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Configuring the Individual: Bodies of Figurines in Minoan Crete

by Christine Morris

The study of clay figurines of anthropomorphic form provides unique insights into the representation of human identity in many cultures. The continuing capacity of human figurines to fascinate is beautifully evoked in a modern context by *Field,* the creation of contemporary artist Antony Gormley, in which great crowds of up to 40,000 small clay figurines were made by volunteers in several places around the world and then each group was displayed en masse. Perhaps most evocative of the timeless character of clay figurines was the display in the British Museum of *Field for the British Isles,* in which Gormley's "terracotta army" was massed in every corner of the Great Court exhibition space while individuals from the "army" nestled in museum cases alongside ancient figurines from across the world.[1]

Although less vast in number than Gormley's creations, ancient figurines tend to occur in relatively large quantities and exhibit strongly distinctive stylistic features. These characteristics lend themselves, at least in principle, to a nuanced formal analysis in relation to issues of social identity and action. Moreover, in relatively complex societies, clay figurines may not be closely tied to (or may even contest) elite ideologies as expressed through more prestigious and visible representational art forms such as monumental sculpture or wall painting.

In the present paper I explore the potential for viewing figurines from Bronze Age Crete as representations that played an active role in constructing and projecting individual social identity within Minoan culture through the selective and morphologically distinct presentation of the human form. The material upon which I focus comes from a discete locational context, the mountain shrines known as peak sanctuaries, and in particular from that of Atsipades Korakias. Peak sanctuaries occur throughout the island of Crete, notably from the palatial periods, and are characterized both by their topographic relationship to Minoan settlements (see Peatfield, this volume) and by their abundant offerings of clay figurines. The figurines include both animal and anthropomorphic forms, as well as body parts conventionally termed "votive limbs," which inspired the widely accepted view that a significant function of these ritual sites was that of healing. Most of the anthropomorphic figurines are solid, handmade, and can be easily held. There are, however, some larger figures, such as groups standing on

1. Gormley 1994; Gormley and Renfrew 2004.

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a shared base and multiple figures within models (all, unfortunately, very fragmentary) that attest to greater complexity in the projection of social and ritual identities and of ritual action.

It is not difficult to imagine a Bronze Age Cretan making the journey up to his or her local peak sanctuary, clutching in hand a clay figurine of human likeness, and then, as part of the ritual process, leaving the figurine within the rocky clefts of the site. Nevertheless, it is useful to remind ourselves that there is much that we still do not understand about rituals at these sites and the role of figurines in them. There are important unanswered questions concerning how often the rituals took place on peak sanctuaries, whether they were centrally organized and communal, and to whom they were addressed. Turning our thoughts to the figurines, there are other, more specific questions such as what the relationship was between figurine producer and user, how the figurines may have represented social status and social relationships, and what the relationships were between the figurine and the individual (or group) who left it at the sanctuary.

I suggest that by directing our attention to the selection and elaboration of specific attributes—formal characteristics of style and technique—that delineate the peak sanctuary figurines as a meaningful group, we may begin to address some of these issues. In this short paper I draw attention to the selection of gesture, gender, and bodily artifacts as important attributes in the construction of human identity in the context of peak sanctuary ritual.

PAST AND PRESENT APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF FIGURINES

There has been a long history within figurine studies of treating anthropomorphic figurines as a category susceptible to universalizing interpretations. Indeed, early studies relegated most figurines to the vaguely defined realm of fertility, as exemplified by the use of the term "fertility idol." Such classifications have been problematic for many reasons. They collapse description and interpretation, and by implication they privilege presumed group uniformity. At the same time, they undervalue or even ignore the potential importance of variations in style and form as evidence for significant social information.

As the field of figurine studies has developed in theoretical sophistication, many scholars have explored the rich diversity of figurine functions, especially in relation to context. Some have argued for a shift to a perspective in which we approach figurines as representations of individual social actors rather than simply subsuming them into undifferentiated categories such as fertility or worshiper figurines.

