

BIRDS OF CLAY: RETHINKING PARTRIDGES IN ENEOLITHIC LANDSCAPES

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Eneolithic sites in Croatia have yielded a number of animal figurines manufactured from clay. Among them is the bird-shaped vessel from the Vučedol site, which gained the status of possibly the most famous archaeological artifact from Croatia. This zoomorphic representation inspired different prominent interpretations that elaborated the potential symbolic, religious, and mythological values of the artifact. Drawing on recent contributions that encourage focusing on more-than-human societies and different ways in which people relate to material culture, this paper will attempt to move away from strictly symbolic interpretations of this artifact. By considering potential meeting places of birds and humans, partridges as a species, and clay as the material that frames their figural representation, this paper suggests that the famous bird from Vučedol is not merely a symbol or a vessel for a ritual drink, but could represent a bird that humans interacted with in shared landscapes and one that reminded them of their own connection with the ground.

Keywords: Eneolithic, Vučedol, bird representations, human-animal relations, shared landscapes, partridges, clay

INTRODUCTION

In the rather small repertoire of zoomorphic imagery from the Eneolithic period in Croatia there are a few representations of birds.¹ Some of them are fragmented, with only the heads of birds preserved, while in other cases bird bodies are shaped as vessels. Discussions focusing exclusively on animal representations are rare in Croatian archaeological literature. Discussions of animal representations in the Eneolithic period are no exception, which is partly due to the relatively low frequency of Eneolithic representations in Croatia.

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This suggests that, in this period, there occurred a temporary reduction in figurative shaping. Figurative shaping comes to the fore once again during the Bronze Age and especially the Iron Age,² when animals were frequently represented not only as figurines but also as parts of adornments, fibulas, and bronze or clay vessels (Majnarić-Pandžić 1998). However, there have been suggestions in reference to the previous Neolithic period, that animal representations reflect the economy of prehistoric communities (Benac 1979) or that smaller and more carelessly made ones represent children's toys or craft (Dimitrijević 1979; Balen-Letunić and Rendić-Miočević 1982.; Težak-Gregl 1998). Eneolithic animal representations in Croatia have most frequently been viewed through the prisms of symbolism, religion, and cultic activities (Marković 1981; Hoti 1993; Durman 1991, Miličević Bradač (2002; 2002a). This is particularly relevant in the case of the bird-shaped vessel that has been, for a long time, commonly referred to as the *Vučedol dove* in popular parlance. The *Vučedol dove* is one of the most famous archaeological artifacts from Croatia, which gained immense popularity outside the academic and archaeological discourse in the 1990s and the Croatian War of Independence, when it was recognized as a symbol of identity, peace, and the city of Vukovar near which it was originally discovered (Kasalo and Serventi 2022; Pasarić 2013). Within archaeological discourse, one of the most influential interpretations of the artifact was offered by Aleksandar Durman (1991). Durman suggested that the bird species represented was not a dove as initially noted by Rudolf Schmidt at the time of its discovery in 1938, but a partridge, a companion bird of the patron god of blacksmiths, related to metallurgical activities that took place at the acropolis of the Vučedol settlement.

This paper reconsiders the famous bird-vessel from Vučedol not as a ritual object or a symbol. Rather, it will be suggested that the bird represents an animal that humans encountered and interacted with in their shared landscape, which is why they chose to model it in clay. The paper draws on recent works advocating interpretative frameworks that depart from the sole focus on the nutritional, material, or symbolic importance of animals and instead highlight how humans might have understood animals through their “daily meetings, interactions and engagements” and how this may have provided a sense of shared landscapes or places (Hussain 2018, 2021; Overton 2016; Overton and Hamilakis 2013). In this way, the paper also moves beyond discussions that associate this famous Vučedol artifact to *grand narratives* of the Eneolithic linked with social, economic, and religious changes that occurred at the very end of the period (such as the beginning of social stratification, the rise of religious elites or those related with the development of metallurgical production, the emergence of specialized potters, etc.) and instead focuses on *smaller narratives* of everyday encounters between humans and animals.

The possibility suggested and argued for by Durman (1991, 2006) – that the Vučedol bird represents a partridge – serves as motivation to explore data about partridges in the

² Iron age Japodian metal representations of horses were discussed by Sineva Kukoč (2003) and Dunja Glogović (2009), while Hrvoje Potrebica (2003) focused on the meaning of water in prehistoric religions but also discussed Bronze and Iron age representations of the so-called “water animals” – aquatic birds and horses.

Eneolithic and to investigate how humans and partridges might have interacted. However, the current scarcity of zooarchaeological data from Vučedol, especially when it comes to birds, and the fact that partridges have so far not been identified in the available samples of bird remains, allows only for reasonable assumptions to be made. Nevertheless, the presence of partridges both in figurative representation and osteological remains has been attested at different Eneolithic sites in Eastern Europe and partridges have also been identified at earlier prehistoric sites in Croatia. Following these leads and intrigued by specific ethological traits of partridges and the unique ecological characteristics of Vučedol's landscape, the paper can only put forward a hypothesis and set to explore a conceivable scenario of interactions that might have taken place between birds – notably partridges – and humans at Vučedol within their mutually shared landscaped.

