

## Research Article

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# Anthropomorphic Symbols on Neolithic Vessels from Puglia

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**Abstract:** In Puglia, human representations on vessels were widespread from the Early Neolithic. Some of these have been interpreted as faces, but they could also be representations of the entire body complete with torso, arms and legs: these include some recently studied symbols from Grotta dei Cervi, which have been compared with others from Grotta delle Veneri, whose published descriptions are open to revision. From this starting point, the scope of the research was expanded to include all documented anthropomorphic symbols on Neolithic vessels from south-east Italy, taking account of their chronology, origin and context. It was possible to establish that in the sixth millennium BC, there were three different categories of human representation in Puglia: vessels decorated with human faces (face vessels), vessels decorated with whole-body human figures and vessels in the shape of human beings (anthropomorphic vessels). Some faces include all elements, while others have just some of them (e.g. the nose). In addition, some faces have extra elements such as bands or bundles of lines that can be interpreted as tattoos, beards, ornaments or clothes. The symbols may be representations of praying figures, dancers, high status or powerful members of the community, ancestors and even gods, who were tasked with either protecting the community or acting as an intermediary between the community offering the vessel and the deity of the underworld. This study examines the presence of these artefacts in settlements, caves and other cult sites, with the aim of describing this distinctive phenomenon that was particularly characteristic of Puglia during the Early Neolithic.

**Keywords:** anthropomorphic representations, face vessels, anthropomorphic vessels, Early and Middle Neolithic, south-east Italy

## 1 Introduction

In 2015, a research project targeted at the prehistoric caves of South-East Italy was started by the University of the Salento in collaboration with the local archaeological Authority (*Soprintendenza ABAP per le province di Brindisi, Lecce e Taranto*). The project made it possible to identify, as part of the study of the pottery complexes found in Grotta dei Cervi (Porto Badisco, Otranto-LE) and Grotta delle Veneri (Parabita-LE) (Figure 1), 16 Early and Middle Neolithic vessels decorated with anthropomorphic symbols. In this article, we include these finds in the broader framework of vessels with human representations that were characteristic of Puglia in the sixth millennium BC. Starting from the finds with anthropomorphic symbols from Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri, we examined in detail all known examples from Puglia.

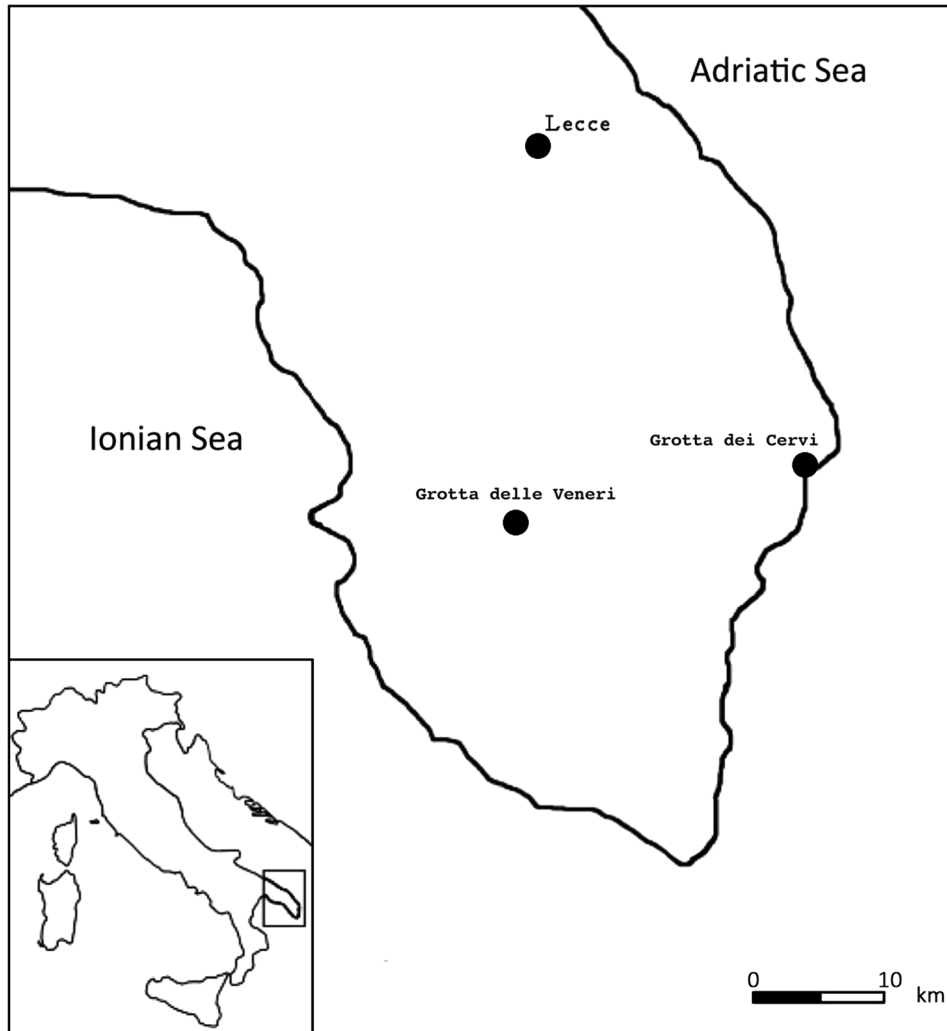
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**Special Issue:** THE EARLY NEOLITHIC OF EUROPE, edited by F. Borrell, I. Clemente, M. Cubas, J. J. Ibáñez, N. Mazzucco, A. Nieto-Espinet, M. Portillo, S. Valenzuela-Lamas, & X. Terradas

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**Figure 1:** Location of Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri.