From this point of view, it may be argued that the relationship between the clay figurine and its representational subject is by no means straightforward, and that the process of figurine production should be understood as involving the representation of only selected aspects of the human form.[2] In a study of human images from Central America, Rosemary Joyce develops this idea, emphasizing that the general resemblance of anthropomorphic

2. Bailey 1992.

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images to the human form, which we somewhat take for granted, in fact masks a very careful selection of attributes for depiction. She approaches her material, therefore, with the assumption that "no detail is simply natural or accidental, the selection of attributes being part of a dialogic process of construction of human identities."[3]

In the case of Minoan figurines, the supposed homogeneity of the material has led us to emphasize the collective shared features of the group while discouraging or muting discussion of the extent and ways in which figurines might have been individualized. The possibility of individuals being self-consciously represented within the peak sanctuary assemblage is, however, raised in Rethemiotakis' discussion of large figures from Kophinas. Fragments of legs from the site suggest the presence of anthropomorphic figures of up to half a meter in size. Rethemiotakis suggests that these could have been intended as "portraits" of individuals for conspicuous display rather than votives simply disposed on the site.[4] The use of figurine size as a material strategy for negotiating social or ritual identity certainly merits fuller consideration, and it will be of great interest to establish the extent, both in space and time, of similar practices at other peak sanctuaries.[5]

I suggest that in any handmade figurine tradition there is likely to be a significant balance or tension between the perpetuation of shared characteristics of style and technique and the selection of attributes through which individual social and ritual identities might be expressed. The expression of shared versus individualizing characteristics needs to be explored both within and between sites and in relation to the organization of production.

The peak sanctuary figurines were usually modeled from several pieces of clay that were joined through the use of shaped clay pegs, for example at the neck or at the join between torso and skirt. Most, though not all, of the figurines were clearly gendered as male or female in accordance with Minoan conventions: a loincloth, codpiece, and belt for male figures, a bell-shaped skirt worn with a tight bodice and belt for females. Details of bodily form are rendered through modeling and simple pinching of the clay, with added pellets for features such as eyes and ears. Bodily artifacts such as hairstyle, headgear, dress, or jewelry were formed most commonly with rolled clay strips and pellets for hair locks, jewelry, and belts, but a variety of other techniques entailing pierced, impressed, or painted details were also used.

A brief review of literature in which Minoan peak sanctuary figurines have been discussed reveals a strong tendency to describe the figurines as "stereotypical," "small and roughly made," and "stylized and simply rendered." Marika Zeimbeki has commented on how the use of the term "crude" (both in the Aegean and the Near East) in relation to figurine form has led archaeologists to suppose a simple or unskilled mode of production rather than the "optimal mode of production" that she convincingly proposes for the Juktas animal figurines.[6] I would add that it is the same perception of figurines as crude and stereotypical that has prevented the observation of difference or led to the assumption that such differences are relatively unimportant.

3. Joyce 1993, p. 256.
4. Rethemiotakis 1997, p. 118.
5. This important issue is discussed in relation to animal figurines from Juktas and Kophinas in Zeimbeki 2004.
6. Zeimbeki 2004, p. 360.

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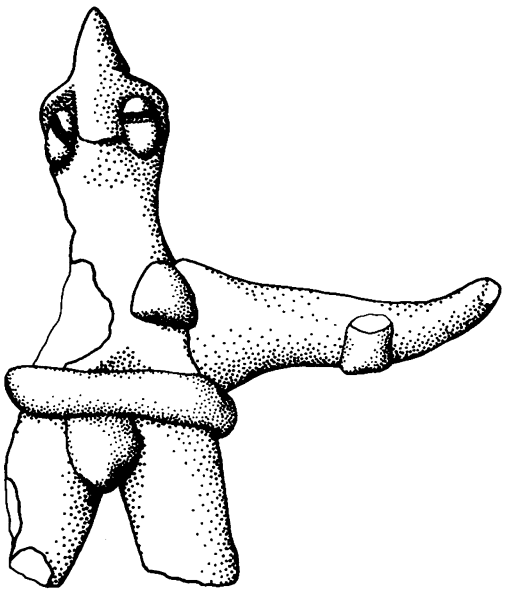

Figure 15.1. Male figurine with open gesture, RM 6784, from Atsipades.
Drawing J. Doole

GESTURE AND GENDER IN PEAK SANCTUARY FIGURINES

From the earliest discovery (at the beginning of the 20th century) of figurines in peak sanctuary contexts, it has been widely agreed (and I think rightly) that they represent the participants in the peak sanctuary rituals. The figurines are thus usually referred to as worshipers, supplicants, or adorants, and their gestures have been collectively termed gestures of adoration or gestures of supplication.[7] Consequently, relatively little attention has been paid to the variety of gestures, despite a lively interest in gesture in other artistic media. The misleading notion that the gestures are limited in form has perhaps resulted both from the repeated reproduction of the same few figurines, which in particular show the arm bent with hands to torso, and from the implicit functional parallel with modes of prayer familiar in our own cultural experiences.

