kin or marital relationships the same as with the Dogon populations in Africa. The relation between the physical and social body

⁵ The same opinion also at J. Chapman (2000, p. 72) who sees a similar phenomenon manifested also through the discovery of figurine heads in Eneolithic settlements in the Lower Danube area.

⁶ For the same opinion, see also M. Eliade 1994, p. 188 or D. Evans 1974, p. 118-120, note 68.

(society) is a strong one permitting elaboration of significances (C. Tilley 2003, p. 241). According to Tilley any general material culture theory should be based on two main pillars: metaphor and metonymy. The later consists of the relationship between a part and the whole; the representation of a hand may signify a person, we refer to a king saying "the crown" or to the USA president by "The White House" phrase. The same author draws three conclusions from the material culture study (2003, p. 340-341):

- 1) Material culture cannot be understood as constituting a system;
- 2) The relationship between thing or artifacts is a fragmented network of partial connections;
- 3) Material culture usually signifies in a non-arbitrary manner.

As a conclusion, excavation and recording methods more refined than the ones used nowadays in Romania are necessary in order to better understand significations of this type of artifact discovered in Gumelnița settlements.

◆ List of discoveries

1. Cunești, Călărași County, four pieces accidentally discovered in plowing, in the *tel* type settlement; the first one represents the left foot, with a length of 10.5 cm and a height of 8 cm; the second one represents the right foot, with a 8.7 cm length and the height of 6 cm; the other two ones constitute a pair and have 15.3 cm length respectively 10.6 cm height; V. Culică 1973, p. 103-108, fig. 1.

2. Gumelnița, Călărași County, four pieces discovered in the eponym settlement; the first one has a 15.1 cm length and a 9 cm height; it was discovered in the dwelling called by Barbu Ionescu "the rich house"⁷; the second was discovered at 0.60 m depth, in the layer; it is long of 10 cm and high of 7.4 cm having an oblique perforation in the upper part; the third item was discovered at a depth of 0.55 m, in the layer, and has a 7.8 cm length and a 7.5 cm height, also with an oblique perforation in the upper part; the fourth piece, fragmentary, was found at a depth of 0.45 m and has a length of 9.2 cm and a height of 5.7 cm, its upper part having an horizontal perforation. Two of the pieces represent the right foot, and the other two the left one; M. Șimon, D. Șerbănescu 1987, p. 29-34, fig. 1-4.

3. Hârșova, Constanța County, unpublished pieces, discovered during Doina Galbenu's excavation carried out in the *tel*; E. Comșa 1992, p. 47 and note 51.

4. Medgidia, Constanța County, two items discovered in Medgidia - "Canton 4" *tel* settlement in the third dwelling. They were found near the house hearth, and represent the right and left foot, having the same dimensions: length of 13 cm and height of 7.5 cm; N. Harțușe, O. Bounegru 1997, p. 85, fig. 38/1, 2 and fig. 41/2.

5. Plosca, Teleorman County, two items discovered in a *tel* type settlement; the first one represents the right foot, has horizontal perforation in its upper part, the length of 11.7 cm and height of 8.3 cm; the second item represents the left foot, has a length of 9.7 cm and a height of 9.7 cm; I. Spîru 1965, p. 308, fig. 2; I. Spîru, C. Beda 1979, p. 401, fig. 1/1, 2.

6. Ruse, Razgrad Region, three pieces discovered in the *tel* type settlement from Ruse, one unbroken and two fragmentary; G. Georgiev, I. Angelov 1952, p. 165, fig. 150/1, 2, 3.

7. Seciu, Prahova County, one piece revealed in the settlement, representing the left foot, with the length of 10.8 cm and height of 9.7 cm; A. Frânculeasa, O. Negrea 2010, p. 49, pl. IX, fig. 8.

