Diversity of the Upper Paleolithic "Venus" Figurines and Archeological Mythology

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ABSTRACT

Meanings attributed to Upper Paleolithic female figurines in the past have been based on the assumption that they are all alike in important ways. Attention is called here to the diversity of the figurines, and possible alternative interpretations.

Among the earliest depictions of human beings, dating back to perhaps 30,000 years ago, are small figurines of nude females, which are found across a broad belt in Europe from the Pyrenees in southern France to the Don river in the USSR, with outliers in Siberia. Every anthropologist is familiar with these Upper Paleolithic "Venus" figurines. They are used to titillate freshman classes, and photographs or drawings, especially of the figurines from Willendorf and Dolni Vestonice, routinely enliven introductory textbooks.

Current trends in literary criticism lean toward deconstruction of "texts," in which both words and situations may serve as the text for analysis. In this chapter I would like to deconstruct some texts in a narrower sense, using the example of the Venus figurines to demonstrate that introductory textbooks of archaeology and physical anthropology produce gender metaphors which, by ignoring much of the scholarship on the figurines, reaffirm the folk model of gender preferred by our culture.

FIGURINE DESCRIPTIONS

The figurines themselves have only gender in common. They are diverse in shape, in pose, in the somatic details depicted, and in ornamentation (Soffer 1988, Fleury 1926, Abramova 1967, Luquet 1926, Delporte 1979). They seem to represent
differences in age as well (Rice 1981). Yet the textbooks tend to represent the figurines as all the same, and then to leap from this purported sameness to a supposed function for all figurines over their 3000 mile and perhaps 10,000 year spread (Soffer [1988], although Gamble [1986, 1987] asserts that most figurines fall within a 2000 year range). We need to explore this phenomenon of perceiving sameness in the diverse figurines, and ask why it occurs.

The texts our students read describe the figurines and frequently ascribe a function to them. There is little indication in the bibliographies that the authors of the texts have read any primary sources about the figurines, or that they are conversant with the rich literature which explores the variation in both the figurines themselves and the possible meanings and functions of the figurines. Rather, it seems that a kind of folklore is repeated, a folklore of the anthropology profession, too well known to require documentation.

The textbooks utilized in this study represent an unsystematic nonrandom sample - all that happen to be on my bookshelves, supplemented with those of my colleagues. Of 20 introduction to archeology or archeology and physical anthropology textbooks thus examined, eight concentrate on methodology and do not mention the figurines, while the other twelve contain cursory remarks on one to three pages. It is these twelve texts which constitute the study sample.

Table 1 shows the distribution of what is written regarding the physical characteristics of the figurines. Six of the textbooks mention exaggerated sexual characteristics as a prominent feature, whether or not they specify which traits are meant. The most common feature to be singled out is the breasts, described as "large," "generous," or "pendulous." All but one of the texts characterize the figurines as having either exaggerated sexual characteristics or large breasts, and four include both. Buttocks are mentioned five times, once described as "protruding," while hips, once with the adjective "broad," are specified three times. Only one author mentions both, showing that he makes a distinction between hips and buttocks. We are left to guess whether these terms are intended to refer to hindquarters in general in the other cases, or whether one set of authors indeed has protruding buttocks in mind (i.e., steatopygia), and the other really means broad hips (i.e., steatomeria) (Boule and Valois 1957:318). In one confusing case, an illustration of Willendorf, without a trace of steatopygia but with undoubted steatomeria, is pictured side by side with a Khoi-San woman, of whom the reverse is clearly the case - that is, protruding buttocks without broad hips (Campbell 1988:508).

The assertion that pregnancy is depicted in the figurines occurs in the textbook sample three times, and one additional author points out the exaggerated "belly," allowing him the satisfying alliteration of "breasts, belly, and buttocks." Three of the authors describe the figurines as fat. The only author to refrain from asserting or implying fatness does not describe the figurines at all, but contents himself with an illustration of Willendorf (Pfeiffer 1985:203). Reading these descriptions, one would suppose that the Willendorf statuette, easily the most familiar, was typical or normal or modal. Instead, it is one of the least stylized and the most obese - referred to in another context with admiration as representing "resplendent endomorphy" (Beller 1977:78).

The generalizations in the textbooks do some violence to the facts. Few of the statuettes represent gross obesity, and some are quite slender (Fig. 1). Even the first figurines found in the 1890s were classified by Piette into svelte and obese classes (Delporte 1979:73). Half a century ago Passemar (1938) examined all the then-known figurines to see whether they were steatopygous, a description quite popular at that time, and came to the conclusion that most were not. Saccasyn della Santa (1947:9-13) reviewed the literature on the figurines again, and also concluded that they were not meant to represent steatopygia.

