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## UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: AN INTIMATE APPROACH TO THE GUMELNITA FIGURINES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this paper I focus on the quality of the material culture to engage us on a very personal and intimate level; on the imprint of the individual actors onto the objects, as opposed to the collective work involved in the formation and use of public space, monuments and representations. By discussing the capacity of miniature anthropomorphic figurines to both enter in the intimate surrounding, and to foster intimacy, I suggest that because they were immersed in the routine of everyday life, constantly exposed to the gaze and/or touch of the inhabitants of the dwellings, it is fruitful to look at them as a choice media of social negotiation.

**Keywords:** Gumelnita, figurines, anthropomorphic.

In recent years, more and more attention is drawn to the question of whether or not, and to what extent, archaeology is capable of working at the level of the person. From reconstructing the path of human kind, and writing the history of civilizations long dead, through investigating how economy / age / gender / occupation / rank / etc. affected categories of people, the perspective has shifted, or has begun to shift, to a finer-grained inquiry into households, or even individuals (see Fowler 2004: 4-5 for a brief review).

Of course, physical anthropology has long been able to answer questions of diet, health, occupation and death; recently developed analyses of coprolites, house middens, and chemical residue analyses reconstruct recipes; and in some cases, exhaustive lists of the inventory a person has had in her/his possession or available for use can be obtained. But daily life is more than food and labor. It involves encounters with family, friends, people of the settlement and foreigners; but also with supernatural beings, memories and dreams, with custom and law; requires dealing with nature. Emotions, inspirations, constraints, conflicts of various magnitudes are inseparable part of life too. Archaeology informed by phenomenology and material culture studies promises exciting new venues for engaging with exactly those aspects of prehistoric life, previously considered inaccessible.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in 2004 for a graduate course on theory in Archaeology led by prof. N. Russell at Cornell University. Many important studies on both Balkan figurines, and archaeology and materiality, have been published, or have come to my attention since, which are not reflected in this version.

K. Lesick, in a review of recent theoretical work on material culture stresses the importance of interaction between the humanity and the material forms:

*“...it is through experience with material forms that humans create knowledge, identity, and indeed reality. Material culture acts as a template to structure thoughts; it is the physical which grounds the abstract ...Rather than being a passive carrier of symbolic knowledge, the material form is active through cognitive process, and structures the nature of human experience... In this sense we are engendered by the objects around us; they pattern our experience of the world, while patterning how others experience us.*

*(Lesick 1997: 37-8)*

Although Lesick's emphasis on the material basis of human life might be met with resentment by some, in reality it is reflected in many of basic principles that guide the practice of archaeology around the world. For example, settlement layout and house plan are counted among the important criteria for identification of a culture, because they reflect its cosmogony, account for labor specialization and social stratification (Renfrew and Bahn 2004: 178-9). More recently, archaeology of landscape has made extensive use of classifications such as near and far, culture and nature, female and male, sacred and profane, and discusses how they play into our notion of space in general (Ingold 2000; Lane 2000; Richards 2000; Tringham 2000; Tringham 1991). Psychological and physical effects of space and light modification have also been used to put forward interpretations of the naturalized ideologies in megalithic tombs or cave sanctuaries. Studies on the production and decoration of “female goods” have also been used by feminist archaeologists as a key to understanding the role of women in what are traditionally perceived as male-centered societies. Revisions of pottery distribution, or of hoards and sets of grave goods are yet another example of how anthropology has enriched our understanding of the importance of material culture as a vehicle and record of social life (Gero 2000; Hendon 1997; Chapman 2000).