The article also considers the transformable nature of clay following ideas that materials and artifacts emerge from different kinds of interactions (Hodder 2011, 2012; Conneller 2011: 20, 128) and thus views certain ceramic artifacts and figurines from Vučedol in the light of relational, everyday connections that humans might have had with different animals, plants, and other elements of the landscape. It will be proposed that our interpretations and understandings of the famous bird-vessel from Vučedol should also arise from the relationship that humans could have had with the land, with clay, and with small animals such as birds they encountered daily. Thus, the paper makes a contribution to the archaeology of birds, to discussions of human-animal interactions framed by specific environmental local conditions, and to aspects of materiality of artifacts manufactured from clay – a triad not frequently discussed in the archaeology of Eneolithic in Croatia. The paper provides a brief overview of prehistoric representations of birds and their interpretations across Europe, narrowing the focus to Eneolithic, bird-shaped vessels and the famous Vučedol discovery, embarking on this partridge-inspired *vision-quest*.

AVIAN SPIRITS, CULTIC AND RELIGIOUS OBJECTS, AND VUČEDOL'S MOST FAMOUS VESSEL

A SHORT FLIGHT ACROSS TOWARDS THE ENEOLITHIC

Birds and humans share many common traits. Their mutual affinity for vocal expression, bipedalism, interactivity and sociality might have drawn human attention towards avian species throughout history. Moreover, humans have certainly been captivated by the unique trait of birds – their ability to fly³ (Russell 2019: 377). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that birds and humans have occasionally been depicted together as early as in Paleolithic rock or portable art (Domingo et al. 2019; Aujoulat 2004: 158–161; Bosinski

³ An exhibition devoted to birds in spiritual and material culture from prehistory to the Middle Ages was mounted in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb in 2013/2014 (see Bunčić, ed. 2013).

2006; Braun 2018). The strong bond between humans and animals from the Paleolithic onwards has been recognized in the images of bird-headed humans from Altamira and Lascaux, with some authors suggesting that these representations reflect a “close liaison” between species (Lorblanchet 1989: 122).⁴

Similar blending of avian and human form is evident later, in the Neolithic and Eneolithic, with the occurrence of figurines with human female or sometimes masculine and bird-like features, such as those from southeast Europe (e.g. Greece, Macedonia, Serbia), which inspired Marija Gimbutas’ interpretations of them as various types of Bird Goddess representations (Gimbutas 1996: 112–151). However, ever since the Neolithic,⁵ birds – like other animals – appeared in ceramic production as zoomorphic vessels, with the animal body or parts of it shaped as a recipient or sometimes represented on vessels or altars as their “signifiers” (e.g., animal protomes), particularly in southeast and central Europe. Vessels with ornithomorphic traits thus make a group of finds whose essential interpretative feature becomes their capacity to enclose something within them. Neolithic and Eneolithic zoomorphic vessels, including those in the shape of birds, were widely believed to have ritual functions, and were thought to have played an important part in cultic activities and perhaps sacrificial rites. They were thought to have been used as lamps, fire starters or incense burners, containers for offerings such as grains, herbs or other solid or liquid substances, perhaps even animal blood or psychoactive drugs (Popova 2022; Marangou and Stern 2009: 397; Bánffy 1997: 78; Stanković 1986: 92; Milićević Bradač 2002). The prominence and diversity of bird representations (bird figurines, rattles, bird-shaped askoi, and bird-shaped vessels) continued in Early and Middle Bronze Age of the Carpathian Basin (Kovács 1972; Guba and Szeverényi 2007), while the central role of birds in the motif of a bird-ship becomes well distributed across Europe in Late Bronze Age manifested in metallurgical craft.⁶

In comparison to other parts of Europe (and their abundant representative ceramic production with zoomorphic repertoires) or even in comparison to the earlier Neolithic

⁴ Although the choice of depicted animal as well as human-animal hybrids has often been interpreted through the lens of hunting magic (e.g., Kozłowski 2004: 61, 62, 74–79,) it has also been proposed that these depictions suggest similarities between humans and at least some animals, which can also potentially be viewed through the lens of Paleolithic animist ontologies (Conneller 2011: 120).

⁵ For a discussion of Neolithic ritual vessels or “rhyta” depicting both animal and human features within the framework of transforming the relations between animal and humans in the process of domestication with the focus on Eastern Adriatic, see Mlekuž (2007).

⁶ It appears that birds reached their central role in the motif of a bird-ship well distributed across Europe in Late Bronze Age. The motif of a bird-ship or a sun-ship, also connected to the Nordic religious concept (Guba and Szeverényi 2007: 88, 89), is typical of Late Bronze age, 10th century BC onwards, and the so called “Urnenfelder” cultural complex well distributed on the territory of Croatia as well (Kukoč 2003.) The central motif is a wagon or ship pulled by birds, or more specifically, birds pulling the disk at the middle of the ship symbolizing the sun (Kukoč 2003: 244). Sineva Kukoč (2003), who studied the motifs in detail, suggests that this solar synthesis evokes an archaic allegory about the movement of the Sun during the day and the year as part of universal symbolism of circular movement-dynamic image of the world that is characteristic of many archaic cultures, representing the daily or annual rise/fall of the Sun on the horizon during the winter/summer solstice, travel, and sinking in the waters of the Ocean encompassing the Earth according to ancient cosmologies.