8. Șeinoiu, Călărași County, one piece discovered in a Gumelnița B dwelling from the *tel* settlement; it represents the right foot and has a perforation in the upper part, 6.8 cm length and 4.3 cm height; M. Șimon, D. Șerbănescu 1987, p. 29.

9. Tangîru, Giurgiu County, two unpublished pieces belonging to the Giurgiu County Museum's collections as found at Tangăru *tel* type settlement⁸.

10. Zavet, Burgas region, a piece discovered in the *tel* type settlement from Zavet, representing the left foot, with a length of 10.2 cm and a height of 7.1 cm; V. Mikov 1961, p. 293, fig. 28.

Translated by Monica Constantin.

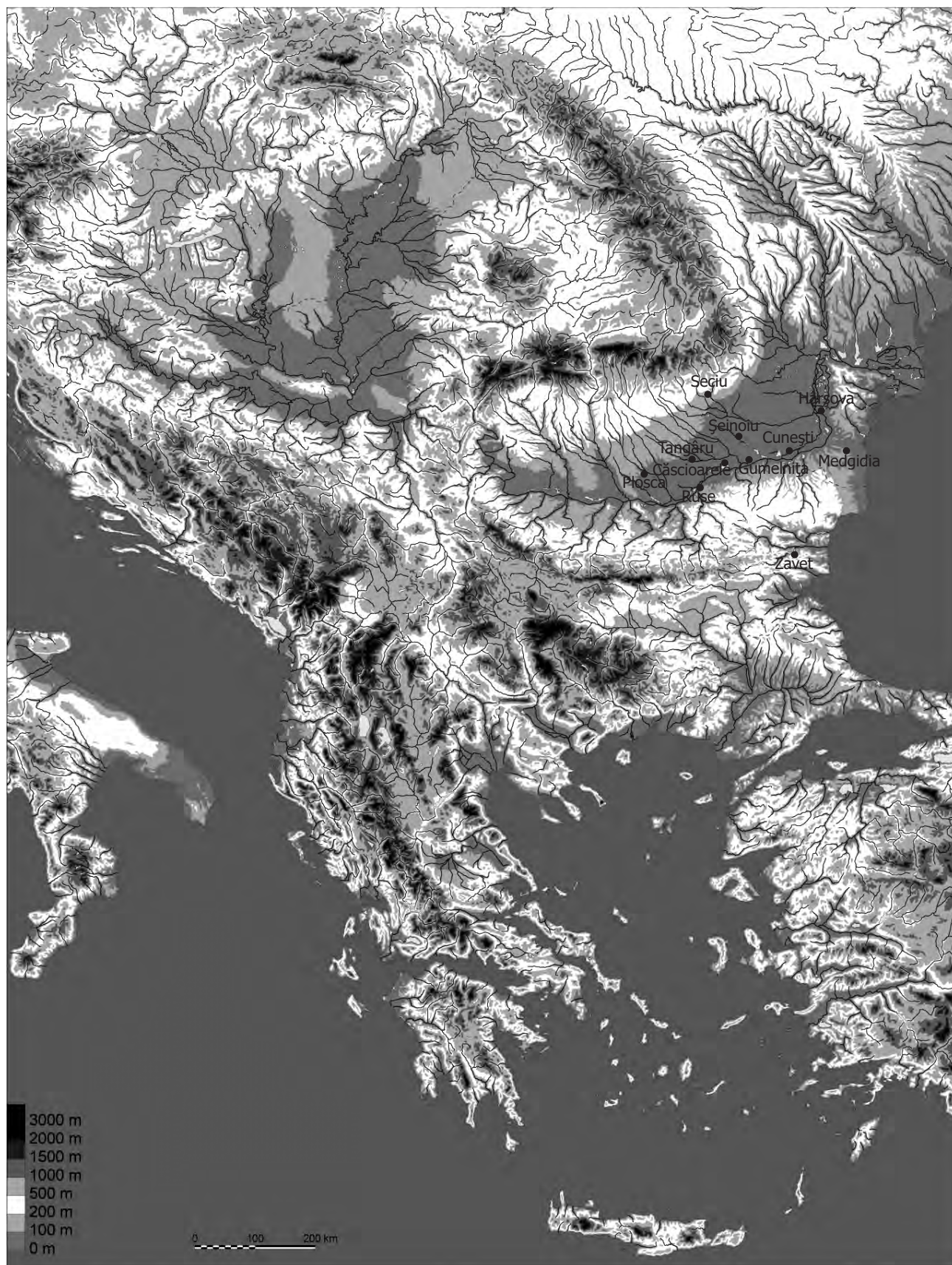
⁷ According to some information the piece might come from the "rich dwelling" researched by Barbu Ionescu in 1963. On the other hand the foot was not mentioned in any of the studies mentioning the complete inventory of this house (VI. Dumitrescu 1966, p. 162-172; VI. Dumitrescu, S. Marinescu-Bilcu 2001, p. 114-144).

