

Introduction

We are in an unsatisfactory position in our understanding of Neolithic figurines. The existing explanations and engagements with these objects, my own previous work included, are misguided. We need a new vision of Neolithic figurines; indeed a new way of looking at objects such as figurines. This new way intends to challenge us over how we see figurines.

Previous approaches to figurines

Why do we need a new vision of Neolithic figurines? A detailed assessment of previous research on figurines from the Balkan Neolithic would require a book of its own. Even a descriptive review of the appearance of figurines in local and international publications exceeds both the scope and purposes of this paper: to highlight the challenges that face figurine research and to suggest how work can move forward. The trend in present research is historiographic: to study not the figurines themselves but to examine the studies of figurines, the schools of interpretation and proposed interpretations. Important texts on figurine historiography include Richard Lesure's new article (Lesure in press), two papers by Meg Conkey and Ruth Tringham (Conkey and Tringham (1995); Tringham and Conkey (1999)) and a collection of shorter comments in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal's* 1996 Viewpoint section entitled "Can we interpret figurines" (Hamilton 1996; Bailey 1996; Ucko 1996; Haaland and Haaland 1996; Joyce 1996). Many analyses concentrate on Goddess interpretations given life by Marija Gimbutas¹ (Ucko 1962, 1968; Fleming 1969; Haaland and Haaland 1995; Meskell 1995). Some investigate the gendering of figurine studies, highlighting the damage that Mother Goddessism has done, paradoxically, to a feminist archaeology.²

Beyond historiographies, the majority of figurine scholarship appears in excavation reports and interpretive essays. Of these, many propose specific meanings or functions for figurines. In addition to the Mother Goddess interpretations, the common references are to ritual, religion and spiritual life. Most propose anecdotal functions: figurines as dolls, toys, magical items, afterlife accessories, sexual aids, fertility figures, effigies, talismans, ritual figures, concubines, slaves, puberty models, training mechanisms, votive and healing objects, parts of initiation ceremonies, contracts, territory markers, identity markers (Meskell 1999).

Few attributions of function offer substantial argument to support their interpretations. Many avoid explicit discussion of the assumptions upon which preferred inter-

pretations rest. The results are evocative, (why else the success and continuity of Mother Goddessism?) but they are also simplistic. They offer anecdote in the place of explanation. They avoid the transparency of approach required of a rigorous, reflective method or the theoretical reasoning that underpins modern archaeology. Worse still this unreflective approach is exclusive; authors provide complete and seamless interpretations. Readers are not given the opportunity to trace the ways that the data are joined with particular interpretations. Because of this, anecdotal interpretation eliminate the potential for criticism or for the development of alternative meanings for particular figurines. Everything is presented as if it were simple and clear. There is neither debate nor even any reason to stimulate debate. The worst news is that the majority of primary publications of figurines follow the anecdotal approach. Why is this the case? What are the alternatives?

With very few exceptions, current and previous approaches are unsatisfying because they ask the wrong questions: questions about typology and chronology (what is the difference between figurines of Hamangia Type A and Hamangia Type B?); questions about the gender balance of societies and the search for matriarchies and patriarchies (was the Vinča culture dominated by men or women?); questions about the rosters of pantheons (was the Bird-Goddess or the Bull Consort present?). These are important questions but they are the wrong ones to ask if we seek the meaning of anthropomorphic figurines. Why are they the wrong questions? Because these questions betray a radical misconception or ignorance of the complexities and dynamics of material culture and, more critically, of visual culture. In doing so they distance themselves from a real understanding of figurine meaning.

Even in studies where archaeologists acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of life and of visual culture³, they fail to move beyond a preliminary, superficial level of understanding. Indeed many figurines probably did function as images of divinities or worshipped ancestors. These suggestions for figurine function, however, are not assessable. There exist no mechanisms for evaluating the accuracy of these anecdotal suggestions. Evaluation is not simply a matter of developing a more complex set of hypotheses or applying a more rigorous statistical analysis, or even of acquiring better contextual information during excavation, of sieving and of 100% sampling. In the end, our inability to assess these propositions is not important; even if you and I could prove (or even agree) that a particular figurine represents a goddess or an ancestor, both the proof and the equation are irrelevant. To determine what is represented by a figurine is not of primary importance. Is it of interest? Yes. But, is it fundamental to a fuller understanding of prehistoric figurines? No.

