Introduction to Neolithic Figurine Art

INTRODUCTION

The first signs of experimental cultivation of plants and domestication of animals, which marked the beginning of the Neolithic Age, were associated with the Epipalaeolithic hunters of the ninth millennium in Syria-Palestine. During the eighth millennium the new productive activities were well instituted and then expanded, possibly by means of some primary trade. So, in the seventh millennium Neolithic communities have spread in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, up to Southern Palestine. In the course of the sixth and fifth millennia these Neolithic cultures have been attested to the rest of the Balkans and to Southeastern Europe as well as in North Africa.

Although chronology is (and seemingly will be for some time to come) very confusing, no archaeometrical method has yet redefined irrevocably the boundaries between the Pleistocene and the Holocene (± 10,000 B.P.). For that reason chronological frames used in this study are based on the $^{14}$C lower half-life.

The first goal of this study is the presentation of the figurine material and its incorporation in the Neolithic cultural background (in regions presenting the earliest traces of Neolithic habitation, such as the Near and Middle East, Asia Minor, Cyprus, North Africa, the Balkans and S-E Europe).

The second goal concerns the interpretation of the figurine art on the basis of the author’s new methodological approach.
CHAPTER 1

THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND
On the basis of archaeological data mentioned, the progressive spread of the Neolithic in the Eastern Mediterranean and Southeastern Europe is sketched as follows:

Although the first known Neolithic culture is traced in the area of the Near and Middle East at the beginning of the ninth millennium, organised Neolithic habitation is only attested from about the middle of the eighth millennium onwards. It is then that the Saharan Neolithic culture, of unknown provenance, takes shape in the Tassili and Akakous mountains as well as the Messak-Fezzan.
By the seventh millennium some evidence for a Neolithic way of life is confirmed in Greece and Cyprus. From now on, evolving of this culture will clearly differentiate it from that of the Near East and form distinct cultural-geographical entities.
From the early sixth millennium onwards the Aceramic Neolithic and then the Early Neolithic of Greece take shape independently, contributing to the further development of the Neolithic of the Balkans and Southeastern Europe, which is divided into two major cultural streams, one in the Central Balkans and the other on the Adriatic coast.
• During the fifth millennium cultural developments first in Greece and then in the rest of the Balkans, possibly due to a wave of immigration from Asia Minor, leads to the emergence of the Middle Neolithic. Thus the Linear Pottery Culture is created (second half of the same millennium), which in its turn affects the formation of the Neolithic of Central Europe and of the steppes northwest of the Black Sea.

• Around the end of the fifth millennium the Neolithic way of life is introduced in Egypt (possibly through the Sinai Peninsula), where it develops into the Faiyum culture.
• In the early fourth millennium influences between the cultural groups of the Danube regions and the Mediterranean are attested.

• In the late fourth millennium elements from the steppes to the west of the Black Sea intrude into the Carpathian basin and expand up to Northern Europe, contributing to the creation of many regional cultural complexes of the Early Chalcolithic.
• In the first half of the third millennium, in the Balkans as well as the Carpathian basin, there are Middle Chalcolithic cultures bearing influences from both the Pontic steppes and the Bronze Age of the North Aegean. By about the second half of the third millennium the Balkans and Southeastern Europe pass to the late Chalcolithic period under continuous influences from the Aegean.
CHAPTER 2
THE TECHNIQUES OF FIGURINE MODELLING
• Figurines made from one lump of clay
• Figurines with internal core
Hollow figurines
DECORATION
Incised or Impressed
Painted
Plastic
Mixted
Figurines with coloured slip
CHAPTER 3

SOUTHERN BALKANS:
GREECE
MACEDONIA AND THRACE

Sitagroi: clay beak-nose head (LN)

Sitagroi: clay masked (?) head (LN)

Sitagroi: lower half of clay sitting female (LN)

Paradimi: clay head (LN)
Ear studs from Thessaly
a) Aceramic Neolithic
b) Ancient Neolithic

Pear-shaped clay figurine from Argissa (EN?)
Clay standing female figurine from Prodromos (EN)

Clay sitting female figurine from Thessaly (EN)

Seated male figurine from Pyrassos (EN)

Clay male figurine of “thinker” from Magoula Mataranga, near Karditsa (EN)

Sitting female figurine from Farsala (MN)
Clay head from Nessonis with bronchocele of the thyroid

Clay painted head from Achilleion

Child’s head with Down Syndrome from Prodromos (EN)
THESSALY

Thessalian figurines rendering scenes of the everyday life
  a) Domenico (EN)
  b) Prodromos (EN)

