GENDER TENSION IN FIGURINES IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE*

by **Robin Hardie**

This paper is a first attempt to show that cross-cultural patterns are visible in diachronic changes in representations of maleness (including phallic imagery) and female sensuality (i.e. erotic aspects of female imagery) in Neolithic and Chalcolithic figurines across southeast Europe. These previously unremarked patterns may reveal a gender dynamic inherent in the Neolithic cultural model itself which spread northwards from Greece.

Allied to notions of agency and contestation these patterns also suggest a shift away from a perceived and possibly resented female prominence in ritual and perhaps society which was itself associated with and partly expressed by the representation of sensuality. If views that the status of women is higher in societies where there is less of a division between the domestic and public spheres[1] and that „some small-scale foraging and horticultural societies are among the most socially and sexually egalitarian societies in the world"[2] are correct such a shift could indicate that some elements of Gimbutas' perspective were not entirely fantastic.

It might also be relevant that current explanations for the emergence of male ideology and chiefdoms at the start of the Bronze Age are lacking in depth of time. It would not be surprising if these developments were at least partly enabled by changes in the Chalcolithic, themselves possibly stretching back into the Neolithic. Any indications of a shift towards maleness in these horizons may therefore be of wider interest.

The ideas outlined here are the result of research into representations of maleness in figurine cultures in central and southeast Europe and the

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* Due to an unfortunate error Robin Hardie's article appeared in volume XXIV of *Memoria Antiquitatis* without illustrations. The Editors wish to apologize both to the author and to our readers and we republish the article in the current volume complete with illustrations.

[1] P.R. Sanday, *Toward a Theory of the Status of Women*, in *AmAnth*, 75, 1973, p. 1682-1700.

[2] M. Lepowsky, *Gender in an Egalitarian Society*, in P.R. Sanday, R.G. Goodenough (eds.), *Beyond the Second Sex. New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender*, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 177.

Mediterranean. These show more variation than female figurines and fall into categories that seem to hold across different cultures and horizons. Moreover, they appear to have a recurring and almost predictable relationship with, in particular, the sensuality of female figurines.

I will first address some of the theoretical issues raised by the approach taken – notably concerning gender, sensuality and cross-cultural comparisons – before turning to the different types of maleness in figurines in southeast Europe and specific gender patterns in figurines in the southern and central Balkans and in the Chalcolithic Tripolye culture in Moldavia and the Ukraine.

Recent research on figurines has focused on abstract concepts of identity and representation. Amongst others, Biehl[3] has written on symbolic designs, Chapman[4] on fragmentation, Talalay[5] on decapitation and Bailey[6] on the mechanisms of social homogenization. There are frequent citations of Butler's theory of performativity and the construction of personal and group identities through figurines. These directions of research may be works in progress but they have yet to yield real dividends, at least for the non-specialist. A Cambridge conference in 2005[7] struggled to identify new perspectives offering more than just marginal progress.

However, they are restricted by two limitations which archaeologists current impose on themselves. Both concern existing and readily available data which, if the thesis of this paper is in any way correct, could substantially increase our understanding of these horizons and the role that figurines played in them. These limitations are contextual particularism and what I call the PG syndrome – post-Gimbutas. It seems that transgressing either could be professionally hazardous because it rarely happens.

The combination of contextual particularism (as a theoretical approach) and geographical specialization (as a professional constraint) discourages comparative analysis of prehistoric figurines from different cultures and horizons. It is possible that potentially significant similarities and patterns are being missed as a result.

It is at least plausible to posit that the various traditions are connected in at least some ways, starting with their origins. Noone maintains that figurines in the

[3] P.F. Biehl, *Symbolic communication systems. Symbols on anthropomorphic figurines in Neolithic and Chalcolithic Southeast Europe*, in *JEA*, 4, 1996, p. 153-176.

[4] J. Chapman, *Fragmentation in Archaeology. People, places and broken objects in the prehistory of south-eastern Europe*, London, 2000.

[5] E.L. Talalay, *Heady Business: Skulls, Heads and Decapitation* in *Neolithic and Greece*, in *JMA*, 17, 2004, p. 139-163.

[6] D.W. Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines. Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic*, New York, 2005.

[7] *Image and Imagination: Material Beginnings. The Global History of Figurative Representation*, The McDonald Institute, 13-17 September 2005.