New questions

We must ask more committed questions about objects such as figurines. By asking questions about the character of objects and about representational objects in particular. It is more important to understand the ways in which miniature

anthropomorphic representations succeeded in being the political tools, goddess images, votive offerings or ancestor portraits that each figurine analyst' has suggested. How and why could figurines play the roles that they did in domestic negotiations of identity, in the manifestation of the otherworldly, in the presencing of the deceased? Why weren't these roles filled by other types of material culture? Why not by oral culture? Why not by other media of representation or other objects? Why not by objects made by different raw materials? What are the powers and consequences of representation in general and representation of the human body in particular? What is the significance of human representations made in miniature? What is the significance of the fact that these Neolithic anthropomorphs are modeled in three-dimensions?

How shall we try to answer these questions?

Let us begin by thinking in terms of visual events, a term familiar to those engaged in the study of visual culture.⁴ At its core, visual culture is about the interaction between viewer and the viewed, the relationship between the person looking (i.e., the spectator) and the thing that that person is looking at. This interaction is a visual event. From this simple idea, new challenges arise for us in our quest to better understand Neolithic figurines. We need to isolate and to understand four things: 1) the viewer, 2) the viewed 3) the conditions of the interaction of the viewer and the viewed; and 4) the significance of that interaction in its social and political contexts.

For example, we must ask what effects do the particular physical characteristics of a figurine have on the spectator? These are questions about the medium, about the condition of a figurine and about the consequences of these conditions. In this sense you and I, together, need to focus on understanding how people respond to different visual media.

How shall we do this? We can begin by redefining the objects we call figurines. In this sense, a Neolithic figurine consists of three fundamental conditions. A figurine is a miniature: it is a small thing, it is a reduction in scale. Second, a figurine is anthropomorphic; thus we are engaging objects that represent of the human form. Third, a figurine is a three-dimensional object; it is thus a small human representation that is modeled in the round. On their own, each of these conditions has important consequences for the way that figurines are, for the ways that we understand them, indeed for the ways in which they worked in southeastern Europe during the Neolithic. Taken together these conditions evoke strong feelings in you and I when we look at or, importantly, hold a figurine.

Focus with me on one of these fundamental conditions, the three-dimensionality of a figurine. Let us examine what is significant about these objects' three-dimensionality. An examination of three-dimensionality will lead us, strangely perhaps, to recognize that, first, figurines confront the spectator with a paradox, second, that this paradox is irresolvable, and third, and perhaps most bizarrely, that within the irresolvability of the paradox resides one of the fundamentals of a better understanding of Neolithic figurines.

What happens when one engages a 3D object?

Three-dimensionality affects the spectator in ways that distinguish it from other media. Engagement with a three-dimensional object demands a commitment of bodily movement. It engages the body of the spectator, moving her, attracting him, repelling them, repositioning her. This is true whether the object is representational, as is a figurine, or whether it is something else, as are many of the three-dimensional objects that engage us in everyday life (e.g., cars, books, sculpture, buildings). Three-dimensional objects invite the spectator (compel her even) into fuller, deeper, proxemic relationships. A three-dimensional object provokes the spectator to build up, to assemble, to collect, an understanding of the thing being viewed. The understanding that emerges is complex, multi-part and not fixed or dictated by the maker or artist. Three-dimensional objects seduce the spectator to find out, to see, to walk-around-the-back-and-see-for-themselves what is behind, to see what is below, what is above.