Female figurine from Magoula Panagou (Chara) in labour position
THESSALY

Expressive clay head (possibly MN)

Female clay head with elaborate hairdo (possibly MN)

Female painted head (MN)
THESSALY

Female painted “kourotrofos” figurine from Sesklo (LN)

Male ithyphallic seated figurine from Larissa (LN)

Acroliths from a) Rachmani b) Assimochoma, with beautiful painted decoration (LN)

Marble schematic figurine from Bei Magoula (LN)
THESSALY

Clay house model from Krannon (MN)

Clay house model from Plateia Magoula Zarkou (LN)
MAINLAND GREECE AND EUBOEA

Marble female figurine from Eleusis (EN)
Clay painted female figurine from Chaeroneia (MN)
Female figurine from the Sarakinos Cave in Boeotia (LN)
Female stone figurine from Aigina
MAINLAND GREECE AND EUBOEA

Clay head from Elateia in Boeotia (EN?MN)

Clay head from Tharrounia in Euboea (LN)

Part of storing vase with human figurines in relief, from Tharrounia in Euboea (LN)
PELOPONNESE

Marble standing female figurine from Sparta (EN)

Clay standing female figurine from Lerna (MN)

Clay painted female figurine from Franchthi (LN)
PELOPONNESE

Clay naturalistic head from Korinth (LN)

Clay head with plastically rendered hairdo from Korinth (LN)
Clay sitting figurine from Sangri, Naxos

Clay sitting female figurine from Saliagos (LN) called “The Fat Lady of Saliagos”

Schematic clay figurine from Saliagos (LN)
Clay figurine parts from Agios Petros, Sporades

Clay head from Agio Galas, Chios, bearing strong anatolian influences

Clay head from Ftelia, Mykonos (LN)

Clay head from Kefala, Keos (LN)
Clay sitting female from Ierapetra, Crete (EN;)
CHAPTER 4

THE EVOLUTION OF FIGURINE ART IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, NORTHERN BALKANS AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

A. SYRIA-PALESTINE

The earliest (Natufian- 9th mill) figures of this region were stone or unbaked clay, naturalistic representations of animals, found in or around graves. Human figures have no genitalia even in the unique case of a representation of sexual intercourse. Bone pendants with two lobes possibly render male genitalia. These figurines are often unbaked and sometimes bear traces of red ochre.

Although some figurines found in PPNA (Pre-pottery Neolithic A- 8th mill) levels presage the future emphasis of the buttocks, a well defined female schematic female type will appear only from the 7th mill on (Pre-pottery Neolithic B).

Characteristic of the PPNB (Pre-pottery Neolithic B- late 8th and 7th mill) is the introduction of male figures (and male symbolisms), which coexist with female and animal ones. Pebbles in niches, schematic cone-headed figurines of both sexes with big round eyes made of unbaked clay as well as stick-like standing figurines with round flat faces bearing large clay pellets for the eyes and nose are also characteristic of the period. In some cases headless figures of natural size have been used as supports for plastered skulls. However, big intact figures (with a head) seem to have been used as real statues, while a group of about thirty statues (35 to 90 cm) with impressive coloured decoration and possibly inlaid hair have been found in a pit. It is unknown whether humans or gods were represented by those particular figurines, but the characteristic series of naturalistic stone masks from the South (Hebron and Nahal Hemar) were probably apotropaic and made for ritual use: They had round hollow eyes, a protruding nose and a half-open mouth with incised teeth. Side holes were made for their attachment, while traces of a dark sticky substance were witnesses of inlaid hair. A stone necklace from Jericho seems to be a miniature model of such a mask.

From the Early Ceramic Neolithic period (first half of the 6th mill) onwards clay figurines displayed influences from the Hassuna material, hence the modelling of conical or atrophic heads and the virtually breastless bodies. Nevertheless, most of the figurines were anthropomorphic pebbles reminding of the Natufian material.

A distinctive type of the Middle Neolithic levels (mid-5th mill) was the ‘Terrible Mother’, in which the intentional high degree of exaggeration (based on specific rules) resulted in ugly disfigurement creating an apparently demonic character.

Animal representations had secondary importance and followed the Aceramic tradition.