Unfortunately, this level of engagement with the materiality or phenomenology hasn't yet gained momentum in figurine studies. Many authors still occupy themselves with issues of why are figurines predominantly female; of whether or not they were **representations** of supernatural beings, what indications do they give us for the organization of the cult; what power relations regulated their production, etc. (Kokkinidou, D. and M. Nikolaidou, 1997: 108; Talalay, 1993: 37-44). Yet figurines are more than anthropomorphic representations. They are also part of the prehistoric households: found in the dwellings, or together with household garbage. Only rarely do we come across circumstances supporting special, set apart use (see Kokkinidou, D. and M. Nikolaidou, 1997: 90-91 for a list of typical loci of discovery of the Aegean figurines; for the Balkan Peninsula, see Todorova, H. 1986, 2003; Tasic, N.N. and N. Tasic, 2003). Considered within the framework of materiality, the participation of figurines in the household expands their significance for the interpretation of archaeological cultures.

In this paper I focus on the quality of the material culture to engage us on a very personal and intimate level; on the imprint of the individual actors onto the objects, as opposed to the collective work involved in the formation and use of public space, monuments and representations. This is intended as a tool for increasing the visibility of the micro-level, the level of the individual. Applied to the analysis of the figurines as products of the intimate relations between people and between people and the material and the idealistic world, it increases our ability to interpret the prehistoric Gumelnita societies.

Chalcolithic figurines of the Balkan Karanovo VI civilization, I believe, give archaeology a great opportunity to access individuals of the past. It has more than once been suggested, that the experiences, and the anxieties of the prehistoric people influenced Neo/Chalcolithic artists (Chapman 1991, Tringham 1991, Todorova, 1986; Kokkinidou, D. and M. Nikolaidou 1997: 93). Supporters of this widely accepted view still, though, restrict themselves to the implications for the analyses of wider social phenomena, neglecting importance of figurines into the lives of the individuals as self-conscious agents.

For example, researchers have noted an apparent differentiation of Chalcolithic human representations, with the majority of the figurines lacking or having very summary facial features, while, on the other hand, a good number of expressive, “realistic portraits”, busts or heads, have also come to light. Whatever their conclusions,<sup>2</sup> archaeologists seem to agree on one – that “persons” “deserved” a “special attention” (Kokkinidou, D. and M. Nikolaidou 1997: 97; Todorova, 1986; Gimbutas 1982; Raduncheva 1976), i.e., that the “portraits” are an acknowledgement of the power/status of an individual by the society, commissioned and sanctioned by the society. Unfortunately, I am not familiar with a study that supplements grand-analyses of the social role of the “portraits” v/s the “abstractions” with observations on the loci of their finding and the associated artifact assemblage, or on the points of similarity or divergence between the respective archaeological complexes. The research focus is still on the capacity of the society to organize itself in a more-hierarchical manner, than on the role of the individuals that pushed the society on that path, or on struggle between the conflicting ideologies and/or individuals.

Arguments on their socially ascribed function aside, certain features make figurines excellent informants about individual attitudes and decisions. Firstly, because they are fairly common throughout a large area and a long span of time, one can safely assume they were traditional items. Also, their number allows for testing of the interpretations proposed. Secondly, according to filed reports, they are usually found in houses; with house refuse in midden piles or trash pits; or, in “special” buildings or sites. Thus a variety of contexts of the interface between individual and society are open to investigation. Thirdly, they also come in a variety of materials, shapes and sizes, which in itself presupposes differential access to materials, differential statements, differential association of meanings,

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<sup>2</sup> And that would usually be concerned with an emerging or existing social stratification and complexity.

and options for different use. And last (but not least), they are shaped after the human body – an object utterly familiar, but also constantly re-made by the interaction between the self and the social (Thomas 1991; Yates 1993).

One generally neglected, or even downplayed aspect of the figurines makes them especially attractive for a student of materiality. I address here to their ubiquity in the archaeological record, and by extension, the certainty that the figurines have been part of the immediate surroundings for prehistoric people. This, in combination with the scale in which they are rendered, makes them part of the intimate world.

