

Interpretation of Neolithic Figurine Art

INTRODUCTION

EARLY HUMAN THOUGHT

The stupendous human capability for learning distinguishes man from the rest of all genuses. In Early Prehistory, the evolution of his concept of the world's function and of his own place in it can be traced through the collection of artifacts that reflect his creative imagination. Human mind, thought and behaviour are approached by *Cognitive Science*, in which a group of other sciences are involved.

According to many scholars, mental functions, ideas and language are directly connected to depictive art, consequently evaluation of archaeological data is the first stage for the research on mental evolution. Great attention must be given though to resemblances between ancient and modern practices, the latter being eventually delusive because time may have changed man's concept of surrounding things and their meaning.

From the aspect of Molecular Biology, it is believed that man has a genetically codified memory and a cumulative experience activated by a stimulus and permitting him to give meaning to his dreams which are then projected as concrete depictions. This process has been the cause for the discrimination of the genus *Homo* from all other genuses.

Technological achievements used by man in order to subject Nature to his needs and survive, group acceptance of concepts, as well as communication through practices and symbols constituted the basis for his realizing of the uncontrolled and for his further worshipping / religious behaviour.

Human capability for analogue thought permitted his communication through visible or invisible symbols. Archaeological research attempts to identify and interpret them, with the great assistance of plastic arts.

CHAPTER 1

EARLY HUMAN FIGURINE ART

Early figurine art has appeared in the Late Paleolithic. It is a phenomenon repeated often and in distant geographical coordinates. There has always been a frequent tendency to be related to human religious beliefs; however it is a great challenge to be investigated through a social approach of religiousness.

We do not know whether time-consuming figurine art is evidence of hidden cultural structures, neither if anybody could have the intelligence and capability to become a modeller.

Neolithic figurines are numerous in the Balkans, the South-Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, their number decreasing suddenly by the end of the period. They present an enormous variety of subjects but they are not spectacular concerning the raw materials they are made of as it happens with figurines in

historical times. Due to the fact that they are often surface finds (hence without stratigraphical coordinates) they are difficult to be accurately dated and to form homogenous entities according to their provenance or typology. For this reason there has not been, up to present, any commonly accepted theoretical and methodological approach of Neolithic figurines.

CHAPTER 2

THE VISIBLE ASPECT OF FIGURINES

I. FROM RAW MATERIAL TO A FINISHED OBJECT

Depictive and morphological renderings of ideas do not undergo any important changes for thousands of years, especially in Prehistory. In its very early stages, Neolithic figurine art does not appear as an evolution of its Palaeolithic analogue. The so-called Palaeolithic *Aphrodite's* do not seem to have the expected evolution but quite later, during the Ancient and Middle Neolithic, when thematology and typology will be spectacularly various.

The concept of human body in many sites has rendered rich archaeological material, which differs according to the area. The head (face / hairdo) constitutes an important reference point. The volumes of the body determine the general aspect of a figurine and attract the attention to the points wished by the modeller. The presence / underlining or absence of the sex features are definitely semeiological data.

Raw materials in Neolithic art are clay, stone, bones, sea shells, gold and wood (?), while the techniques vary according to the material.

Clay is used largely. Various techniques are applied but mainly that of modelling and bonding together one or more pieces of clay, which then are baked in ceramic ovens. Stone figurines are more compact. Other materials are used less often due to the modelling restrictions they impose.

II. TRACING THE ARTIST

A. DECORATION

Decoration is optional and is achieved by incision or impression, by paint but also plastically, by addition of small pellets of clay on the figurine's surface. Combinations of all these techniques are often applied. The decoration by inserted elements seems to be quite possible.

B. THE FIGURINE'S SEX AND THE SEX OF THE MODELLER

The sex of the modellers is unknown. Though bibliography usually connotes male modellers, women might have modelling activities as well, since they seem to undertake other duties in the Neolithic society as well, a fact which makes matriarchy very probable.

CHAPTER 3

THE INVISIBLE ASPECT OF FIGURINES THE MEANING OF FIGURINE ART

I. APPROACHES BASED ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

NEOLITHIC HUMAN FIGURINES INTERPRETATIVE THEORIES

A) INTERPRETATIONS RELATED TO FERTILITY AND LIFE

1. EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS ABOUT FERTILITY / MOTHER GODDESS

(Evans 1921, Childe 1925, Crawford 1925, Mylonas 1928, Hawkes 1951 et al.)

2. NEOLITHIC PANTHEON RELATED TO THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

(Parrot 1960, James 1960, Gimbutas 1974, Cameron 1981, Bouzek 1998, Cauvin 2003 et al.)

3. SYMBOLS OF WISHES

(Harrison 1912, Hansen 1933, Broman 1958, Theocharis 1973, et al.)

B) INTERPRETATIONS RELATED TO DEATH

4. OBJECTS IN THE SERVICE OF THE DEAD

(Hogarth 1927, Myres 1930, Contenau 1914, Baumgartel 1950-51, Mellaart 1965 et al.)

5. PORTRAITS OF ANCESTORS

(Karageorghis 1977 et al.)

C) INTERPRETATIONS RELATED TO SOCIAL HUMAN RELATIONS

6. OBJECTS FOR MULTIPLE USES

a) Dolls b) Instructive objects c) Bearers of sympathetic magic

(Pumpelly 1908, Kenyon 1956, Ucko 1968, Talalay 1993 et al.)

7. EARLY FORM OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

(Chourmouziadis 1973 et al.)

8. SYMBOLS OF IDENTITY AND CONFIRMATIONS OF A DEAL

(Talalay 1987, Chapman 2000, Pollard 2004, et al.)

9. AMULETS NOT DEDUCING POWER FROM THE SEX OF THE DIVINITY REPRESENTED

(Papachatzis 1987 et al.)

10. MATERIAL CODICES FOR THE INSTITUTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS (Kokkinidou-Nikolaidou 1997)

11. DEPICTIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY RESULTING TO SUBCONSCIOUS IDENTIFICATION AND CREATING SOCIAL CONNECTION

(Bailey 2005)

12. THEORY OF REPETITION

(Orphanidis 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2009)

II. APPROACHES BASED ON THE REPETITIVE PROCESS

THE THEORY OF REPETITION

Figurines being parts of behavioural systems must be studied first in relation to other figurines and then in the social and personal frame of their modellers and their users.

Being responsible for the Neolithic Project of the Academy of Athens, I had the opportunity to deal with Neolithic figurine art for a long time and to make comparative studies in older finds as well as in rich material from private collections in Thessaly, Greece, which I started recently to publish for the first time. This material includes a number of over two thousand five hundred figurines.

The whole reassessment of the scientific method of approaching Neolithic figurines analyzed in the present book chapter is the result of my attempt to find common elements and differences of figurines unearthed up to now- at least in human figurine material- in order to proceed to their interpretation which would not need their accurate dating, and find spots or even the broader area they were found in. My aim has been the isolation of their typological attributes which reveal systems of thought and behaviour. So, based on their general form and on the degree of repetition of their specific characteristics, I propose an alternative methodological / interpretational approach to the subject.

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