

REPRESENTATIONS: FEMALE FIGURINES AND SOCIAL IDENTITY ON PROTOHISTORIC CYPRUS

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Introduction

How can archaeologists come to better understand issues related to gender and social identity on the basis of material culture? Shared social practices – imprinted in materials such as bodily ornaments, weapons, terracottas, utensils and tools – can be actively involved in expressing social identity and gender. Symbolically and materially, representations of people, divine beings, plants, animals and much more come together in archaeological contexts that conjoin architecture, ritual imagery, belief systems and gender constructs. The abstractions and representations of prehistoric people were not separate and intangible, but rather formed an integral part of the material aspects of their everyday life.

Using a selection of Late Bronze Age Cypriot female figurines whose iconography, form and function are quite different from those of their earlier Bronze Age or Chalcolithic counterparts, I consider the link between gendered representations and social identity. Bolger recently observed that as long as we continue to insist that these figurines represent deities, we shall never be able to consider alternative interpretations.¹ Most Late

Bronze Age figurines are dated to the Protohistoric Bronze Age 2 (ProBA 2, LC II) period; they portray nude females and other features seen on earlier examples. In this study, I focus specifically on the well-known bird-headed figurines (Type A) and their less avian (Type B) counterparts,² and consider whether these representations have anything to do with a deity rather than with other people – mothers, priestesses, dancers or celebrants – who lived and worked on protohistoric Cyprus.

Archaeologies of gender

As a basic organising principle of society, gender has come to serve as a key focus of archaeological analysis and interpretation.³ Sex and gender are fundamental to the ways that people work, dress and perform, and how they function in the family, household, social group and community. Gender also influences how people cope with authority, class, age and race; how they experience landscapes, space and place; how they make or modify their histories and construct their identities. Current archaeological research treats gender as a crucial aspect of a person's identity, and has re-conceptualised issues of sex, sexuality and the body

to examine women's and men's roles and statuses in the past. Informed by feminist theory, archaeologies of gender thus can help us to examine the material remnants of the past in their total social context, and thus to reintroduce people, their beliefs, their bodies and their sexuality – indeed their very identity – into a more coherent and reliable framework of understanding and interpretation.

How has Cypriot archaeology dealt with this wider vision of gender? Despite inauspicious beginnings, many Cypriot archaeologists have developed an abiding research interest in gender-related issues,⁴ and there are several other areas where this interest could be developed (e.g. textile production, the role of children and the life cycle, images of women on pottery and other media). Such conferences as the one where this paper was originally presented provide an optimum venue for such undertakings.

Gender imagery and representation

Issues related to gender imagery, representation and symbolism are no longer regarded as marginal pursuits in archaeology, nor are they prede-

terminated by the inherent nature of archaeological data. Representations of people, divinities, animals and artefacts found in archaeological contexts refer to everyday social practices, ideologies and ritual practices, gender constructs and social identity. No matter how abstract or realistic these representations of prehistoric people may seem to us, clearly they formed an integral part of the material factors of everyday life on protohistoric Cyprus.

Employing as examples several Late Bronze Age anthropomorphic figurines, in this paper I examine the links between gendered representations and social identity. Most scholars who have studied the function and meaning of these figurines presume that both the Type A and Type B figurines represent some sort of goddess (or goddesses) of fertility that was worshipped in sanctuaries, cultic buildings or even households, or else were placed in tombs as part of mortuary rituals.⁵ Along with Bolger,⁶ I suggest that we need to suspend such lines of interpretation in order to consider alternatives, and to see how these figurines might have figured in other, daily practices of life on prehistoric and protohistoric Cyprus.

The earliest, 'spindle shaped' figurines,⁷ dated to the ProBA 1 (MC III) period, are mainly Plain Ware but also include Red Slip and Black Polished examples. On the one hand, these hearken back to certain Red Polished and White Painted plank figurines of the PreBA (Fig. 1).⁸ On the other hand, they presage later ProBA styles and depict – in sharp contrast to the plank figurines – naked women with emphasised sexual features, hands positioned beneath the breasts, perforat-



Fig. 1. Red Polished ware 'plank' figurine with geometric patterns portraying distinctive body features and bodily ornamentation, Lapithos, Swedish Tomb 313A (PreBA 2).

(Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm. Inventory no. L. 313A:40 V. Karageorghis et al., *The Cyprus Collections in the Medelhavsmuseet* [Nicosia, Stockholm, 2003], p. 62, no. 51 [front and back])

ed ears and tight necklaces. Most of the Late Bronze Age figurines portray nude females and other features seen on the earlier examples, and most are dated to the ProBA 2 (LC II) period.⁹ They were manufactured in a fabric similar to Base-ring pottery, termed 'Brown ware'.¹⁰

ProBA female figurines

There are two basic types of figurine, Type A ('bird-faced') and Type B ('normal-faced'),¹¹ both of which are

also often dubbed 'Astarte' figurines and/or 'pubic triangle figurines'.¹² Although the Type A examples show stylistic affinities with Levantine Astarte figurines (e.g. naked females, hands on the body under the breasts, holding animal or floral motifs), both Merrillees and Karageorghis emphasize their wide distribution on the island and thus argue for a Cypriot origin.¹³ Budin also acknowledges their Cypriot origin, but adds that Type A figurines "... show clear derivation

from Near Eastern images that are explicitly divine”.¹⁴

The Type A figurines represent women with a small, beaked (bird-type) nose, vertically-placed ears and large ear-rings, arms placed on, below or between small pointed breasts, and genitals marked by (unpainted) incised or punctured patterns. One common variant (Type Aii or *kourotrophos*) holds an infant.¹⁵ There are 48 known examples depicted with an infant and 65 without.¹⁶ Budin notes some of the continuities with various PreBA female figurines, notably in the emphasis on incised decoration, prominent nose and ears, and on earlier tendencies toward three-dimensional portrayals and emphasized sexual attributes.¹⁷ The *kourotrophos* examples find some counterparts in the plank figures of the PreBA, but Morris feels that the earlier figurines are much more individualistic.¹⁸ More than one scholar has described these figurines as being very schematic,¹⁹ and Karageorghis finds their manufacturing technique and decoration so similar that he feels they must have been mass produced, perhaps reflecting some common religious beliefs.²⁰

Type B figurines have a form very similar to that of Type A, but stylistically they are quite different (Fig. 2).²¹ Perhaps modelled more on the style of Mycenaean tau, phi and psi painted figurines than on that of Levantine statuettes,²² the women are represented with triangular, flat-topped heads, pointed-down ears, painted facial features, pierced navels and occasionally painted genitals with incised or punctured patterns; only one example holds an infant.²³ These Type B figurines are commonly dated to the 13th century BC,²⁴ with conti-



Fig. 2. Type B, normal-faced, nude female figurine, Base-ring ware, from Enkomi Swedish Tomb 3, ProBA 2 (LC II). (Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm. Inventory no. E. 3:184 V. Karageorghis et al., *The Cyprus Collections in the Medelhavsmuseet* [Nicosia, Stockholm, 2003], p. 103, no. 106)

nity on a smaller scale into the 12th and perhaps even 11th centuries BC. Webb lists 100 standing examples, 20 seated examples, and 23 fragments of uncertain variety.²⁵

ProBA figurines: Context

Throughout the relevant literature, opinions on the contexts or findspots of all these figurines differ radically. Both Karageorghis and Orphanides, for example, maintain firmly that most Type A and B figurines were found in ProBA 2 (LC II) mortuary contexts.²⁶ Merrillees is less firm, and points out that all *kourotrophos* figurines “from controlled excavations” were found in tombs, with one exception.²⁷ Begg, whose stated aim was to conduct a contextual analysis of all LC II figurines, concluded that only 11 of his Type II (= ‘Astarte’) whole figurines were found in mortuary contexts, whilst 16 fragmentary examples were found in settlement contexts.²⁸ Courtois also listed several examples from settlement contexts at Enkomi.²⁹ Taking a broader view, Webb pointed out that Type A and B figurines accompany less than 5% of all LC II burials.³⁰ Keswani, without distinguishing between Type A or Type B examples, lists some examples from very high status tomb groups (e.g. Enkomi tombs B67, B93, B47), others from less sumptuous burials that nonetheless contain at least some high status goods (e.g. Enkomi tomb C19).³¹ Whilst Webb lists six examples from residual cult assemblages at Kouklia, Enkomi, Idalion and near Myrtou *Pigadhes*,³² Karageorghis states that none were found on the floors of ‘sanctuaries’.³³ On the basis of their paucity in ‘ritual’ contexts, Begg thought they might have been used as

personal charms,³⁴ but Webb responded that the more prominent use of these figurines in domestic contexts doesn't mean they weren't somehow related to deities "...worshipped in communal cult buildings".³⁵

