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Lumps of Clay and Pieces of Stone: Ambiguity, Bodies, and Identity as Portrayed in Neolithic Figurines

Ian Kuijt and
Meredith S. Chesson

The human body is always treated as an image of society and . . . there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension.

Douglas (1982:70)

Introduction

The Neolithic of the Near East encompassed some of the most profound and fundamental innovations in human lifeways in our species' history. Approximately 11,500 years ago, people in certain regions of the southern Levant established the earliest sedentary villages in the world, settling down in food-producing communities relying on domesticated plants and animals for subsistence. This transition involved tremendous changes in lifeways, with a move from a mobile hunting and gathering lifestyle to one of year-round sedentism and food production of cereals. The establishment of viable farming communities may have required several generations, but from an archaeological standpoint this shift appears to be fairly rapid in certain areas. However, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that these early farmers continued to hunt animals and gather plants, as well as trading domesticated cereals for plants and animals hunted and gathered by people in the nearby upland areas, especially east of the Jordan River.

From the perspective of many archaeologists, as well as the general public, one of the most interesting aspects of the ancient Near Eastern Neolithic is the assemblage of exotic anthropomorphic statues, animal and human figurines, and plastered and painted human skulls, all potentially representing powerful, idealized forces of nature, fertility, and society's struggle to control and contain shifting struc-

tures of economy and lifeways (see Verhoeven, this volume). The representation of humans in Neolithic communities is a topic that has received a great deal of attention as a crucial element of several researchers' interpretive frameworks for understanding Levantine early agricultural society. At the foundation of this literature are two deceptively simple questions: "What do figurines do?" and "What do figurines mean?" To address these questions, researchers have utilized diverse theoretical perspectives from a broad spectrum of disciplines, especially art history, religious studies, ancient history and literature, sociocultural anthropology, and archaeology. They have, moreover, usually explored these questions by examining Neolithic figurines from a broad geographic and temporal scope. While drawing upon this foundation, this chapter differs from most previous treatments in two ways. First, we approach these questions as anthropological archaeologists, with a strong focus on the spatial and temporal contexts of these objects on micro- and macro-level scales. Secondly, we limit our analysis to all published objects from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the southern Levant, restricting the geographic and temporal scope in order to focus on the use of figural representation in a defined space and time. This chapter discusses three-dimensional representations of humans, animals or geometric shapes in the form of figurines, statues, masks, or human skulls from southern Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) sites (figure 8.1).

We argue that the attention to context forces us to change research questions about figurine function and significance, contextualizing peoples' manufacture, use, and discard of these objects within the social, economic, and political frameworks of their communities. Thus, this chapter explores how researchers can investigate the potential meanings and functions of figurines to PPN peoples. In this period people established the first agricultural communities in the world, essentially creating a new way of life that focused on sedentism, agriculture, and animal herding. Throughout the PPN period, we witness the tremendous growth and eventual abandonment of these earliest agricultural communities. Interestingly, the nature and scale of manufacture and use of figural representations of humans, animals, and geometric shapes shift in these communities over time, often changing with documented transitions in economic and social practices. Our focus, then, rests on understanding how we can explore the relationships between social and economic behavioral changes and figurine use in these communities, and more specifically, how the representation of human forms may reflect changing understandings of what it meant for people to live in these communities as individuals and members of collective groups.

Figurines, Bodies, and Identity

Analysis and interpretation of the social and symbolic context of prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines has produced an extensive series of debates and discussions. Researchers have generated a substantial body of literature which explores questions of why people make figurines, what figurines "do," what figurines mean, and what we can learn about a society from its figurines. This historical context and

