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Pottery Figurines: The Development of a Coroplastic Art in Chalcolithic Cyprus

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During the 1987 excavation season at Kissonerga-Mosphilia, the Lemba Archaeological Project discovered a ritual deposit comprising some 50 objects packed in and around a bowl in the form of a building model. The objects included 18 figurines. This article discusses the eight pottery figurines and considers the new evidence they have contributed to our understanding of the coroplastic art of Chalcolithic Cyprus.

A brief survey of the general development of coroplasty during the period is followed by a more detailed presentation of the figurines from the deposit. Based on the evidence of their iconography and wear patterns it is suggested that all the figurines were associated with childbirth, and were perhaps used as teaching aids to explain the events that would occur during parturition or in connection with some kind of ritual that took place during the event itself.

In the final days of the 1987 season at Kissonerga-Mosphilia, the Lemba Archaeological Project made a startling and significant discovery. It consisted of an unmistakably ritual deposit comprising some 50 objects packed in and around a large bowl (fig. 1). This was no ordinary bowl. It was constructed in the form of a building with a central hearth, raised floor partitions, and a door that opened and closed on a pivot. The assemblage of objects associated with the building model included stone tools; pottery vessels; bone needles; a triton shell; and, in particular, 18 figurines, most of them anthropomorphic. Ten of the figurines were made of stone, the remaining eight of pottery. This article looks in detail at the eight pottery figurines and the new dimension they have added to an appreciation of the coroplastic art of Chalcolithic Cyprus.¹

Despite the large number of figurines known from the period, evidence for their development, significance, and function remains fairly thin. One reason is that a very high proportion of the extant figurines are extremely fragmentary. It is difficult to construct a meaningful framework or typology based on examples represented only by amputated

heads, legs, arms, and torsos. A second reason is that only a small proportion come from good contexts, and a number lack even a certain provenance. At Kissonerga-Mosphilia, a carefully excavated site that has produced nearly 130 figurines or figurine fragments to date (about half of pottery), a large number of the examples were extremely fragmentary and many came from disturbed contexts or were surface finds. Since figurines must take their function from their context (cf. French 1981: 173), a reasoned discussion of their significance and purpose is difficult. It is probably largely for those reasons that there has been no comprehensive study of pottery figurines so far, although previous authors have considered them briefly (e.g., Vagnetti 1974: 25–26). Stone figurines, especially picrolites, have been discussed in more detail, presumably because they tend to survive in better condition and often come from more immediately comprehensible contexts, such as burials.

Stone figurines are discussed elsewhere in this issue, so this article presents a brief outline of the development of pottery figurines generally, to set the eight examples from the ritual deposit in their overall chronological context.

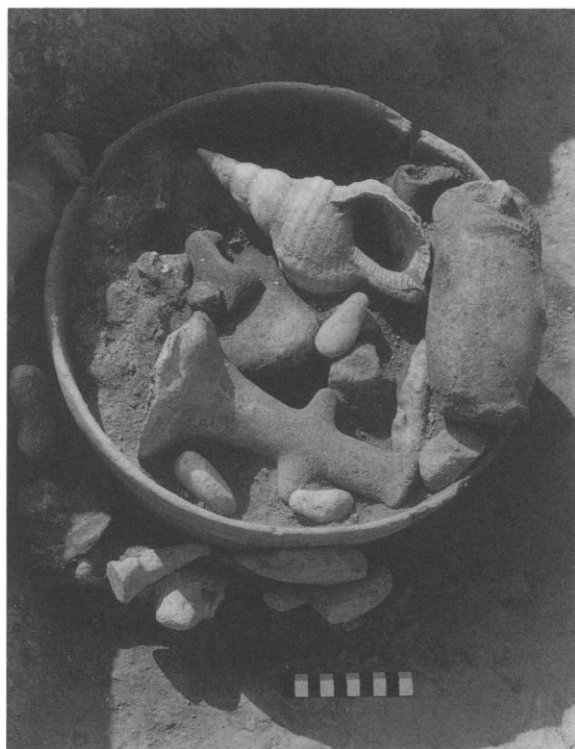


Fig. 1. The ritual deposit *in situ* at Kissonerga-Mosphilia.