The contradictory nature of these interpretations indicates that those who have studied the figurines most closely lack any consensus on either their contextual associations or their meaning and function in Late Cypriot society. The common notion that such figurines were manufactured as mortuary goods stems in part from the overwhelming funerary bias of the Cypriot archaeological record,³⁶ and in part from the fact that most earlier, PreBA 2 (plank) figurines with good provenance were recovered from burials.³⁷ Looking at the ProBA figurines as a whole,³⁸ it seems clear that they were used and discarded in settlements, but rarely in 'ritual' contexts, and not infrequently were deposited in (sometimes very wealthy) mortuary contexts. Thus they would have been used in life as well as in death, and may be regarded – at the very least – as valued possessions of those who owned them.

ProBA figurines: Function and meaning

As already noted, most scholars (excepting Bolger, Budin and Morris) have interpreted both Type A and Type B figurines as representing some sort of goddess (or goddesses) of fertility. In their detailed discussions and analysis of these figurines, both Webb and Budin also include the Bomford Figurine and other 13th–12th century BC nude bronze female figurines,³⁹ such as the one from Palaepaphos-*Teratsoudhia*.⁴⁰ Concerning the Bom-

ford Figurine, Catling's interpretation of it has proved to be central to all subsequent interpretations of these figurines as a class:⁴¹

I believe we should identify the Bomford statuette as the 12th century B.C. version of a long-established Cypriot female deity whose origins are ultimately to be found in the Near East. [...] In her Bronze Age manifestation, she was doubtless a goddess of fertility.

Bolger has harshly criticised such a notion, pointing out that even as the presumed consort of the illustrious Ingot God from Enkomi, she controls nothing except the possible productive output of the mines, and lacks any significant political or social position.⁴² Budin too testily disputes the association of this female image with fertility,⁴³ as well as Morris' more secular interpretation of these figurines as sexual playthings.⁴⁴ In her view, we either have a divinity whose sexuality is bound up with a good harvest, or a human representation whose sexuality provides a free pass to 'Nirvana'. For Budin, the ancient goddess she believes to be represented in these figurines embodies sexuality as power and pleasure, not as maternity and fecundity.

Whether any of these figurines represents a deity, however, remains a question that demands closer consideration and more focused contextual analysis. Bolger rightly insists that it is unacceptable to use modern religious concepts when discussing prehistoric Cypriot society,⁴⁵ or, I might add, to see temples in every distinctive ashlar structure, or to identify gods and god-

esses in every remarkable statuette.⁴⁶ Instead, such figurines should be interpreted in their spatial and social contexts, and we should acknowledge that social space, political (not religious) ideology and economic structures were intimately linked in prehistoric and protohistoric societies like that of Bronze Age Cyprus.

Like Bolger and Budin, who have their own reasons for dissenting from the mainstream interpretations of these figurines, I am concerned about an uncritical assumption made by almost everyone who has examined them. This is the assumption that both Types A and B represent a goddess of fertility, whether Astarte (and her variants) in the Levantine tradition, Hathor/Isis in the Egyptian tradition, or Ishtar/Inanna in the Mesopotamian tradition. Equally, I am sceptical that she might have been a precursor to or model for the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Like Bolger, I question whether most of these figurines represent a deity at all. The Bomford statuette, along with the bronze female figurine from *Teratsoudhia*, seem somewhat exceptional, rendered as they are in a different medium, fully modelled in the round, nude and with sexual attributes somewhat less explicit than those of the terracotta figurines. Budin emphasizes the sheer sexuality of the Bomford figurine as a corrective to those who emphasise only its fertility.⁴⁷

My own understanding of the Bomford figurine, however, remains firmly in the realm of the ideological rather than the sexual. Alongside the Ingot God from Enkomi, and a range of other ideological paraphernalia, I continue to believe that the Bomford statuette served as a representation

of the political elite of ProBA Cyprus, people who manipulated and legitimised their domination over copper production and exchange by adopting and using such socially charged symbols.⁴⁸ Whether they represent human beings or divine guardians, these striking metal figurines served as symbols of authority that helped to forge the urban expansion of the ProBA, and to establish the political position and social identity of a dominant elite class.