period in the region, most Eneolithic cultural complexes in Croatia can be defined as aniconic (Težak-Gregl 1998: 114) and, consequently, representations of animal or human bodies are relatively rare. However, in the Vučedol cultural complex (approx. 2900 to 2300 BC), where Eneolithic artistic expression flourished, figurative sculpture became more prominent again (ibid.). Although it seems that zoomorphic representations were more schematized and featured fewer details in comparison with representations of human bodies, bird protomes found in Vinkovci and Vučedol and the bird-shaped vessel from Vučedol challenge this conclusion. Nicely shaped and decorated bird heads from Vinkovci (Dimitrijević 1979: 295) and Vučedol (Durman and Balen 2005: 31) are the only body parts found. However, bird-shaped *askos*, probably used as receptacles, were found in Vukovar (Tasić et al. 1979: 449), with possible complex affiliations with Baden, Kostolac, and Vučedol (Dimitrijević 1956: 20; Tasić et al. 1979: 449). The body of the bird is decorated with a series of notches and punctures (Dimitrijević 1956: 10) and the hollow insides indicates a possible receptacle function. A preserved hanging lug on the upper side of the body could indicate that the bird figure was suspended from something or something might even have been suspended from it, also indicating that the bird might have been a part of a larger whole (ibid.).

A CHICKEN, A DOVE, OR A PARTRIDGE

However, the most famous bird or bird-shaped vessel is the so-called *Vučedol dove* found at Vučedol, an archaeological site in eastern Croatia, of great importance in the region of the Carpathian Basin providing insight into daily life from the Early Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age. Vučedol – a fortified settlement on a prominent strategic and communication point near the Danube River and the site of the eponymous Vučedol cultural complex – was considered the primary center of copper production for the wider region.

The bird-shaped vessel attributed to the Vučedol culture (2900 to 2300 BC) was unearthed at a separate acropolis-like (elevated) part of the settlement known as Gradac, which has been linked with the ruling elites, metallurgical, ritual, and religious activities. More specifically, the artifact was discovered in a pit positioned near the only above-ground residential building, where remain of furnaces, molds for casting, and fragments of copper were also discovered, which contributed to naming the structure the “megaron (house) of the copper caster” (Schmidt 1945: 22). The body of the bird stands on three legs and an opening is visible at the top of the bird’s head. White inlay decoration is visible on the back and chest area of the bird and ornaments also mark the tail, eyes, and the beak (Milićević 2002: 71). Because of its outstanding features and inlay decorations, including the motives of the double axe or *labrys* in the neck area, archaeologist Rudolf Schmidt assumed that this was an unusual artifact, utilized in cultic activities as a receptacle for a significant drink (Schmidt 1945: 107). He was also the one who renamed the bird, initially recorded in the field diary as a chicken, into a dove (ibid; Durman 2006: 52; Milićević Bradač 2002: 72).

This intriguing bird and the unique location of its discovery naturally lead to further interpretations. Judging from the bodily features of the represented bird and chiefly due to its body proportions indicating an avian species closely tied to land, Aleksandar Durman suggested that the bird represents a partridge (Durman 1991: 162–164). By looking into the beginning of use and processing of metal and Indo-European blacksmith deities, including Hephaestus, he notes that lameness is a trait often associated with these deities. He further suggests that these deities are a result of early Indo-European traditions when metallurgy was only starting. Metallurgy at the time was based on copper sulfate which contains arsenic, an element with poisonous properties that could damage the nervous system of blacksmiths, causing lameness or further affecting their capacity to walk (Durman 1991: 158–168). Some mythological contexts reveal a relation between Hephestus and partridges, birds that can fake lameness when they sense danger (Srđić, 1962: 44); of further interest is the dance of lame partridges performed in erotic orgies dedicated to blacksmithing (Graves 1957: 88). Therefore, Durman (1991: 164) claimed that the bird discovered in front of the so-called *megaron of the copper caster*, a space devoted to metallurgical activities and possibly to a blacksmith god similar to Hephestus, was a partridge, Hephestus's companion bird – thus claiming that it played a role of a sign, a symbol of metallurgical activities and the worship of blacksmiths' patron Gods.⁷

Considering the fact that the vessel was discovered in a pit near the *megaron of the copper caster* in the vicinity of which a complete burial of a sacrificed deer was also unearthed, Marina Milićević Bradač (2002) extensively reflected on the cross-culturally known shamanic techniques of ecstasy where birds and deer stand out as the shaman's most common assistants on their ecstatic journey to the other world. The fact that shamans and blacksmiths often enjoyed equal social status due to their knowledge of special skills or that a single person might have held both functions at the same time, as well as the fact that intoxicants were also used to achieve shamanic ecstasy and were ritually drunk from special cult vessels, led her to suggest that the bird-shaped vessel from Vučedol was very likely one such vessel, in which they probably served beer, mead, or alcohol made of birch sap with herbal additives or mushrooms with hallucinogenic properties (ibid.).