The art of coroplasty commenced within the Chalcolithic period, but it seems likely that the stylistic tradition can be traced far back into the Neolithic. That period produced a number of highly sophisticated figurines alongside other stylistically simpler examples, often made from hard stones such as diabase. The materials used must have affected the styles produced to a significant degree. Nevertheless, the beginnings of features that became standard in the Chalcolithic can be found already within the Neolithic tradition: the elliptical shape for the face; the emphasis on brows, eyes, and nose, where facial features were rendered; the phallic form for the head and neck. It seems characteristic of the early figurines that there was little emphasis on the arms, which were sometimes shown as stumps but were equally often not even modeled. In addition there was little interest in indicating gender.

There is a single piece of evidence that Chalcolithic coroplasty might have had more than stylistic roots in an earlier period. That is the startling

unfired clay head from Aceramic Neolithic Khirokitia, an object highly sophisticated in its impact (Dikaïos 1953: pls. 98, 144). Although fired pottery figurines were unknown, the existence of that head argues for a familiarity with the modeling technique and an appreciation of the plastic qualities of clay. The contours of the face are sensitively shaped and the facial features carefully modeled. The confidence of the piece suggests it was not the first to be made by the sculptor.

It is probable that other work was also achieved in clay, and perhaps in perishable materials such as wood. Wood sculpting and stone modeling are fundamentally different techniques from the working of clay. The former techniques subtract material from a larger whole to create the end product. The latter manipulates or even adds to the material to reach the desired form. Despite the difference in approach and medium, the makers of stone, wood, and clay figurines presumably were working within a single artistic tradition. However there is no evidence for any continuity into the Chalcolithic, despite good settlement and burial finds from the intervening periods.

The Chalcolithic coroplasts produced a wide variety of pottery figurines in different fabrics and apparently in a wide range of types. There appears to be much more diversity of form among the pottery repertoire than among the picrolites, perhaps reflecting similar diversity of significance and function. In 1974, Vagnetti noted the difficulties of classifying the pottery figurines because of their fragmentary nature and decided to consider the heads and torsos separately (Vagnetti 1974: 26 n. 3). She distinguished two main styles of heads but did not attempt to classify the bodies. Excavations in the years since that article was written confirm the difficulty of using stylistic classification to group the figurines. The heads of the figurines do indeed tend to have recognizable and repetitive characteristics. However the overall forms of the figurines seem sufficiently diverse that attempts to impose too rigid a typology may be misleading. Only general groupings may be possible. The author is currently carrying out a thorough analysis of all the figurine material from Kissonerga-Mosphilia, and that work may produce more definite conclusions. However, with some exceptions, variety of type within a recognizable stylistic framework seems characteristic of Chalcolithic coroplastic art. Even where general groups may be

distinguished (for example, figurines seated on birthing stools), individuality of execution seems to be a feature.

It is not yet possible to trace the actual beginnings of true coroplastic art within the Chalcolithic. Kalavassos-Ayious, Kissonerga-Mylouthkia, and Kissonerga-Mosphilia all have produced early pottery figurines but the evolution of types currently remains unclear. Many of the known examples are so confidently executed that prototypes must surely lie further back in time or in other materials. Certain characteristics are common to the early examples. It is clear that there was an increased interest in the development of the human form in the Early Chalcolithic period. That may be related at least partly to the plastic nature of the medium.