Specifically, we considered the type of representation, chronology, facies, iconographic elements, geographical area and context of discovery, to highlight any similarities or differences in style or symbolic value in the various parts of Puglia during the sixth millennium BC. Here, we also introduce comparisons with similar vessels from other European regions to highlight the sharing of a common ideological heritage, and we advance hypotheses concerning their interpretation based on recent studies.

## 2 Vessels Decorated with Faces and Whole-Body Human Figures from Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri

Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri are key ritual sites in Southern Puglia.

Grotta delle Veneri, located on an inland relief near Parabita, was a sacred place during the Upper Palaeolithic, as demonstrated by two Venus figurines and 500 stones and bones with engraved geometric and abstract motifs deposited here (Ingravallo & Grifoni Cremonesi, 2020; Possenti, 1997; Radmilli, 1966), and again from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, as shown by the presence of pits excavated in the floor of the cave containing fragments of vessels and animal bones, perhaps offered to the deities (Tiberi, 2017, 2020a, 2020b).

Grotta dei Cervi, located 6 km south of Otranto on the Adriatic coast, is one of the most important centres of post-Palaeolithic art in Europe: on the walls of the three corridors, 20–28 m deep and up to 200 m

long, there are 100 of signs painted in red and brown. Some of these were interpreted by P. Graziosi as realistic representations (deer hunting, agriculture, social events) and others as abstract images (subjects whose essence is reduced to graphemes; Graziosi, 1980).

Recent studies of the pottery complex found in Grotta dei Cervi during the 1970–1971 excavations by Felice Gino Lo Porto and in Grotta delle Veneri during the 1967–1972 excavations by Giuliano Cremonesi have made it possible to reconstruct the history and functions of both caves from the Early Neolithic to the final Bronze Age (Aprile, Bianco, Ingravallo, Muntoni, & Tiberi, 2017; Tiberi, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

Grotta dei Cervi was an international sanctuary during the Neolithic, as shown by the presence of exogenous raw materials (e.g. Albanian bitumen, cinnabar, obsidian, greenstone), symbolic artefacts with parallels in Greece and South-East Europe (e.g. anthropomorphic vessels, pintaderas, rhyta and praying figurines) and pottery decorated in accordance with styles documented in Dalmatia (e.g. Channelled Pottery). Grotta delle Veneri was an important sacred site and a centre for social gatherings used by the farming communities who inhabited inland areas in South Puglia.

Both caves were occupied from the early Neolithic. During this phase, many large containers and flasks with impressed or impressed and incised decorations (Impressa culture/Guadone style: 5800–5600 BC) were deposited as offerings in these caves, perhaps to the divinities of the underworld. In Grotta dei Cervi, fragments of these vessels were found in all the cavities and tunnels excavated in 1970–1971, including Cavity A, immediately accessible from Entrance A (at depths of 3–3.40 m and 3.60–3.80 m below the vault); Cavity E, accessible from Entrances D and E (at depths of 3.90–4.10 m and 8.90–9.10 m below the vault); the Tunnel linking Entrances D and E (at a depth of 3–3.20 m); and in the North and South-East Tunnels. Unfortunately, in Grotta delle Veneri, the ceramic material comes from a layer disturbed by unauthorised excavators which cannot therefore be considered a reliable stratigraphic sequence.