Ukraine or Moravia sprang up spontaneously with no connection to the traditions in southeast Europe. Indeed, it seems they all derive from Greece where figurines appeared with the rest of the Neolithic package which was already fully formed[8].

Aspects of their use and meaning must have differed across cultures and horizons – and even villages – but their principal context (domestic), material (clay), subject (the body) and size (miniaturized) are relatively constant. There can be variance in one of these factors, such as the bone figurines from Kodzadermen and the figurines in graves in Hamangia, but rarely, if ever, in two. This suggests a broad, underlying coincidence.

A proposed connection between the various traditions is supported by the relatively sudden (by archaeological standards) and still unexplained reduction or outright disappearance of figurines in most cultures by or in the Chalcolithic. The cause is not obviously external. One could postulate influence from the Pontic steppes but how then could we explain the rich, and late, traditions of Cucuteni and Tripolye in the Chalcolithic itself? These cultures lie exactly between the steppes and SE Europe.

If the cause was internal it might be suggested in the figurines themselves, reflecting – and partly constituting – a dynamic tension in these early farming societies which led to a similar result in nearly every case: the disappearance of figurines, often without their replacement by other material signs of cult. The existence both of common attributes in the early figurines of different traditions and of similar patterns in their later evolution would support this thesis. If cult and everyday life in these horizons were indeed intimately enmeshed, these might allow us to glimpse potentially significant changes in both.

The second limitation, the PG syndrome, concerns gender. The retreat from an interest in gender in figurines after (and in reaction to?) the publication of Gimbutas' books was ironically encouraged by feminist writers. They warned that an emphasis on female figurines or any suggestion of female goddesses could undermine the goals of feminist archaeology and feminism itself by promoting the essentialist view of the „elevated status of women … [as] … due to their reproductive capabilities"[9]. Since the late 1980s most writing on figurines has been gender-neutral or even-neutered. In the excavation report on Selevac by Tringham and Krstić[10] the words 'male' and 'female' are practically restricted to the chapter on animals. Bailey[11] and others have stressed

[8] C. Perlès, *The Early Neolithic in Greece: the First Farming Communities in Europe*, Cambridge, 2001.
[9] E.L. Talalay, *A Feminist Boomerang: The Great Goddess of Greek Prehistory*, in *GH*, 6(2), 1994, 173.
[10] R. Tringham, D. Krstić, *Selevac. A Neolithic Village in Yugoslavia*, Los Angeles, 1990.
[11] D.W. Bailey, *The social reality of figurines from the Chalcolithic of northeast Bulgaria: the example of Ovcarovo*, Doctoral dissertation, Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, 1991; Idem, *Reading prehistoric figurines as individuals*, in *WorldArch*, 25(3), 1994, p. 322-331.

the large number of figurines which are ungendered. With some exceptions[12] gender is incidental to most current theoretical concerns.

Two potentially useful types of data – neither, as it happens, eschewed by Gimbutas – can be missed as a result. The first is representations of maleness, whether in male figurines, phalli or phallic forms, which have rarely been addressed outside the culture-historical tradition[13]. Male figurines and phalli are relatively uncontroversial to identify but the attribution of a phallic form is epistemologically problematic. The consideration of phalli also still seems to be tainted with our Victorian legacy. Moreover, the amount of maleness in figurines would have to be radically revised if long necks were to become recognized as phallic (including the entire cruciform canon in Cyprus, for example). All of these have discouraged a more direct approach to this topic.

The second type of overlooked data is the sensuality of figurines. Attribution of eroticism may seem highly subjective and culturally bound but the phallus is a universal symbol of male sexual arousal – and possibly of arousal in either gender as there is no comparably visual female equivalent. Buttocks may also be a near-universal erotic symbol although I cannot cite any academic research to support this. They are widely and carefully modelled in various figurine cultures.