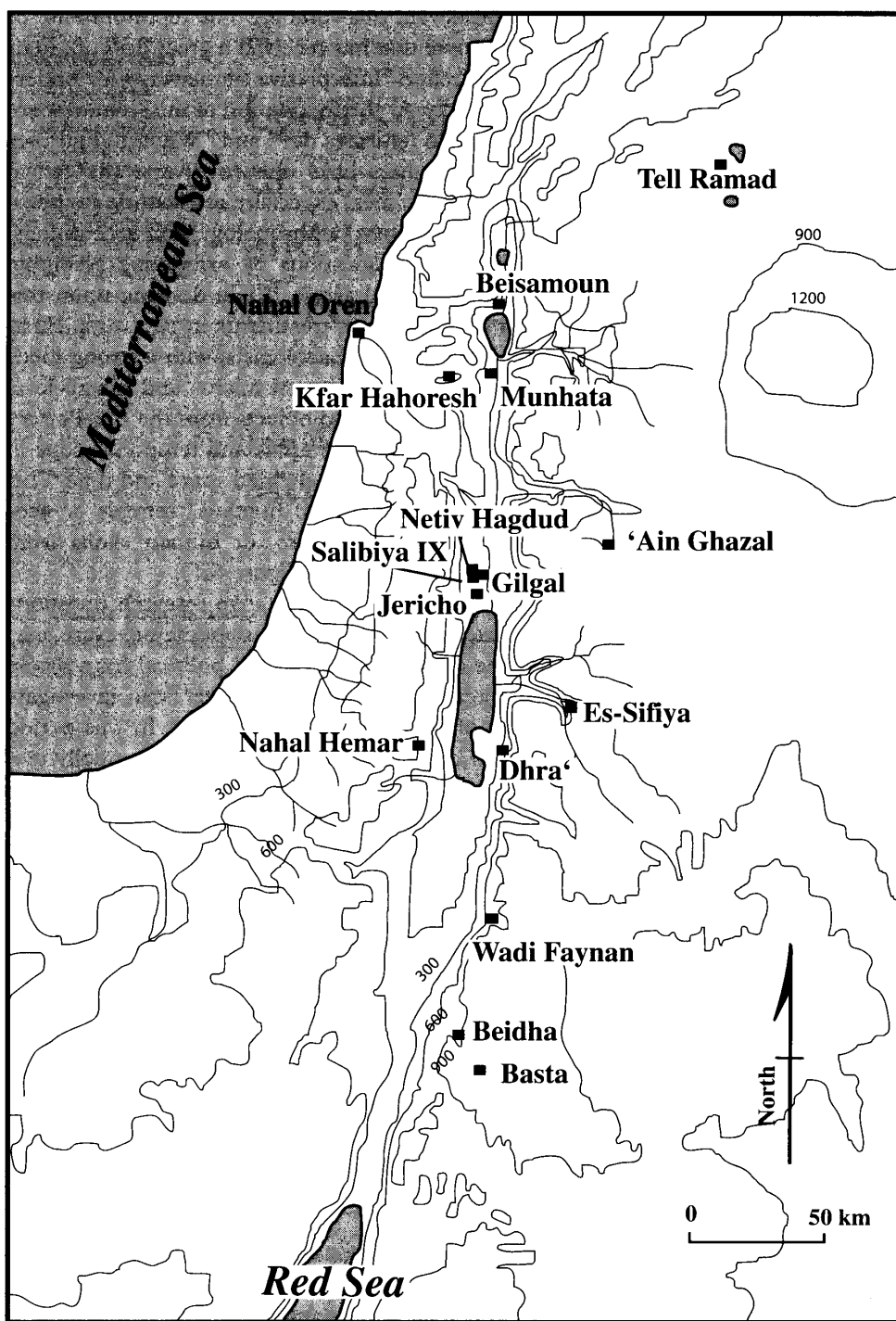


Figure 8.1 Map of Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites of the Southern Levant (authors' original)

overview of the practice and theory of figurine studies has been widely discussed in several surveys (in particular the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* feature "Can We Interpret Figurines?" [Bailey 1996; Haaland and Haaland 1996; Hamilton 1996; Marcus 1996; Ucko 1996]; Knapp and Meskell 1997; Lesure 2002). These authors note that figurines represent a unique form of human representation with a complex array of meanings, simultaneously obvious and nuanced, that may change throughout their life history as the makers and/or users of the figurines negotiate their own lives and relationships. The figurine may change hands several times over its life history, be used in many different and differently charged contexts, and embody multiple significances to different people (Joyce 1993; Bailey 1996).