These valuable discussions offer important and welcome interpretations of the *Vučedol dove* or *Vučedol partridge*. Yet, they tend to view the artifact primarily as a ritual object, perhaps a religious or identity symbol used by powerful and distinguished groups or individuals. This also relates the artifact to *grand narratives* of the Eneolithic related to social, economic, and religious changes that occurred at the end of the period (such as the development of metallurgical activities, the rise of ruling and religious elites, etc.) and are usually the central theme of Eneolithic-related discussions. However, there are still other questions that can be asked about the famous bird-shaped artifact, ones which can move us towards, perhaps more fragmented, *small narratives* focusing on everyday life and

⁷ For a discussion of other Greek mythological contexts revealing the relationship between partridges and metallurgy, see Durman 2006: 56–60.

multispecies/interspecies interactions. For example, how much is actually known about partridges or other birds that inhabited the settlement of Vučedol or its surroundings during the Eneolithic and the period of the Vučedol culture? What kind of birds are partridges and how could have they been perceived and experienced by the inhabitants of Vučedol, who then chose to represent a specimen of the species in clay?

SO, WHERE ARE THE BIRDS?

Although the Vučedol site provided valuable data for a number of distinct discussion and contributions about various aspects of the Eneolithic, life narratives about human-animal relations at Vučedol or the Eneolithic period in Croatia are still underrepresented. This is especially true when it comes to birds. Although birds most probably played a part in the diet of the Vučedol population or in other aspects of their lives, they have thus far not received much research attention. Relying on a sample of 21 bird bones from settlement waste pits, Vesna Malez (1995) identified the remains of the rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) and the carrion crow (*Corvus corone*) as well as the bean goose (*Anser fabalis*), the goose (*Anser sp.*), the mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), and the common crane (*Grus grus*) in pits attributed to the Vučedol cultural complex, suggesting that water birds must have been part of the inhabitants' subsistence. Additionally, the Baden/Kostolac pit yielded remains of the pelican (*Pelicanus*) and a culturally mixed feature showed remains of the common pochard (*Aythya ferina*) and of the Eurasian goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) (Malez 1995: 27–28). In wider discussions about hunting and farming in the Vučedol culture, only a single reference relates ceramic weights from Vučedol not only to fishing nets but also to the possibility that they were used on land for hunting birds or even larger game (Jurišić 1988: 52). According to the current state of research and when compared to cattle, other domesticated or hunted animals at Vučedol, or even fish, the role of birds in human subsistence was most likely not that substantial. Birds were probably important for Eneolithic communities in ways that surpassed nutrition. Humans inevitably encountered various bird species that they shared their landscape with, and these interactions could have affected them in various ways, depending on specific characteristics and habits of each particular species.

The present scarcity of bird remains at Vučedol may be related to the current lack of zooarchaeological analyses especially from more recent excavations, it may be related to research questions asked or procedures implemented in the past, as well as to taphonomic challenges related to the fragility of avian osteological material, although fragile fish remains have been unearthed at the site in large quantities (Jurišić 1988: 45, 46, Miloglav 2016: 143). Also, simply a smaller number of avian bones at the site is a valid possibility and not all bird species encountered in the landscape get entangled in interactions that result in the deposition of their remains in settlement pits. In any case, Galliformes or particularly partridges, have so far not been identified in the available avian sample from Vučedol (Malez 1995). However, given the current scarcity of available

analyses of bird remains, perhaps future research will reveal more data about the distribution of the species. Especially since gray partridges (*Perdix perdix*) are considered to be a native gamebird from the pheasant family of gallinaceous birds (Phasianidae of the order Galliformes) inhabiting all parts of Croatia where there are abundant fields, such as the Pannonian Plain, but also south of the Sava River to Gorski Kotar and Lika, Istria, and the lowland part of Dalmatia (Mijić 2018: 1; Darabuš 2004: 150). Archaeologically, partridges have been identified in Croatia already in Paleolithic sites and can also be traced in different subsequent prehistoric periods in some countries from the region. For example, gray partridges have been identified at the Krapina Neanderthal site as well as the Velika pećina site at Ravna gora in northwestern Croatia (Malez and Malez 1989; Malez 1984). Both gray partridges and rock partridges (*Alectoris graeca*) are found in Pleistocene layers at the Šandalja II cave site in Istria (Oros Sršen et al. 2014) as well as in Pleistocene and Holocene layers at other sites in the Adriatic region of Croatia such as Romuald's Cave, Vela spila, and others (Mauch Lenardić et al. 2018; Zaher and Oros Sršen 2017). Remains of these birds have been found at Neolithic sites in Dalmatia as well. Malez records the remains of gray and rock partridges at Vela spila (Malez 2001: 120) and gray partridges at the Crno vrilo settlement (Malez 2009: 70).

Partridges have been identified at a number of Eneolithic sites in the neighboring Balkan or eastern European region. Gray partridges (*Perdix perdix*) were found in Eneolithic settlements of Bordusani Popina and Harsova in Romania, both gravitating towards the Danube (Gál and Kessler 2002). They have also been identified in Bulgaria since the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods onwards and specifically at the following Eneolithic sites: Yagodinska Cave, Dolnoslav, Galabovo, and Golyamata Kauna Cave (Boev 1995: 433, 434). At some inland Bulgarian sites, gray partridges and quails were found in large numbers and were often caught and killed as juveniles (ibid.: 437, 438). The importance of these birds not only in human subsistence but also in spiritual life is attested by a vessel in the shape of a partridge that was found at Sadievo (Kancheva-Ruseva 1999: 24, 25). In the Eneolithic Trypolye cultural complex in Ukraine, gray partridges have been identified in the sample of game fowl birds dominating bird assemblage from the Vertebea Cave cemetery (Ledogar et al. 2019). The species distribution at Vertebea Cave coincides with other Tripolye sites in that the identified birds are consistent with the local environment and were most likely opportunistically and seasonally hunted (ibid.). It has also been proposed that some Tripolye figurines represent partridges or quails (Bejenaru and Monah 2014).

