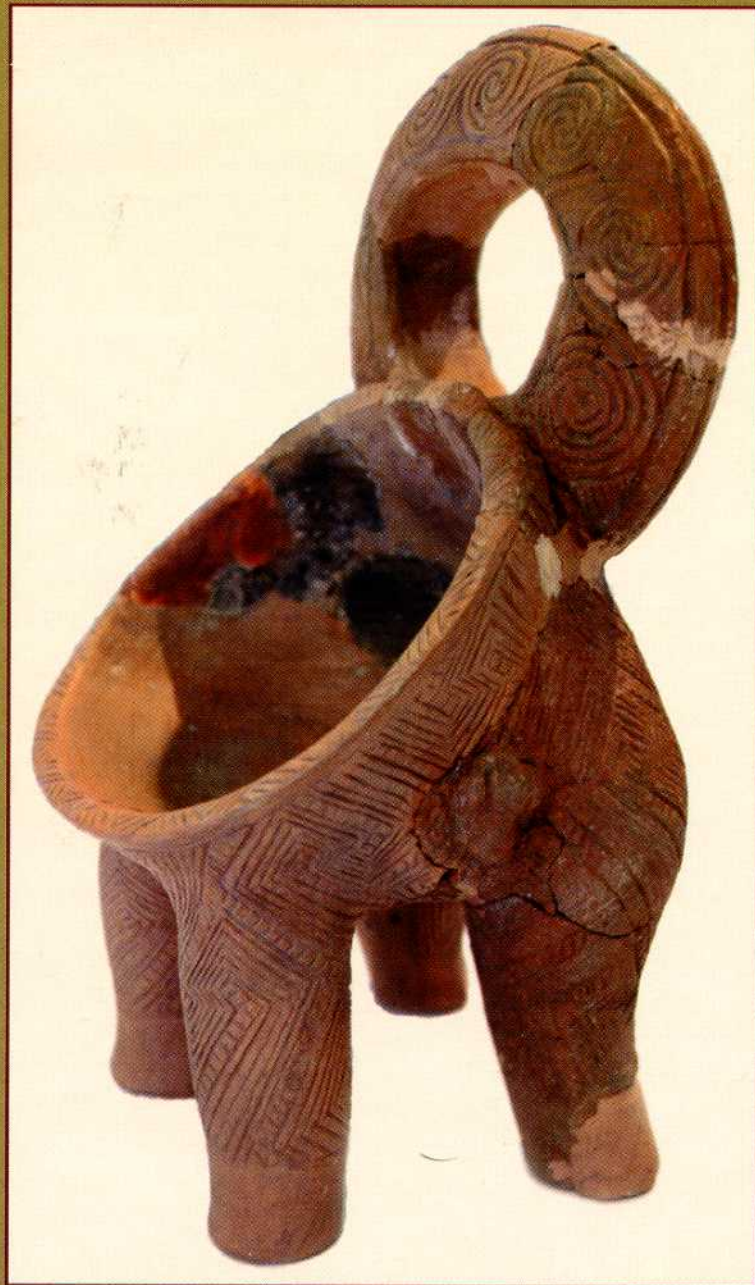


# The Rhyton from Danilo

STRUCTURE AND SYMBOLISM OF  
A MIDDLE NEOLITHIC CULT-VESSEL



Omer Rak

Translated by

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The so-called *rhyton* from Danilo, an archaeological site near the coastal town of Šibenik in Dalmatia, Croatia, is a four-legged Neolithic vessel made of fired clay that according to the consensus of archaeological opinion was most likely a cult vessel used in rituals of unknown origin and content. "Danilo Culture" is the eponymous name bestowed on a culture flourishing in the period from about 5500–4800 BC at Danilo and at some neighbouring sites. This culture had great influence along the eastern Adriatic coast and its hinterland and produced a significant number of these vessels. Rhyta, which other Neolithic cultures also made, were dispersed throughout a vast area of southeast Europe, from Greece to the Alps. This book is an in-depth study of that mysterious, prehistoric archaeological artifact which, due to its antiquity, structure and symbolism, has become a kind of universal proto-matrix for all relevant mythological and spiritual structures of the Mediterranean zone of later, historic times.