⁸ The pieces were brought to my attention by Raluca Kogălniceanu to whom I would like to thank again in this way.

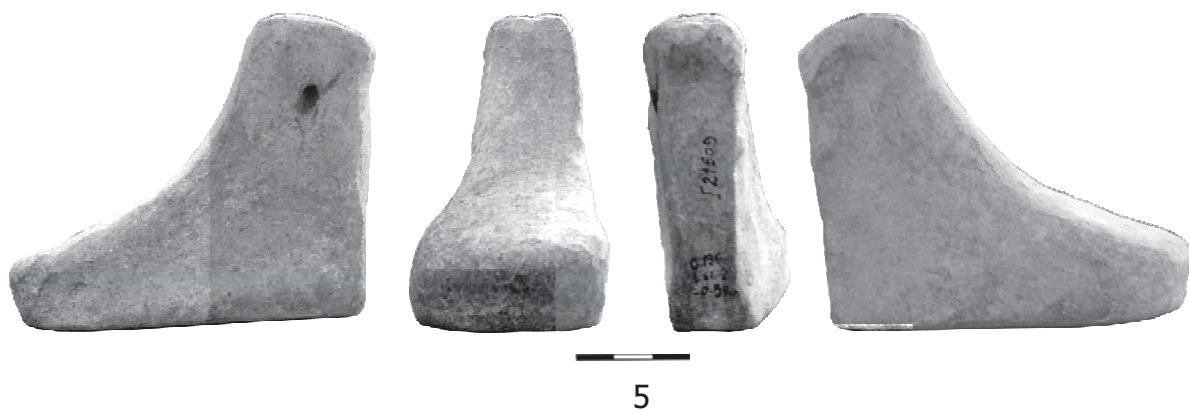
