

ANTHROPOMORPHOUS FIGURAL SCULPTURE IN THE PALEOLITHIC AND EARLY NEOLITHIC PERIOD

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One of the most characteristic features of the Neolithic in the Near East, Anatolia and South-East Europe is the production of anthropomorphic figural sculpture. Its function is still unknown to a large extent but the majority of scholars suggest a magic-religious meaning. Most of the figurines were read as representations of women. Some scholars interpret the female figurines as symbols of fertility (e.g. Müller-Karpe 1968), some as a constituent part of the “*révolution des symboles au néolithique*” (Cauvin 1994), others as representations of a “*Great Goddess*” (Gimbutas 1982, 1989; contra Röder/Hummel/Kunz 1995). These key-words clearly show the importance which many archaeologists attach to these small figurines for their reconstruction of religion.

Other archaeologists question a religious meaning at all. But so far a well established suggestion for a non-sacral function hasn't been made. Based on ethnographic studies several authors published catalogues of a supposed profane use (Talalay 1993). It may be interesting to know that sometimes somewhere small clay figurines were used as children's toys but it has no relevance to the interpretation of Neolithic figurines. The find-contexts give only limited information about their use (Gallis 1993; Bánffy 1990-1991).

For a understanding of the Neolithic figurines it is helpful to bring to mind the essential features of the calibrated radiocarbon dates a new picture of the figurines can be outlined. For a detailed discussion of a material I refer to a more extended study (Hansen, in preparation).

Anthropomorphic figurines (also of clay) were made since the Gravettian. One of the numerous prejudices about the so-called Venus-statuettes is that all these figurines are depictions of voluptuous women with big breasts, a distinct tummy and a pronounced representation of the pudenda. But actually only a small number of statuettes corresponds to this cliché. The famous “*Venus*” of Willendorf and the “*Venus*” of Moravany (fig. 1, 5) belong to this first group.

The majority of statuettes doesn't show a pronounced genital but they clearly depict women. To this second group the sculptures of Kostenki, Adevo, Khotylevo and Gagarino belong (see Abramova 1962; Gvozdover 1995).

A third group of statuettes of Mauern (fig. 1, 4) for example as an abbreviated representation of a woman. At a closer look we can equally detect a phallus with testicles. Ambiguous are as well some pendants from Dolni Vestonice (fig. 1, 2). Denis Vialou (1991) interprets a shape as male genitals. On the front side the artist engraved some lines below the penis to show the female triangle and the vulva. Therefore the testicles can likewise be

read as the opened legs of a women. This throws new light on the famous statuette from Lespugue (fig.1,1), which can also be seen as the shape of a phallic pendant. Through a thorough study of the Paleolithic statuettes at least three groups of representations can be distinguished. These different representational types probably have different meanings. Especially the figurines of the ambiguous group show a subtle play with female and male characteristics.

In contrast to earlier research it is now evident that a break between the production of Paleolithic and Neolithic figurines doesn't exist. The earliest Epipaleolithic statuettes from the Near East are roughly contemporary with the latest figurines from the European Paleolithic. This doesn't mean a genetic relationship between the European and the Near East figural art even though it can't be excluded. Remarkably the earliest sculpture in the Near East, the figurine of Ain Sakhri (fig.1,6), dated to the Natufian is also of ambiguous character (Boyd/Cook 1993). It depicts a squatted couple presumably during sexual intercourse. A closer look shows that it can also be read as a phallus. This tradition is continued by the better dated figurines (fig.1,7) from some settlements of the Khiamian (see Bar-Yosef 1980) which can equally understood as female statuettes and as phalluses.