The study of the Atsipades figurines has shown, however, that the range of gestures made by the figurines is much more varied than is usually assumed. It includes a variety of open or divergent gestures in which the arms are held in different arrangements away from the body (Fig. 15.1). This surely invites us to ask why there were so many gestures, and it encourages us to revisit the role of gesture as an attribute selected for attention by the makers and users of these figurines. Peatfield and Morris have suggested elsewhere that the rich gestural language of Minoan figurines merits a more theorized approach, one which locates gesture as an active element of embodied practice, representing and communicating the ritual actions and experiences of the participants.[8]

The discussion of Minoan figurines has been more responsive to current trends with regard to matters of gender. There is a new interest in comparing the representation of male and female figurines and, in some cases, in attempting to draw inferences concerning social identities and status. It has been repeatedly suggested that some figurine gestures, for

7. Adoration: Myres 1902–1903, p. 368; supplication: Rutkowski 1986, pp. 87–88.

8. Morris 2001, 2004; Morris and Peatfield 2002.

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example, the symmetrical hands to torso gesture, are gender specific or, at least, strongly gendered. Why then do we find this gesture described both as a mostly male gesture and as a predominantly female gesture? In both cases, the conclusion seems to have been reached on the basis of subsets of the overall body of material, and it is also predicated on the as yet untested assumption that the figurines exhibit cultural uniformity in relation to gesture and gender across the island.

Similar issues are raised by the statement that male figurines outnumber females in peak sanctuary contexts in the Neopalatial period.[9] In this context, questions that place gender at the forefront are important. Are there gendered gestural conventions? Does one gender have greater visibility as expressed through figurine numbers and proportions? We are unlikely to produce satisfying and nuanced answers to these questions if we rely on impressionistic evaluations of the relevant evidence. We need robust data from specific sites giving ratios of male to female figurines, but we also need to place this data in the wider context of the considerable proportion of fragmentary material that cannot be gendered.

Another trend observable in recent work has been the use of figurine evidence to support the suggestion that male status and individuality were privileged over that of females within Minoan society. This suggestion is both surprising and intriguing given the high visibility of females in ritual contexts in elite art, i.e., in palatial frescoes and gold seal rings. It has been suggested that individual male identity was stressed through the greater variability and elaboration of dress and accessories seen in the clay figurines, as well as "a marked tendency to depict females in a more simplified manner than males [which] carries over into the bronze figurines of the following period."[10] The two figurines depicted by Preziosi and Hitchcock would at first glance seem to support this suggestion: the male figurine is indeed carefully modeled and painted, while the female figure appears by contrast to be rather plainly dressed with a low brimmed hat and a simply flaring skirt.[11]

This reading of the material, however, is problematic for two reasons. First, we should look at the way in which gender is elaborated within specific peak sanctuary assemblages before moving to wider interpretations. In this case, the two figurines, though captioned as coming from Petsophas, do not come from the same site. The female figurine is from Chamaizi (not a peak sanctuary), and it is stylistically different from the Petsophas material.[12] More importantly, the argument is undermined by closer examination of material from Petsophas, since both male and female figurines may be either finely modeled and painted, or more simply shaped, as illustrated here by two male figurines (Figs. 15.2, 15.3).

The key methodological point is that a formal analysis of any group of figurines needs to take account of the environment of practice, i.e., the contextual framework of production and consumption within which choices were made by both the makers and the users of figurines. Although we have no direct access to the intentions of the figurine maker, we can observe that there is a significant relationship between the level of detail rendered in individual figurines and the types of clays from which they were made. A relatively fine clay was shaped into a more sharply articulated body form, with greater care invested in the modeled detail and painted decoration,

9. Rehak and Younger 2001, p. 433.

10. Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, p. 87.

11. Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, p. 86, fig. 48.

12. This confusion over provenance seems to have arisen from the illustration that is the source of fig. 48, i.e., Marinatos and Hirmer 1960, pl. 15, where a male and female figurine from Petsophas, both very finely modeled and painted, are shown together with the larger female figurine from Chamaizi.