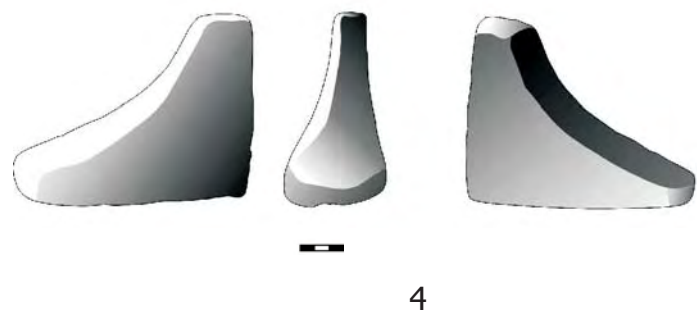
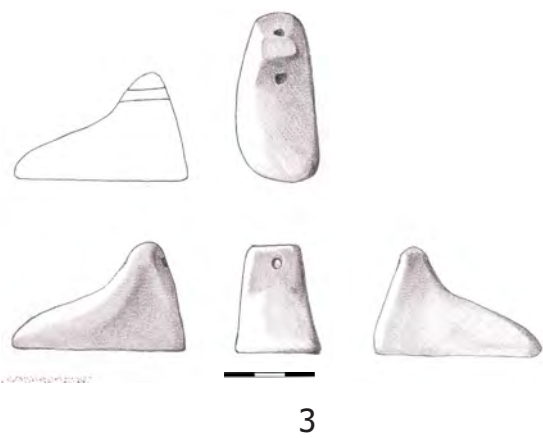
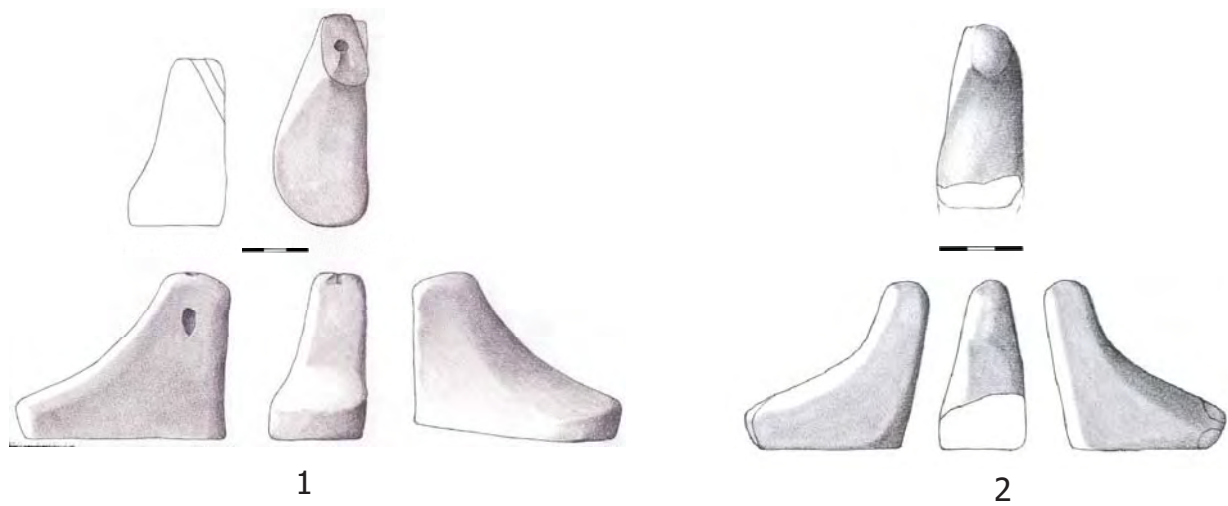
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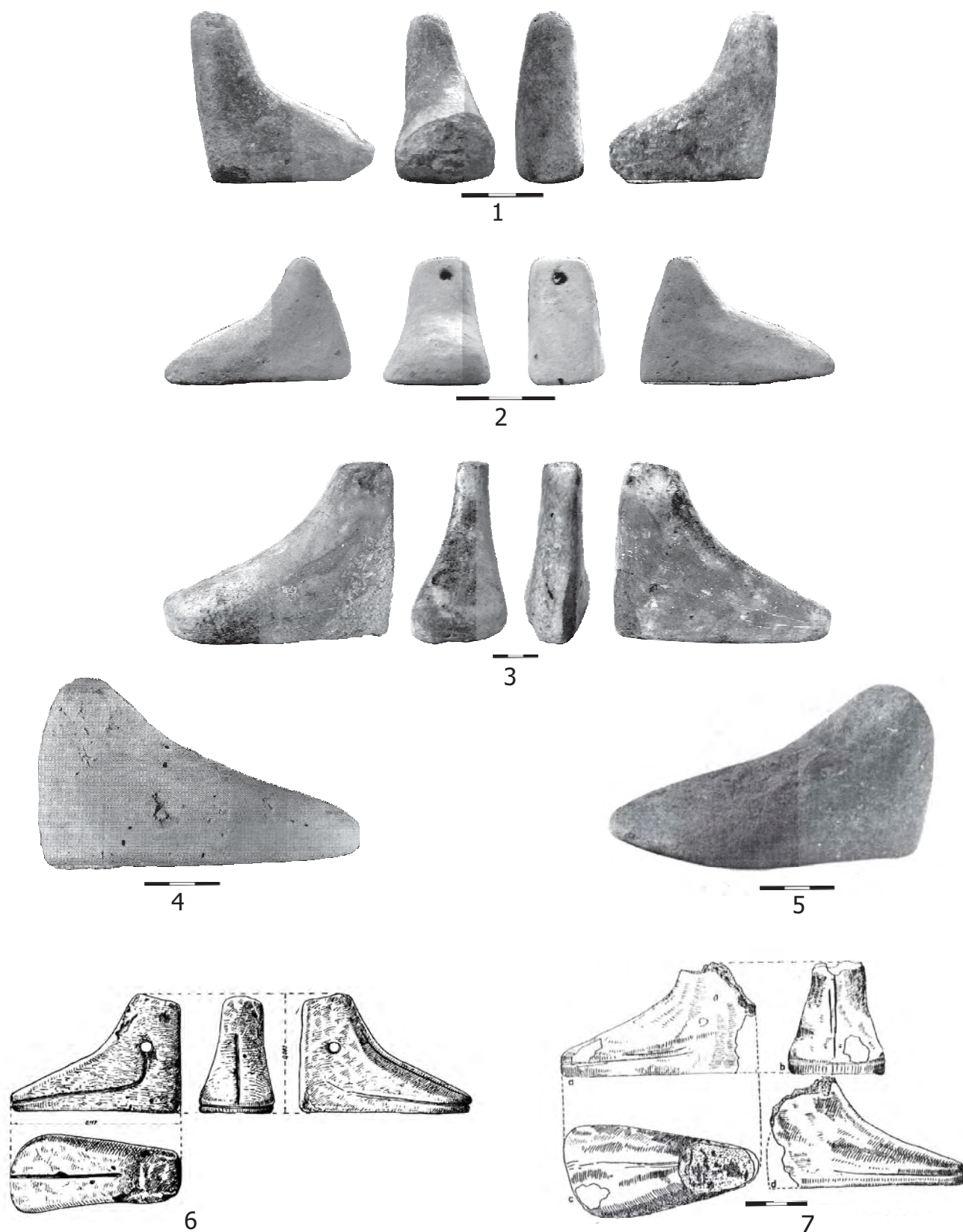
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PI. I. The map with the settlements specified in text.
Harta cu așezările menționate în text.