Traditional reserve among prehistorians is breaking down, however. Inspired by Butler's theorizing[14] and following Yates' widely cited article on Scandinavian rock art[15] which addressed depictions of phalli, Meskell[16] and Joyce[17] are leading the way in establishing sexually embodied subjects as a focus of archaeological analysis. A joint summary of their work is titled „Phallic Culture"[18]. Joyce's article on male sexuality and the ancient Maya was

[12] E.L. Talalay, *Archaeological Misconceptions: Contemplating Gender and Power in the Greek Neolithic*, in M. Donald, L. Hurcombe (eds.), *Representations of Gender from Prehistory to the Present*, London, 2000; Idem, *The Gendered Sea: Iconography, Gender and Mediterranean Prehistory*, in E. Blake, A.B. Knapp (eds.), *The Archaeology of Mediterranean Prehistory*, Oxford, 2005.

[13] M. Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500 BC. Myths and Cult Images*. London, 1982; V. Karageorghis, *The Coroplastic Art of Ancient Cyprus I. Chalcolithic-Late Cypriote I*, Nicosia, 1991.

[14] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, 1990.

[15] Yates (1993).

[16] L.M. Meskell, *The Somatization of Archaeology: Institutions, Discourses, Corporeality*, in *NAR*, 29 (1), 1996, p. 1-16; Idem, *Sexuality in New Kingdom Egypt*, in R.A. Schmidt, B.L. Voss (eds.), *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, New York – London, 2000; Idem, *Archaeologies of Identity*, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today: Breaking the Boundaries*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 187-213.

[17] R.A. Joyce, *Male Sexuality among the Ancient Maya*, in R.A. Schmidt, B.L. Voss (eds.), *op.cit.*; Idem, *Embodied Subjectivity: Gender, Femininity, Masculinity, Sexuality*, in L.M. Meskell, R.W. Preucel (eds.), *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, Oxford, 2004, p. 82-95.

[18] L.M. Meskell, R.M. Joyce, *Phallic Culture*, in L.M. Meskell, R.M. Joyce, *Embodied Lives*, New York - London, 2003.

notable for both the images and the archaeological novelty of her approach: „a consideration of sexuality … as the play of desire"[19]. Meskell has written on female sexuality in New Kingdom Egypt[20] and called for more attention to maleness and to male and phallic figurines at Catalhöyük and elsewhere[21]. Bailey has also stressed sexuality in his recent book on figurines[22].

What patterns, then, can be seen in maleness and sensuality in figurines? The most intriguing figurines lie at the start of many European figurine traditions. I call them „phallic females" as the phallic form is incorporated into the neck, torso and buttocks of otherwise female figurines and only becomes evident when they are viewed from the rear. All these figurines have large buttocks, some exuberant. Figure 1 shows examples from five different Neolithic cultures.

These figurines were first highlighted by Gimbutas although this is rarely recognized by other writers. Knapp and Meskell wrote on similar figurines from Chalcolithic Cyprus and suggested that the phallic elements represent „characterizations of the individual self"[23] and the emergence of individuals in Cypriot prehistory. Their view may have been influenced by their interpretation of the Bronze Age in Cyprus „where representations of the self seem to be highly visible"[24] and I do not know if they would wish to apply it to early Neolithic European figurines.

I agree with the main, gynocentric conclusions of Kokkinidou and Nikolaidou's frequently cited article[25] on these figurines except for the authors' emphasis on fertility as opposed to sensuality and for their rejection of any potency of phallic imagery in its own right as suggested by their statement that phallic-shaped objects were „especially appropriate" for use as pedagogic items[26]. Whittle[27] has described these figurines as strongly phallic and suggested that „this fascinating combination … lies at the heart of the lifestyle" of these

[19] R.A. Joyce, *op. cit.*, in R.A. Schmidt, B.L. Voss (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 264.
[20] L.M. Meskell, *Sexuality in New Kingdom Egypt*, in R.A. Schmidt, B.L. Voss (eds.), *op.cit*.
[21] L.M. Meskell, C. Nakamura, *Figurines and Miniature Clay Objects*, in *Catalhöyük 2005 Archive Report* (www.catalhoyuk.com/archive_reports/2005).
[22] D.W. Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines*.
[23] B.A. Knapp, L.M. Meskell, *Bodies of Evidence on Prehistoric Cyprus*, in *CAJ*, 7(2), 1997, p. 195.
[24] *Ibidem*, p. 191.
[25] D. Kokkinidou, M. Nikolaidou, *Body imagery in the Aegean Neolithic: ideological implications of anthropomorphic figurines*, in J. Moore, E. Scott (eds.), *Invisible People and Processes*, London, 1997, p. 88-112.
[26] *Ibidem*, p. 103.
[27] A. Whittle, *Beziehungen zwischen Individuum und Gruppe: Fragen zur Identität im Neolithikum der ungarischen Tiefebene* [trans: *Connections between the individual and the group: questions of Neolithic identity in the Hungarian Plains*], in *EAZ*, 39, 1998, p. 473-474; Idem, *The archaeology of people: dimensions of Neolithic life*, London, 2003, p. 56.