TAKING A CHANCE ON PARTRIDGES. ENVISIONING A SCENARIO OF A SHARED LANDSCAPE

Taking into account valuable archaeobotanical analyses and information about the vegetation surrounding the settlement of Vučedol, agricultural activities, and the utilization of nearby meadows and pasture grounds (Miloglav 2018: 127), it is possible to anticipate a

more diverse and vibrant ornithofauna than currently attested in published zooarchaeological data. The rich ecosystem around Vučedol, the vicinity of the Danube River where marshes and forests can be expected (Jurišić 1988: 16), elevated loess terraces suitable for agricultural activities, oak forests and forests with wild fruits such as the cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*), the elder (*Sambucus sp.*) and the Chinese lantern (*Physalis alkekengi*), and open grassy areas with some shrublands (Miloglav 2016: 126, table 23) are all environments where not only water birds, crows, and rooks could prosper (the remains of all of these were found at Vučedol), this is also a landscape and ecosystem where partridges thrive as well.

How humans could have experienced particular bird species in their shared environments has been discussed through examples of human-owl interactions in the East Central Europe during the Paleolithic and the relations of humans and swans in the Danish Mesolithic (Hussain 2018; 2021; Overton and Hamilakis 2013). Actions humans and birds undertake, their shared, complementary or distinct characteristics, rhythms and mobility patterns, specificities of geographic areas, and notions of temporality are all important points of consideration when it comes to how humans could have perceived and understood birds they interacted with as well as made sense of the broader environment (Hussain 2018: 9; Overton and Hamilakis 2013: 117–126, Overton 2016).

In an attempt to sketch possible scenarios of interaction between humans and partridges in environments similar to Vučedol's, we should note at the outset that partridges are non-migratory birds whose living environment is significantly connected to the ground. Even their color resembles the color of the soil and the environment they live in. Partridges nest on the ground, they mostly walk or run and are not particularly keen on flying, although they can fly short distances (Čeović 1940: 104, 108; Darabuš 2004: 152, 154). Gray partridges (*Perdix perdix*), which today inhabit parts of Croatia where Vučedol is located, are rather small birds (up to 35 cm in length), they usually inhabit open meadows, grazing and agriculture land, and wooded or semi-wooded areas during the winter (Ettinger 1897: 82; Čeović 1940: 104, 106; Darabuš 2004: 154), which are ecosystems very similar to those surrounding the Eneolithic Vučedol settlement. Being social birds, they live in coveys of up to thirty, forty specimens that stay in close proximity, while pairs separate during the mating season (Darabuš 2004: 154). Devoted to their habitual territory, they usually move only in a radius of between half to one kilometer but are nevertheless engaged in different activities during the day (Darabuš 2004: 154, Ettinger 1897: 82). Thus, partridges could have mirrored the habits of humans invested in permanent residence in a single place⁸ but also their sociality, group activities, and closeness to the land due to agricultural and husbandry practices.

Gray partridges change their location across their habitat over the course of a day. In the morning gray partridges can usually be seen sand or dust bathing and then in search of

⁸ At Vučedol this has been documented by the renewal of houses and several phases of settlement occupation (Dimitrijević 1979: 283; Forenbaher 1995: 20).

food, they spend afternoons on shady grass meadows, and when the dew descends, they look for a place to spend the night, usually a seclusion of dense undergrowth surrounding fields and cropland (Darabuš 2004: 154). Humans inhabiting Eneolithic settlements such as Vučedol could have come across them in the surroundings of the settlement quite frequently, even daily. They could have observed and heard them at the loess terraced fields, at open grassy areas and oak patches, and other places while following their own daily rhythms and performing a variety of tasks such as tending to domestic animals, working in the fields, foraging for wild fruits and weeds, hunting or gathering various raw materials, excavating for clay, or while undertaking other similar activities.

It is also worth noting that gray partridges communicate using four different kinds of vocalizations; when they fly, during the mating season, while communicating danger, and when communicating with their partners and young (Darabuš 2004: 151). These vocalizations are distinct and easy to differentiate. Vocalizations of partridges are most common during the hours just before sunset and after sunrise. The frequency of their calls increases during the spring months due to the mating season, with their calls being least frequent during the summer months, when partridges attend to nests and hatchlings (*ibid.*). When flying, in danger, or while relocating, the short wings of the gray partridge produce a whirring noise (*ibid.*). The tendency of partridges to be more vocal during mornings and evenings or at certain times of the year and to relocate within their habitats depending on their rhythms/activities linked with times of day could have affected ways in which humans too experienced the environment around the settlement. These habits of partridges could have contributed to the human experience of familiarity with certain locations within the landscape and facilitated their orientation through it. For example, the auditory perception of partridges could have contributed to human orientation in how close or far humans ventured from their settlement or made specific locations in the landscape more memorable. Hearing a distinct vocal expression of this bird at a specific location within the landscape at a certain time of day or year might have also facilitated ways in which humans made sense of time in terms of daily cycles or those of annual seasonality, but also as a signal for certain activities. For example, vocal expression of partridges could have also been related to other animals such as those in whose presence partridges could have experienced danger and an urge to relocate, while humans, on the other hand, gained an opportunity to hunt. It is worth noting that the remains of weasels, marten, and foxes which are considered predators to partridges (Čeović 1940: 110; Darabuš 2004: 155; Ettinger 1897: 83 have been identified at Vučedol (Jurišić 1988: 19), as have crows and hawks (Malez 1995).

