

The nature of artistic expression of the Únětice culture's people

Tomasz Gralak

ABSTRACT

The analysis of the artistic expression of the population of the Únětice culture was carried out assuming that the style is expressed through various media. Due to different materials, their properties and methods of treatment, the effects must differ in obvious ways. However, the idea remains common. Comparing subsequent elements of a culture, we can expect to perceive a set of repeatable features – the paradigms. Hence, the analytical procedure consisted in searching for and classifying similarities. It was carried out in three fields: architecture, artistic expression, and paratheatrical activity. The results obtained indicate that the artistic activity of the population of the Únětice culture was a harmonious whole. Individual types of expression were complementary and in part also resulted from each other.

KEY WORDS

Únětice culture; style; art architecture; paratheatre.

Artistic expression is a common feature of all cultures, but the contemporary understanding of art and the role of the artist in society originates in Renaissance Italy (TRZECIAK 1992, 11–15). Therefore, the use of the term ‘art’ in reference to prehistoric artefacts is a procedure which may lead to some overinterpretation (GEDIGA 2000, 355–356; MIERZWIŃSKI 2001). It would be a kind of intellectual seizure which would give those creations meanings totally unknown to their creators. Such an approach leads to a complete misunderstanding of the sense of such an activity.

Analogous problems are also related to the analysis of the so-called folk art. According to A. Jackowski, traditional communities did not know the notion of art or artist and they were imposed by representatives of the so-called higher culture. Therefore, a problem appears. What is an artistic product and what is not, since their creators do not know of such definitions. Because during the ethnographic studies it was possible to indicate the role of this type of products and their creators, it was possible to clearly define the features characterizing folk art. First of all, it was a creation in which the canon was the basic value, not the individual creativeness. An individual, in turn, was able to express himself in the form of variants. Such an art integrated the group and allowed it to self-identify. That is why it was in accordance with the aesthetics of the whole community, within the confines of its values and aesthetic preferences (JACKOWSKI 1981, 189–190). It seems that the phenomenon of artistic expression in prehistory can also be understood in a similar way. This is also indicated by the premodern concepts of art, which was treated rather as a kind of craft. This is how the term *techne* used by ancient Greeks should be understood to describe artistic activity as well (see ROOCHNIK 1996). According to St Thomas Aquinas: ‘*ars est recta ratio factibilium*’ – art is a proper knowledge of making things (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, 57, 4). For Alexander of Hales ‘*Ars est principium facendi et cogitandi quae sunt facienda*’ – art is a principle of action and reflection on what needs to be done (*Summa Alexandri* II, 12, 21).

Information useful for understanding prehistoric art is also provided by ethnolinguistic research. According to the classic works of L. Lévy-Bruhl, the languages of traditional peoples describe shape, position, movement, and the manner of acting in the space of individual objects, people and animals very accurately. Therefore, they are of a pictorial nature, i.e. the descriptions refer primarily to the sense of sight (LÉVY-BRUHL 1992, 182–195; see also LÉVI-STRAUSS 2001, 9–27). According to F. Boas, the primary languages were characterized by a poorly developed network of abstract concepts (BOAS 2010, 180–182). Assuming that prehistoric communities used precisely these kinds of languages, this determines the method of analyzing archaeological artefacts. Since our world exists as far as it is described in the language, then: the lack of abstract concepts = the lack of abstract thinking = the lack of abstract representations. Therefore, for example, a representation of a tree cannot refer to ‘some’ tree – it will be a specific plant. It should be assumed, therefore, that the ornamentation found on various objects represents something. They are not abstract representations – in the art of the West they appeared as late as at the beginning of the 20th century (KOWALSKA 1989, 52–55).