Besides giving figurines more recognizably anthropomorphic outlines, the artists gave more attention to details of human features. Fragments of legs from Kalavassos-Ayious have divided toes, and hands have divided fingers (South 1985: figs. 3.4, 3.6). In particular, there seems to have been more interest in the arms themselves, which expanded from small buds to much more emphatic features. There was a tendency toward the deliberate indication of gender. Examples from Ayious have incised pudenda and carefully-shaped hips (South 1985: fig. 3.1). Most of the figurines where gender is shown are female. Painted decoration was already quite sophisticated and elaborate. Again from Ayious, there are fragments bearing all-over designs including parallel lines, latticing, and vertically-hatched panels. One leg fragment even bears vertical "tassels" between the leg and foot, a decorative motif found in a more sophisticated form later at Kissonerga-Mosphilia (South 1985: fig. 3.4). The site of Kissonerga-Mylouthkia has yet to be fully investigated but preliminary work has revealed fragments of fantastic zoomorphic creatures predating the later exotic creations from Souskiou. It seems reasonable to suppose that a fantastic repertoire coexisted alongside more realistic anthropomorphic types.

The makers of the figurines fully understood the plastic potential of clay. The fabrics are identical or very close to those used for making ceramic vessels, suggesting both a common source of materials and a common knowledge of manufacturing and firing techniques. The painted motifs do not differ markedly from those used in the pottery repertoire, suggesting a common source of inspira-

tion. Later, the pots and figurines are linked by rare examples of vessels with modeled anthropomorphic features (from Erimi and Lemba-Lakkous, as well as Kissonerga-Mosphilia). Those products surely span the two crafts. It seems possible that the potters and the coroplasts were the same people, or at least specialists within a common medium. While drawing upon the same esthetic and technical sources they also utilized the artistic traditions of the local stone figurine makers (contrast Bolger 1988: 103).

During the Middle Chalcolithic period, the number of figurines increased and the repertoire expanded. The best evidence comes from the sites of Erimi, Lemba-Lakkous, Kissonerga-Mosphilia, and Souskiou. The tendencies noted in the earlier period continued, toward a more developed interest in the human form, the position of the arms, the indication of gender (usually female), and zoomorphic and fantastic types. Facial features show particular emphasis on the brows, eyes, and nose, the brows and nose usually in relief, the eyes punched or shown as pellets. There is often a general lack of emphasis on the mouth. It was sometimes omitted altogether, but more often shown as a slit or small hole. Sometimes, at Kissonerga-Mosphilia, it was outlined in red. Hair was often shown in paint, as wavy lines, and the hairline at the forehead could be painted or modeled and incised. The torsos, legs, and arms of Red-on-White figurines often were elaborately decorated. Jewelry was sometimes shown: bands around the neck, beads strung around the arms, and occasionally suggestions of earrings. The depiction of arms became more varied: stylized wedge-like arms tapering towards the ends (as on stone and picrolite figurines) apparently coexisted alongside fully modeled limbs. There was more variety in the actual position of the arms, which were not always simply outstretched. The indication of gender is more marked. The cemetery at Souskiou has produced spectacular zoomorphic figurines, hinting at a rich repertoire of more exotic types perhaps still to be paralleled at other sites. Erimi and Kissonerga-Mosphilia have so far produced relatively few fragments of zoomorphic figurines.

A range of ceramic fabrics was used for Chalcolithic figurines. Simple, crudely modeled clay examples with pinched outlines and of naive style were sometimes produced, but generally the fabrics parallel those in use for pottery vessels. At Erimi,