Partridges could have made a food source for humans but, furthermore, they feed on so-called agricultural pests such as caterpillars, grasshoppers, and insects, as well as weeds (Borg and Toft 2000). Partridges also feed on grains, however, according to some researchers, they will only eat grains left on the ground after humans picked them rather than from grain ears (Čeović 1940: 106), and will most certainly disperse grains into the ecosystem (Orłowski et al. 2016). Meadows surrounding the Vučedol settlement,

rich in weeds such as chess grasses (*Bromus sp.*), fat hen (*Chenopodium album*), grasses (*Gramineae*), common corn cockle (*Agrostemma githago*) (Miloglav 2016: 126, table 23) as well as fields cultivated mainly with einkorn, barley, and emmer (Reed 2016) could have potentially made a thriving environment for partridges. Furthermore, Eneolithic communities that engaged in crop cultivation could have experienced partridges not as competitors for food but perhaps as potential allies in achieving its abundance.

If partridges inhabited the landscape of the Vučedol settlement, they would have been observed by humans during the entire year and their presence would have been linked with distinct locations and places. This is particularly true in relation to water birds, whose way of being was closely tied to a different natural element and different annual cycles, but also in relation to corvids, which spend lot of time in open areas, but due to their opportunistic and scavenging characteristics (Reichelmann 2013) sometimes also approach human settlements. The connection between partridges or similar birds and the ground more than air and water, their ability to blend in well with their landscape, as well as their habits of dust or sand bathing might have been appealing qualities to humans observing them, and ones that reminded them of their own relationship with the ground and possibly with what lay underneath its surface.

BIRDS OF CLAY

A relationship with the ground and what lies beneath it must have been an important aspect of life that late Eneolithic communities had to consider and maintain. Among other things, digging into the ground facilitated architectural solutions and settlement organization, while different forms of land modification further aided various aspects of life and life sustaining activities (for details see Gillespie 2021). This also meant obtaining significant amounts of clay or copper, as enhanced ceramic production and metallurgical activity flourished during the time of the Vučedol culture. Metallurgy was one of the pillars of Vučedol economy, in addition to agriculture, animal husbandry, and hunting (Miloglav 2018: 124). Yet, copper objects of the Vučedol culture are mostly represented by weapons or tools (such as daggers, flat axes, awls, and chisels) while other artifacts, including jewelry or other decorative objects, have so far not been discovered (Miloglav 2018: 134) This turns our attention towards clay, “the most primal material of all, the earth itself” (Gillespie 2021) with which humans have been significantly entangled since the Neolithic⁹ and through which ideas about different aspects of life continue to be framed (see Conneller 2011: 3, 5).

⁹ An interesting account of what entanglement with clay might have looked like has been offered by Ian Hodder, in reference to his work at Çatalhöyük, in his works “Human-thing entanglement: towards an integrated archaeological perspective” (2011) and *Entangled. An archaeology of the relationships between humans and things* (2012).

Ceramic production in general has been a recognizable trait of the Vučedol culture, distinct in style and decoration, and manufactured by skilled craftsmen (Težak-Gregl 1998: 140; Miloglav 2018: 136). The wide range of ceramic products includes vessels of different types and qualities, numerous cooking and working utensils (e.g. hooks, weights, whorls, etc.), as well as molds for cooper casting, small house altars, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurative expressions (Miloglav 2018: 123, 140). It has been suggested that clay objects can be seen as gathered or assembled things (Hodder 2011, 2012). This is elaborated in Ian Hodder's work about the entanglement of humans and things (2011; 2012). One of the four premises that his entanglement model is based on, alongside the principle that humans depend on things, is the notion that things too depend on other things or different component parts. When it comes to clay artifacts, this becomes evident already in the preparation of clay paste, which consisted of clay, temper, and water, and each of these elements can be further explored in the light of its component parts (Hodder 2012: 116, Fig. 6.1). For example, Hodder notes that the temper for the early clay objects at Çatalhöyük consisted of organic fibers, including wild grasses, straw, and cereal chaff (Hodder 2012: 152). This highlights not only the transformable nature of materials but also the idea that they emerge from interaction, as has been suggested by Chantal Conneller (2011: 20, 128).