The analysis of the artistic expression of the Únětice culture population was carried out assuming that the style ‘as a way of making something’ (HODDER 1990, 45) is expressed through various media (USPIEŃSKI 1977, 181–212; GOMBRICH 2009, 195–209). Using different materials (wood, pottery, metal, *etc.*) similar content can be presented. Due to different materials, their properties and methods of treatment, the effects must differ in an obvious way. However, the idea remains common – it is difficult to imagine the deliberate execution of anything without prior intention. Thus, comparing subsequent elements of a culture, we can expect to perceive a set of repeatable features – the paradigms. Hence, the analytical procedure consisted in searching for and classifying similarities. It was carried out in three fields: architecture, artistic expression, and paratheatrical activity. Only these spheres are more widely perceptible thanks to archaeological excavations.

The analysis began with the work on architectural relics. In this way, any archaeologically perceptible manifestations of construction or space organization were treated. Open-area excavations carried out in recent years in Lower Silesia in Poland, allowed one to recognize the ways of planning used by the population of the Únětice culture (GRALAK – SADOWSKI – WASYLUK 2006; 2009). It was found that the most common form of a dwelling buildings were small oval and sunken structures. However, it was not noticed that features found on settlements formed a recognizable and repeatable structure. This form of space organization was defined as an amorphous cloud. It was recorded, however, that settlements were flanked by graves, and their greatest concentration was always located on the southern or south-eastern side. Such a scheme repeats itself many times. Thus, the settlements and accompanying burial grounds formed linear systems running along the NS axis, especially NNW-SSE, and less often NW-SE (**Fig. 1**). There were also graves or burial mounds in burial grounds along these lines, in this manner grave pits were orientated and bodies were placed in them. Characteristically, the heads of the dead rested on the southern side. This corresponds to the location of the cemeteries in relation to the settlements. It seems that this phenomenon can be interpreted as a sign of a positive valorization of the southern direction.

Observing burial mounds of the population of the Únětice culture, it was noticed that the element organizing their construction was a vertical axis running through their centres. Along it the individual elements were located – a grave pit and the mound covering it. It is especially perceptible in the case of the burial mound 3 from Łęki Małe, Kościan district – the burial chamber is a several meter-deep shaft with 33 levels of pavements and burials (KOWIAŃSKA-PIASZYKOWA 1956, 123–133, fig. 17). At the barrow in Szczepankowice, Wrocław district, subsequent mounds built one on top of the other were also located along the vertical

