Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic

Introduction

Neolithic in Balkans.

Sotheby’s or Christie’s Auctions
The goal is to understand how and why objects such as figurines evoke the strong responses that they inevitably stimulate in people.

Though figurines were produced in other periods of Europe’s prehistoric past the Balkan Neolithic provides the largest body of material: hundreds of thousands of figurines were made.

The Neolithic of Southeastern Europe
The Balkan Neolithic is a collection of communities that lived their lives in similar ways.
Diversity along regional and chronological dimensions distinguishes different groups.
Important variations:
- Ways people shaped and decorated pots
- Size shape and permanence of their habitations
- The manner in which they handled death and displayed status
- Intensity of exploitation of food resources

Traditional approach to this diversity:
- Identifies formal variations in material culture (namely ceramic vessels). Distinguish different cultural groups of people
Archeaologists separate people through time and space based on these.
At the pan-regional level- more similarity than difference
When looking closer- tremendous variation between:
- Parts of a region
- Within single river valleys or plateaux
- Between two adjacent settlements
- Between individual houses, huts and even individuals w/in house.

At the regional level, however, the similarities force us to think of a broadly common way of life.

Different Neolithic Balkan communities share many characteristics- they are distinct from those that occupied the region in the millennia before 6500 bc.

Important: suggest that people living in region after this time thought about the world in radically new and different ways: possessed a new philosophy of life
Figurines were one of several key components in this new way of living

The Built Environment
Pre-Neolithic- temporary occupations and mobile existences that made short-term uses of caves and open-air sites
Neolithic- was about huts, camps and villages- settling down
Physically built their own environments- architecture offers shelter
More importantly: it provided the mechanisms for people to engage create place
In some cases: larger, more permanent structures were grouped together in highly organized ways, forming villages often tightly packed
In other instances: building arrangement left significant areas of open space as areas in which people shared activities and resources, ate and talked
Tell villages- represent communities’ commitments to particular places
Rebuilding- established links between living and past generations
Social and Political emphasis of architecture cannot be over emphasized
Houses and villages- create tangible boundaries between groups/activities
Inclusive/Exclusive
Resolution/Conflict- major part of Neolithic life
Played out:
New objects and raw materials
Developments in attitudes to the dead
Changes in the scales of economic activities

A New Materiality
In addition to architecture:
Dramatic increase in number and range of objects people made and used
Neolithic potting 2 stages:
Experimental encounter (casual attempts- few make 1 or 2 simple design, irregular construction, uneven firing
The first potters- experience in locating, gathering and processing other raw materials- plants for food and medicine, mood-altering substances. These abilities were special skills. Special meanings. The first pots were non-functional Evoked the magical and otherworldly- Ceramic Practitioners: Magicians, shamans and respected or feared possessors of special knowledges
Longer phase- elaboration of forms, techniques and uses- when ceramic technology stabilized. Cooking, storage, transportation, display- now preferred material for container technology. Pots had also become social objects: important roles in feasting and exchange and in expressions of group and individual identities. Carried messages of status and imagery

Creating a permanent medium/ from impermanent. Perishable/durable are significant material and spirituals transitions

Ceramic most important for of material culture, others as well?:
Stone (ground and flaked) axes, scrapers, blades, grinders
Animal bone- spoons, scrapers,
Animal horn- digging sticks, shaft-hole axes, adzes, hammers, pound Containers- woven plants, gourds, wood
Leather straps and coverings
Net bags, textile clothing, rugs and wall coverings

Increase in objects: documents new ways of living
Of people and possessions
Of increased scales of production and consumption
Of technological evolution
Of collection and hoarding
But also of giving, receiving and sharing
New paradigms of living
They are all consequences of the marking out of space

Expressive New Material Culture
Anthropomorphic Figurines- example of new, permanent, expressive objects
Materials had consequences for the ways in which people acted out who they were and what they intended as their relationships with others
Potent mechanisms with which people and their communities negotiated and contested their lives and their relationships

Treatment of the Dead
In the Southeast European Neolithic (The Balkans)
Deposition of the deceased closely tied to occupations and meanings of building and village space
The predominance of children’s burials is striking
For all ages and both sexes: the range of grave goods were limited
Pots and bone or shell beads
By the 5th millennium: important developments in mortuary ritual evident
Adults buried with larger number and more exotic grave goods
Men buried with more exotic grave goods and special objects than wo. Dislocation of death from the village and living spaces

Status and power relationships: “people listened”
1. cemetery-centered, publicly expressed, ceremonial statements
2. house- and village- focused private, quieter versions of reality
cenotaphs (often misunderstood)- mock burials at times when the need for reaffirmation of status was the greatest

Plants and Animals
Pre-Neolithic- hunting and distribution of meat from large-bodied animal:
    Important mechanisms:
        Of group aggregation
        For individuals to express status, identity and power
Meat sources changing- smaller- dogs, goats, pigs
Size of groups based on meat determines size of household

Socio-Politics
House, household, village, cemetery, object- key social institutions
If the Balkan Neolithic- defined by incorporation and exclusion-
    Expressing of identities

What are the key institutions of socialization today?
Family, education, media 1990
Are they in that same order today?
What about Renaissance Italy?