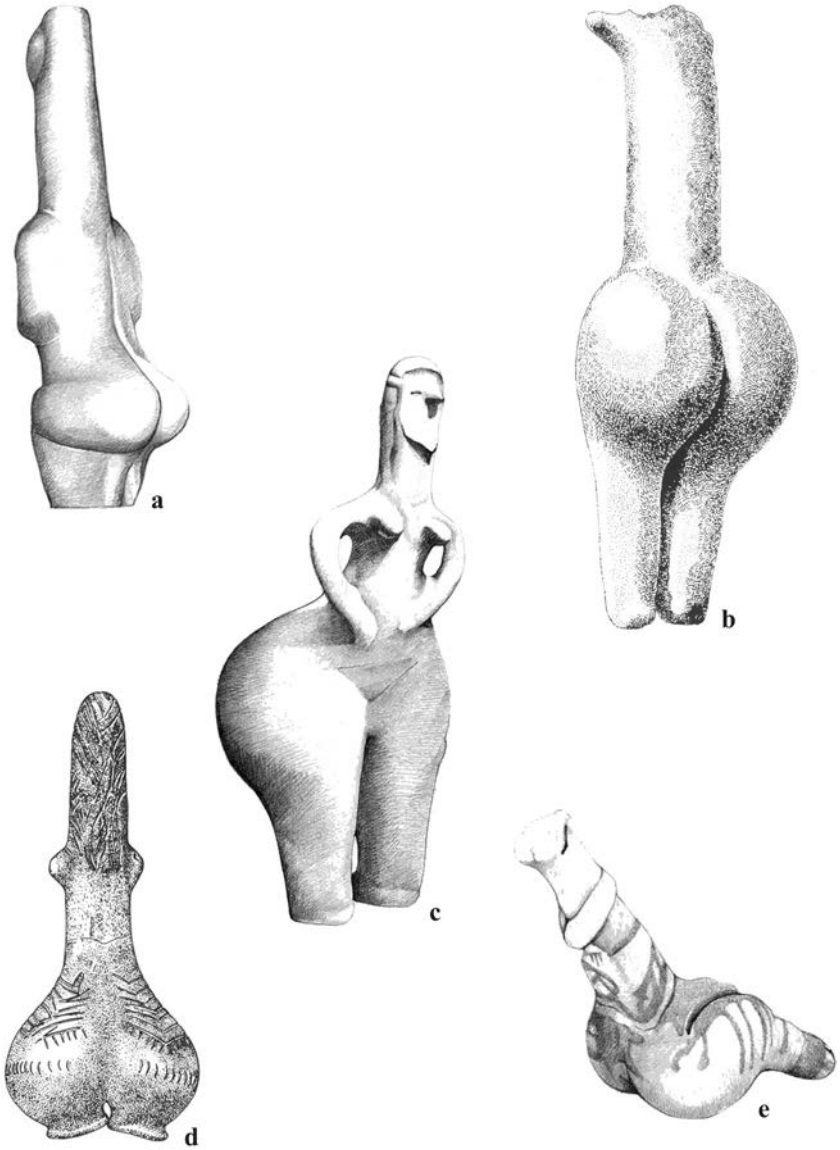

Fig. 1. Phallic females: a. *Attica*, Proto-Sesklo (after Gimbutas, 1982); b. *Bakonycserny*, Lengyel c. 4500 BC (Reproduced with permission from *Archaeolingua* from Kalicz, 1998); c. *Donja Branjevina*, Starčevo c. 6000 BC, H c. 30 cm (after photo by M. Trninic); d. *Endrod-Szujoskereszt*, Koros c. 5500 BC, H 19 cm (reproduced with permission from Thames & Hudson from Gimbutas 1989); e. *Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru*, Precucuteni c. 4800 BC, H c. 8 cm (after photo by G. Dumitriu)

cultures without, unfortunately, elaborating further. These figurines are therefore well-known but have not been put in a wider, diachronic context.