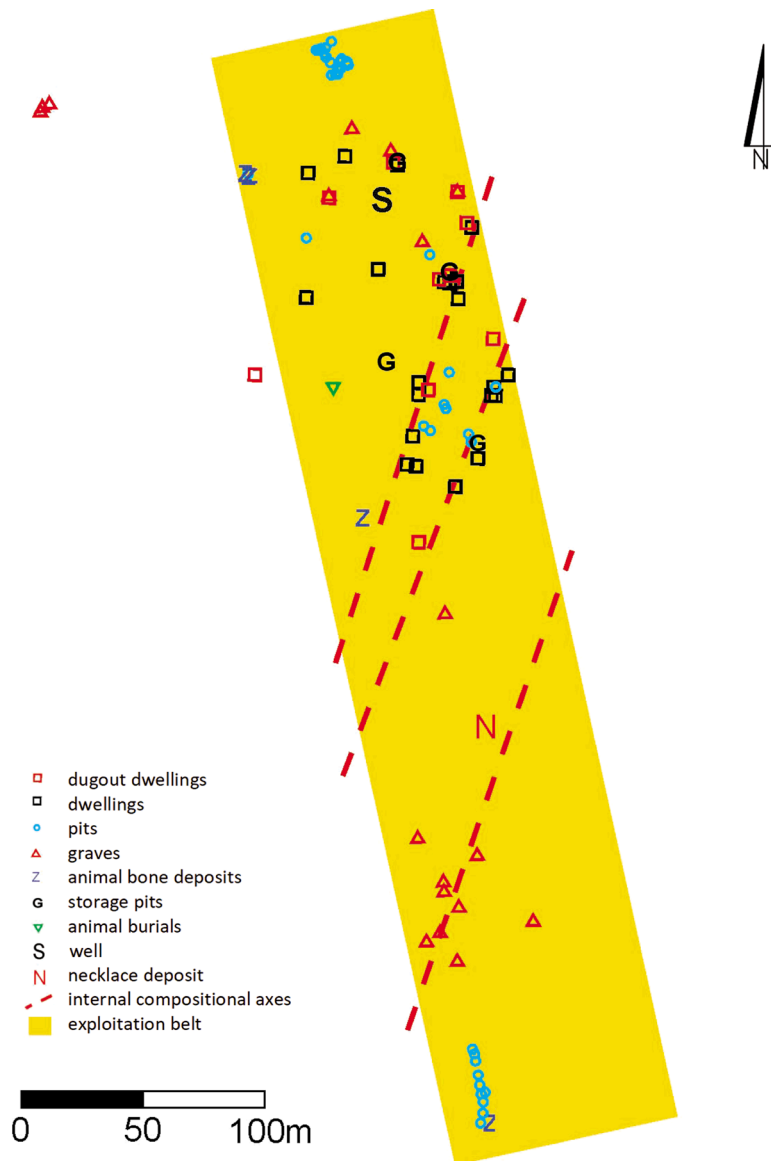


Fig. 1: Wojkowice 15, Wrocław district. After GRALAK – SADOWSKI – WASYLUK 2006.

axis (SARNOWSKA 1969, 296–315, fig. 125). It is also worth noting that burial mounds were built on a circular plan – which should also be treated as a completely deliberate choice.

To recapitulate, it was found out that despite its simplicity, the architecture of that time was created in accordance with repeatable paradigms. It seems that for this population, first of all, two axes NS (along with deviations) and top-down were important. In both cases they express astronomical relations. In the case of the first one, it was most likely to point to the strongly valorized southern direction – the sun at its zenith. The other one pointed to the sky.

The visual-art expression of the population of the Únětice culture manifested itself with the use of various raw materials. Pottery and metals were most often used – less often amber. As its manifestations were recognized in all ways of shaping solids and their surfaces. Hence, the analysis concerned mainly everyday objects.

A characteristic feature of the of the Únětice culture's pottery is the limited number of decoration patterns. This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced in the context of earlier groupings – the Corded Ware culture and the Bell Beaker culture, where decoration was extremely popular and developed. Thus, in this respect, the vessels of the Únětice culture clearly differ. The lack of decoration is a clear contrast and a significant novelty. However, the surfaces of vessels started to be very carefully treated. They were smoothed and as a result of firing they were intensively black in colour. Mica was added to the clay paste and in effect the black, smoothed surface was also shiny. As a result of a strong smoothing and firing, an effect reminiscent of graphite-coated vessels was also obtained, and such vessels produced light reflections (**Fig. 2**). Such repeatable features of the style perceptible through pottery are the lack of decoration patterns as well as shiny and glittering surfaces.



Fig. 2: Zybiszów, Wrocław district. Shiny surface of a vessel. Photo T. Gralak.

In the case of metal objects, the shiny surface is also a repeatable element. This is due to the natural properties of the raw material – this applies to copper, tin, and bronze. This effect is most clearly visible in the case of gold, which is emphasized by its intense colour.

An important element of style is also the shape of metal objects, mainly bronze ones. These artefacts are mainly jewellery and parts of clothing. A repeatable set of curvilinear motifs was used to construct them: they consisted of circles, semicircles and spirals. Metal bars had a crescent (rib-like) shape (**Fig. 3: c**). The necklaces were in the form of a ring with spiral ends (**Fig 3: a, b**). The form of cuff-shaped bracelets indicates that it is actually a multiplication of the rings (**Fig. 3: d-g**). The spiral shape had coils of gold wires – probably also constituting a kind of ingot (MOUCHA 2007, pl. 175). Small spirals made of bronze wire were used for hair pinning (**Fig. 4: a-e**). Necklaces were made of spirally wound bronze wire or band – *saltaleone* (SARNOWSKA 1969, fig. 118: j-n). Through the multiplications of rings, chains which form pin ends were also made (MOUCHA 2007, pl. 87: 3, 159: 4, 176: 2-3, 181: 5-6). Such links were used to make items from Kotla, Głogów district (SARNOWSKA 1969, fig. 156) and Obora, Jičín district (MOUCHA 2007, pl. 158: 1, 159: 30), where four chains were connected with a disc. In the case of this first specimen, it additionally had the form of concentric circles (**Fig. 3: h**). In the area occupied by the Únětice culture, there were also recorded numerous small ring-shaped or circular pendants. They could have been made of bronze, bone or amber (SARNOWSKA 1975, 24, 25 fig. 9, 10). Earrings from this period (**Fig. 4: f**) also have a circular form. Pin heads can also be circular (**Fig. 4: h**). The latter were also decorated with concentric circles. *Tutuli* and the so