For the purposes of this paper, the following meanings of intimacy will be important:

1. Intimacy is a **private**, very **personal relation**;
2. To be intimate one has to be **involved** in the relationship.
3. One feels **comfortable** in intimate spaces/relations.
4. Often it is synonymous with **friendship (unthreatening, safe, one you can expect support from)**.
5. Intimate relations also involve **trust**, total **transparency**, and **lack of secrets**.
6. Intimacy also stands for possession of **deep**, very **detailed knowledge**, **which is result of experience**, or for **familiarity**;
7. Intimate relationships are first hand, **unmediated**. Require **common language** and **willingness for understanding**.
8. In an intimate relation, **what one means need not explicitly be put into words**.
9. The spatial aspect of intimate relations is that it draws the involved in a very **close proximity**.
10. Of course, intimacy is also a euphemism for **sex**.

How are figurines intimate? First of all, according to excavation logs, the figurines are most commonly found in the main room of the houses, near the oven/fireplace, and near the food storage and processing vessels. No special compartments or features are mentioned, that could have held them. This is valid for excavations of both orderly emptied and of fired houses (Raduncheva 1976; Todorova 1986; Macanova 1992; T. Kanceva 1992). Thus, figurines should have been **in plain view** on a daily basis for anyone allowed in the house, and near the fire. Since they haven't been set apart from the rest of the household equipment, one should have been able to, or even forced **to touch** them while rearranging the working space for his/her routine tasks. Thus, on a daily basis, **personal contact** (through gaze or touch) is granted. Because of the size of the figurines, most probably it was just a single person handling them at any given time; hence the **private** aspect of the relation is also granted.

From habitation levels, destroyed by a single event/accident, usually every building yields a statuette or more. Thus, anthropomorphic representations were considered part of every household's kit, and since conscious effort is necessary to

add those to the kit, personal **involvement** with whatever the figurines used to stand for is also checked.

They are not set apart, but are positioned amongst the pottery, which suggests that contact with them was not polluting or dangerous, that one felt **comfortably** in their presence. Whether or not those enhanced good fortune/fertility, etc., it is certain they were **safe** to be with.

Part of the household, so to say of its “heart”, and accessible, the **knowledge** (explicitly thought, or acquired by observation and inference) of the symbolism involved and the rules for proper handling should have been available to anyone interested / present. Messages, carried by objects so immersed in the house as we find figurines to have been, are usually **read intuitively**, and often uncritically. They are yet another medium available for **tacit communication** between those literate in their language, and for expressing positions.

Sacred objects or not, figurines have been entirely embraced by the everyday routine. If ritual, or magic, paraphernalia, the context of their finding suggests that the rites in which they were involved were more likely to be performed mechanically than consciously set apart from “profane” life. In fact, no real line can be drawn between sacred and profane with regard to the anthropomorphic figurines. This goes in line with ethnographic reports of figurines used as sacred objects in specific rituals, but as children’s toys outside the ritual (after Talalay 1993: 40-44).

Additional support for this argument can be drawn from observations on the relative abundance of figurine finds in levels deposited as a result of a violent accident, as opposed to the numbers in settlements abandoned in more orderly fashion. One would expect that should a threat occur, one would save the most valued and sacred things first, and it seems that anthropomorphic figurines did not fall into either of these categories. Human victims buried by the debris are extremely rare (Todorova, 2003), which means that either all the fires have occurred in an empty house (accident, or planned event), or that people have had a chance to escape and, probably take few valuables with them. Figurines, especially the small ones, are left behind. In the orderly evacuated sites, figurines, along with every other type of household belongings are a scarce find. Does this mean that those statuettes “belonged” with the food, i.e. with the expendable, and were not central for the integrity of the household?

Coming back to our list of figurine intimate nature: people, using the figurines, were **bound** together not only by their shared knowledge of what the objects meant, but also **physically**. They were grouped under the same roof, for starters. On the other hand, if more than one person were to use them simultaneously, due to the size, they would have been forced to come in close proximity, giving a visible sign of their unity to the world. If use were to be sequential, with the figurines being handed down a line, a possibility for creating a special bond between the handing and the handed to person emerges, comparable to the one born in exchange of tokens or gifts.