In early Neolithic Starčevo we see possibly phallic figurines which are cylindrical or have very long necks but without a lower body. Long necks on female figurines in neighbouring Greece become almost ubiquitous in the middle Neolithic and are widespread in other cultures as has often been noted. Male figurines with long necks are, however, extremely rare in either horizon. If the interpretation by Kokkinidou and Nikolaidou[28] and Whittle[29] of long necks as phallic is correct these are a more formalized and less sensual than the earlier full-bodied phallic females. A similar progression is seen in Chalcolithic Cucuteni where the necks become significantly shorter over time.

Phalli themselves, often broken at the base, appear in most cultures and in different periods, including the early phase, but without any obvious pattern. However, in the miniaturized world of figurines, phalli are the only objects that are commonly lifesize and often larger than figurines themselves. Two examples[30] from early Neolithic Greece and Starčevo of apparently vivified phalli indicate clear comfort with sexual imagery. They do not seem disembodied or cases of *pars pro toto* but to have been given being in their own right. These various observations support the notion that the sensuality of figurines in different cultures is at its height in the earliest phase when, with rare exceptions, there are no clearly male figurines – which only appear in the middle or later periods.

The key criterion of maleness for most writers is a penis although it is safer to view a penis as representing maleness (on figurines which may or may not be primarily or exclusively male) rather than as a redundant criterion. Male figurines can also be placed into three broad categories - informal, ritual and realistic - two of which, informal and realistic, are significantly more common in male than in female figurines and therefore of potential interest.

The most troublesome term is „informal". It is imprecise, relative and in this context new but nevertheless, I believe, useful. It stands in contrast to 'ritual' for figurines that are asymmetrical, sitting on the ground, more roughly finished or less decorated. Figurines such as the thinker from Târpeşti[31] which is seated on the ground but with the hands on each side of its face possess formal ambiguity – a combination of both formal and informal elements. In the famous couple from Cernavodă[32] the symmetrical male figurine seated on a stool is

[28] D. Kokkinidou, M. Nikolaidou, *op. cit*., in J. Moore, E. Scott (eds.), *op.cit*.
[29] A. Whittle, *Fish, faces and fingers: presences and symbolic identities in the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in the Carpathian basin*, in *DocPraehist*, 25, 1998, p. 133-150.
[30] M. Gimbutas, *op.cit.*, p. 135, 217, fig. 94, 168.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 233, pl. 251-252.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 232, pl. 247-248.

more formal (and active, in its thinking) than the female which is asymmetrical and sitting on the ground. Neither, however, is „ritual" because of their realism and lack of decoration. The vast majority of ithyphallic figurines and a significant proportion of all male figurines are informal and suggest a certain ritual exclusion – perhaps the main inference of this category.

If this exclusion had a perceived social parallel it would not be surprising if the resulting tension was reflected in figurines. The ithyphallic figure from Larissa[33], the largest figurine in either horizon in Europe, is an example of seemingly outright contestation. Seated on a stool but in an asymmetrical posture with one hand holding what was probably an enormous phallus and the other on its face the figurine is formally ambiguous. If one understands material culture as being more of an argument than a conversation this was a very loud statement.

Formal, „ritual" male figurines are uncommon and may have differing interpretations. A series of seated figurines with penises from a restricted area in Neolithic Thessaly[34] shows their legs depicted as the front legs of a curved stool. They have been remarked on[35] but not yet studied and have a clear formality in their posture and symmetry. The indisputably feminine breasts on one of them[36] make it the inverse - or imitation – of the earlier phallic females. There, a predominantly female form incorporates a male phallus. Here, a predominantly male form incorporates female breasts. This unusual and localized series suggests a challenge to elsewhere predominantly female ritual imagery.

The so-called „sickle god" from Szegvar-Tuzkoves in middle Neolithic Tisza in Eastern Hungary[37] is another example of a formal ritual male figurine. It is symmetrical (apart from the sickle) and seated on a chair but the seated female figurines from the same site[38] are more decorated and I take them to have more central ritual importance. The female figurines are also depicted without a head. This example seems one of acceptance of male ritual representation and participation, albeit in a subsidiary role, rather than contestation.