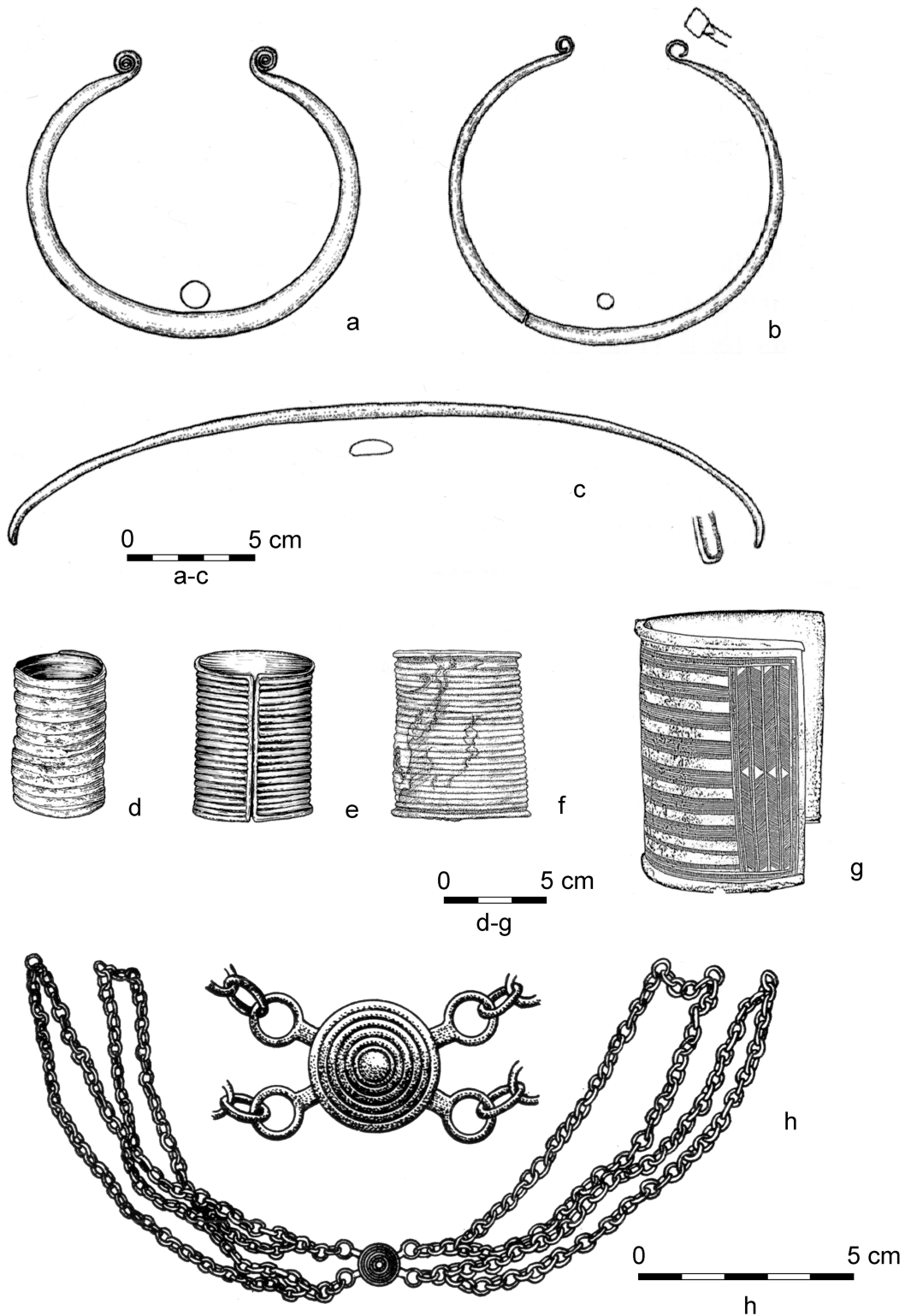


Fig. 3: a - Soběnice, Litoměřice district; b - Čelákovice, Praha-východ district; c - Hradiště, Písek district; d - Neprobylice, Kladno district; e - Noutonice, Praha-západ district; f - Tursko, Praha-západ district; g - Lobkovice, Mělník district; h - Górká, Głogów district; a-g after JIRÁŇ 2013, h after SARNOWSKA 1969.

called *Schmuckscheiben* or *Zierscheiben* also have a circular shape – they are also often decorated with concentric circles (**Fig. 4: g, j**). In their centres, horizontal elements of a pointed form were placed. Some *tutuli* were made of spirally wound wire, in this way a vertical spike was also created (**Fig 4: i**). Pins were also twisted around their own axis (**Fig 4: k**). In both cases, it is most likely that these are representations of rotational movement.

To recapitulate, the form of metal objects results from several consistently applied paradigms. Circle, semicircle and ring motifs were widely used. There also occurred vertical elements and representations of rotational movement.

Another raw material used by the population of the Únětice culture is amber. It has a shiny surface, bright colour and transmits light. The aforementioned circular pendants and beads in the form of balls or polished lumps were made of it (SARNOWSKA 1969, 328–329, fig. 147: d, e). In the case of a necklace from Wrocław-Gądów (**Fig. 4: i**), two amber pendants constitute a representation of an axe (SARNOWSKA 1969, 219–220, fig. 76: g). Similar representations are also known in the case of a bronze specimen from Deszczno, Górzów Wlkp. district (SARNOWSKA 1969, 337, fig. 152: e). It should be clearly stressed that the axe is the only object that was represented by the population of the Únětice culture. Apart from this exception, this style is almost completely non-figurative with a complete lack of representations of people, animals, plants, and products of material culture.