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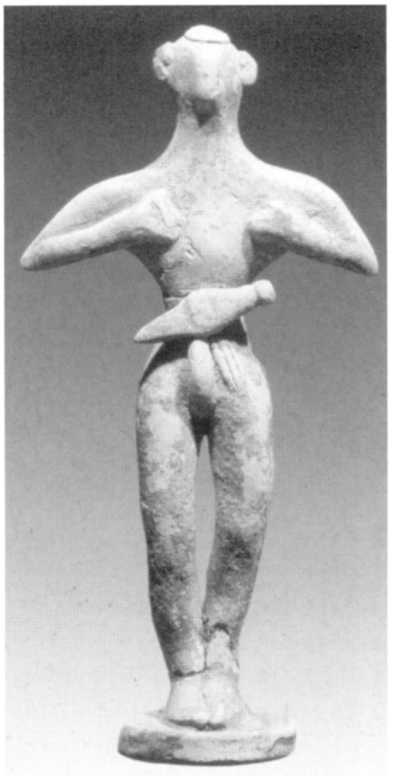

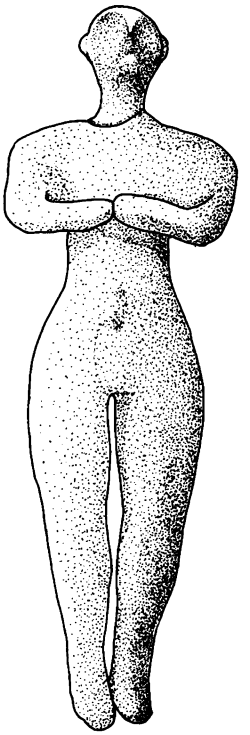

Figure 15.2 *(left)*. Male figurine, finely modeled and painted, from Petsophas. Photo A. Peatfield

Figure 15.3 *(right)*. Male figurine, more simply modeled, from Petsophas. Drawing A. Kelly, after Davaras n.d., fig. 30, center

while coarser clay was more simply modeled.[13] Elaboration or simplification of bodily form relates, therefore, not primarily to gender but to the production of figurines from clays with different working qualities. There does not seem to have been an obvious association of finer fabrics with males and coarser fabrics with females that might indicate a deliberately greater investment in the production of male figurines. A different kind of patterning, however, is observable at Atsipades, where only a small proportion of the figurines was made from finer clays, and these were used for human as opposed to animal figurines.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN FIGURINE STUDIES

I suggest that our ability to establish a framework for assessing the expression of individualization in the Minoan figurine repertoire and to relate those expressions to social identity and action is hampered at present by three major factors. These are:

1. the highly selective sample of material that is readily available for study;
2. the assumption that peak sanctuary figurines are a stereotypical assemblage and that generalizing statements made about them necessarily apply to the whole island;
3. the different "ways of seeing" practiced by different scholars in evaluating the visual information contained in the figurines.

13. Zeimbeki (2004, p. 353) makes a similar point in relation to the small animal figurines from Juktas.

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Figure 15.4. Atsipades figurine, RM 6891. Photo A. Peatfield

The very limited publication of peak sanctuary material creates genuine difficulties at every level of analysis, from calculating numbers of figures to trying to assess the range of variability in relation to almost any element of figurine form. The summary publication of Petsophas in 1903 and its reworking in 1991 have given the material from this site a particularly high visibility.[14] Indeed, one of the Petsophas male figurines has been illustrated so often that it has become almost iconic, creating the impression that peak sanctuary figurines were far more standardized than may really have been the case, while masking the very different expressions of the body form that occurred along with the more familiar, idealized Minoan bodies (Fig. 15.4). Only full and detailed publications can ameliorate this problem in the long term, but for the present all discussion—and especially generalizing statements—should be tempered by the awareness that the diversity of the figurines is only imperfectly glimpsed through the currently published material.

The other two factors relate to the practice of studying figurines. These can be addressed by a shift to the careful study of morphological variation as an intentional strategy for communicating social identity and action, as proposed above. The assumption that peak sanctuary cult was expressed in a uniform way throughout the island has led to the minimization of possible differences between regions or even individual sites.

While modes of production may have varied, the model of production groups making both pottery and figurines locally, as suggested by Marika Zeimbeki for the Juktas animal figurines[15] and by Geraldine Gesell for the rather different "goddesses with upraised arms" from Kavousi,[16] also seems valid for the Atsipades material. The Atsipades pottery and figurines seem to have been made from visually similar fabrics, and experiments in replicating some of the distinctive figurine types show that they are relatively easy to produce. Study of style alongside fabric strongly suggests that figurines were on the whole both produced and consumed (i.e., deposited at

14. Myres 1902–1903; Rutkowski 1991.
15. Zeimbeki 2004, p. 353.
16. Gesell and Saupe 1997.

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the peak sanctuary) locally, and may therefore exhibit significant evidence for local preferences and needs. For example, the Atsipades figurines are stylistically different from those of one of its nearest neighbors, the site of Vrysinas, where there was a fondness for impressed detail as part of the modeling process—a technique that is almost totally absent at Atsipades. Other intersite differences include contrasting preferences for miniature animal figurines at some localities and for medium or even large-sized clay animals at others.