Beside the formal aspects of the Paleolithic and the Natufian/Khiamian sculpture they share a common economic background. Since the Gravettien complex hunter-societies (see Testart 1982) with specialized hunting, partial sedentarism, food storage and social ranking lived in Eurasia. The same economic and social background of specialized hunter-societies existed in the Natufian of Palestine (Belfer Cohen 1991). Probably the statuettes were used to express different precarious social relations (gender relations or social ranks which are of increasing importance in complex hunter-societies). Considering the social basis of complex hunter-societies it is possible to understand the European and the Near Eastern figural sculpture. While for the small scale societies in Mesolithic Europe there wasn't a demand for figural sculpture, this demand continued to exist in the Neolithic villages of the Near East. So figural sculpture declined in Europe and raised in the Near East. The demand for symbols as a mean of differentiation, marking, counting of property or performance of kinship-relations seems to have increased in the large PPNB settlements like Ain Ghazal or Nevali Cori at the latest. The large number of geometric clay objects (tokens) which are interpreted as calculi may be indicative. They existed long before the production of pots as the only clay artifacts beside the figurines (e.g. Schmandt-Besserat 1990).

In the early Neolithic, the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNA), basically new type of representations emerged. In comparison to the Paleolithic statuettes which can't stand on their own and which hold their head bowed down, the Neolithic figurines constitute something revolutionary new. We find seated and standing figurines with shifted body axis e.g. from Mureybet (fig.1,8) and Netiv Hagdud (fig.1,9) which are turned upwards. In the Early Neolithic Period (PPNA and PPNB) of the fertile crescent most of the formal details of figurines were developed which were later part of the Neolithic in the Balkan. The adoption of anthropomorphous sculpture and of other enigmatic objects like house models, animal and human shaped vessels in South Eastern Europe occurs either as an integral part of

colonisation or as part of the diffusion of the Neolithic package. Regarding the statuettes apparently a complex process took place because some Neolithic groups don't know figural art, for example the Impresso-pottery in the Western Mediterranean or the Linear-Pottery in Central Europe. The reasons for the refusal of clay-figurines are probably different and have to be discussed elsewhere.

At this point I would like to draw the attention to the sculpture of Neolithic Cyprus. Despite of its geographical situation near the Levantine and the South Anatolian coast small clay figurines are absent on Cyprus. The only exception is an outstanding head from Khirokitia. Instead we find a number of stone figurines of ambiguous or clear phallic character (fig. 1,10-12). These ambiguous and phallic sculptures were produced in the Pre-Pottery-Neolithic (Khirokitia, fig. 1,11) and in the Pottery-Neolithic as well (Sotira-culture, e.g. Sotira fig. 1,12). It is very difficult to find contemporary analogies for this sculpture. Earlier than the Cypriote figurines are the Khiamian-Figurines mentioned above. It seems clear that the sculpture of Cyprus ties up to this pre-agricultural tradition of figurines-shapes. Roughly contemporary is a stone-phallus from Tepe Guran in the Zagros-mountains (fig. 1,13). Beside the figurines there are some other fundamental differences between Cyprus and the mainland. Round houses on Cyprus, rectangular houses on the mainland, fallow deer on Cyprus and cattle on the mainland as domestic animals beside sheep and goat. Avraham Ronen (1995) recently suggested in a seminal essay that the reason for this specific development on Cyprus might be the religious self-isolation or in a positive formulation: the search for a better way of life.

Contrary to preconceived ideas (Great Goddess, childrens' playground) an understanding of the statuettes can only be reached through an approach which put the figurines in their social context. Such an approach includes on the one hand the formal order to detect interregional and diachronic similarities and on the other hand an analysis of find contexts. For the study of the figurines I suggest three levels of meaning which have to be examined.

In the first place it can be argued that the production and use of the small clay-figurines was an essential part of religious beliefs (which we cannot reconstruct). Secondly sculpture can be viewed as a functional aspect which reaches beyond the subsystem religion. It can be presumed that sculpture expresses social relations on an intra-site level as well as on an inter-site level. This could explain the differences in adopting figurines in the European Neolithic. A third approach would study the social complexity of groups producing sculpture and thereby taking into account the situation which we have identified in the Paleolithic and Early Neolithic. For example it can be seen in the Near East and in South-Eastern Europe that the distinct and organised use of sculpture is generally related to permanent settlements. These three levels complement one another.

In this paper I could only briefly point out the transitional phenomenon of the production of statuettes in two different economic contexts (hunter/gatherers and agriculturists) in order to shed new light on the meaning of the Neolithic figurines and to provoke new questions.