Versus the two-dimensional

When you and I engage a three-dimensional representation that one can hold in the hand such as a figurine or when one encounters a more recent object such as Auguste Rodin's *Le Penseur* which we walk around, we establish a radically different relationship with the thing that we are looking at than when we engage a two-dimensional representation, even if it is a photograph or a drawing of that same figurine or marble sculpture. Two-dimensional representation is a prison for the spectator. Painters, photographers, cartographers dictate the type of relationship that the spectator can have with the object viewed; they pre-determine and fix the terms, conditions and consequences of the visual event. In two-dimensional representation, the spectator only ever has one position from which to see the image. Granted, the spectator may move around and change her position, she may peer close-up or back away, but, so long as she stays in front of the image, the perspective one has of the painting, drawing or photograph remains the same. The spectator is in perspectival prison.⁵

A three-dimensional object is fundamentally different: it liberates the spectator. The spectator is free to move around the three-dimensional object (if the object is larger) or to move the object itself, in one's hand for example, if it is small. The view from the 'rear' is very different then the one from the 'front'. Equally different are the views available from every different, almost infinite, number of positions a spectator can occupy while moving around an object. In this sense then, three-dimensional representation allows a complete and full comprehension of the object. As a medium, it gives spectators the highest degree of authority to change positions and viewpoint; every side can be seen, nothing is left to the imagination, nothing is hidden or left out.

Three-dimensionality therefore provides a freedom from the control and pre-determination deployed by the make of two-dimensional images. However, there are troubling dynamics at work within the freer, more open and less authoritarian relationship between the spectator and the three-dimensional object. The most important of these is the irresolvable paradox of-comprehension.

The paradox of comprehension

Although the three-dimensional medium frees the spectator, who can, for example move around a Rodin sculpture or turn over in her hand a Neolithic figurine, the spectator can never hold the entire view at any one time. She cannot be both in front and behind Rodin's *Penseur*, for example, nor can she be at both sides simultaneously. In this sense, three-dimensional objects escape complete comprehension. They can never be viewed in their entirety at any one time. In this sense, and unlike the engagement with two-dimensional representations, the visual event of engaging the three-dimensional object is temporally extended. The spectator needs time in which to attempt her understanding of a three-dimensional object. During the extended time of trying to collect a complete visual understanding of the sculpture or the figurine, the spectator accumulates numerous different views and numerous different perspectives on the object. None of these views or perspectives is exactly the same as the next one; each slightly contradicts the others. From these contradictions emerges a paradox of comprehension for the spectator: a three-dimensional object is both open to understanding (because of the freedom of perspective offered to the viewer) as well as closed to a complete understanding (because of the multiple, contradictory and competing perspectives available). From this paradox of comprehension comes the evocative, attractive power of figurines.

The power produced by the paradox of the three-dimensional, and the unbalance and unease that accompany it can be seen in many manifestations from modern and historic life. It is the power that draws the public to the dioramas of past worlds that one finds in museum galleries. It is the power that draws 2 million visitors a year to *Madam Tussauds* in London, the tourist attraction that displays life-size, three-dimensional wax mannequins of famous (and infamous) individuals. It is the power that the Hollywood studios turned to in the 1950s when the first television broadcasts threatened their hold on visual entertainment; they invested in the production of "3D movies" such as the *Creature of the Black Lagoon*. It is the power that attracted early photographic viewers in the 1840s and 1850s to stereoscopic views of far away places such as the pyramids at Giza.

The power of the three-dimensional rests within these more modern examples, but also in the examples of sculpture and in the spectator's engagement with a Neolithic figurine. It is a power that takes people outside of their own worlds into other places, both real and make-believe. These are the places that I visit when I hold a figurine from our excavations in Romania. There are the places that Neolithic women, children and men visited when they picked up this figurine, looked at it, turned it over in their

hands, held it and put it back down again. The power of the three-dimensional comes from the sub-conscious paradox that affects the spectator who is confronted with both a whole-ness of vision and the incomplete-ness of multiple perspectives.

For us the most important condition of the paradox of three-dimensional engagement is that it cannot be resolved. The subconscious fluctuation between complete and incomplete comprehension of an object that the spectator experiences unbalances her perception and understanding of that object. Such an instability of the spectator's engagement with the figurine or the sculpture means that the object is always active and in the process of being understood; the spectator is never completely at ease with it. The energy that gives anthropomorphic figurines the power to hold our attention in the same way that they held the attention of Neolithic people comes from the unease, the instability, the unbalance, and the inherent paradox of the three-dimensional.