Accepting the premises described in the introduction regarding the way of thinking of traditional communities, it should be assumed that the style of metal objects (based on curvilinear motifs) is also a representation of real entities. However, the question arises as to what could be represented in this way. It seems that the answer is given by the disk from Nebra (MELLER 2002) – the only narrative scene known in the Únětice culture (although very specific). On its surface are represented the sun, the half-moon, and the stars. The elements marked on its edge, in turn, constitute a calendar record of their movement (see SCHLOSSER 2002; HANSEN 2006). This find clearly indicates that the observation of the sky and the resulting knowledge constituted an important part of the life of the population of the Únětice culture. It can therefore be presumed that the repeatable motifs of circles, semicircles, rings and the representation of rotational movement are representations of celestial bodies (sun, moon, stars) and their movement through the sky. The gloss repeated on products made of various raw materials may, instead, be an imitation of their shine. This interpretation is also confirmed by the positive valorization of the southern direction, which is perceptible in architecture. As already mentioned, it most likely indicates the side of the world designated by the sun at its zenith. Vertical elements of *tutuli*, often correlated with the representation of rotation and vertical axes organizing the structure of burial mounds, can, in turn, represent the rotation of the sky around the imaginary axis running between the earth and the polar star. Such an image often appears in traditional cultures (BARTMIŃSKI 2012, 22). Usually, it was also identified with the axis of the world (*axis mundi*) connecting the underground, the earth, and the sky (ELIADE 1996, 25–31). Accepting such an interpretation, the architecture and artistic expression of the population of the Únětice culture is a reflection of the way of perceiving and understanding the world. The applied paradigms reproduce the structure of the entire universe – as it was then perceived. Most probably, this kind of artistic expression also had mythological foundations. However, no accurate data is available to analyse them. Based on written information from the Middle East and Mediterranean areas, it can only be stated that the celestial bodies and the deities associated with them constituted a very important element of religion in the Bronze Age (see KRISTIANSEN – LARSSON 2008, 250–319).