Similarly, ceramic artifacts from Vučedol can be seen as assemblages or amalgamates of clay, plant, and animal materials. For example, it has been noted that some Vučedol vessels were reused and repaired by tying broken pottery fragments with stripes of leather or plant fibers (Miloglav 2018: 141). Beeswax was identified on vessels for serving food as it ensured their impermeability (ibid.: 139), while shellfish were found to be a component of the white incrustation (paste) used for decorating ceramic vessels (Miloglav 2016: 143). Burned animal bones, antlers, and sometimes even human bones were also identified as elements of the decorative paste (Kos et al. 2015; Miloglav et al. 2023). Components such as clay, water, and plant fibers had to be sourced, dug out and purified, or collected from the river, picked from meadows or fields, and humans interacted with each of them in very specific ways at different locations of their landscape, sometimes even long before any technological and transformational processes of making occurred. To obtain beeswax people had to engage with bees, find their nests (or keep bees), and successfully harvest their product. Shores and water of the Danube, certainly a crucial reference point in the landscape for people living at Vučedol in a number of ways, were also an important aquatic location for harvesting shells. Antlers could have been collected once shed or they could have been sourced from hunted deer, most probably from locations in the wider vicinity of the settlement (Jurišić 1988: 28). Similarly, various animal bones often used as raw materials could have been relatively easily obtained in or around the settlement on various occasions. However, in all these cases, specific properties of animal and plant material were probably more important than the once living animals or plants they originated from (see Conneller 2011: 50–75). In tying together broken ceramic pieces, plant and leather fibers were likely valued for their flexibility, durability, and resistance to

breakage, while the property of beeswax to melt at lower temperatures enabled it to easily enter the pores of vessels after firing, blocking them and ensuring their impermeability (Heron et al. 1994). Just by firing and soaking mollusk river shells, white paste could be obtained while a slightly longer process of firing, grinding, pulverizing, and then mixing antler or animal bones with water resulted in a paste of yellowish and light gray color (Miloglav et al. 2023).¹⁰

Different natural elements, animals, and plants thriving in the vicinity of the Vučedol settlement or perhaps in a slightly broader area of the landscape that Vučedol people interacted with, were inevitably woven into the technology of ceramic production. However, some of them were also represented in clay artifacts. For example, it has been suggested that elaborate decorations of white inlay and the red print on some finely made vessels, such as those in the recognizable shape of the Vučedol's *terina* vessel, marked a flat line of the horizon visible to the Vučedol people (Durman and Hutinec 2016: 40). Some motifs represented the sun, water landmarks visible on the horizon, or landscape features such as hills, whereas other motifs marked night sky star constellations (ibid; Durman 2017: 5–8). According to Durman, the lower part of the vessel remains undecorated because it is unknown what lies on the other side of the horizon, and thus this part represents darkness, death, or the unfamiliar (Durman and Hutinec 2016: 40).

Finally, it should also be noted that several animal species were represented in the form of clay figurines or zoomorphic vessels. Apart from representations of birds, Vučedol yielded a figurine of a deer with the head of the animal shaped as a vessel. This find was linked with the sacrificial role of the deer buried in front of the house of the copper caster (Milićević Bradač 2002). A number of small altars in the shape of horns, also known as the *horns of consecration*, as their origin has been linked with the shape of the bull's head (Hoti 1989, 1993) have been discovered in relation to houses and fireplaces (Schmidt 1945.; Hoti 1989). Although these artifacts have, so far, primarily been interpreted through a ritual framework, it should be highlighted that they represent animal species that lived and interacted with humans at Vučedol or its vicinity. Cervids were an important hunted game, while cattle made the basis of Vučedol's husbandry (Jurišić 1988: 44, 71). Their remains have been most numerous among the remains of domesticated animals, and this includes well preserved and complete cattle burials (Jurišić 1990; Pasarić 2012).

In this light, it can be suggested that humans at Vučedol interacted with deer and cattle, or more specifically with individuals of the species they hunted or raised and cared for throughout their lifetimes. Humans also handled animal postmortal remains in various ways and represented their bodies or parts of them in clay. This line of thought serves as an additional argument for the proposal that the famous gallinaceous bird from Vučedol, possibly a partridge, was included in the inventory of rather rare zoomorphic representations not simply as an abstract idea, a religious symbol, a symbol of metallurgical activity

¹⁰ For more details about reconstructing the technique of decorating with inlay and the experimental processes see Kudelić et al. 2025.

or an attribute of the god of blacksmiths, but because it represents an animal that humans came upon in the landscape and interacted with in ways described above. Since the living habits of partridges have been primarily tied to the ground, these birds could have reminded humans about their own connection with it. This connection was one that demanded reciprocity to be carefully maintained for a multitude of life-sustaining reasons. Finally, the bird vessel represents a vivid example of an assemblage of clay (used for shaping the body) and animal remains (most probably shells used to decorate its surface), which arose from a meshwork of practices through which humans engaged with the land, its elements, and creatures, whereby the making of the bird-shaped vessel becomes an act of active involvement and interaction with the world.

THE VESSEL OF EVERYTHING. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Eneolithic communities relayed on the soil for agricultural and husbandry practices as well as for sourcing various soil-related materials, with clay remaining vital for many life-sustaining activities, framing ways in which humans interacted with more than the human world they lived in. Interactions with different locations in the landscape, with living plants and animals, or with their material remains were inevitable, daily, and constant and they also became embedded in the process of ceramic production at Vučedol. In the rather small repertoire of animal representations of the Vučedol culture, the presence of birds stands out. Unlike the famous bird-shaped vessel, other representations that have been unearthed were fragmented and incomplete. However, due to their hollow insides, the possibility that they too were shaped as vessels was noted (Dimitrijević 1979: 295, Durman and Balen 2005: 31). If viewed symbolically, vessels can be seen as framing cycles of birth, death, and rebirth at both the physical and metaphysical levels (Belisle 2024) and in ways most relevant for a community. Yet, no matter what was placed inside them, the fact that it was protected and preserved in the shape of a bird indicates the importance of these animals for Vučedol communities that exceeds their symbolic significance, their value in subsistence and ritual, and can be viewed from a perspective that links birds, humans, and their shared landscapes. In this light, the paper considered the famous vessel in the shape of a bird not as a ritual object or a symbol, but as a representation that materializes human familiarity with the habitat, characteristics, and behaviors of the local avifauna. This contribution followed a suggestion by Durman (1991, 2006) that the bird represented by the Vučedol bird-shaped vessel was most likely a partridge and presented an exploratory imaginable scenario of interactions that might have taken place between humans and partridges at Vučedol.