The third category of male figurine is realistic and seen particularly in heads. Figure 2 shows some of the first lifelike sculpted heads in Europe[39]. They

[33] D.R. Theocaris, *Neolithic Greece*, Athens, 1973, fig. 55.
[34] M. Gimbutas, *op.cit.*, p. 231, pl. 244-245; K. Gallis, L. Orphanidis, *Figurines of Neolithic Thessaly*, vol. 1, Academy of Athens Research Centre for Antiquity, Monograph, 3, 1996.
[35] E.L. Talalay, *Archaeological Misconceptions: ...*, in M. Donald, L. Hurcombe (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 5-7.
[36] K. Gallis, L. Orphanidis, *op.cit.*, fig.45.
[37] M. Gimbutas, *op.cit.*, p. 84, pl. 46-47.
[38] *Ibidem*, p. 211, pl. 210-211.
[39] There are lifelike engraved heads in the Upper Palaeolithic with more than 60 in the cave site of La Marche alone. See A. Roussot, *L'art prehistorique*, Bordeaux, 1997, fig. 33.

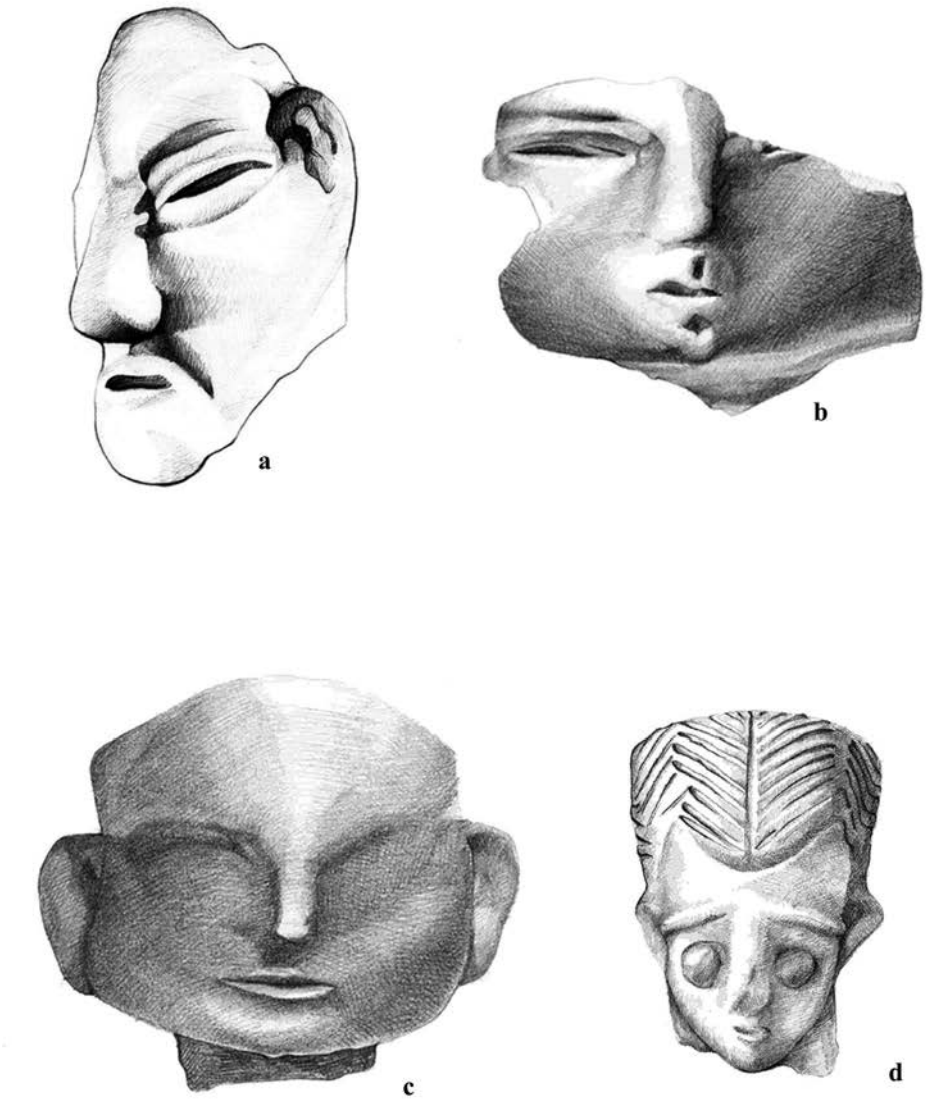

Fig. 2. Realistic heads: a. *Domokos*, Thessaly, H 6.7 cm (after Gallis and Orphanidis, 1996): b. *Drama*, Karanovo VI, H. 4.3 cm (after Költsch *et alii*, 1988); c. *Gabarevo*, Karanovo VI, H 7 cm (from Költsch *et alii*, 1988); d. *Butmir*, late Neolithic, H c. 5 cm (after Benac *et alii*, 1979)