Chalcolithic figurine art of Jordan, of unknown origin, has been influenced by its neighbouring cultures in various periods (i.e. Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, but also Syria/Palestine and possibly the Aegean).
CHAPTER 4

MESOPOTAMIA
Female clay figurines from Tepe Sarab
Female alabaster figurines from the Tell es – Sawwan I και II cemeteries, with inlaid eyes and head gear made from asphalt. The necklace is made of turquoise beads (Samarra culture)
Male hollow clay figurine with painted decoration from Tell es - Sawwan
(Samarra culture)
Clay figurine heads from Choga Mami (Samarra culture)
Clay painted figurines of Halaf culture

(a) Tell Halaf I / (b) Tell Arpachiyah/ (c) και (d) Chagar Bazar/
Clay painted figurine from Tepe Gawra
(Northern Ubaid culture)

Clay figurine from Ur
(Southern Ubaid culture)
CHAPTER 4

ASIA MINOR
Clay female figurines from Catal Huyuk
Clay figurines from Catal Huyuk

Twin figures from Catal Huyuk
Seated goddess with leopards from Catal Huyuk
Clay female figurines from Hacilar
Clay female figurines from Hacilar

(a) with child  (b) with animal
CHAPTER 4

CYPRUS
Anthropomorphic andesite heads from Choirokitia, with holes for earrings (?) (Neolithic I)
Figurine made of andesite from Choirokitia
(Neolithic II)
Unique stone figurine of sitting female with phallus shaped head from Sotira-Teppes (Neolithic II)
CHAPTER 4

EGYPT
Characteristic figurines from Egypt (pin figures)
CHAPTER 4

NORTHERN BALKANS
SOUTH EAST EUROPE
Stone figurine from Lepenski Vir II with features recalling a fish (AN)

“Kouroatrofos” figurine from Gradac in central Yugoslavia (Vinca culture- MN)

Clay figurine from Crnocalacka Bara in S-E Yugoslavia (Vinca culture- MN)
Clay figurine of a sitting female, called “The Great Goddess of Hamangia”, from the Cernavoda cemetery in East Romania (Hamangia culture – MN). The figurine has been found together with the “Thinker” of the next picture.

Clay male seated figurine, called “The Thinker” or “The Sad God”, from the Cernavoda cemetery in East Romania (Hamangia culture – MN).
Female clay figurine in labour position from Medvendjak near Beograd (Vinca culture- MN)

Clay female sitting figurine with incised and impressed decoration for the rendering of garments and jewels, from Carsija in central Yugoslavia (Vinca culture- MN)
Clay sitting figurine, called “The Sad God of Tirpesti” from Moldavia (Precucuteni II-III culture - LN)

Seated female figurine holding a shallow vase, from Bordjos in North Yugoslavia (Tisza culture – LN)
Clay seated male figurine from Szegvar Tuzkoves in Hungary (Tisza culture – LN)

Figurine of seated pregnant woman, with incised decoration marking belly and pubis, from Kolekovats on central Bulgaria (LN)
Clay figurine with incised decoration, characteristic to Cucuteni culture from North Moldavia (Chalcolithic).

Clay shrine model from Popudnia, in West Ukrania, including oven, hearth, vases and a figurine (Cucuteni culture late phases-Chalcolithic).
Figurine of a resting dog from Pietrele in South Romania (Karanovo VI- Gumelnita culture - Chalcolithic)

Flat schematic bone female figurine with marked pubis, from Lovets in Bulgaria (Karanovo VI- Gumelnita culture - Chalcolithic)
Seated clay female figurine, called «The Lady of Pazardzik», from the so-called site in central Bulgaria (Karanovo VI- Gumelnita culture - Chalcolithic)

“The lovers of Gumelnita”: clay figurine complex from the so-called site, possibly rendering a sacred marriage (Karanovo VI- Gumelnita culture - Chalcolithic)
CHAPTER 4

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
NORTHERN BALKANS
SOUTH EAST EUROPE
SYRIA - PALESTINE
• The earliest (Natufian- 9th mill) figures of this region were often unbaked clay naturalistic representations of animals or schematic renderings of humans, found in or around graves. Human figures have no genitalia even in the unique case of a representation of sexual intercourse. Bone pendants with two lobes possibly render male genitalia. These figurines often made of unbaked clay, rarely bear traces of red ochre.

• Schematic females found in PPNA (Pre-pottery Neolithic A- 8th mill) levels presage the future emphasis of the buttocks. From PPNB onwards a very schematic femamale figure will appear in Ras Shamra and Tell Ramad.
Complex of two figures in sexual intercourse from Ain Sakhri (Natufian culture)

Clay chamois from Beidha (Aceramic Neolithic)
• Characteristic of the PPNB (Pre-pottery Neolithic B- late 8th and 7th mill) is the introduction of male figures (and male symbolisms), which coexist with female and animal ones.