Discussion

Archaeologists working on Cyprus over the past century clearly have found ProBA figurines quite difficult to analyse as a class. They have attempted to distinguish between them contextually but are unclear whether they stem primarily from households, burials or ritual compounds. Similarly, they have interpreted these figurines in diverse and inconsistent ways. One of the most coherent discussions of the figurines as a group is that of Webb;⁴⁹ it is likely to remain so until somebody undertakes more focused contextual and quantitative research on them. Webb concludes that, prior to LC IIIB (and the onset of the Iron Age), no ProBA terracotta female images played a significant role in public cult: “Their low incidence in LC II residual assemblages [i.e. the Type A and B figurines] suggests no more than occasional use as votives”.⁵⁰ Because no anthropomorphic figurines of any type have been found in ‘sanctuaries’ thought to have been devoted to male divinities (Enkomi’s Horned God and Ingot God sanctuaries), Webb feels that the use of these figurines and the rituals they depict must have been restricted to the worship of one or more female deities.⁵¹

The increasing prominence of *psis*-type figurines (‘goddess with upraised arms’) in LC IIIB and Cypro-Geometric I contexts clearly signals a change in both the iconography and function of anthropomorphic figurines. By that time, both male and female representations may have played a more integral role in social and ritual practices, as human or divine representations of people involved in music and dance performances. Both Burgh and Kolotourou have discussed representations of several sexually ambiguous dancers and musicians on ceramic and ivory objects, in relief sculpture and on seals from the Bronze and Iron Age Levant, western Asia and Cyprus.⁵² Kolotourou discusses and illustrates tambourine and lyre players (from ProBA 3 through Cypro-Archaic 2), whose arms are extended to hold the instruments.⁵³ A shallow bronze bowl from 8th–7th century BC Idalion depicts a lyre player, a pipe player and a drummer, all similarly clothed with no apparent evidence of gender.⁵⁴ The drummer on this bowl, and in several of the other representations, is depicted with upraised arms, and one might suggest that such a gesture was meant to represent either drumming or clapping in a musical performance.

Current interpretations of the ProBA anthropomorphic female figurines raise more questions than answers about prehistoric gender, iconography and representational imagery. For example:

- How clearly or intentionally were these representations coded sexually?
- Who created them, and who used them?
- Did men and women see or use

these depictions differently?

- What kinds of gender information are broadcast by the gestures, postures, dress, ornamentation, size, media and colour used in these representations?
- Were certain sexed (or unsexed) figures reserved for use in designated domestic, public or ceremonial contexts?

We should no longer think of these human representations in simple sexual terms, and certainly we should not be assuming that all of them were somehow involved in unspecified and unknown ‘religious’ or ‘cultic’ practices. Although some males are represented, most ProBA figurines depict females. A more thorough and focused analysis would almost certainly reveal hybrids or more ambiguous, third gender representations, or images that moved in and out of traditional sexual categories. In other words, the ProBA figurines may have the same kind of multiple or ambiguous genders that we see in the PreBA and in earlier prehistoric contexts.

We also need to consider these figurines’ possible *performative* roles in ProBA Cypriot society.⁵⁵ Certainly they were produced, used and displayed in a variety of contexts, which itself argues against any single function or use. Representations of human or divine beings can serve to reinforce, transform or call into question a whole range of ideas, strategies or rules of social and ceremonial behaviour (e.g., a female rite of passage). Because homogeneity in form does not preclude heterogeneity in meaning or practice, these figurines may also convey multiple if not contradictory messages, depending on who made

them, who viewed or used them, and who controlled their use.

Conclusion

Given the lack of sustained research, we remain uncertain about various aspects of gender, gendered ideologies and gendered performance during the ProBA. Nonetheless, the images or individuals represented by the anthropomorphic figurines of this period must have played some role in shaping the ideology of gender in everyday life. Once we dispense with the notion that every statuette or human representation portrays a deity, these figurines might be seen as representing individual women, motherhood, feasting or other types of celebration (dancers or celebrants in a rite of passage), or possibly cultic practice (priestesses). I am still inclined to think of the bronze Bomford statuette

as a striking marker of elite female identity, one that may have served in part to legitimise elite domination over copper production and trade. Both male (Ingot God, Horned God) and female metal figurines would have served as representations of elite authority that helped to promote and support urban expansion and economic intensification during the ProBA. As a wider class, the ProBA figurines should not be analysed solely in binary terms: both males and females (the majority) are represented, and more thorough and nuanced analyses may uncover multiple or ambiguous gendered representations that defy traditional sexual categories, as is the case with PreBA figurines. Bolger's discussion of gender mutability nicely portrays the possibility of 'third gender' or 'transgendered' individuals interred in ProBA tombs at Enkomi,