Another analysed type of artistic expression is paratheatrical activities. This term, like the theatre of sources, was propagated in the 1970s by J. Grotowski (1979, 94–103). Initially, they

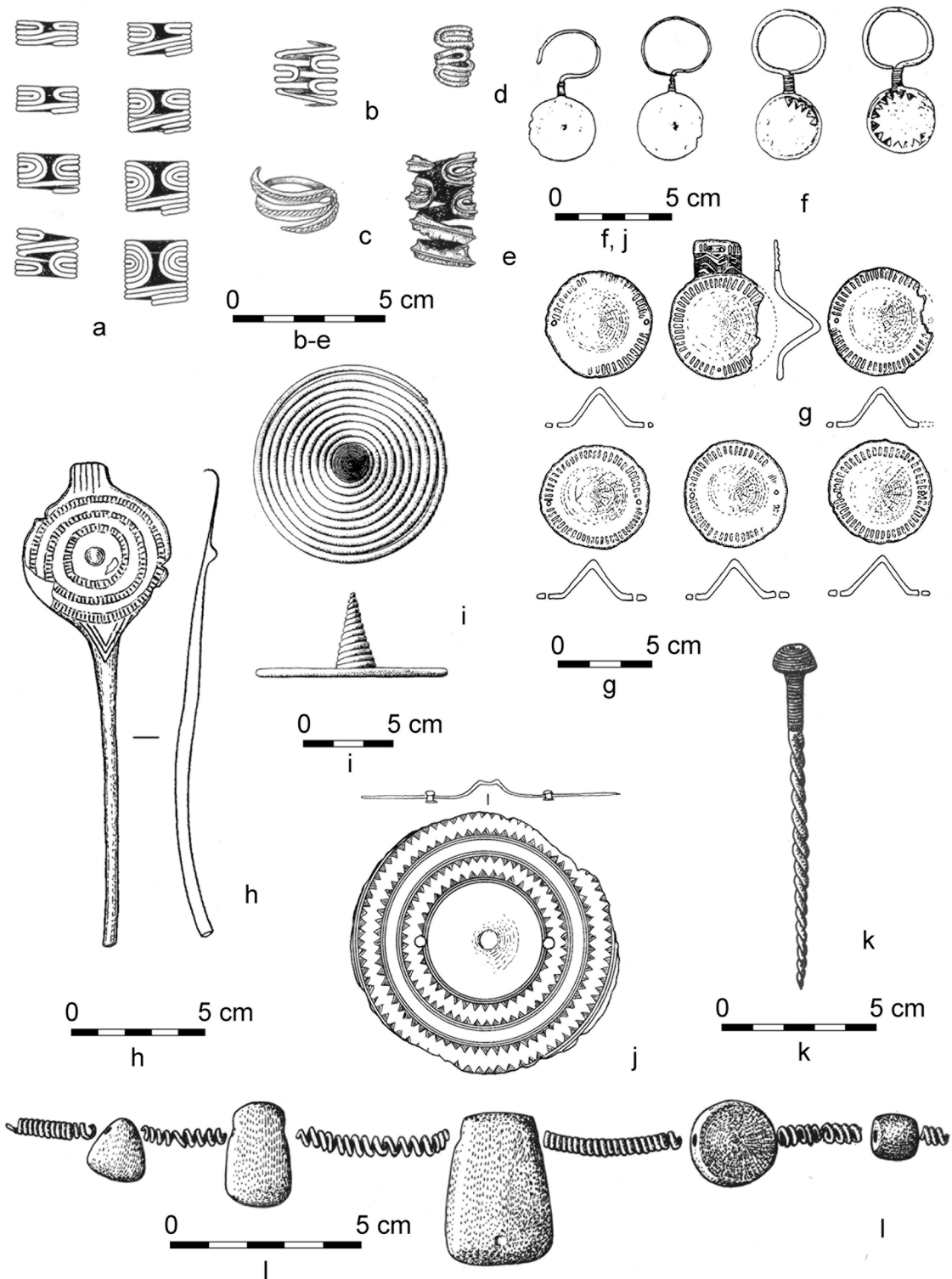


Fig. 4: a - loop temple ring types; b - Slaný Pod Slánskou Horou, Kladno district; c - Ledce, Kladno district; d - Tursko, Praha-západ district; e - Slaný, Kladno district; f - Starý Bydžov, district Hradec Králové; g - Slaný, Slánska Hora, Kladno district; h - Kamýk, Praha-západ district; i - Týn nad Vltavou, České Budějovice district; k - Glinica Głogów district; l - Wrocław-Gądów, Wrocław district. a-j after JIRÁŇ 2013; k-l after SARNOWSKA 1969.

concerned beyond-the-stage theatre practices (paratheatre), later the presence of similar phenomena was noticed in traditional religious rituals, dances etc. (theatre of sources). This issue became the subject of separate research (see KOCUR 2016). In this work it was assumed that what can be defined as paratheatrical activities are those ritual activities which are focused on expression, and their performance is to affect the emotions of the recipients (audience), whose presence is therefore indispensable. In addition, they need artistic skills – experience and technique used by celebrants. Such events cannot, therefore, have the character of accidental improvisation – they are repeatable because they result from knowledge and tradition present in a given community.