An unpublished statistical study of the variation in body shapes made 22 measurements on each figurine for which both frontal and profile photographs could be found - 24 measurable figurines in all. The statuettes sorted into distinct groups of 10 obese (wide hips and thick body), 3 steatopygous (protruding buttocks), and 11 normal (Nelson n.d.). Another study shows that only 39 percent of these figurines could
### TABLE 1
Description of Figurines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Sexual</th>
<th>Abdomen</th>
<th>Breast</th>
<th>Buttocks</th>
<th>Hips</th>
<th>Pregnant</th>
<th>Fat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barnouw (1978)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbell (1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chard (1975)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark (1977)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>(thighs)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddy (1984)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagan (1986)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hester &amp; Grady (1982)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurmain et al. (1981)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pfeiffer (1985)</td>
<td>(stylized)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poirier (1987)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith (1976)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenke (1984)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
possibly represent pregnancy, slightly over half (55 percent) have pendulous breasts, 45 percent have broad hips, and 13 percent have protruding buttocks. Twenty-two percent have none of these characteristics, (Nelson and Bibb n.d.). Bodyshapes depicted in the figurines have been divided into three or four categories by intuitive studies as well, such as those by Fleury (1926), Abramova (1967), and Luquet (1926).

Rice (1981) has suggested that this variability in body shape reflects different age groups, and has shown that different body characteristics can be so interpreted, with a high correlation between ratings. The distribution of the figurines in these age categories corresponds to the expected age pyramid for foraging societies.

Failure to acknowledge the variability of the figurines makes it easier to produce sweeping generalizations about their probable meaning or function. This is evident in the textbook interpretations. By far the most common function ascribed to the figurines is that of "fertility" (Table 2), specifically so designated in seven of the 12 texts, and called "procreation" and "maternity" by one text each. This ascription is usually

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**FIGURE 1**

Slender figurines from a: Petrokovi e, Czechoslovakia; b: Elisevitchi, USSR; and c: Sireul, France.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Fertility</th>
<th>Goddess/Cult</th>
<th>Erotic</th>
<th>Artistic/Stylized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barnouw (1978)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbell (1988)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chard (1975)</td>
<td>rejects</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark (1977)</td>
<td>x(maternity)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddy (1984)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagan (1986)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hester &amp; Grady (1982)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jurmain et al. (1981)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Pfeiffer (1985)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poirier (1987)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith (1976)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenke (1984)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
not explained at all, or weakly expressed at best. For example, "It seems unlikely that Upper Paleolithic women actually looked like that, but perhaps it was an ideal type or expressed a wish for fertility" (Barnouw 1978:176). Apparently in conjunction with the fertility function is the idea of a "cult" or "Mother Goddess," since the five authors who use one or both of these expressions attach them to the fertility notion. Only one author rejects fertility as an explanation, on the grounds that hunters are not concerned with human fertility. Rather he explicitly suggests that the figurines are erotic: "Pleistocene pinup or centerfold girls" (Chard 1975:182).

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

The brief descriptions and interpretations of the female figurines contain and to some extent conceal unexamined assumptions about gender. Among them are: that the figurines were made by men, that the figurines were made for men, that nakedness is necessarily associated with eroticism, and that depiction of breasts is primarily sexual.

Underlying the description of the female figurines as erotic or reproductive is a masculist construction of the world, in which females are assumed to exist primarily for the use of males, sexually or reproductively. The scholarly literature is replete with explicit examples of this worldview, which the textbooks reflect.

A few quotations from the scholarly literature will demonstrate that males are usually assumed to be the sculptors of the figurines. The italics are mine throughout. "How did the artist's vision, which reflected the ideal of his time, see her? For as with man, we can never know what she really looked like...so we have to make do with the version her companion, man, had of her" (Berenguer 1973:48). The possibility that it was her version appears not to have crossed Berenguer's mind. Although this mindset focuses on males exclusively, it is not confined to males only, as shown from this quote from a woman, "He [the artist] desired only to show the female eroticly and as the source of all abundance - in her he portrayed not woman but fertility" (Hawkes 1964:27). Referring to the not uncommon find of broken-off legs, Campbell (1982:410) suggests that "they may have cracked off in the baking, or when the ancient ceramicist tossed aside a work that failed to please him." (Most of the figurines of course are carved.) In case there is any doubt about the use of the specific rather than the generic use of the term "man", Leroi-Gourhan (1967:90) makes it crystal clear that "prehistoric man" doesn't include females, speaking of "the first figurines representing prehistoric man - or at least his wife."

If the figurines are assumed to have been made by men, then it follows that they were created for male purposes. Even when they were first discovered, the Abbé Breuil (1954, cited in Ucko and Rosenfeld 1973:119) said they were for "pleasure to Paleolithic man during his meals" (do we have a euphemism here?). Berenguer (1973:52) focuses on reproductivity: "we may deduce man's obsessive need for women who would bear him lots of children to offset the high mortality rate caused by the harsh living conditions." Von Königswald worried about other possessions, "It certainly is an old problem: how could man protect his property, mark a place as 'his home', 'his living site' so that others would recognize and respect it, especially in a period where there were no houses, just abris and caves?" He concludes that men made the "grotesque" figurines to guard their property, and scare off intruders! Delporte (1979:308) muses more philosophically, "for [paleolithic men] as for us ... the mother who gives and transmits life is also the woman who gives and shares pleasure: could the paleolithic have been insensitive to this novel duality?" [my translation]. Could the present be insensitive to the fact that there were paleolithic women as well as men? Are women to be denied their own sensitivity, or indeed their own existence as sentient beings?