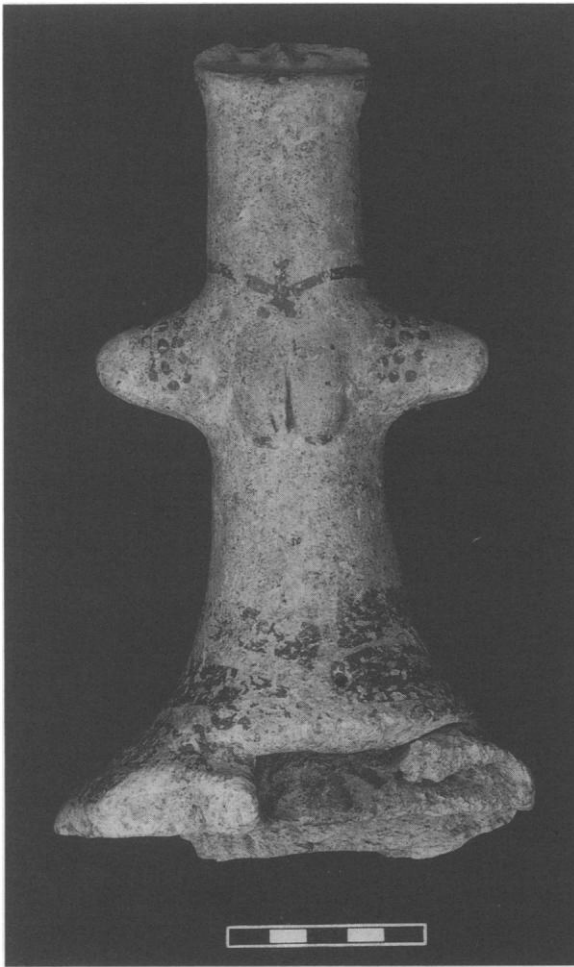


Fig. 2. Figurine depicting the moment of giving birth.

various styles in a number of different wares, construction methods, and decorative techniques occurred in every phase of habitation (Bolger 1988: 105). Well-preserved examples in fabrics other than Red-on-White include the two well-known lactation figures (one from Alaminos and the other, unprovenanced, in the Louvre) and the ejaculation figure now in the Pierides Foundation Museum (Caubet 1974: pl. 7; Karageorghis and Vagnetti 1981: fig. 1). Complete large and elaborate examples are exceptional.

Two other developments are worth briefly noting here. The first is a degree of deliberate sexual dimorphism. The female characteristics may be clearly marked on the torsos, but the heads and necks have an unmistakably phallic shape. The

same phenomenon is apparent on stone figurines. The second development is that of scale. Erimi and Kissonerga-Mosphilia have both produced examples that, although now fragmentary, must be classed as statuary rather than figurines. Bolger (1988: 104) calculated that some of the Erimi examples are likely to have stood about 1 m high. That has major implications for their significance and function.

The eight pottery figurines from the ritual deposit at Kissonerga-Mosphilia (Unit 1015) provide exciting new evidence for the understanding of Chalcolithic coroplastic art. As a group, they are particularly important because they are exceptionally well-preserved and fairly intact, they have an identifiable style and form of decoration, and they come from a well-defined context. They are also important because they are a group. At Kissonerga-Mosphilia, figurines are usually very fragmentary; frequently they come from disturbed contexts and are found individually, usually unassociated with any other artifacts. The figurines from Unit 1015, therefore, add a new dimension to the evidence. They also have a unique importance individually. When the figurines were first cleaned and examined, each one provided some special detail and added a new fragment to the overall picture.

The date of the figurines can only be assumed from their context. Unit 1015 may be dated by its stratigraphy and ceramic associations to Period 3 at Mosphilia, falling within the Middle Chalcolithic. That does not mean that all eight are of the same age, or that they were all used at the same time. We know only that they were eventually deposited together.

The most unexpected (and revealing) of the eight was a large figurine shown at the very moment of giving birth (fig. 2). It is fully preserved from the head to the buttocks. It has an elliptical head tilted back at an acute angle on a thick, elongated neck (the whole effect unmistakably phallic). The facial features are indicated by relief, puncturing, and paint. The arms are outstretched and flung to either side, and they are ornamented with a pair of painted bracelets. The breasts are fairly flat and unemphasized, but the nipples are reddened with paint. The body expands to a flaring bell shape. There are latticed bands around the lower body, and the buttocks are emphasized as protruding bosses. The most remarkable feature is that which is shown on a flat panel provided between the (now

missing) legs. Upon this, there is a large oblong dot between a pair of curved lines. This motif represents the head and arms of a baby emerging in the correct birth position. It appears head first, and the arms have just been freed. The artist has depicted the moment quite clearly, albeit in two dimensions. No equivalent motif has been found among the extensive repertoire already known on Red-on-White pottery, and the significance of the location places the interpretation beyond doubt. In addition, the figurine originally sat on a stool, undoubtedly a birthing stool, in a position that is entirely natural for giving birth.