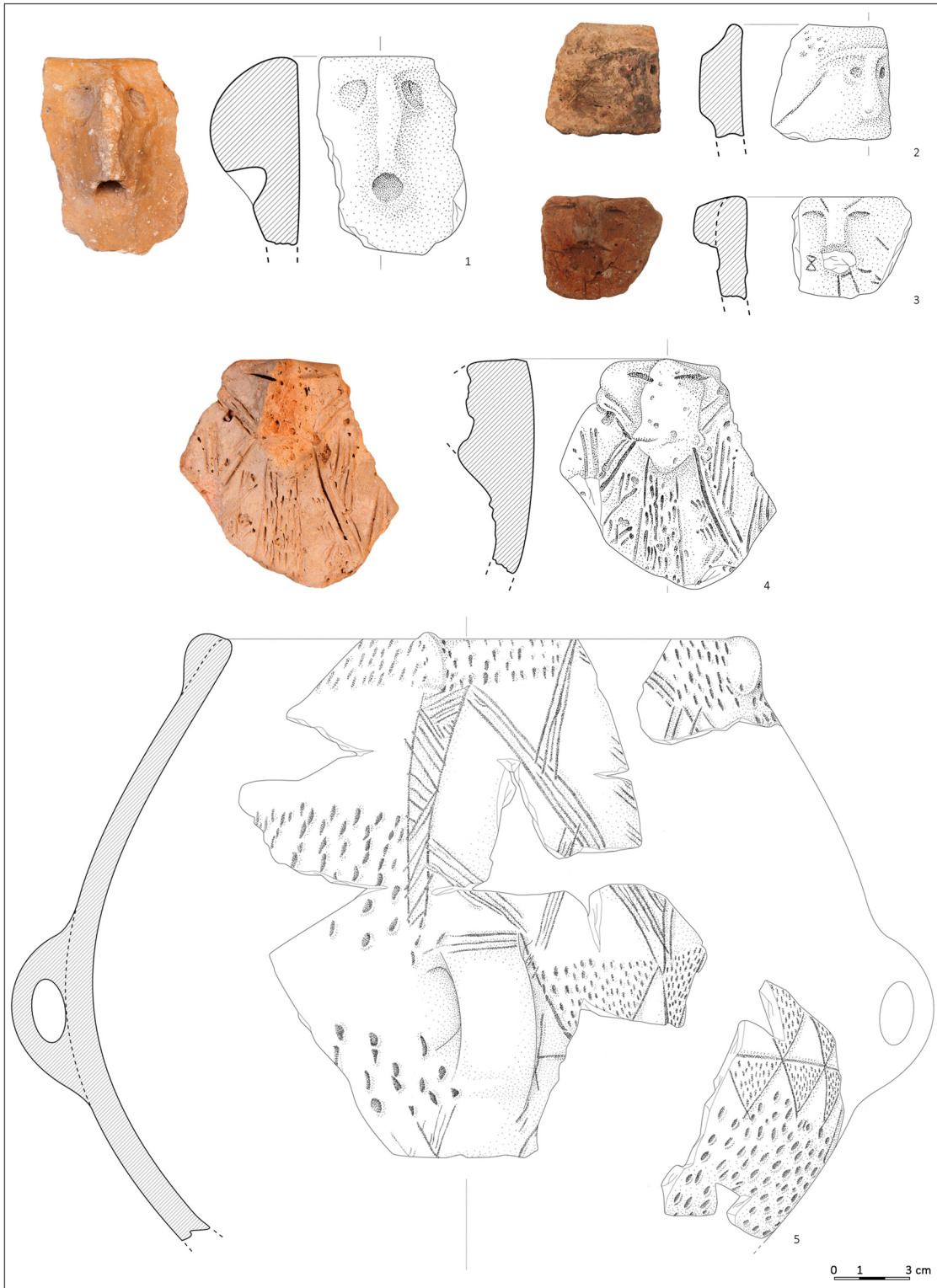
These vessels, which probably contained food or liquids, are made of coarse yellow clay. Ten of them (four from Grotta delle Veneri and six from Grotta dei Cervi) were decorated with human faces and whole-body human figures on the rim.

Those from Grotta dei Cervi were found in Cavities A (Figure 2(1,2 and 5)) and E (Figure 2(3)) and in the North Tunnel (Figure 2(4)). They present a face or just a nose depicted with a clay band; the eyes are indicated by impressed points, circular motifs or horizontal lines; in one case, the eyebrows are also depicted with semicircular clay bands (Figure 2(2)); the mouth is an impressed horizontal line or a circle, giving the face a terrified or astonished expression (Figure 2(1)). In one case, there is a butterfly next to the mouth (Figure 2(3)). In some cases, a long vertical band composed of impressed lines hangs from the face or from the chin; on one side or both sides, there are one or two other small oblique bands (Figure 2(4 and 5)).

The four vessels with human faces and whole-body representations from Grotta delle Veneri are characterised in three cases by a face or just a nose depicted with a clay band (Figure 3(1)), eyes indicated by impressed points and mouths indicated by impressed horizontal lines (Figure 3(2 and 3)). In two cases, a long vertical band composed of impressed or incised vertical lines hangs from the face; on both sides, there are other small triangles or oblique bands (Figure 3(2 and 3)). The fourth vessel (Ventura, 1997, Figure 12, p. 206) shows only a bundle of incised lines that ends with four short lines: it is probably a representation of an arm bent upwards with four fingers.

One whole-body representation from Grotta dei Cervi and one from Grotta delle Veneri are very similar: in the former, the band starts from the chin, and on both sides of the band, there are other small oblique bands (Figure 2(4)); in the latter, the band starts from the mouth and splits in two at the bottom, while on each side of the band, there is a triangle (Figure 3(3)). Another similar fragment from Grotta delle Veneri has a vertical band composed of incised vertical lines, which hangs from the chin with small oblique bands on each side (Figure 3(2)).

The long vertical band could be interpreted as a long beard, in accordance with the interpretation of vertical bands or triangles under the mouth on similar face vessels from elsewhere in Southern Italy (Becker, 2017; Grifoni Cremonesi, 2004). However, it could also be a symbol of fertility: a representation of seeds or water (such as a river or rain) flowing from the mouth, or even seminal fluid as assumed, for example, for motifs such as the triangular apexes of stylised human representations on Precucuteni-Trypolie A vessels (Ursu, Țerna, & Aparaschivei, 2017). In contrast, we argue that the band is a long, ornamented garment, and the small lateral bands and triangles are schematic depictions of arms bent upwards.



**Figure 2:** Vessels with human faces (1–2–3) and whole-body human figures (4–5) from Grotta dei Cervi.

A butterfly next to the mouth of one piece from Grotta dei Cervi (Figure 2(3)) can be interpreted as a tattoo, as hypothesised, for example, for the horizontal and oblique lines engraved under the eyes of numerous Balkan Neolithic figurines (Martini, Sarti, & Visentini, 2017).