The fact that the figurines were unclothed, or scantily clothed, for several wear belts and other decorations (a fact that is noted only by Clark [1977:105] among our textbook sample), surely has been essential to the interpretation of eroticism, in spite of the fact that there are many other possible reasons for the depiction of nudity. For example, people may have been usually unclothed inside the cave or hut, so that nakedness was not a special condition. The
Figurines could have been teaching devices for girls' puberty rites, as Marshack (1972:283) has suggested.

Nakedness frequently has different connotations when men rather than women are the sculptor's subject. For example, a naked male torso from Harappa is shown under the heading "Figures of Authority," in *The First Cities*, a widely used book from the Time-Life series (Hamblin 1973:133). The text tells us:

Although male figures rarely appear among sculptures dug up at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the few that do all seem to represent men of importance. In the three works reproduced here, there is a common theme, however varied the pieces themselves may be: regality or godliness.

As Conkey and Spector (1985:11) point out in another context, changing the rules of interpretation according to sex will not reveal anything about prehistoric gender roles. Rather it comforts us in supposing that things have always been the same.

In spite of being naked, however, it would seem that the fat figurines have little sex appeal to modern male scholars. This has called forth various explanations, ranging from assertions that they are stylized, to a suggestion that you cannot tell what might have turned on those prehistoric men (you can almost see the shrug and the wink), to a rejection of the erotic argument on the grounds that the figurines are simply too grotesque! In all of this discussion, passivity of women is assumed.

Alternative explanations, based on variability rather than generalizations, are not lacking in the scholarly literature. The figurines have been argued to represent priests or ancestors or clan-mothers, to show women as actors with a ritual function (Klima 1962:204, Abramova 1967:83, Hancar 1940). These possibilities are not even hinted at in the texts, with one sole exception (Campbell 1988:481).

**Archeological Mythology**

What are the possible reasons for the selective reporting found in the textbooks? First, to be fair, is the summary nature of the texts. Little space is given to the figurines, and it is necessary to paint a broad picture with a few strokes. But the selection of this particular way of viewing the Upper Paleolithic figures as fat, as sexual, and as representing fertility, can be linked to our own cultural stereotypes and assumptions about the nature of men, women, sexuality, and reproduction. I suggest that our own culture makes these generalizations seem so natural, so satisfying, that there is no reason to examine them. The "text" read into the figurines is ours.

Several archeologists have commented on the problems of reading our unconscious assumptions about the present into the past. "History and prehistory constitute bodies of knowledge used to legitimize social policies and to validate social trajectories" (Moore
FIGURE 2
"Rod with breasts" from Dolni Vestonice, Czechoslovakia.
This tendency has been traced to the dominant paradigm in archeology: "Because of the logic of empiricist epistemology, theories rising on empiricist foundations potentially serve only to recreate in the past the dominant cultural ideologies of the present" (Saitta 1983:303). We must recognize "the importance of taking into account the conceptions we hold of our own society which inevitably mediate our understanding of the past" (Miller and Tilley 1984:2).

Recent research on gender roles in cultural anthropology proposes that "male and female, sex and reproduction, are cultural or symbolic constructs" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:6). These constructs are often reflected in origin stories as "metaphors for sexual identity" (Sanday 1981:56), which Sanday calls "scripts." I am suggesting that culturally constructed gender roles, and our attitudes and beliefs about sex and reproduction, enter into the selectivity of reporting on the Upper Paleolithic figurines. The reading of the metaphors of the figurines derives from a masculist script.

I do not wish to impute either evil intentions or inferior scholarship to the authors of these textbooks. It is important to note the unconscious nature of the acceptance of cultural scripts. But that does not make them less pernicious. Reinforcing present cultural stereotypes by projecting them into the past allows whole generations of students to believe that our present gender constructs are eternal and unchanging. Especially those who deal in prehistory need to be alert to our cultural biases, and not imply that present gender roles are external verities.

Marvin Harris points out that "our ordinary state of mind is always a profoundly mystified consciousness . . . To emerge from myth and legend to mature consciousness we need to compare the full range of past and present cultures" (Harris 1974:5). The trick is to examine the past without the mystification.

I am not proposing that alternative explanations are necessarily better, only that the diversity of the figurines should be taken into account. Maybe women made some of the figurines. Maybe the figurines were used for women's purposes. Maybe it isn't relevant whether men find them sexy or not. If an explanation feels intuitively right, perhaps that is the best reason to reexamine it.

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