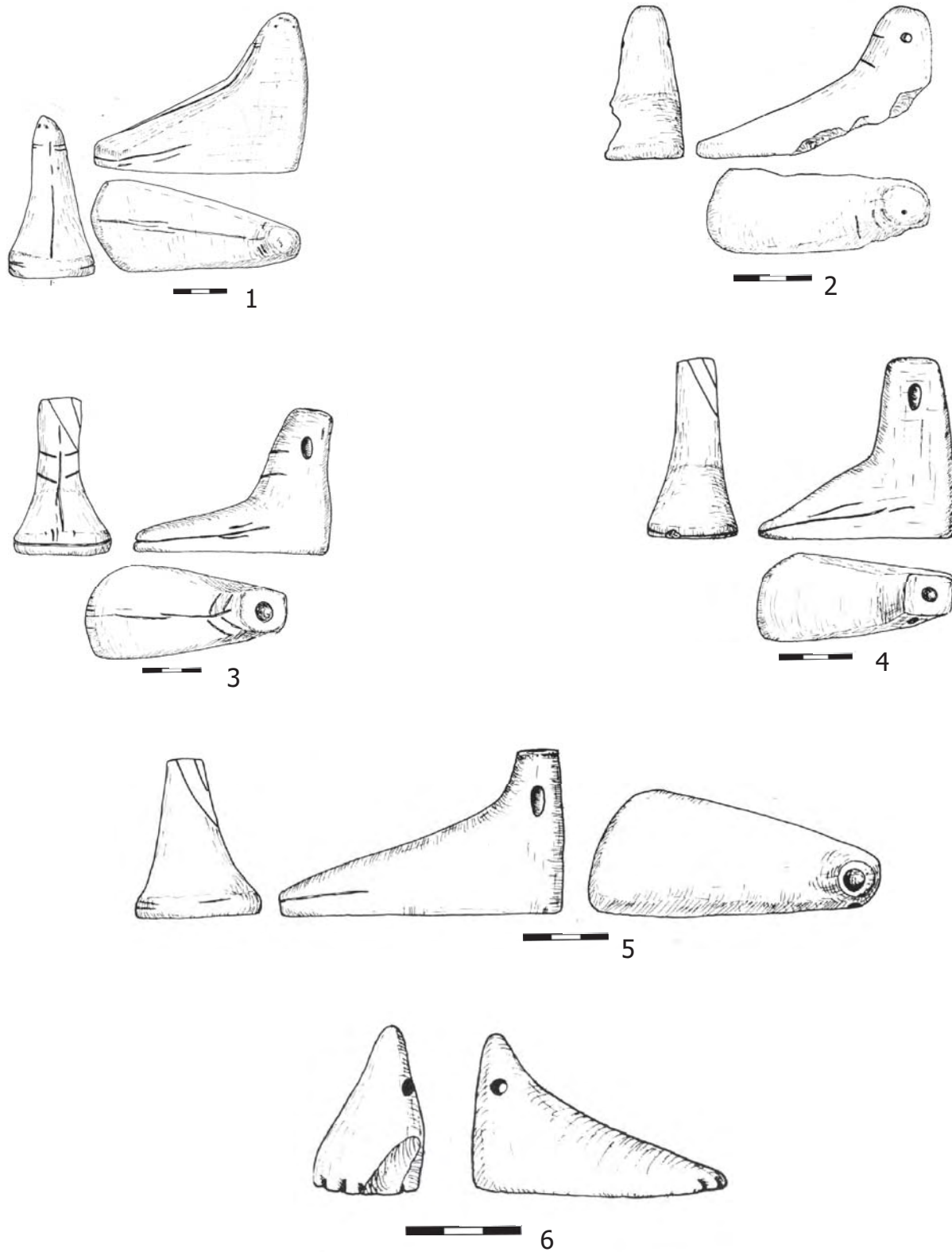


Pl. II. Clay feet. Fig. 1, 2, 4, 5. Căscioarele - "Ostrovel"; Fig. 3. Cunești; bar scale 3 cm.
Picioare de lut. Fig. 1, 2, 4, 5. Căscioarele - "Ostrovel"; Fig. 3. Cunești; scara 3 cm.



Pl. III. Clay feet. Fig. 1, 3. Căscioarele - "Ostrovel"; Fig. 2. Cunești; Fig. 4, 5. Medgidia (N. Harțuche, O. Bounegru 1997); Fig. 5, 6. Plosca (I. Spiru, C. Beda 1979).

Picioare de lut. Fig. 1, 3. Căscioarele - "Ostrovel"; Fig. 2. Cunești; Fig. 4, 5. Medgidia (N. Harțuche, O. Bounegru 1997); Fig. 5, 6. Plosca (I. Spiru, C. Beda 1979).



Pl. IV. Clay feet. Fig. 1-5. Gumelnița; Fig. 6. Șeinoiu (M. Șimon, D. Șerbănescu 1987); bar scale 3 cm.
Picioare de lut. Fig. 1-5. Gumelnița; Fig. 6. Șeinoiu (M. Șimon, D. Șerbănescu 1987); scara 3 cm.