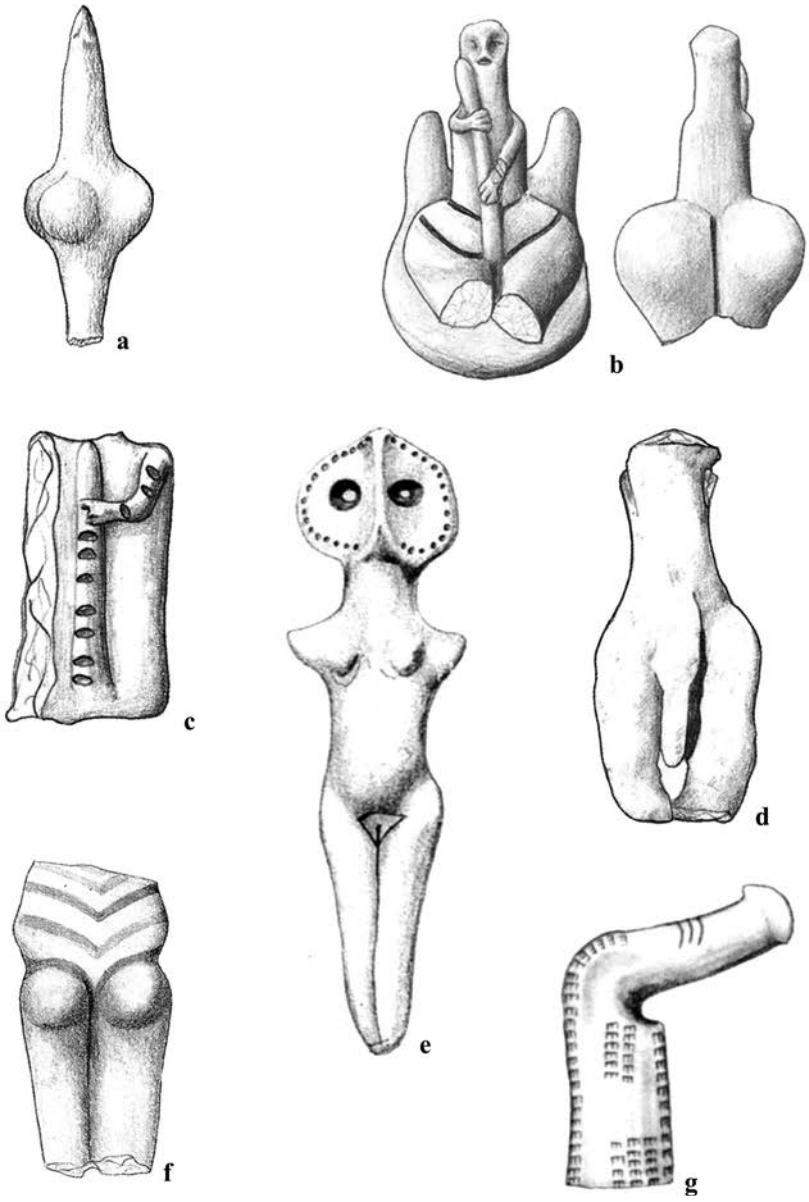

Fig. 3. Tripolye figurines: a. *Golerkany*, early Tripolye, H 7 cm; b. *Sabatinovka*, early Tripolye, H 8 cm; c. *Lenkovcy*, early Tripolye, H 6 cm; d. *Luka Vrubleveckaja*, early Tripolye, H 9 cm; e. *Vychvatincy*, Late Tripolye, H 13 cm; f. *Zalesciki*, mid Tripolye, H 10.4 cm; g. Usatovo, late Tripolye, H 7 cm (reproductions by permission of *Beiträge zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie* from Pogoševa, 1985)

have also not been studied and have yet to be given importance in either archaeology or art-history. I take them to be male by the shape of the jaw since few, if any, female figurines have a similarly pronounced jaw or chin. Even semi-realistic female heads are rare in European figurines and none compare in terms of detail. This apparent taboo and its (possibly indirect) transgression only in male figurines suggest that rituals centred on female representations were cultic and not just social. The appearance of these realistic male heads towards the end of various traditions implies change in the established cultic and social practice relating to figurines.