Hala Sultan Tekke, Ayios Dhimitrios, Ayios Iakovos and Lapithos.⁵⁶

Engendering material objects is an exercise fraught with difficulties, and the use of binary or essentialist categorisations is unlikely to enhance our understanding of prehistoric or historic societies. Nonetheless, each one of the images or individuals – human or divine – represented on ProBA figurines would have reflected and helped to shape gender ideologies, practices and performances within society, whether on an everyday, seasonal or episodic basis. Understanding the role and relevance of ProBA Cypriot coroplastic art can provide crucial insights into the ways that gendered practices and social identities were formed and maintained in prehistoric and proto-historic societies.

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NOTES

- 1 Bolger 2003, 99.
- 2 Karageorghis 1993, 21-23; Morris 1985, 166.
- 3 Most recently, for example, Cole 2005; Diaz-Andreu et al. 2005; Talalay 2005.
- 4 See various papers in Bolger & Serwint 2002; Bolger 2003.

- 5 Cf. Morris 1985; Budin 2003, 140.
- 6 Bolger 2003, 99.
- 7 Karageorghis 1999, 84-90, figs. 57-61.
- 8 Karageorghis 1991, 49-66, 170-180.
- 9 Budin 2003, 140-145, 232-241; Karageorghis 1993, 3-14; Morris 1985, 166-174.
- 10 Karageorghis & Karageorghis 2002, 271.
- 11 Karageorghis 1993, 3-13.
- 12 Morris 1985, 166.
- 13 Merrillees 1988, 55; Karageorghis 1993, 21.
- 14 Budin 2003, 140.
- 15 Karageorghis 1993, 3-10, pls. I-VII; Merrillees 1988; Morris 1985, figs. 280-287, pls. 194-198.
- 16 Webb 1999, 209, 235, n. 28.
- 17 Budin 2003, 143.
- 18 Morris 1985, 166.
- 19 E.g. Begg 1991, 11-12.
- 20 Karageorghis 1993, 1, 21.
- 21 Karageorghis 1993, 22.
- 22 Budin 2003, 145; Karageorghis & Karageorghis 2002, 272.
- 23 Karageorghis 1993, 10-13, pls. VII-X; Morris 1985, figs. 269-279, pls. 191-193.
- 24 Courtois 1984, 79-80; Webb 1999, 209-211.
- 25 Webb 1999, 256, n. 31.

26 Karageorghis 1993, 21; Orphanides 1983, 45-48; Orphanides 1991.
 27 Merrillees 1988, 55.
 28 Begg 1991.
 29 Courtois 1984, 75-82.
 30 Webb 1992, 90; Webb 1999, 211.
 31 Keswani 2004, tables 5.9b-5.9d, 5.11 and 5.13.
 32 Webb 1999, 211.
 33 Karageorghis 1993, 21-22.
 34 Begg 1991, 53.
 35 Webb 1999, 211.
 36 Talalay & Cullen 2002, 184.
 37 Frankel & Webb 1996, 188.
 38 Webb 1992, 90; Webb 1999, 211.
 39 Webb 1999, 211; Budin 2003, 156-59, 215.
 40 Catling 1971; Hulin 1989; Karageorghis 2002, 96, fig. 194.
 41 Catling 1971, 29.
 42 Bolger 2003, 97-100.
 43 Budin 2002, 316.
 44 Morris 1985, 166.
 45 Bolger 2003, 99-100.
 46 Knapp 1986; Knapp 1988; Knapp 1996.
 47 Budin 2002, 319-320.
 48 Knapp 1986, 4.
 49 Webb 1999, 209-215.
 50 Webb 1999, 215.
 51 Also Karageorghis 2003, 216.
 52 Burgh 2004; Kolotourou 2005.
 53 Kolotourou 2005, 188-200, pls. 23-3, 24-3.
 54 Markoe 1985, 171-172, 246-247 [Cy3]; Burgh 2004, 131-133.
 55 Talalay 2005.
 56 Bolger 2003, 175-179.

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