Figurines involve the creation of the human image in a three-dimensional, durable, and tangible format that extends beyond gesture, voice, and language in portraying some aspect of humanness (Bailey 1996). While many figurines may not have been designed to be strictly realistic representations of a human form, nevertheless they do depict recognizably human elements. What is often interesting is the nature of this representation, namely which elements are emphasized and which are de-emphasized or even omitted (Joyce 1993). Joyce argues that details of human images are not random; rather they are deliberate and reflect stereotyping of mental constructs by the makers and users of them. Thus, emphases and omissions in figurines potentially represent a series of naturalized features that are important elements in how a particular society understands the materiality of human bodies and social identities. Douglas (1982) notes this close and inseparable relationship between peoples' physical bodies and social bodies. In outlining the connections between the personal and social body, Douglas (1982:63) discusses the interesting implications for how societal structures can be expressed on the body, arguing that, "The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society." We believe that the figural representation of humans potentially intensified this relationship between the personal and social. In representing the human form in a durable material good, people created an enduring representation of the personal and social body, focusing attention on the key elements of what it meant to be a person and exist in a human body in a particular society.

Many researchers have recognized this connection and interpreted this relationship as a potential venue for expressing concepts of identity, particularly sex and gender, in a society (Martin 1987; Butler 1990, 1993; Lacqueur 1990; Lock 1993), prompting archaeologists to think about identity in the archaeological past (Conkey and Gero 1997, and references therein; Gilchrist 1999; Meskell 1999; Joyce 2000). While the vast majority of archaeological studies of gender successfully de-couple the concept of gender from sex and recognize gender as a social construct, they do not similarly problematize the notion of sex (Knapp and Meskell 1997). Lacqueur (1990) and Butler (1990, 1993) have demonstrated the constructed nature of sex and gender, that people's understandings of their biological, material bodies are just as socially constructed as understandings of their own gender identities. Therefore there can be multiple ways of understanding the materiality of human bodies that

may differ across space and time. How does this affect our study of anthropomorphic figurines? If researchers do not question the binary categories of male and female and conflate categories of sex and gender, then their approach to human figurines by default assumes the presence of only these two categories. They approach the figurine assemblage looking for signs of maleness (penis) and femaleness (breasts, hips, buttocks) that are associated with secondary sexual characteristics. They may also categorize figurines according to other traits, such as costume, hair, or even find context, that may be interpreted as indicating male or female characteristics. If figurines do not display any of these markings then they are often placed in an "Other" category that may or may not enter researchers' discussions of normative ideas about sex and gender in a society. This constrained approach fails to consider the social construction of sex or gender, or the complexity of figural representation of human bodies.

In this paper we discuss how integrating theories of the social construction of sex and gender with the analysis of anthropomorphic figurines from the PPN period of the Southern Levant allows researchers to explore the possible meanings and social context of figurine use in early agricultural villages. Specifically, we focus upon two major themes in this reexamination of Neolithic figurine use, meaning, and interpretation. First, rather than accepting the traditional view of two naturalized sexes, we instead investigate the spectrum of representation and explicate the nature of marked, unmarked, and ambiguous representations. We argue that for some periods of the Neolithic the traditional search by researchers for two naturalized sexes is misleading and inappropriate, as the vast majority of PPN figurines are unmarked, and thus the emphasis on males and females as key binary features of identity is inaccurate. In this way, we hope to gain a greater understanding of how the PPN people understood what it meant to be human, and how they linked their bodies, and portrayals of human bodies, to the expression of identities. Second, we emphasize the importance of context in analyzing figurines (Joyce 1993; Bailey 1996; Haaland and Haaland 1996; Marcus 1996; Knapp and Meskell 1997; Soffer et al. 2000; Voigt 2000). Since meaning is contextual, and often spatially organized, these objects can hold multiple significances. Therefore it is imperative to pay close attention to the context of the objects in any analysis of figurines. In initially exploring the nature of PPN representation, as well as the context of each figurine, we ask several general questions to document and explore issues of bodily representation and potential meanings:

- What elements of the human body are represented? Are representations restricted to portions of bodies (e.g., head, penis), or is the entire human form included?
- What bodily elements are omitted (e.g., feet, hands, legs, secondary sexual characteristics)?
- Are there any indications of marking or emphasizing certain bodily elements (e.g., head, eyes, buttocks, penis)?
- Where was this object found? What other material culture or structural elements were associated with this figurine?