I now wish to look briefly at specific gender patterns in three figurine traditions.

I have sketched the progression in early Neolithic Greece from full-bodied phallic females to less sensual elongated necks and the appearance of different types of male figurine. How do we account for the limited canon in the succeeding Rachmani culture in the Chalcolithic of acrolithic figurines with flat, painted torsos and an apparent emphasis on heads which lack any facial features? One interpretation that would take this whole trajectory into account could be that a gender-based contestation of the early Neolithic female and sexualized imagery led to the elimination of *all* gendered representations in favour of a new and sexually more conservative iconography. One result of this playing out of gender tensions through ritual was the removal of female imagery not just from a position of apparent dominance but from the entire corpus. If sensuality was associated with perceived – and resented – female dominance, the Rachmani figurines may not be as gender-neutral as they appear.

Further north in the central Balkans the overt sensuality of Starčevo figurines was completely eradicated in the succeeding Vinca culture whose figurines are amongst the most decorated and dressed of any European culture. Large buttocks, phallic necks or torsos and separate phalli are almost non-existent and there are few clear indications of gender. Some male figurines appear in all three of the categories identified earlier and figurines drop off sharply in the Chalcolithic Baden culture. The Vinča aversion to sexual imagery is almost complete and suggests that a perception of sensuality in the preceding Starčevo culture is not just subjective.

Finally, in Cucuteni's sister culture of Tripolye which constitutes the last of the figurine traditions in Europe an obvious and seemingly refined sensuality persists until the final stage of the culture[40]. Highly sensual semi-abstract figurines appear at the very start of the tradition. Female buttocks are

[40] See examples in figure 3.

often pronounced and heavily decorated and become more realistic in the later period with a shift towards young people of both sexes.

There are two examples of ritual male figurines, both from the early period. The seated female figurine from Sabatinovka holding a rod[41] is well-known. The rod is often considered to be phallic although the figurine itself is also phallic. However, two other, less well-known figurines (one of them considerably larger) holding a similar rod appear to be male. They are more decorated than the figurine from Sabatinovka and the notches on their arms and rods indicate greater formality and a more central ritual role.

As would be expected from other traditions (although female Tripolye figurines also become more realistic over time), informal and realistic male figurines appear in the middle and late periods, possibly representing elements of disruption since some seem grotesque[42]. In the final, Usatovo phase both realism and variety give way to a single form that is ungendered apart from a curious phallic neck and head.

The early appearance of ritual male figurines, the persistence of sensuality almost throughout the culture and the extension of sensuality and realism to figurines of both genders all suggest that the Tripolye culture negotiated and maintained a gender balance more successfully than many of its predecessors.

In conclusion, within discrete developments in different European figurine traditions there seem to be elements of a possibly generalized (though not uniform) pattern of increasing contestation of the relative dominance and sensuality of early female figurines. These elements might reflect the playing out of gender tensions inherent in the ritual and structural model of the Neolithic package in SE Europe which spread northwards from Greece – tensions which may ultimately have contributed to the as yet unexplained disappearance of figurines themselves. Further studies of individual cultures and including other aspects such as mortuary data (abundant in some cases but scant in most) may help to assess the validity of the ideas presented here. Whatever the merits of particular interpretations in this paper, however, I hope to have persuaded some readers of the wider potential of analysing representations of both maleness and sensuality in these horizons.

[41] *Ibidem*.

[42] A.P. Pogoševa, *Die Statuetten der Tripolie-Kultur*, in *BAVA*, 7, 1985, p. 159, Abb. 252; D. Monah, *Plastica antropomorfă a culturii Cucuteni-Tripolie*, *BMA*, III, Piatra-Neamţ, 1997, p. 356, fig. 104-106.