

## SEVERAL POINTS OF VIEW REGARDING THE INTERPRETATION OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES

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**Rezumat:** În studiul de față sunt trecute în revistă principalele puncte de vedere privind interpretarea figurinelor antropomorfe. Reprezentări ale zeităților după unii autori, simple jucării sau reprezentări ale indivizilor după alții, figurinele antropomorfe au suscitat interesul cercetătorilor încă din secolul al XIX-lea. Un lucru determinant în interpretarea posibilelor funcții ale figurinelor îl reprezintă contextul descoperirii acestora. De asemenea, un rol important în această interpretare îl joacă și contextul ideologic în care cercetătorul respectiv activează: astfel, avem o paletă largă de interpretări, de la viziunea integratoare a unui cult al fecundității și fertilității, la abordarea feministă a Marijei Gimbutas sau la concepția lui Douglass Bailey, care pune accentul pe expresia identității indivizilor în preistorie.

**Cuvinte cheie:** statuete antropomorfe, religie preistorică, cultul fertilității, ideologie.

**Keywords:** anthropomorphic figurines, prehistoric religion, fertility cult, ideology.

The interpretation of anthropomorphic figurines discovered in prehistorical sites raised the interest of specialists since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Most of them have been interpreted in the ideological terms of a Mother Goddess and have been considered for a long time proof of prehistorical religion<sup>1</sup>. Debates on this subject start from three major sources: pre-historical encyclopedias, selections of archaeological reports from different sites and detailed typological and chronological classification of figurines from sites and particular cultural areas.

According to Peter J. Ucko, there are four possible lines of investigation for the interpretation of pre-historical figurines: thorough examination of the figurines, archaeological context, late historical evidence for the considered area and relevant anthropological evidence<sup>2</sup>.

During the nineteenth century Flinders Petrie denied the association of Egyptian figurines from the *Early Dynastic Period* with a fertility cult. Arthur Evans extended this theory to the Aegean figurines, considering them at a later time prototypes of a Mother Goddess in the Middle East<sup>3</sup>. Thus developed a long tradition of worshipping a Mother Goddess starting in the Upper Paleolithic and continued in the Middle East Bronze and Iron Age. Such interpretations were based on simple, ethno-historical analogies between the worshipping of the mentioned goddess and the treatment of the figurines in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. These analogies have been extended to all figurines of all ages in the Middle East and Europe.

Archaeologists assumed that the Paleolithic figurines were expressions of a Mother Goddess therefore the function and the style of the Neolithic ones were directly inherited. Even in the context of such an universal point of view there were different interpretations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the Pre-Dynastic Egyptian figurines were considered to be

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<sup>1</sup> Ucko 1962, 38-54.

<sup>2</sup> Ucko 1962, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Bartel 1981, 73.

concubines of the deceased, depictions of the servants or fertility symbols acting as protection characters<sup>4</sup>. Some figurines in the Middle East were interpreted as toys or devices for sympathetic magical practices<sup>5</sup>. During the twentieth century, anthropomorphic figurines continued to be interpreted in terms of fertility and Mother Goddess. Hutchinson considered that they were not expressions of a Mother Goddess but simple amulets. He also suggested that these particular figurines were associated with the ritual of childbirth<sup>6</sup>.

Following the excavation of very important sites in Europe (Vinča, Starčevo, Karanovo) archaeologists attempted a comparison between the styles of the figurines from Europe and the ones from the Middle East. Weinberg made a comparative analysis of the figurines from Greece, Crete and the Cyclades finding similarities between them and advancing the theory of a possible origin in the Mesopotamia or Anatolia<sup>7</sup>.

Certainly one of the most important studies of the last century regarding anthropomorphic figurines was written by Peter J. Ucko in 1968. The British scientist used them to determine inter-cultural similarities, trends, influences and cultural group typologies and drew the following conclusions:

1. Usually archaeologists focused on functional interpretations without taking under consideration that the figurines may be valuable trans-cultural markers.
2. Research based on inter-group relationships approached the data through isolating and comparing individual figurines as artifact types or through certain attributes they may have.
3. A lot of caution must be taken in inter-cultural comparison to ensure secure space and time control.
4. Functional continuity between the Paleolithic and Neolithic figurines is not valid.
5. The Middle East is the only area for which we have early historical proof of worship of a Mother Goddess. She is associated with a fertility cult so this function of the figurines is only valid in this case.
6. A single functional interpretation is not valid for all figurines.
7. Ethnographical information suggest different functions.
8. The origin of the figurines can help revealing their functions<sup>8</sup>.

In the '50s, three British archaeologist, Gordon Childe, O.G.S. Crawford and Glyn Daniel backed the idea of a unique goddess worshiped in the Neolithic cultures from the Atlantic to the Middle East. Childe was rather moderate and Crawford most enthusiastic in this matter. They both projected this image in the later eras: Childe supposed it lays behind the Christian worship of saints in the Middle Ages. Crawford found traces of this goddess in different customs like the making of maize dolls<sup>9</sup>.

Echoes of this image can be traced to the field of psychology. It seems that Freud did not touch upon the subject. Considering his famous theory on archetypes it is rather surprising that Jung did not have anything to say on the subject either. He stated that the essential

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<sup>4</sup> Ucko 1968, 415.

<sup>5</sup> Bartel 1981, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Ucko 1968, 416.

<sup>7</sup> Weinberg 1951, 121-133.

<sup>8</sup> Bartel 1981, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Hutton 1997, 92.

archetype is the “Mother” one and saw the goddess as a derivation from it<sup>10</sup>. His disciple Erich Neumann affirmed in 1963 that the proof of a universal goddess indicate that the Big Mother was a constant working image in the human psyche. Neumann developed an entire theory on the evolution of the human spirit in which the Goddess represented “the archetypal unity and the multiplicity of the feminine nature”<sup>11</sup>.