It seems that one should take into account the widespread presence of such rituals in prehistory, including the population of the Únětice culture. Archaeological finds allow their recognition only partially, only the record of the last final scene can be discovered. Only the moment of ending the activity can be captured – when the artefacts are deposited in the ground. To consider the finds to be a manifestation of paratheatrical activity, two criteria were applied. First of all, they must indicate repeatable activities. It evidences the presence of people with appropriate knowledge and skills. In addition, the finds must indicate that the activities in question were aimed at the presence of recipients (viewers). By implication, they were also supposed to affect their emotions. However, this last issue must remain debatable – emotions concern all people, but they depend on the culture of a given community, but also on the predisposition of individuals.

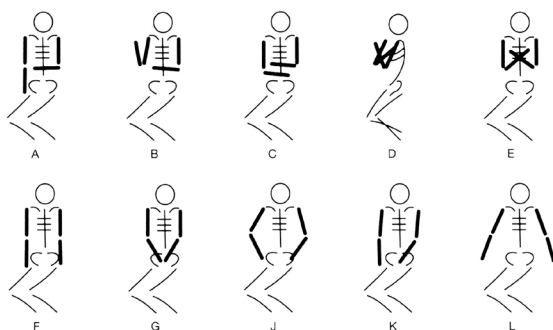


Fig. 5: Positions of bodies in graves. After HÄUSLER 1977.

In the case of the Únětice culture, the paratheatrical activity is particularly perceptible through the burial rites. Usually, the bodies were deposited in graves in specific postures (**Fig. 5**). Several repeatable systems and gestures expressed by the way of the arrangement of the hands were recognized (HÄUSLER 1977, 24, fig. 3). It is the repeatability which indicates the presence of people who were able to arrange the bodies of the dead in certain positions. It was not accidental, in this way meanings understandable to the spectators – participants of the funeral ritual were expressed. It can also be presumed that death and the funeral itself were those elements of the ritual that strongly influenced emotions.