• Pebbles in niches, flat sexless figurines, schematic cone-headed figurines of unknown sex with big round eyes made of unbaked clay as well as stick-like standing figurines with round flat faces bearing large clay pellets for the eyes and nose are also characteristic of the period.

• In some cases headless figures of natural size have been used as supports for plastered skulls. However big intact figures (with a head) seem to have been used as real statues, while a group of about thirty statues (35 to 90 cm) with impressive coloured decoration and possibly inlaid hair have been found in a pit. It is unknown whether humans or gods were represented by those particular figurines, but the characteristic naturalistic stone masks from the South, were probably apotropaic and made for ritual use.
Clay head from Tell Ramad III (PPNB)

Bone figures of bulls from Bouqras (PPNB)
Figurine from Munhata (PPNB)
Plastered skull from Jericho (PPNB)

Figurine of natural size from Ain Ghazal (PPNB)
A series of stone masks unearthed in South Syria/Palestine (Hebron and Nahal Hemar are characteristic to the PPNB period. Their round hollow eyes, their protruding nose and their half-open mouth bearing incised teeth are witnesses of their probably apotropaic character. Side holes were made for their attachment, while traces of a dark sticky substance are witnesses of inlaid hair. A stone necklace from Jericho seems to be a miniature model of such a mask.
Stone masks from Nahal Hemar (PPNB)
• From the **Early Ceramic Neolithic** period (first half of the 6th mill) onwards clay figurines displayed influences from the Hassuna material, hence the modelling of conical or atrophic heads and the virtually breastless bodies.
Figurine with characteristic head from Byblos (AN)
• A distinctive type of the Middle Neolithic levels (mid-5th mill) was the ‘Terrible Mother’, in which the intentional high degree of exaggeration (based on specific rules) resulted in ugly disfigurement creating an apparently demonic character.

• Animal representations had secondary importance and followed the Aceramic tradition.
The “Terrible Mother of Palestine: Figurines from Munhata and Tell Aviv
• Chalcolithic figurine art of Jordan, of unknown origin, has been influenced by its neighbouring cultures in various periods (i.e. Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, but also Syria/Palestine and possibly the Aegean).
## Chapter 5

### 1. The Problem of the Use of Figurines and the Basic Interpretational Theories

The use of figurines was initially based on the interpretation of Palaeolithic material, especially the so-called ‘Venuses’, which have been considered as a kind of portable shrine of a fertility divinity, as implied by the rendering of voluminous breasts and buttocks.

Henceforward, many interpretative attempts have been made, treating figurines as phenomena in a tight geographical or chronological frame. These interpretations are summed up below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEOLITHIC ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES INTERPRETATIVE THEORIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Expression of Religious Ideas about Fertility</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(“Mother Goddess”) (Evans 1921, Childe 1925, Crawford 1925,</td>
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<td>Mylonas 1928, Hawkes 1951 et al.)</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Multifunctional Objects</strong></td>
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<td>a) Dolls  b) Instructive objects  c) Bearers of sympathetic</td>
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<td>magic (Pumpelly 1908, Kenyon 1956, Ucko 1968 et al.)</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Objects Serving the Dead</strong></td>
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<td>(Hogarth 1927, Myres 1930 et al.)</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Symbols of Wishes</strong></td>
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<td>(Broman 1958, Theocharis 1973)</td>
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<td>5. <strong>Primitive Means of Social Communication</strong></td>
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<td>(Chourmouziadis 1973 et al.)</td>
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<td>6. <strong>Neolithic Pantheon Related to the Cycle of Life</strong></td>
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<td>(Parrot 1960, Gimbutas 1974 et al.)</td>
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<td>7. <strong>Portrayals of the Dead</strong></td>
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<td>(Karageorghis 1977)</td>
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<td>8. <strong>Symbols of Identity and Tokens of a Deal</strong></td>
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<td>(Talalay 1983)</td>
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<td>9. <strong>Amulets Whose Power is Not Related to the Sex of the Divinity Represented</strong></td>
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<td>(Papachatzis 1987 et al.)</td>
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AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF NEOlITHIC FIGURINES

Meticulous study of Greek figurine material and its comparison to that of its neighbouring areas in the broadest sense, has prompted a reassessment of the scientific approach of figurine art in view of its interpretation.

In my opinion, interpretation of figurines should be based on how often a naturalistic or schematic type is repeated along with comparison to figurines of various typologies.

I believe that the interpretative approach outlined extensively for the first time in the present volume and which may be called ‘Theory of Repetition’, is possible to be applied to any figurine material regardless of date, which should no longer be considered a major obstacle in the interpretative process.
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