Figurines and their links to the key phenomena
General understanding of Balkan Neolithic context
What can we say about anthropomorphic figurines?
1. One of many categories of things through which people expressed, maintained, negotiated and contested identities and realities
2. They were made of a new durable, transformative and perhaps transgressive material
3. One of a number of different, particularly expressive, materials
4. With one major exception, figurines were used and consumed in houses or at the very least within the boundaries of the village space; their absence from burials is conspicuous
5. Appeared w/in a period during which critically important questions were continually being sked about who people were, where people belonged, and about what relationships existed between individuals and among groups
This book is meant to address these matters

*Previous approaches to figurines*
Highlight challenges facing figurine research and suggest how to move forth

*Previous approaches to figurines*
Present trend in figurine research is historiographic:
To research not the figurines themselves but to examine:
  1. studies of figurines
  2. schools of interpretation
  3. proposed interpretations
Many analyses concentrate on:
  Goddess interpretations
  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, items used in initiation ceremonies, contracts, territory and identity markers
Few attributions of function offer substantive argument to support interpretations. Many avoid explicit discussion of preferred assumption
Authors provide seamless interpretations- readers are not given the opportunity to trace the way that data joins with particular interpretations.

*A special rhetoric*
Figurines possess strange attractive powers that seduce and overwhelm archaeologists and editors
Disproportionately large proportions of published volumes to the presentation of Neolithic figurines
This is essentialist rhetoric (no need for explicit justification)

*Empirical solutions*  
*antonym of theoretical*
scientific examination, description and measurement
numbers, tables, illustrations

*Critical questions*
What makes an object a figurine?
When is something simply an oddly shaped stone, bone or lump of clay and when is it a representation?
When is that representation anthropomorphic?
What is a representation and what are the cognitive or political significances and consequences of making representations?
What of viewing representations?
Of handling them?
When is an anthropomorph a representation of a man and when of a woman?
When of a child?
When of an animal?
Are these categories exclusive?
Are they significant?

Moving forward
no interpretation unsatisfying because they ask only of:
typology and chronology
gender balance
rosters of pantheons

Two primal distinctions- Mary Douglass, Julia Kristeva

Representing Females
1. Leroy McDermott and Catherine McCoid- transformed our understanding of Upper Palaeolithic Venus figurines
Approaches the material from the point of view of the person who made the objects.
Correlation between venus figurines and the view that women had of their own body
Status of image shifts:
from a sexualized representation viewed by another
to a self-conception of both subject and object
Consequences- understand the emergence and manipulation of self, identity and personality
How did people in the Paleolithic/Neolithic conceptualize themselves?
As objects? As beings?
How did representations of the human form reshape prehistoric ideas of what it is to be human?
What are the consequences of taking account who is looking and why?
What are the consequences of thinking about who is being looked and why?
How can we re-define figures if we think more deeply in terms of the visual and the roles that the spectator plays and if we examine the power relationships that develop around acts (and mechanisms) of being looked at?
What are the politics of looking and of being seen?
Of wanting to be seen?
To be seen in a particular way?
To possess particular characteristics of form and of material essence?

2. Gunnar and Randi Haaland
Is a figurine a direct reflection of actual being, whether it is human or divine?
Critiques Gimbutas and the Mother Goddess movement
Attacks two assumptions
  a. that a predominance of images of women in a society reflects females holding dominant social positions
  b. is a characteristic of matriarchic societies
Ethnographic studies among the Fur in western Sudan-
Abundance of female imagery- it can’t be read as a reflection of female dominance
Clearly it would be possible somewhere to find this
The interesting issues are this:
  a. The relationship between sexed imagery and community power structures exists at all
  b. It is more frequently expressed and manipulated through images of women and not of men
Why does female imagery work this way?
Why do female symbols possess the potential to evoke particular kinds of associations?
What may figurines say about human relationships?
Why does an imagery modeled on attributes of the female body convincingly express ways of engaging these relationships?
Distinguish: what a figurine is an image of? and ask what is an image for?
To ask the second question demands that we accept that figurines are active material representations and that there is an inherent potential within such material to affect people and their perceptions of reality.

3. Susan Langdon
Suggests that asymmetries in the number of male and female figurines reveal new strategic uses of gender to validate imbalances in male and female roles in the development and participation in IronAge cult.

81% are male

Male figures depicted in greater range of activities than females: herding animals to sacrifice, drawing back a bow, working at metal-smithing. Female activities are more passive: standing or holding a pot - more static.

Between 1000-7000 BC religion assumed a greater symbolic value. New cults founded and existing ones reorganized.

Number of bronze offerings at sanctuaries increased.

Langdon argues that bronze anthropomorphic figurines played a role in revising and communicating gender definitions and norms for religious and cult activities. Figures were used aggressively to propose and reinforce a male domination of religious development.