**Figure 3:** Vessels with human face (1) and whole-body human figures (2–3) from Grotta delle Veneri.

The application of signs and symbols (e.g. vertical lines, M, U) in connection with human faces on the vessels is widespread in several European regions (Schwarzberg, 2011), but their meaning (sexual characteristics, symbols of group identity, masks, animal horns, beards and chins) is still debated (Becker, 2017).

Other Middle Neolithic (mid and late sixth millennium BC) whole-body representations from Grotta dei Cervi include two scratches in the Matera-Ostuni style from Cavity E (Tiberi, 2019, Figure 64.2–3) and one painted in the Scaloria Alta style from Cavity A: the latter has a triangular head and the body is also depicted by a series of triangles (Tiberi, 2019, Figure 10.3; Table 6(d)).

There are also three anthropomorphic vessels in the same style (Figure 4), one of which, found in the Tunnel connecting Cavities D and E, is known as “the face of the goddess” (Figure 4(3)) (Tiberi, 2019, Figures 11.2, 32.2 and 59.3).

### 3 Overview of Early and Middle Neolithic Vessels with Whole-Figure Representations, Face Vessels and Anthropomorphic Vessels in Puglia

#### 3.1 Methods

This work involved two phases: the first focused on the detailed classification of the human representations from Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri and the second aimed to relate these specimens to the human representations documented on Neolithic vessels from Puglia as a whole (Figure 5).



**Figure 4:** Anthropomorphic vessels in the Scaloria Style from Cavity A (1), Cavity E (2) and Tunnel connecting Cavities D and E (3) of Grotta dei Cervi.

We considered human representations to include all those that presented clearly identifiable anatomical elements. Regarding abstract representations, we included them in human representations because the same elements can be observed in other finds together with other anatomical parts. An example is a vertical relief under the rim used to indicate the face or nose.

We distinguished three categories of finds with human representations: vessels with whole-body figures, face vessels and anthropomorphic vessels.

We divided the face vessels into three subcategories: abstract (using a single element to represent the whole face), schematic (with only certain facial features such as schematic eyes, noses or mouths) and detailed (with specific elements such as hair or a headdress, eyebrows, nostrils and lips).

The whole-body representations were classified on the basis of the elements of which they are composed, the presence of facial elements and the general type of representation, i.e. dynamic or static. We considered representations with raised arms (in a hieratic position) and straight legs or arms stretching downwards with open hands to be static. By dynamic, we mean figures with bent arms and legs that simulate the movement. In some cases, the movement seems to be represented with arms shown in series (see Masseria La Quercia) (Tunzi, 2015, Figure 27, p. 58). In other cases, however, the representations are incomplete, and the lack of legs means that it cannot be determined with certainty whether they constitute static or dynamic images.

In both groups, we also examined the presence of ornamental and symbolic elements and their position.

The study also considered the provenance of the finds: the geographical area, whether they had been found by excavation or non-systematic survey, the type of site and in a few cases the specific place of discovery.

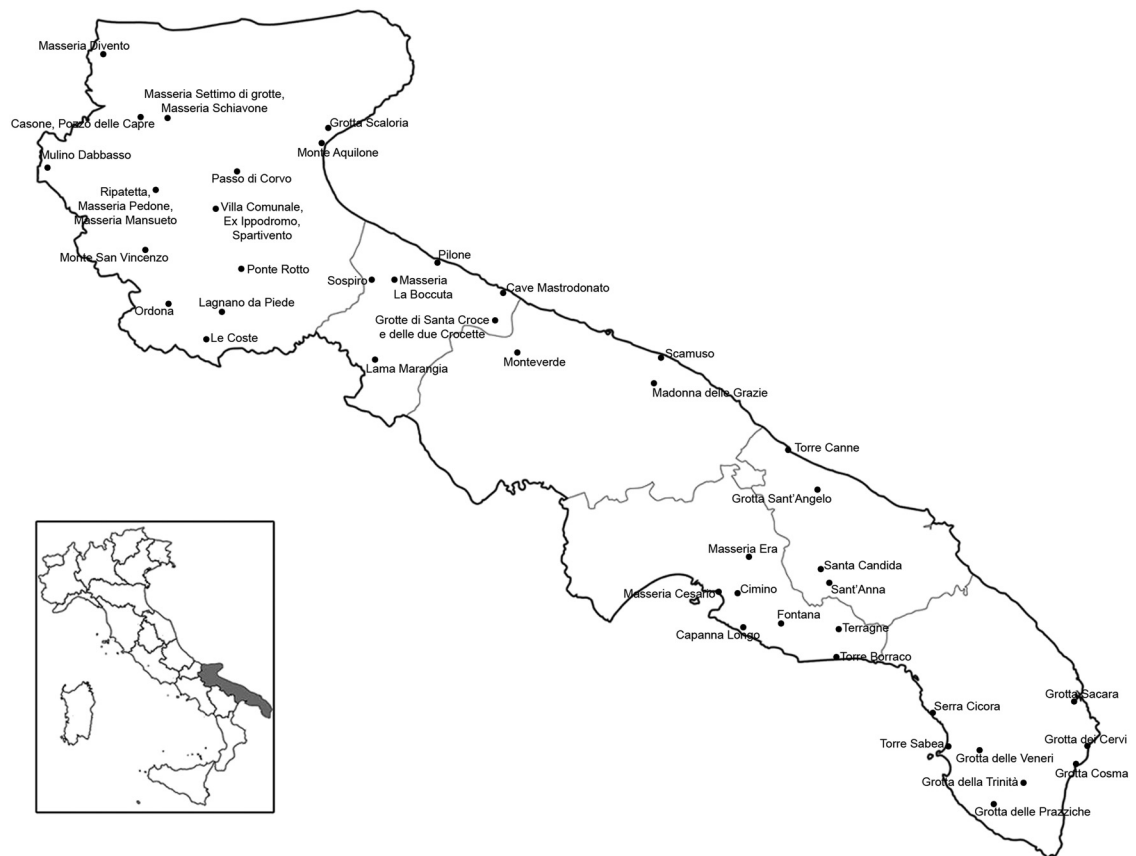


Figure 5: Location of the sites mentioned in the text.