Another important feature is the painted anthropomorphic pendant around the figurine's neck. The pendant apparently represents a figure very similar to the figurine itself. A tiny stroke is visible between the legs of the pendant, although slightly obscured by damage. This is no slip of the brush, but a rather significant element (see below).

Such a depiction of childbirth is so far unique and was totally unexpected. The figurine itself belongs to a recognizable group of seated female figurines of which several examples are now known from Kissonerga-Mosphilia. When the first was discovered, it was suggested that the posture indicated childbirth, and that the integrally modeled seat was a birthing stool (see, e.g., Morris 1985: 122). That interpretation has now been graphically confirmed. The first example to be discovered was a surface find (KM 299; Peltenburg 1984: pl. 20). Although it shares many features of the childbirth figurine, in other respects it is quite different. As on the childbirth figurine, the arms are outstretched, as if indicating straining. The body is bell-shaped, and the legs, complete with divided toes, are draped over the edge of the stool. The legs are set wide apart. This figurine also wears a painted anthropomorphic pendant. Here it is quite clear that the stroke between the legs of the pendant was not a slip of the brush but a deliberate feature. Is it possible that the pendant is shown at the very moment of birth, with a child depicted, albeit very schematically, emerging between the legs? As on the childbirth figurine, elaborate painted decoration is largely confined to the lower body. But here the similarities end. The decoration itself is far less sophisticated, consisting of simple but dramatic strokes of paint. There is no panel between the legs, but attention is drawn to that area by deeply marked pudenda and by the direction of the painted



Fig. 3. Figurine of a pregnant woman seated on a birthing stool.

strokes. In particular, the belly is far more emphasized. One wonders if the figurine depicts a stage in labor before the child emerges.

Two more fragmentary examples of figurines on birthing stools were included in Unit 1015. One has only its lower half surviving, including an integrally modeled circular stool with four legs (KM 1463; fig. 3 here). It has well-preserved painted decoration consisting of latticed panels similar to those on the childbirth figurine. It has an exceptionally swollen belly, more swollen even than that of the surface find. It has neither a painted panel nor incised pudenda between the legs but a wide and deep cutaway gap. The surviving leg of the figurine has no toes but there is elaborate painted decoration all along it.

The third seated figurine from Unit 1015 (KM 1443) is also the most fragmentary. It shares features with the others, specifically the latticed panel decoration of the lower torso, the posture, and the swollen belly; but in addition the belly is emphasized by a double cross. It has no flat panel between the legs, no incised pudenda, no cutaway gap, only a simple curved area between the legs, covered in red paint.

A fragment of a fifth example of the same type is also known from Kissonerga-Mosphilia (KM 507). It is represented solely by a leg, once curved over the edge of a birthing stool. Like KM 299, it has divided toes and rather simple painted decoration, now very worn.



Fig. 4. Small figurine of a woman giving birth in a squatting position.

The group provides evidence for a very specialized type that must have a specific meaning and function. All are clearly associated with childbirth. However each figurine may be shown at a slightly different stage, and the crucial area between the legs could be treated in several ways. The existence of pendants around the necks of two of the figurines strongly suggests that some kind of wearable charm could be used when childbirth was in progress. But how could such pottery figurines have been used?

Some evidence may be obtained from a consideration of their form and their wear patterns. It is noticeable that the figurines with surviving upper torsos have decoration largely confined to their lower torsos. The natural place to hold the figurines

is between their outstretched arms and their flaring hips and buttocks, that is, around the waist, perhaps with the fingers over the belly. The wear patterns tend to confirm this. The childbirth figurine is very abraded over the front surface, around the waist, and the center of the back above the buttocks is scratched. What does this evidence amount to?

Ancient representations of women in childbirth, on pottery or in the form of figurines, do not show the woman alone in labor. She is always accompanied by supporters. She is assisted in her efforts by a close physical contact: another woman will grasp or cradle the woman from behind, usually under her arms and over her belly, giving her support, while the midwife in front receives the child.² The Chalcolithic figurines are therefore unusual in showing the woman alone in childbirth. Where are her supporters? Can the figurines have been used as teaching aids, meant to be handled, to show the expectant mother or the initiate what would happen during childbirth? Or might they have been handled as part of a ritual associated with the act of parturition? Both suggestions could provide a possible explanation for their iconography, their wear patterns, and their individual features.

