

NYU's Institute For The Study Of The Ancient World—

## Ritual & Memory: The Ancient Balkans And Beyond

NEW YORK CITY — The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, at New York University, presents “Ritual and Memory: The Ancient Balkans and Beyond,” which is on view through February 19.

In present-day Romania, archaeologists have discovered 21 stylized female figurines and 13 model chairs — none more than 3½ inches in height — inside a vessel at a site where a sanctuary likely stood almost 7,000 years ago. Although the ceramic women all share a similar shape, close inspection reveals variations in their faces and bodies, and scholars believe that each depicts a different character. Some have ventured that this

collection represents a “Council of Goddesses,” with the larger figurines symbolizing older divinities. Other researchers believe that these artifacts were used by the Neolithic community that created them to understand aspects of group identity in an earthly realm. Despite the multiple interpretations of this grouping, scholars are united in their conviction that the figurines served a potent ritual function.

Although no textual sources from this prehistoric culture have come down to us through time, the objects themselves, as well as the location of their discovery inside a vessel, tell us something about one of the first settled European farming

communities. Whether these ceramic women were intended to evoke supernatural figures or members of a living community, we know that ancient people attempted to steer their destinies or understand their place in the world through ritual objects. The figurines offer a glimpse into the cosmology of this civilization from ancient southeastern Europe, and hint at practices that mediated human-divine relations and provided structure to social connections.

Featuring loans from 11 countries, “Ritual and Memory” presents a range of artifacts — not only figurines but also eating and drinking vessels, jewelry, sculptures, swords, axes, altars and more — from a region that stretches from the Balkan Mountains to the Carpathian Basin. Beginning in the Neolithic period (about 8,000 years ago) and extending through the Iron Age (about 2,500 years ago), this show presents seldom-exhibited ritual objects used by men and women, warriors and wives, kings and farmers, in celebrations and in funerals. The exhibition invites visitors to consider beliefs, ritual practices, and community organization in different ancient cultures, and what such artifacts reveal

about the connections between various groups in the region in times of both war and peace.

“Ritual and Memory” also serves as a reminder that these present-day borders are new and based on modern history rather than ancient precedent. The fluidity of cultural practices and the interactions between different ancient groups reinforces the dynamism of ancient southeastern Europe rather than fixed homogeneous divisions. The participation of 18 lending institutions further signals a new era of international cultural diplomacy and collaboration: our unique historical moment presents an unprecedented opportunity to explore new perspectives on the ancient world across a broad sweep of space and time.

Although many museums in the United States have entire galleries filled with works from the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and the ancient Near and Far East, as well as from other cultures, artifacts from ancient southeastern Europe are unfamiliar and rarely exhibited. Yet these stunning works are a revelation: mother goddess-style figurines, weapons, miniature architectural models, elegant pottery, adornments in gold

and amber and more, all reveal great artistic and technological accomplishment and suggest the ritual practices of enigmatic cultures. Presenting more than 200 artifacts, the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World invites visitors to consider the world views, ceremonies and social order in these long-silent civilizations, and to explore a much broader view of the interconnectedness of ancient cultures than can be understood through conventional narratives of antiquity.

“Ritual and Memory: The Ancient Balkans and Beyond” is organized in partnership with the Field Museum’s First Kings of Europe project and has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy

demands wisdom. This exhibition at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World is made possible by support from Nellie and Robert Gipson and the Leon Levy Foundation. Additional funding provided by the Gilbert and Ildiko Butler Foundation and James H. Ottaway Jr. The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University is at 15 East 84th Street. For information, 212-992-7800 or [www.isaw.nyu.edu](http://www.isaw.nyu.edu).



Fibula, Vicinity of Gracac, Croatia, 500-300 BCE, bronze, 6½ inches long. Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.



Hoard with sword and axes, Hajdúsámson-Hegedús-hegy, Hungary, 1700-1600 BCE, bronze, Déri Museum, Debrecen, Hungary. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.



Stela representing funeral procession, Kamenica, Kosovo, 500-100 BCE, stone, 36½ inches high. National Museum of Kosovo, Prishtina, Kosovo. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.



Helmet, Peretu, Romania, 325-275 BCE, silver gilt, 10½ inches high. National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest, Romania. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.



Bird-shaped lamp, 1200-900 BCE, bronze, 4¾ inches high. Hungarian National Museum, Budapest, Hungary. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.



Architectural model, Cascioarele, Romania, 4600-3900 BCE, ceramic, 20 inches long. National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest, Romania. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.



Treasure with rhytons, bowl and pitcher, 360-300 BCE, silver gilt, Borovo, Bulgaria, rhyton with a protome of a galloping horse; rhyton with a protome of a sphinx; rhyton with a protome of a bull; bowl; pitcher. Rousse Regional Museum of History, Rousse, Bulgaria. Photo ©Field Museum, photographer Ádám Vágó.