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## FOREWORD

Twelve years ago, during the excavations underway at Grotta dell'Edera, a seven metre thick cave sequence in the Trieste Karst in north-eastern Italy, a few fragments of a typical, undecorated, four-legged *rhyton* were brought to light from a well-defined Neolithic context, which was later radiocarbon dated to the middle of the seventh millennium uncal BP, and attributed to an "impoverished" aspect of the Dalmatian Danilo Culture, locally called Vlaška, a term introduced by Lawrence Barfield in the early 1970s. Potsherds of the same ring-handled pot were later analysed by one of my former students, Michela Spataro, now Scientist at the British Museum, London, who defined the origin of the paste and inclusions employed for their manufacture, and contributed to the understanding of the (local) production of these important ceramic fragments.

My interest in these unique vessel types had already been awakened a few years before, thanks to reading an interesting and innovative paper on the *rhyta* of the upper Adriatic basin, focused on their function, circulation and cultural attribution, written by my fellow postgraduate student, John Chapman. His provocative new interpretations greatly contributed to redirecting my attraction to the Neolithic of the Dalmatian coast, and the Balkan Peninsula in general, a topic I had always kept firmly in mind thanks to the lectures on transhumance and pastoralism in the Balkans by our supervisor, John Nandris, whose classes had benefited us both during our PhD courses at the Institute of Archaeology, London University.

Since then the number of studies on the Neolithic *rhyta* have multiplied. Several authors have contributed, in different ways, and from different viewpoints, to the interpretation of the origin, production, relative and absolute chronology, cultural attribution(s), territorial distribution, function and (symbolic) significance of this "cult vessel" that undoubtedly played a very important role in the life (and death) of both farmers and pastoralists of the early-to-late Neolithic of a great part of the Balkan and Aegean worlds.

*Rhyta* were conceived, adopted and developed in the very articulated and complex geographic and political landscapes of south-eastern Europe, a territory of fundamental importance for understanding the movement of peoples and

transmission of ideas, at least from the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic onwards, at the meeting place of two different worlds, along the natural route that links Anatolia with Central Europe.

Surprisingly *rhyta* spread very rapidly, but not exclusively, along the coasts of the eastern Adriatic during the development of the Dalmatian Danilo Neolithic. They represent a common feature of several cultural entities, defined by archaeologists with different names, sometimes corresponding to chronologically or typologically similar or subsequent aspects. *Rhyta* were often marked by specific characteristics among which are the presence/absence of decorative patterns, scratched, grooved or painted geometric and/or spiral motifs, slightly different vessel shapes and handles, as well as four or double-legged specimens.

This innovative and comprehensive volume by Omer Rak on this unique “cult vessel” falls within the complicated framework of the Balkan Neolithic outlined above. The author, apart from providing the reader with a detailed history of the *rhyton*’s archaeology, its first discoveries and descriptions by archaeologists in former Yugoslavia, points out the geographic distribution of these pots and the variable cultural contexts from which they were recovered. His attention is attracted by the concept of its non-functional value, its importance in the spiritual world of the Neolithic farmers and its multi-regional distribution, possibly indicating a “*first integration of European territory in prehistory*”.

He continues with the interpretation of this “cult vessel” by different authors, within the spiritual world of the Neolithic populations of the Balkans and the Aegean, widening his scope to Anatolia and the Far East, looking for historical and philosophical contexts and explanations from which to extract spiritual values, in an attempt to explain such an intricate archaeological phenomenon. He experiments with the stylistic interpretation of the geometric decorative patterns, which ornament some of the ceramic types, pointing out the symbolic importance of the *rhyta*, which constitute a unique “*irreproducible phenomenon*” that spread from the Aegean Sea to the Alps. Although he partly accepts the idea of previously suggested, although interpretatively restrictive, relationship with other cult objects within the broader framework of a fertility cult, where the *rhyton* represents the female counterpart, he also poses a number of important new questions regarding the complexity of its potential role in ceremonies/sacrifices, possible reason in the funerary rites for its fragmentary recovery status and dislocation, and its importance in “*the spiritual and cultural integration of the inhabitants*”.

These are but some of the reasons why this volume by Omer Rak represents an important contribution to the study and understanding of a unique Neolithic

“cult vessel”. It supplements and integrates earlier papers by several authors on the topic, and poses new questions on the nature, interpretation and possible function(s) of the *rhyta*. It is an updated and widened English version of a successful volume by the same author on the same subject written in Croatian in 2008.

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