### 3.2 Materials

Overall, 113 finds from Puglia were examined: 91 human representations from the Early Neolithic and 22 from the Middle Neolithic. Sixty-six face vessels and 25 vessels with whole-body representations can be attributed to the Early Neolithic, while two face vessels, 10 vessels with whole-body representations and 10 anthropomorphic vessels can be referred to the Middle Neolithic.

The Early Neolithic specimens (face vessels and the vessels with whole-body representations) were from locations throughout Puglia (northern, central and southern), as were the Middle Neolithic vessels with whole-body representations, while the Middle Neolithic face vessels were from northern and southern (but not central) Puglia.

The finds come from both excavations (settlements, cult caves, necropolises) and non-systematic surveys. Unfortunately, we do not always have information on the exact stratigraphic position.

## 4 Results

The 66 Early Neolithic face vessels come mostly from excavations (Table 1). Many fragments were found in inhabited areas, while a small number come from cult caves and necropolises. Unfortunately, in many cases, we have no other information on the exact place of discovery.

In the north of Puglia, many face vessels were found in trenched settlements, and it should be noted that they often come from the compound or main enclosure. They consist almost exclusively of fragments in which the representation of the face is totally preserved.

Table 1: Summary of the characteristics of the Early Neolithic and Middle Neolithic face vessels

Geographical area	Type of investigation		Archaeological context		Specific place	Representation		Conservation		Ceramic style	
	Excavation	Survey	Settlement	Necropolis		Cave	Abstract	Schematic	Detailed		Fragment
Early Neolithic	South. Apulia: n. 12	2	7	3		3	5	4	11	1	Guadone
	Centr. Apulia: n. 8	8	7	1		2	5	1	8		Guadone
	North. Apulia: n. 46	37	9	2	-Hut (1) -compound Trench (7) -settlement Trench (1)	20	22	4	43	3	Impressed pottery (n. 7); Guadone (n. 14); Guadone/L. da Piede (n. 10); L. da Piede (n. 1); Mass. La Quercia (n. 13); L. da Piede/Mass. La Quercia (n. 1) Matera-Ostuni
Middle Neolithic	South. Apulia: n. 1					1			1		
	North. Apulia: n. 1						1		1		Passo di Corvo



Regarding the iconographic style, most have schematic representations of facial elements, as seen in the two samples from Grotta dei Cervi. Fragments with abstract representations always have a vertical relief used to represent the face. The few detailed samples have specific facial elements such as hair or head-dresses, eyebrows, nostrils and lips. A few fragments of face vessels feature ornamental and symbolic elements such as clusters of points or notches or engraved lines at the sides of the eyes or face, on the neck or across the whole face. Other fragments have “V” motifs under the mouth or geometric motifs on the sides of the face. There are no anatomical elements with which to distinguish the gender (breasts, genitals).

The 25 Early Neolithic vessels with whole-body representations all come from excavations (Table 2). They were mainly found not only in inhabited areas but also in cult caves. Only one is from a necropolis. This category includes fragmented vessels in which the representation of the body itself is fragmented. Regarding the iconographic style, the representation is static in most fragments, as we can see in the samples from Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri.

The anatomical elements represented include the torso with the head and arms. In some artefacts, we can distinguish other anatomical details such as facial elements or hair, but there are no anatomical elements with which to distinguish the gender.

The only two Middle Neolithic face vessels come from inhabited areas and have an abstract and schematic iconographic style (Table 1).

The fragments with whole-body representations come from settlements and cult caves (Table 2). In most samples, the representation is static, and various combinations of anatomical elements are seen. The torso is often represented as a rhombus or two opposing triangles, while in the Early Neolithic specimens, it is always a band or line. Only one representation has other anatomical details such as facial elements and ornamental or symbolic elements such as a sequence of triangles on or around the eyes.

The last category examined is that of the Middle Neolithic anthropomorphic vessels. It is mainly the neck with the representation of the face that is preserved, but in a small number of cases, the shoulder of the vessel is also extant. Most of the specimens come from cult caves, except for two from a necropolis and two from a settlement. Unfortunately, for this category, there is no information on the stratigraphic position of discovery.

The techniques used include combinations of engraving, impressing, painting and reliefs.

The iconographic style is abstract (with only a relief to indicate the nose) schematic (with the nose and eyebrows indicated by reliefs) or detailed, with painted or impressed noses, eyes, eyebrows and hair or headdresses.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Puglia

The face vessel from Torre Sabea (Gallipoli) in the South of Puglia (Fontò, Guilaine, & Cremonesi, 2003, Figure 28, p. 2) is the oldest so far discovered in this region (Figure 6(1)).