Another feature of burial rites was the reopening of graves (KADROW 2001, 133–134; GRALAK 2007, 197) (**Fig. 6: a**). It seems that one of the goals of this activity was to collect the bones of the dead. The repeatability indicates the presence of people with the knowledge and skills to do it. No data is available to determine if these actions were taken in front of other community members. If so, they most likely evoked strong emotions. Single human bones are also found within houses – most likely they were displayed. It cannot be ruled out that they appeared



Fig. 6: a - Wojkowice 15, Wrocław district, grave 1058-III-00, reopened grave pit; b - Piskorzówek 14, Oława district, grave 16, skeleton without skull; c - Wojkowice 15, grave 304-III-99, burial of a skull; d - Wojkowice 15, grave 1044-III-00, partial burial; e - Wojkowice 15, grave 784-II-99 - fragmentation of the corpse; f - Nowa Wieś Wrocławska 4, Wrocław district, cattle burial. a, d, e after GRALAK 2007; b after GRALAK 2009a; c after GRALAK 2009b; f after GRALAK 2011.

there as a result of graves reopening. It is clear, therefore, that human remains were used as props in an ongoing social game.

There are also known graves in which skeletons without skulls were found (LORENCOVÁ – BENEŠ – PODBORSKÝ 1987, 140-142; GRALAK 2009a) (Fig. 5: b). There are no analyses which would explain whether they were removed as a result of graves reopening or before the burial a decapitation of a living or dead person had been carried out. The burials of skulls themselves are also known (PRIMAS 1977, 33-34; GRALAK 2009b) (Fig. 6: c). These finds leave no doubt that various rituals were performed in which a human head or skull was an essential prop (see

also JELÍNEK 2018). Both the deprivation of the head of a dead or alive person and its burial had the characteristics of paratheatrical activities. They were repeatable, they required appropriate skills – and like other funerals, they were probably celebrated in public. Operating the skull or head most likely also affected emotions. That is why the scene with a skull from Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' is almost an archetype of what is now understood as the theatre.

The next ritual of the paratheatrical characteristics is the fragmentation of the corpses (GRALAK 2007, 169, 190 fig. 60–61, 77–79) (**Fig. 6: d, e**). Partial burials are known in the area of the Únětice culture. Only selected fragments were deposited in the grave, often mixed and disarticulated. The very course of this process is not unequivocally recognized. One can presume a mechanical fragmentation or one caused by the excarnation of soft tissues. In both cases this process had to be controlled – it was supervised by people with appropriate skills. As a form of burial rite, it was most likely performed in public – hence it affected the observers. Like any radical interference with the human body, it probably influenced emotions.

Within settlements and burial grounds of the population of the Únětice culture in Silesia, also cattle burials were found (GRALAK 2011) (**Fig. 6: f**). In each case, there were traces of various operations related to the heads of these animals. Most often the skulls were in a non-anatomical position – most likely these animals had been killed by breaking their necks. Also, in this case skills were needed. The act itself linked with burial was most probably also performed in public. Its goal was to influence the participants. It also seems that the death of a living being always evokes strong emotions. In addition, there is also a realization of the loss of a large amount of valuable food.

The element linking all the aforementioned manifestations of paratheatrical activity is the manipulation of a human or animal body (living or dead) as a carrier of information. It seems that this phenomenon results from the non-figurative plastic style of the population of the Únětice culture. Ideas or emotions related to the body could not be shown with the help of its representation. It was impossible to produce a sculpture, an engraving etc. Therefore, this was done with the help of real bodies. For this reason, they became such an important cultural artefact. It may also be the reason for the appearance of various forms of burial rites.

To sum up, architecture, artistic expression and paratheatrical activity indicate that the artistic activity of the Únětice culture population was a harmonious whole. Individual types of expression were complementary and in part also resulted from each other. In the case of architecture and visual art, they showed a way of perceiving and understanding the order of the world. Paratheatrical activities are a clear derivative of the ban on figurative representations. They also show the manner of human body perception. It can, therefore, be stated that the artistic expression of the population of the Únětice culture is the realization of the values and ideology of that time.

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Tomasz Gralak

Instytut Archeologii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego

ul. Szewska 48

PL-50-139, Wrocław

tomasz.gralak@uwr.edu.pl