Marija Gimbutas was one of the most scientists that wrote about prehistoric religion. Her theory marks an interesting development because of its strong feminist interpretation starting with her first book on this subject – *The gods and goddesses of old Europe*, 1974 (republished in 1982 with a reversed title to emphasize the leading role of the goddesses) and continued with the 1989 *The language of the goddess* and the 1991 *The civilization of the goddess*. Gimbutas carefully remodeled the image of the Great Goddess according to the evolution of feminism diminishing the maternity, fertility and sexuality to emphasize the strong creator, life-and-death controlling side of it<sup>12</sup>.

Recent archaeological excavation in the North of Greece (Kephala) revealed figurines in the vicinity of graves indicating a possible function of these artifacts as territorial markers serving as ancestral binding elements in Neolithic cultures<sup>13</sup>. Ethnographical reports from Africa suggest a connection between the placement of the figurines and an ancestors’ cult. They were thought to be toys, dolls, primitive contracts or parts of the birthing ritual among the above mentioned roles<sup>14</sup>.

Chapman determined in terms of gender status a connection between the proportion of the goddesses discovered and the female contribution to the local production. A large number of feminine figurines often reflect an important contribution of women in food providing<sup>15</sup>.

Ian Hodder ties the feminine artifacts to the concept of *domus* and to the process of domestication. He states that the habitat becomes an important centre of the productive and symbolic activities. It includes food storing and preparation, protection and shelter as long as a burial place for women and children<sup>16</sup>. This hypothesis explains the domestic context of the figurines – found even in household debris – especially associated with hearths and storing pits.

The multitude of possible approaches in the interpretation of prehistorical anthropomorphic figurines has been underlined by a recent study<sup>17</sup>. Naomi Hamilton emphasizes the importance of ideology in different interpretations of the figurines and condemns the attempt of providing a single sense for these artifacts. She sees them as part of an archeological context as opposed to a different field of study that would isolate them from the context<sup>18</sup>. Joyce Marcus stressed the importance of the context in the interpretation of the figurines particularly for the Zapotec people from Mexico and Guatemala. (1500-500 BC). Here, the difference between religious ritual for males and females determines the presence or absence of the figurines in different contexts. Marcus also detected more female statues than

<sup>10</sup> Jung 2003, 85-118; vezi și Monah 1997, 203-204.

<sup>11</sup> Neumann 1963, 336.

<sup>12</sup> Hutton 1997, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Talalay 1991, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Meskell 1995, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Chapman 1991, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Hodder 1990, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Viewpoint 1996, 281-307.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton 1996, 282-285.

male ones excavated in particular archaeological contexts and a possible social stratification based on their typology or the type of grave. She suggested the terms of people *with authority* and *conformers*<sup>19</sup>.

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Romanian literature expressed interest for this matter, especially in the studies of Vladimir Dumitrescu, Silvia Marinescu-Bîlcu, Eugen Comșa, Anton Nițu, Dan Monah and Radian Andreescu<sup>20</sup>. Valentina Voinea offers a very original interpretation of the Gumelnita figurines. She explored the biblical information along with other leads and identified a series of cultic themes in the Gumelnita art, taking an important step forward in decoding its message<sup>21</sup>.

A particular vision in the research of anthropomorphic art belongs to Dan Monah for the Cucuteni-Tripolie area. Monah's thesis is inspired by Mircea Eliade's studies on sacred phenomenology. It is an excellent and original argument for the partial re-enactment of the Cucuteni religious world<sup>22</sup>.

The newest approach in the study of anthropomorphic figurines has been initiated by Douglass Bailey. He critiqued the previous obsession for typology and chronology and emphasizes a very important feature of the figurines: their tri-dimensionality<sup>23</sup>.

He also considered them to be means of manipulation and definition of identities and status of different characters in their societies<sup>24</sup>. The presence of lip and ear rings both on the figurines and in the graves suggests different ritual contexts of expressing personal identity<sup>25</sup>.

Most clay anthropomorphic figurines are incomplete and very few whole ones have been discovered. Dan Monah tried to clarify this circumstance for the Cucuteni area, stating that certain local rituals involved deliberate breaking<sup>26</sup>.

The context of unearthing determines the interpretation of the figurines. Placing them in pits can signify their connection with the ancestors and the frequency of such figurines in the Gumelnita culture, for example, proves that such deposits were quite a common social practice<sup>27</sup>.

The multitude of interpretation options of the anthropomorphic art can be easily acknowledged from the lecture above; they vary from a universal vision of a fertility and fecundity cult (nearly abandoned today) to an individual expression of identity (concept originated in the western intellectual environment)<sup>28</sup>. The biggest problem is that archeologists have access only to artifacts from different contexts not to individuals that maneuver them, as

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<sup>19</sup> Marcus 1996, 291.

<sup>20</sup> Dumitrescu 1974; Marinescu-Bîlcu 1974; Comșa 1995; Nițu 1970; Monah 1997; Andreescu 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Voinea 2005a, 383-398; Voinea 2005b, 66-72.

<sup>22</sup> Monah 1997, 201-215.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey 2002, 89-90.

<sup>24</sup> Bailey 2000, 233.

<sup>25</sup> Bailey 2000, 234.

<sup>26</sup> Monah 1997, 202-203.

<sup>27</sup> Chapman 2000, 68-79.

<sup>28</sup> Anghelinu 2003, 301, note 926.

Julian Thomas remarked: *Here lies the paradox: it is impossible the significance of the artefacts without hypothesising the people responsible for their disposition, yet any specific identification of social sub-units can only be hypothetical*<sup>29</sup>.

Translated by  
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<sup>29</sup> Thomas 1996, 179.

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