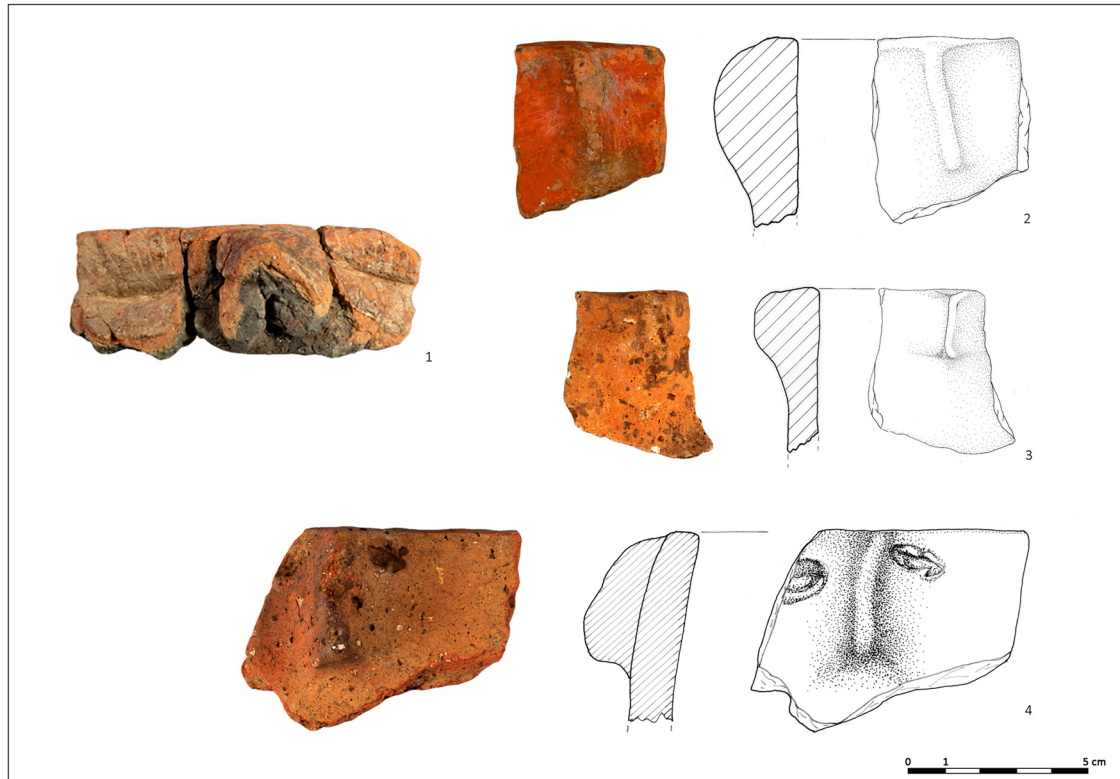
Torre Sabea is one of the most ancient Neolithic villages in south-east Italy, dating back to the period from 6000 to 5700 BC. The face vessel was attributed to the *Ceramica Impressa Archaica* style (Radi, 1997, Figure 20, p. 110).

At the site of Serra Cicora (Nardò) near Torre Sabea, we found four Early Neolithic face vessels (Figure 6(2–4)). Serra Cicora was inhabited by Neolithic farmers from 5700 to 5500 BC, and in the Late Neolithic, it became a necropolis (Tiberi, 2011). The face vessels of Serra Cicora are stylised: the nose is composed of reliefs, and in one case, the eyes are depicted by deep impressions (Figure 6(4)).

Many face vessels from central and northern Puglia in the *Guadone* style are similar to samples from Serra Cicora: they are characterised by stylised representations of facial elements consisting of impressions or reliefs. Some of them are very realistic.

**Table 2:** Summary of the characteristics of the Early Neolithic and Middle Neolithic vessels with whole-body representations

Geographical area	Type of investigation		Archaeological context			Specific place	Representation		Conservation		Ceramic style	
	Excavation	Survey	Settlement	Necropolis	Manufacturing site		Cave	Dynamic	Static	Undetermined		Fragment
Early Neolithic	South. Apulia: 9 n. 9		1	1		7	Pit (n. 1- necropolis)	1	8	7	2	Guadone
	Centre. Apulia: n. 7		5			2		3	4	6	1	Guadone
	North. Apulia: 9 n. 9		8			1		4	4	1	9	Masseria La Quercia (9); Lagnano da Piede (2) Matera-Ostuni (n. 6); Scaloria (n. 1)
Middle Neolithic	South. Apulia: 7 n. 6		1		1	5		1	5	1	2	Painted (1); Matera-Ostuni
	Centre. Apulia: n. 4		1					1	3	4		



**Figure 6:** Face vessels from Torre Sabea (1) and Serra Cicora (2–4).

To the same period may be attributed a bowl found in the small necropolis of Samari, near Torre Sabea and Serra Cicora. It is characterised by a stylised whole-body representation created using the microrocker technique (Orlando, 1997, Figure 20, p. 131) (Figure 7(3)). A triangle with fringes at the end of an oblique line was interpreted either as a thread-like body with a triangular head and short hair or as an arm bent upwards with a hand and five small fingers. The same technique was used to create another whole-body representation on a bowl found in the Grotta della Trinità near Ruffano (Ingrosso, 1997, Figure 4, p. 239): the limbs are depicted by two zigzags and the head by a circle; one arm is bent upwards: one hand has fingers (Figure 7(1)).