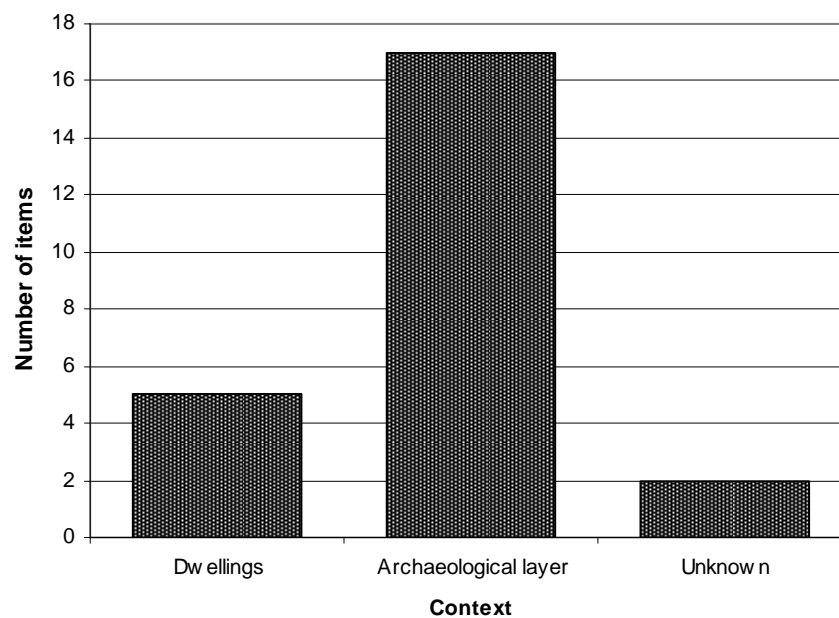


Fig. 1.

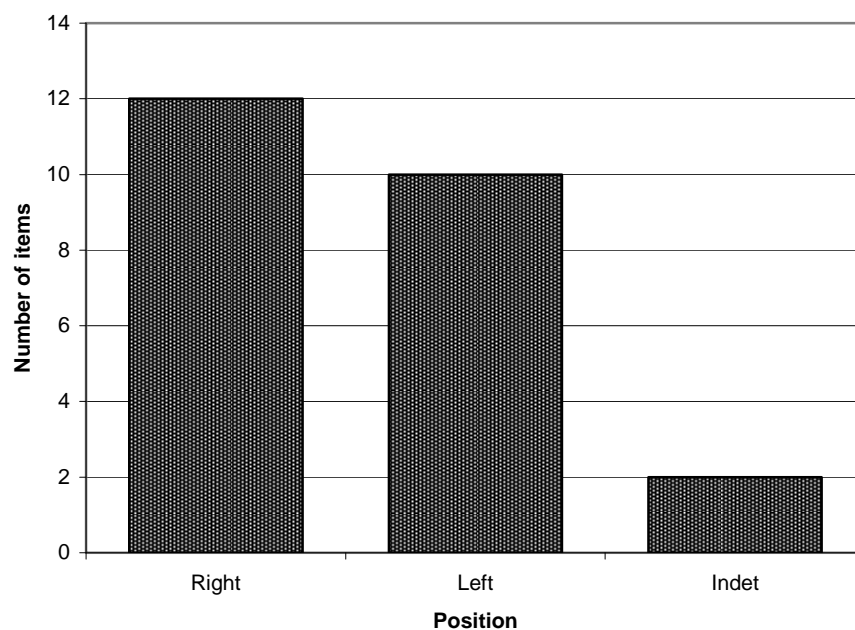


Fig. 2.

PI. V. Fig. 1. The contexts of the clay feet discovered in the Gumelnița culture. Fig. 2. The number of the right or left feet represented in the cultural contexts.

Fig. 1. Contextele picioarelor de lut descoperite în cultura Gumelnița. Fig. 2. Numărul de picioare drept sau stâng reprezentate în contexte culturale.