And finally, those making, and those using the figurines, through this had an immediate everyday encounter with the “intimate parts” of the human body. To the modern mind, there is a kind of automatic connection between ancient, primitive, and nude. Modern people of simpler societies, by coincidence, seem to be spending their time half-naked, exposing most of their bodies to the sun, the air, and the gaze of other people (excluding the Eskimo, of course). Classical Greek art abounds in examples of nude warriors, workers, feasting parties, etc. Yet the temperate zone is no place for prolonged nudity, and therefore its preponderance in Chalcolithic anthropomorphic sculpture needs to be explained. To be more precise, the majority of the figurines are not exactly nude. Many of them bear signs of shoes, cloths, and jewelry. But while curves of the body didn't seem to cause much difficulties to the producers of the figurines, breasts are almost always added to the body, thus drawing our attention to them not with their size, but because of the technicalities. Accentuation of the penis, the breasts, the hips and the pubic triangle, or the so-called “iconography of sexuality”(Kokkinidou, D. and M. Nikolaidou 1997:93) has been widely interpreted as “an attempt of Neolithic people to understand and interfere symbolically in the phenomenon of fertility” (ibid.), or as an attempt to gain control over the female (but note – this aspect of ‘control over’ is never considered in connection with the itiphallic imagery) sexuality in terms of reproductive power or as a means of sexual gratification, or as the use of the figurines as educational materials in initiation rites. What strikes me as peculiar in the Chalcolithic treatment of human body, and especially with the female body, is that there is an inversion of “visibility”. Heads, hands, and legs are usually only schematically marked. Belly buttons, pubic triangle with the sexual organs, breasts, the small pits at the lower back, the knees and ankles are the areas that attracted most attention. It seems as if through figurines the bodily parts (not restricted to parts engaged in procreation only) usually covered by climate-appropriate clothing have been exposed. If figurines were revealing what's hidden, they shared with those looking at them a secret. I am not interested whether those parts were taboo or not, whether they aroused desire or not, for the mere fact that those were hidden satisfies my argument. This **shared secret** is another tie that binds humans to their figurines and all humans using the figurines too. Although this aspect of intimacy can further be explored, for the purpose of this paper I shall close this question and concentrate on the implications of the so established relation of intimacy between Chalcolithic people and figurines.

As I've already pointed out in the beginning, our immediate environment, the objects that constantly accompany us in life, are just as important for conveying social values as are the structured landscape, architecture and monuments. But they have the added bonus of being much more easily manipulated by individual actors. They provide means for expressing unorthodox aspirations and preferences. I have shown how figurines fit into the definition of being intimate to the Karanovo VI people. I have also pointed out the various kinds of connections figurines, by their quality of intimate objects alone, become mark of. Thus I believe, I've added to

the field of figurine studies, making them applicable for wider set of inquiries into the past lifeways.

Apart from opening new horizons, this line of investigation doesn't conflict with the approaches taken so far, nor does it preclude identification of figurines as magical / religious paraphernalia. It only increases the set of spheres they mediate between. Ritual, according to Victor Turner, is a practice, in which social norms become reinforced through their affirmation in a repeated collective action in a setting that separates them from the competing regulations and circumstances that may prove them obsolete (Turner 1967). Praxis, Bourdieu says, in this case the practicing of rituals, on the other hand, is the locus of change, and through their mere participation or abstinence from participation, people come to reject, rework, or reconfirm the social norm under question (Bourdieu, 1990). Hence, if bound to ritual, figurines would be at the apex of both affirmation of cultural values and of agency and change. Immersed in the routine of everyday life, constantly exposed to the gaze of the inhabitants of the house, it is fruitful to look at them as a choice media of social negotiation.

In addition, understanding figurines as products of social relations and tools for their change, can affect interpretations of the disappearance of the anthropomorphic figurines from the central Balkans in the Early Bronze age as a crucial argument in support of the thesis that newcomers with new beliefs and practices took over the land. Apart from looking for external source of change, we can once again evaluate the input of internal events.

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