If they did serve such functions, can the three childbirth figurines from Unit 1015 be associated in any practical way with the other five pottery figurines from the deposit? The most obvious link appears to be with an upright figure (KM 1464). It has the familiar elliptical head tilted back on an elongated, phallic-type neck. The brows and nose are shown in relief, the eyes and mouth punctured and highlighted by red paint. The breasts are indicated in low relief and the usual outstretched arms taper toward the ends. From the waist upward the resemblance to the childbirth figurine is very close. Below the waist, the body expands abruptly to wide, shelf-like hips. The belly is swollen, indicated by a relief curve. Below this there is a flat panel, now too damaged for us to be certain of its details. The figurine originally stood on two thick, wide-set legs. As with the seated figurines, the painted decoration is largely confined to the lower torso and legs. In this instance, the motifs are fairly simple curvilinear lines, zigzags, and dots. Like the other three seated examples, this one was already damaged when it was packed inside the building model. It had lost both its right arm and right leg.³

The thrown-back head and arms, the open mouth, the feeling of strain, and the general simi-

larities with the seated figurines suggest that this figurine is also in labor. She is standing rather than seated, but that would also be an acceptable position to adopt during childbirth, especially if the mother was supported.

Two much smaller upright figurines were also associated with the deposit. One has a simple elliptical head merging almost directly into the usual elongated neck (KM 1442; fig. 4 here). Both arms are missing but were probably outstretched. Thus there are again very general similarities with the figurines in labor. The breasts are flattish but unusually full, extending to the waist. Below the waist, the hips shelf outward in a way similar to those of the previous standing figure, but the posture is different yet again. Light and sensitive modeling on the flaring lower body show the figurine is squatting with her legs wide apart. That is also a natural childbirth position.

The second small figurine (KM 1460) is more enigmatic, and also rather more damaged. The remains of the neck indicate that it was thick and long, but the head is missing. Both arms have been broken away. The breasts are smaller and flatter, and there are rolls of fat below the armpits. There is no modeling on the lower body to indicate the posture. Painted decoration consists of simple horizontal bands. The lack of painted decoration on the upper torso and the probable forms of the head and arms are features shared with the previous figurines, but otherwise the meaning of this example is not explicit. The fact that both small figurines are very worn, especially on the upper torso, suggests that they were well handled and were used for a specific purpose. Despite their relative simplicity, they have no exact parallels within the general assemblage at Kissonerga-Mosphilia.

The two remaining pottery figurines from Unit 1015 are both very different. One (KM 1475; fig. 5 here) was found in a most striking position outside the bowl, wedged between its outer wall and the edge of the pit. It was lying on its side, facing the doorway of the building model and completely blocking it. One wonders whether the position had special significance.

The modeling technique of this figurine differs from the previous examples since the body and neck are hollow. It stands firmly in a well-balanced stance with the legs placed wide apart, one slightly in front of the other. The position of the arms is especially noteworthy. The hands rest on the shoulders to either side of the neck. The arms are bent



Fig. 5. Large standing figurine with arms bent upwards.

tightly upwards, almost giving the impression of compressing the breasts between the elbows. Thus far no exact parallel for this position of the arms and hands has been found. The emphasis of the modeling is on the grotesquely broad hips, the belly with its swollen relief curve, and the exaggerated buttocks. The breasts, by contrast, are rather small although quite prominent. The details of the modeling and paintwork draw attention to the pudenda, indicated by an incised line on a flat panel between the hips. There is decoration all over the body, best preserved on the lower torso and legs. There are traces of curvilinear motifs over the belly and hips, and rows of thick, horizontal dashes interspersed with a few dots over the back, buttocks, and legs. At the bottom of the legs is a single row of vertical dashes resembling tassels or a fringe.