The whole-body representation on the piece from Masseria Era (Taranto) is in the Guadone style: two zigzags indicate a stylised body with arms bent upwards. The piece is on display in the MARTA (National Archaeological Museum in Taranto), but no scientific description has been published. From the same period (5800–5500 BC) are some whole-body representations in the Masseria La Quercia style, painted on vessels from Grotta Scaloria, Masseria La Quercia, Passo di Corvo and Masseria La Boccuta (Canne) in northern and central Puglia (Tunzi, 2015, pp. 51–62). They also have circular heads above zigzags (for the limbs) and vertical bands (for the body) with multiple arms reaching upwards (Tunzi, 2015, Figure 27, p. 58).

The same iconography is seen on scratched ware (Matera-Ostuni style) and red painted ware (Passo di Corvo style) from the early phases of the Middle Neolithic (5600–5300 BC), for example the vessels from Grotta S. Angelo and Santa Candida (Ostuni) (Coppola, 2001, Figures 9.1 and 17.9). It should be emphasised that representations of arms pointing upwards are also seen in numerous pictograms on the rocky walls of Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta Cosma (Santa Cesarea Terme) (Graziosi, 1980), as well as Grotta delle Due Crocette in central Puglia (Radina, 2017).

The whole-body representation scratched on a small vase from Sant’Anna near Oria is characterised by an oval head, a rectangular body, bent legs and feet pointing outwards (Tiberi, 2007, Figure 23, p. 49) (Figure 7(2)): it looks dynamic, similar to the “Shaman figure” painted on the wall of Grotta dei Cervi (Figure 7(4)).



**Figure 7:** Vessels with whole-body representations from Grotta della Trinità (1), Sant’Anna (2), Samari (3) and the “Shaman figure” painted on the wall of Grotta dei Cervi (4).

In terms of their state of conservation, the face vessels and the vessels with whole-body representations from Puglia mostly consist of fragments, but there is a key difference between these two categories. In the face vessels, the representation is fully preserved in 96% of findings. However, this is not observed in fragments with whole-body representations, where almost 60% of the finds are only partially preserved. This feature does not seem to be accidental: in our opinion, it reflects a desire to reuse this part of the face vessel even after the container was no longer in use, perhaps repurposing the human representations as amulets or figurines.

Anthropomorphic vessels appeared in Puglia in the second half of the sixth millennium BC. They are very similar to artefacts common in Balkan regions during the Neolithic: this is not surprising because relations with these regions have already been highlighted in the study of other ceramic artefacts and raw materials from Grotta dei Cervi (Tiberi, 2019). Specifically, the study of this cave showed that the exchanges between these regions did not concern not only goods and raw materials but also traditions and perhaps religious practices. This could be indicated by the use of a common symbolic language seen in decorations on vessels and other ceramic artefacts such as pintaderas as well as cave paintings (Tiberi, 2019).

In many caves in Puglia, facial features were found on the necks of flasks: three are from Grotta dei Cervi (Tiberi, 2019, Figure 81.1–3) and others were found in Grotta Cosma (Santa Cesarea Terme), Masseria Cesario (Taranto) (Gorgoglione, Laviano, & Rugge, 2012, Figures 1.2 and 3.5), Grotta della Tartaruga (Bari) (Coppola & Radina, 1985, Figures 56–57), Grotta Scaloria (Manfredonia-FG) (Gorgoglione, Isetti, & Traverso, 2016, Figure 5.7.6, p. 271), Pulo (Molfetta) (Caramuta & Radina, 2016, Figure 154) and Cala Tramontana (San Domino-Isole Cheradi) (Palma di Cesnola, 1967). In most cases, the eyebrows are joined to the nose in accordance with the typical T-face pattern, and zigzag motifs (vertical or horizontal) are painted on the cheeks.

In the fifth millennium BC, human representations disappear from the vessels of South-East Italy: only zoomorphic motifs (mostly rams’ horns) remain, incised or painted in brown in Serra d’Alto pottery.

Human faces and stylised whole-body representations appear again at the end of the Neolithic, on vessels in the Macchia a Mare/Zinzulusa style, for example two bowls found in Grotta dei Cervi (Tiberi, 2019, Figures 17.1 and 50.2).

## 5.2 Puglia in the European Framework

In conclusion, we argue that face vessels are documented in southern Puglia at a time when Neolithic culture was taking hold, as shown by the case of Torre Sabea. A similar situation is seen for example in central and western Macedonia, with the Early Neolithic anthropomorphic representations of Nea Nicomedia (Rodden, 1965; Perlés, 2001, Figure 12.3) and Mavropigi (Karamitrou-Mentessidi et al., 2013).

In Romania and Hungary in the Early Neolithic (Starčevo-Criş and Körös cultures: 5800–5500 BC), human silhouettes, in relief or attached to the vessels, are widespread. The globular vessel with a stylised whole-body representation from Acmarium (Blandiana, Alba, in Romania) can be compared with similar vessels from Hódmezővásárhely-Kotacpart, Vata-tanya, Szajol-Felsőföld and Becsehely-Bükkalja-dűlő, attributable to the Körös Culture (Fântâneau & Bărbat, 2015).