Possible instances of distinctive practice at the local or regional level need to be evaluated cautiously nonetheless. For instance, as discussed above, the figurines from Atsipades display a range of open or divergent gestures in which the arms extend away from the body. The apparent rarity of these gestures at other sites, however, is more likely to reflect the physical frailties of the gestures than their absence. Whereas the closed hands-to-torso gesture tends to be preserved intact, figurines displaying open gestures are far more susceptible to broken arms. These are only likely to be reunited with their original owner in a context of full retrieval of finds followed by intensive post-excavation study.

Further shifts in perception are needed in order to explore the tension between individuation and standardization within the clay figurine population. This, too, needs to be viewed within the context of production. Numerous studies of hand-modeled figurines from different cultures have demonstrated that no two figurines are ever exactly identical, and that there are often small clusters of material displaying sufficient similarities to suggest that they could be the work of a single figurine maker. The identification of intentional differentiation between figurines is not then unproblematic. It may be hard to distinguish from the idiosyncratic variations in practice among different figurine makers. It must be explicitly located within the variability expressed by individuals, and within and between sites. In the case of Minoan figurines, this form of analysis is as yet in its infancy.

It is clear that within the deceptively simple modeling of the Minoan figurines, certain attributes of body and dress were given special attention. Painted decoration, for example, was used to create complex patterning on clothing or to create jewelry, though often poorly preserved. One area that consistently received careful attention from the figurine makers was the arrangement of the hair and headgear. These exhibit a dazzling range of sinuous scalp-locks, edgy piecrust "Mohicans," looped "Regency" buns, and brimmed or conical hats (Fig. 15.5). It seems likely that this bodily artifact communicated important social information, yet it has been little discussed, despite a strong interest in hair as a visual marker of age-grades in more prestigious media such as frescoes. I venture to suggest that one of the factors contributing to this neglect is a cultural bias that does not predispose us to view hair and hats as a fundamental expression of identity and status. Another factor may be the "male gaze" of some writers who simply describe the hats as "fantastical" or tell us that "*women* (my emphasis) wore their hair in different styles."[17]

In a study of Mesoamerican figurines, Joyce Marcus carefully analyzed the rich and diverse hairstyles represented.[18] She was in the fortunate position of being able to draw upon ethnohistorical records to clarify the basic

17. Rutkowski 1991, p. 46.
18. Marcus 1998.

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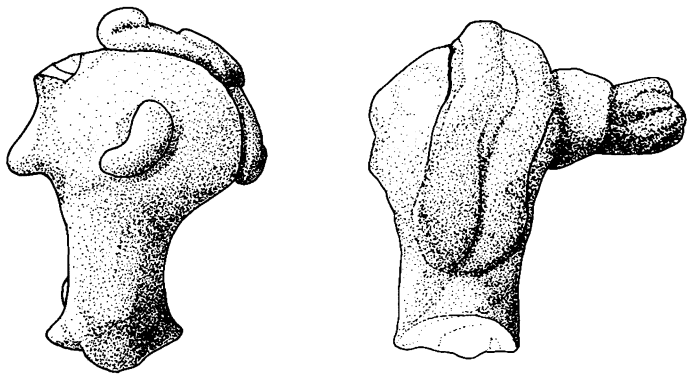

Figure 15.5. Peak sanctuary figurines, illustrating different hairstyles.
Drawing A. Kelly, after Davaras n.d., figs. 26, 37

styles, their significance in relation to age, marital status, and rituals, and also their regional variants. In some sets of figurines, which seem to have been used together (she suggests in ancestor rituals), the varied hairstyles constituted the focal individuating feature within a group.

The hairstyles and hats observed on Minoan figurines are richly diversified; indeed, they seem to be far more varied in the figurine material than in other Minoan media. For the present, the significance of these different hairstyles remains somewhat mysterious. The careful elaboration of these features, which in some cases do seem to be highly individualized, supports the argument that the figurines should be read not as undifferentiated worshipers, but as individuals operating within a complex social reality.

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