This revealed that gray partridges, which still inhabit parts of Croatia where Vučedol is located, thrive in ecosystems very similar to those surrounding the Eneolithic settlement. Meetings of these birds and humans could have occurred daily, in all seasons and in different places in the landscape, since gray partridges change their locations across their

habitat over the course of a day. As shown above, the rhythms and daily activities of these birds and changes in their vocal expressions linked with their daily or annual cycles could have coincided with those of humans and/or contributed to how humans could have experienced certain places, facilitated their orientations within them, as well as developed a sense of daily or annual temporality. Although partridges could have mirrored humans in their sociality, group activities, and protective instincts, perhaps these birds stood out from other bird species inhabiting the vicinity of Vučedol (such as corvids or water birds) for different reasons. Their tendency to nest on the ground, easily blend in with their landscape, mostly walk or run, their devotion to a habitual territory where they engage in different activities during the day, their tendency for dust or sand bathing as well as their feeding habits which could have been beneficial to human agricultural activities, might have all been seen as qualities appealing to humans, reminding them of their own relationship with the ground.

The fact that the vessel representing a bird whose specific way of life has been closely tied to the land was placed in a pit in front of the house of the copper caster, a space where transformations of specific ground materials took place, could have been a performative action in setting “relations of reciprocity with the earth itself” as termed by Julian Thomas (cited in Gillespie 2021), one that returned the *bird of clay* back to the ground. The making of the bird-shaped vessel was a structural, chemical and alchemical process, requiring elements which otherwise sustain the very life on Earth – soil itself, water, and fire supported by air. Being a relatively easily transformable material, clay, nevertheless, framed powerful synergy, the shape of an animal, the materiality of the soil, and human engagement facilitating its form. Instead of viewing this *bird of clay* as a ritual paraphernalia, an artifact that marks the identity of powerful human individuals, blacksmiths, shamans and other religious elites or skilled and specialized potters, it has been suggested here that the vessel represents a bird that was important to humans as a living being with a very specific way of being in the world and as a being that humans observed, experienced, and interacted with and chose to represent in clay. Rather than expanding narratives about the Eneolithic as a period of great social and structural changes, this paper focused on possible relations that humans might have had with animals and their shared landscape. More specifically, it aimed to highlight the significance that small animals such as birds had in Eneolithic communities.

Although zooarchaeological data about avifauna in prehistoric periods of Croatia, especially the Eneolithic, is still scarce, which highlights an important area in need of further research, the available analyses, nevertheless, reveal the presence of partridges already in Paleolithic sites from Northwestern Croatia and the Adriatic region, as well as Neolithic sites from Coastal Croatia. Consistent with this data and the fact that partridges are considered native gamebirds of the pheasant family of gallinaceous birds inhabiting different areas of Croatia, it can be expected that future research will reveal more data about the distribution of these species throughout different prehistoric periods. It is worth noting that whereas Galliformes have been the most common European game fowl up until the

middle of the 20th century, today gray partridges can be seen as indicators of healthy farmland ecosystems, with their numbers declining rapidly throughout Europe (Kuijper et al. 2009).

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PTICE OD GLINE: RAZMATRANJE O JAREBICAMA U ENEOLITIČKIM KRAJOLICIMA

Na eneolitičkim nalazištima u Hrvatskoj pronađeno je nekoliko životinjskih figurica izrađenih od gline. Među njima je i posuda u obliku ptice s lokaliteta Vučedol, koja je stekla status vjerojatno najpoznatijeg arheološkog nalaza iz Hrvatske. Ovaj zoomorfni prikaz potaknuo je važna tumačenja koja su sagledala ritualne, simboličke i mitološke interpretativne aspekte tog nalaza. Oslanjajući se na nedavne arheološke doprinose koji usmjeravaju fokus na viševrsna društva i promišljaju različite načine na koje se ljudi odnose prema materijalnoj kulturi, rad će se nastojati odmaknuti se od strogo simboličkih tumačenja ovog predmeta. Razmatrajući potencijalna mjesta susreta ptica i ljudi, etološke karakteristike jarebica te glinu kao materijal od kojeg je izrađen taj zoomorfni predmet, ovaj rad predlaže da bi poznata posuda u obliku ptice s Vučedola mogla reprezentirati pticu s kojom su ljudi bili u svakodnevnoj interakciji u zajedničkim krajolicima i koja ih je podsjećala na vlastitu povezanost sa zemljom.

Ključne riječi: eneolitik, Vučedol, prikazi ptica, odnosi ljudi i životinja, zajednički krajolici, jarebice, glina