A few centuries later but still in the Early Neolithic, face vessels spread throughout the villages, caves and cult sites of Puglia. Iconographically they vary, being either stylised or extremely realistic.

Whole-body representations appeared at the same time: they tend to be stylised, with the focus of representation on the arms bending upwards. This is seen in two vessels from Grotta delle Veneri traditionally interpreted as face vessels.

We find the same iconography in the Middle Neolithic. In this period in the Balkans, many vessels are decorated with anthropomorphic symbols, such as the vessels in the Precucuteni-Trypolie A style from Romania. In dwellings in Bahia-În Muchie (Suceava county) for instance, 68 vessels decorated with stylised anthropomorphic pillar-like representations were found from 2012 to 2014: the bodies are depicted with long silhouettes, ornamented in some cases with necklaces; the heads are depicted with triangles, semi-circles or dots and the arms are shown in various positions (Ursu et al., 2017).

Parallels between face vessels and anthropomorphic representations on vessels from Puglia and ceramics attributed to Eastern Linear Pottery Culture were proposed by Becker (2017), who highlighted similar features such as a vertical line underneath the mouth: this motif is common, in particular, in the upper Tisza in the period 5500–4800 BC.

One question remains, however: Who were the characters thus represented?

Based on the interpretations presented by other scholars for similar pieces, some hypotheses can be proposed:

- Guardians of the contents of the jar.

Fugazzola Delpino, Pessina, and Tiné (2004) and Tunzi (2015) all suggest that the human representations impressed, incised or applied on the rims of Neolithic vessels from south-east Italy may have had an apotropaic function, serving to magically protect the contents of the vessels, which frequently contained foodstuffs. This hypothesis is among those advanced by Ursu et al. (2017) regarding the anthropomorphic pillar-like representations on Pre-Cucuteni-Trypolie A vessels.

- Praying figures.

Some human representations on Neolithic vessels from Central Europe are interpreted as figures in the act of meditative and ecstatic worship. For example, Kaňáková Hladíková (2009–2010) considered figures belonging to the basic Y and bi-triangular schemes to be praying figures and those belonging to the basic X and  $\Phi$  schemes to be dancers.

- Dancing figures.

Some scholars have interpreted the figures with bent arms and legs that were engraved, painted and applied on many vessels in the Near East and South East Europe during the Neolithic as dancers. Dance in prehistory is considered by Garfinkel (1998, 2010) for instance as a religious experience in which the individual expresses their worship of supernatural powers. The trance generated by rhythmic movement

made the dancers feel as though the supernatural powers were also participating in the dance, thereby joining the “other” world with this world.

– Gods.

Coppola (2001) interprets the face vessels of Neolithic pottery from Puglia as female or androgynous divinities in the most ancient phases of the Neolithic and, later, as male divinities with beards. Some Central European figures, disproportionately larger than the dancing and praying figures, have also been interpreted as superhuman entities (Kaňáková Hladíková, 2009–2010).

– Ancestors.

The hypothesis that anthropomorphic vessels were used as a means of remembrance and a way of establishing relationships with individuals, ancestors or deities is proposed by Naumov (2017). According to Naumov, the corporeality expressed in anthropomorphic vessels is apparently similar to what is seen in other ceramic human depictions in the Neolithic communities of Macedonia. In addition, Hofmann (2017) also suggests that LBK figurines, figurative vessels and anthropomorphised pots could be images of clan ancestors who played an active role in society, for example in creating identity groups and maintaining long-distance links.

– Dedicants.

The purpose of the human representations may have been to indicate the identity of the high-status or powerful members of the community (priests or intermediaries) who offered the vessels and their contents to the gods to invoke their protection of the group, as suggested in some cases by ornaments, tattoos and particular garments.

## 6 Conclusion

The analysis of 16 anthropomorphic symbols on Early and Middle Neolithic vessels found in Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta delle Veneri, in the South of Puglia, prompted the authors to extend the study to all Neolithic vessels with human representations found in this region. The analysis showed that the various iconographic types (abstract, schematic and detailed) were produced in Puglia from the beginning of the Neolithic and that they coexisted throughout the sixth millennium BC. Vessels decorated with human representations come mainly from surveys, but when they come from excavations, they are found in caves, necropolises and villages. Specifically, in the necropolises, ceramic fragments with human representations are found in the ceremonial areas around the tombs; in inhabited areas, they are found in the infill material in ditches.

Most of the finds are fragmented, but in the face vessels, the human representation is fully preserved. We hypothesise that this is not by chance but could be explained by the reuse of these ceramic artefacts for example as amulets or figurines.

In the second half of the sixth millennium BC, anthropomorphic vessels very similar to artefacts that were widespread in the Balkans during the Neolithic appear in Puglia.

In the fifth millennium BC, human representations disappear from the vessels of south-east Italy, and only zoomorphic motifs (mostly rams' horns) remain, applied, incised or painted in brown on Serra d'Alto pottery. Human faces and stylised anthropomorphic representations appear again at the end of the Neolithic on vases in the Macchia a Mare/Zinzulusa style.

It is difficult to interpret the identity of the characters represented: people praying or dancing, ancestors, gods, dedicants and priests are some of the hypotheses. However, we know that these representations appear on vessels used during the sixth millennium BC across a vast geographical area that includes the Balkans and Southern Italy. This can be interpreted as further evidence of the far-reaching network of exchange that included Puglia, but also of the existence of a common ideological heritage.

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