Conclusions

When we take the perspective of visual culture, we ask new and radically transformed questions about figurines. We shift from asking questions about what these objects are (is it a man, a woman, a goddess?) to questions about how these objects do what they do and why they are successful in doing what they do? What makes them work? Why are these objects made in these media when others are available? In terms of their three-dimensionality, figurines do the things that they do (and did the things that they did in the Neolithic) because they unbalance the spectator and make complete comprehension appear possible when it is not.

But what does it mean to think in these ways about a prehistoric object such as a figurine? How does it help us towards a better understanding of them? What is the benefit of thinking about figurines in terms of their material conditions of which three-dimensionality is but one example? First, in doing so we open the debate to a new and larger range of analytical dynamics and variables. My goal in this paper, however, is not to suggest that by walking around a figurine or turning it over in your hand we will understand it better. Rather the goal is to suggest that, when thought of anew in terms of the spectator and her positioning(s), our understanding of figurines opens up to include a better understanding of how these objects worked in people's lives, the reactions that they evoked and how people perceived them. This is their real meaning.

In this paper, I have suggested that the key to understanding representational objects such as Neolithic figurines rests in a new approach which focuses on the interaction between the spectator and the object being looked at. I am interested in placing the spectator at the core of the investigation of images and representational material culture. I am excited about thinking about the different senses, dynamics, and roles that a spectator can possess, about the events and conditions that affect the position and power of the spectator.

I have also suggested in this paper that, as archaeologists, we will benefit from focusing on the visual event, that we will benefit from examining the ways that people engage an image or element of material culture. Similarly we will refine our knowledge of the past by

investigating images in terms of their physical characteristics and the repercussions that these characteristics have on the spectator and on how the spectator understands and reacts to images. Important issues within these investigations are the medium, size, fixidity and permanence of representational objects.

The prospects are exciting not only for the study of the Neolithic. The precision of our understanding of human behaviour would be refined if we made similar examinations of other categories of visual culture from the Neolithic or from other prehistoric and historic periods: investigations of sculpture from the classical period, of imagery on coins and medals, on Medieval wall paintings and frescoes, *inter alia*. I hope that in addition to provoking our discussion over Neolithic figurines, this paper has suggested a way of refining our understandings of these other visual phenomena.

Endnotes

¹ The key Gimbutas texts are *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991).

² Tringham and Conkey have argued convincingly that Mother Goddess interpretations of figurines (both Palaeolithic and Neolithic) reinforce modern sexist notions: the male-female sex and gender bi-polarity, the primary association of the female with reproduction and fertility, the conflation of anatomical sex with gender, the assumption that these images are unambiguously about female-ness or a limited nature (Tringham and Conkey 1999: 26). Meskell has criticized Mother Goddessism for the essentialism which allows it to ignore the large variety in figurine form and decoration (1995; 1999). More positive elements of the Gimbutas approach are less frequently noted. Haaland and Haaland argue that the questions that Gimbutas asked were of merit for their time, and are of note today, because they were an alternative to the sterile positivism of the 1970s and 1980s with its aim for absolute, quantifiable truths (Haaland and Haaland 1995: 120). The Haaland's also argue that Gimbutas' objective has been misunderstood, that her goal was to project a picture of prehistoric society as a counterpoint to disagreeable tendencies in modern society, that she intended her reconstructions to stimulate us to think about modern concerns of sexism, violence and inequality (Haaland and Haaland 1995: 116-7). See also reviews by Talalay (1994) and Tringham (1993).

³ Good examples can be found in the following studies: Tringham and Conkey (1999); Biehl (1996); Pavolovic (1990); Marcus (1998); Morris and Peatfield (2002); Conroy (1993); Langdon (1999); Haaland and Haaland (1995); McDermott (1996).

⁴ Excellent introductions to the study of visual culture can be found in Evans and Hall (1999) and Mirzoeff (1998, 1999).

⁵ There are of course numerous attempts in modern art to break away from this tyranny of the imager. Cubism and Surrealism are two examples: in both, artists fooled around with the number and orientation of the perspective and the point of view offered to the spectator. In doing so they created unbalancing images, images that though powerful on their own, in truth only worked when seen in relation to the traditional single perspective of two-dimensional representation.

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