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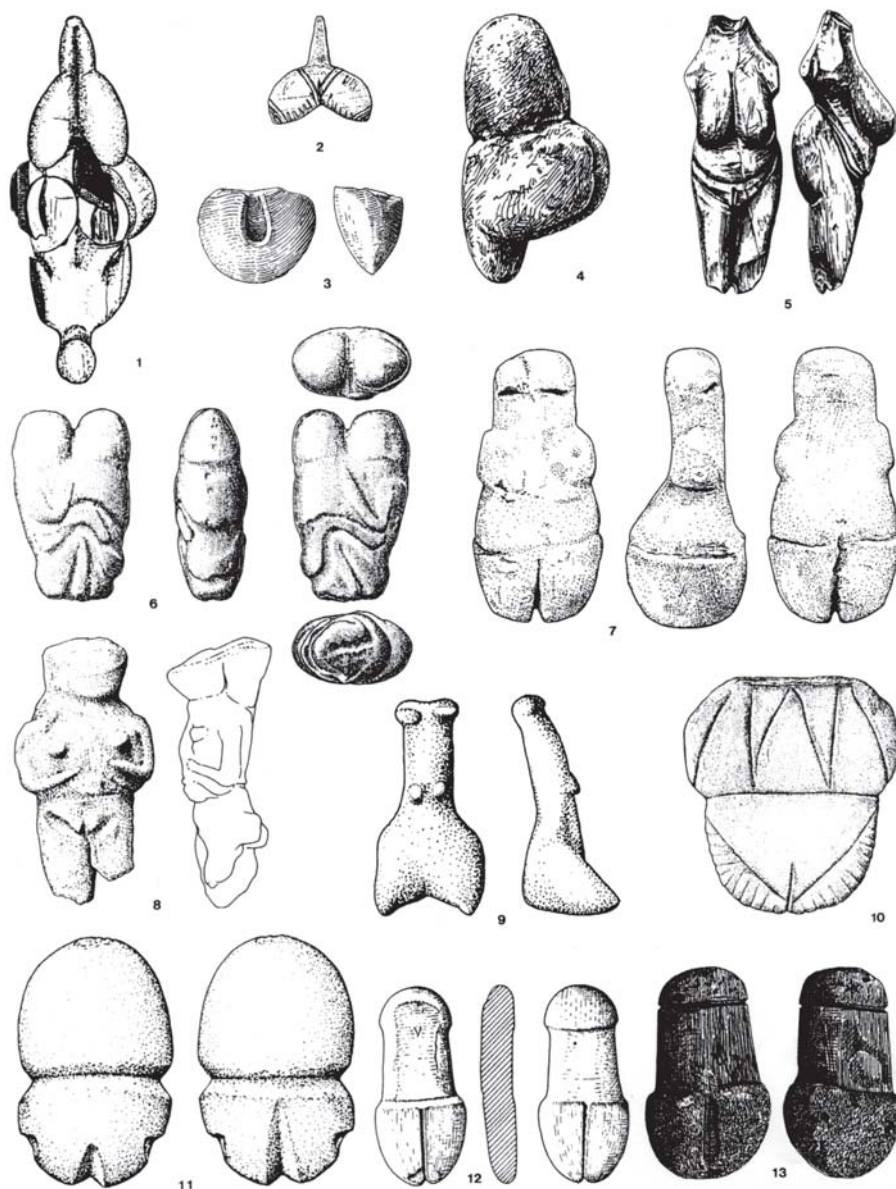


Fig. 1 1-Lespugue 2-Dolní Vestonice 3-Kostenki 4-Mauern 5-Moravany nad Váhom 6-Ain Sakhri 7-Salibiya IX 8-Mureybet III 9-Netiv Hagdud 10-Ayios Thomas 11-Khirokitia 12-Sotira 13-Tepe Guran (after Duhard 1991 (1), Müller-Beck/Albrecht 1994 (2), Abramova 1962 (3), Zotz 1955 (4), Zotz 1968 (5), Boyd/Cook 1993 (6), Bar Yosef 1980 (7), Cauvin 1994 (8-9), Karageorghis 1992 (10), LeBrun et al. 1989 (11), Dikaios 1961 (12), Meldgaard/Mortensen/Thrane 1964 (13); drawings (7.10) A. Kuczminski). Various scales.