Similar vertical dashes have already been noted on an earlier leg fragment from Kalavassos-Ayious. There is even closer decoration on another leg fragment from Kissonerga-Mosphilia. There may also be a link with the more elaborate paintwork

on the legs of a very important figurine from Mos-philia, which was probably once an appliqué from the wall of a vessel (KM 778/854). It is difficult to know whether this and other decoration represents clothing, tattooing, or body paint. The fact that the pudenda may be visible through the decoration need not be conclusive. The consistency of use and location of the vertical dashes around the legs could suggest both a long continuity of tradition and the application of the motif for a particular event. For instance, perhaps this was a type of body decoration applied specifically on the occasion of childbirth.

The significance of this impressive figurine is open to speculation. It would have been interesting to have known the form of the head, and especially its position. The only other clue to its interpretation lies in the wear pattern. The flat genital panel was heavily abraded, and all the protruding rounded surfaces (the arms, breasts, hips, belly, and buttocks) were rubbed as if the figurine had been much handled.

The position of the arms might possibly suggest some comparison with lactation figurines. However although the modeling of the arms is superficially similar, on those the action is quite unambiguous: the hands are shown in the process of manipulating the nipples. I would suggest that the figure from Unit 1015 is actually standing in a position of great strain, and that the hands grasping the shoulders are providing a form of self-support. This figurine is probably also in labor, and is actually "bearing down."

The eighth pottery figurine from Unit 1015 (KM 1466) is in many ways the strangest and the most ambiguous. It is also the most damaged and worn. Only the torso survives. The figurine is hollow at the neck, but the arms and legs (now missing) were apparently solid. It is obviously female, with long pendulous red-painted breasts hanging down over a swollen belly. The decoration is very abraded but was once quite elaborate. A lozenge design over the neck may represent the remains of a necklace.

The condition of the figurine makes interpretation extremely problematic. The female could be pregnant, or just obese. A clue might lie in the decoration over the buttocks, which consists of latticed panels. Although that motif is very common on ceramic vessels, it was also used consistently on the three seated figurines, and it is possible that it had a particular relevance to depictions of childbirth.

In conclusion, it seems possible to argue that all the pottery figurines had some association with aspects of childbirth. They were much handled and used in some specific way prior to their burial in Unit 1015. They were not created solely to be buried and they were not made solely to be looked at. Although they had the capacity to stand unsupported, some kind of handling was an important part of their function. In addition, they were all damaged in some way. Most of the breaks were very sharp and fresh, and must have occurred shortly before interment. The figurines could have been used to explain procedure that would occur during parturition, perhaps as part of an initiation ceremony; or they may have been used in connection with some kind of ritual that took place during the event itself. For whatever reason, they were eventually broken, perhaps to negate their power, and were buried in a final ceremony with no intention ever to retrieve them. (The evidence for the interpretation of the deposit as ritual, and the full argument for these and other conclusions relating specifically to the figurines, will be presented in the forthcoming publication of Unit 1015.)

These suggestions should encourage us to look anew at other occurrences of pottery figurines, to look critically at their decorative motifs, their condition and wear patterns, and especially at their contexts. Some of them at least, like the picrolites, may have played a highly significant role in Chalcolithic society, a role not confined to the usual suggested uses as dolls, idols, or votives, but one absolutely fundamental to the continuity and transmission of life itself.

NOTES

¹The Lemba Archaeological Project is based at the University of Edinburgh and is directed by E. Peltenburg. The final publication of the deposit is currently in preparation. Preliminary reports include Peltenburg *et al.* 1988: 43–52; Peltenburg 1988a: 289–93; 1988b: 3–15. I thank Dr. Peltenburg for permission to discuss the figurines in advance of the final publication, as well as for many useful comments.

²I am grateful to M. Bruno for drawing this to my attention.

³Unusually, however, the left leg and arm were also broken away but were placed separately within the building model. The arm was found resting on its broken end beside the hearth on the floor of the building model where it was at first mistaken for a small cone.

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