- What is the overall nature of economic organization, political structure and social organization of the site in which this figurine was found?

These serve as a foundation for exploring the social and political context of figurines from different phases of the Neolithic (cf. Lesure 2002). We now turn to a brief introduction to the major social, economic, and political structures of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic periods in the southern Levant.

Zoomorphic and Anthropomorphic Figurines in the Southern Levantine Neolithic

There is no question that archaeological field research in the southern Levant provides researchers with our most detailed understanding of the technological background, temporal and spatial distribution of the use and manufacture of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines, as well as clay geometrics, within any single region of the Near East (Bar-Yosef 1997) (figure 8.1). Research in other geographic areas, specifically at the settlements of Çatal Höyük, Hajji Firuz, and Gritille Höyük (Mellaart 1967; Ucko 1968; Voigt 1983, 1985, 2000; Forest 1994; Hamilton 1996), provide important insights into figurine use from surrounding areas. When considering figurine use in the southern Levant, it is clear that changes in both style and frequency of different types of figurines are seen in all of the major phases of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, including the first sedentary collector-agricultural villages in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA), the formation of established agricultural villages of the Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (MPPNB) and the eventual emergence of large aggregate villages of the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period/Pre-Pottery Neolithic C (LPPNB/PPNC). Each phase of the PPN involves a specific combination of settlement patterns, socio-economic structures, and community types (Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995) (table 8.1).

PPNA

The PPNA period represents the first period of the Neolithic of the Near East. It is characterized by relatively small forager-farmer communities whose architecture is primarily composed of oval-circular stone structures. There are seven anthropomorphic figurines dated to PPNA contexts from several sites and all are carved in the round from limestone or formed of baked clay (figure 8.2; tables 8.2, 8.3, 8.4). One figurine has also been found at el-Khiam and identified as anthropomorphic, but we have characterized it as unknown or unidentifiable due to the lack of any overt human features (figure 8.2d). All but the el-Khiam figurine are stylized representations of portions or all of a human body, and each involves a unique combination of marked features or omissions. For example, excavators at Dhra' and Netiv Hagdud have argued that two figurines represent female bodies, based on their identification of secondary sexual characteristics (breasts, hips), and overall shape of the figures (figure 8.2e-g) (Bar-Yosef and Gopher 1997; Kuijt and

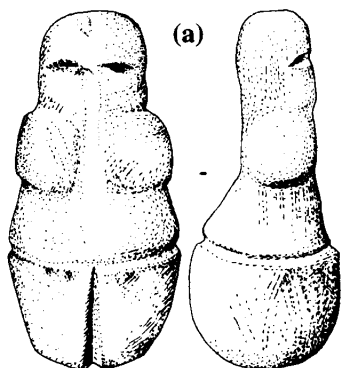
Table 8.1 Summary of Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement systems and figurines

Time period	Calibrated C14	Settlement types	Settlement scale ^b	Economic practices ^c	Stresses on the community	Figurines
PPNA	11,700–10,500 B.P.	Camps Hamlets	10–100 people	Hunting foraging farming	Shift from foraging to food production; establishing sedentary communities	Fairly equal proportions of unmarked human figurines, figurines with breasts and hips (female), and phalli (male); no geometric or zoomorphic figurines
EPPNB^a	Unresolved	Unresolved	Unresolved	Unresolved	Unresolved	None
MPPNB	10,500–9,500 B.P.	Camps Hamlets Villages	10–750+	Hunting foraging farming herding	Population aggregation and growth; increasing scale and size of communities and of stable economic/social/political structures	Majority figurines zoomorphic; human figurines, statues, masks, and skulls mostly unmarked (few statues with breasts marked)
LPPNB/ PPNC	9,500–8,700 B.P.	Camps Hamlets Villages	50–750+	Hunting foraging farming herding	Increasing crowding and population density in large communities; stress from resource depletion, scale of food production necessary to support large communities	Majority of figurines zoomorphic and geometric; most human figurines unmarked (few with breasts and hips, possible phalli reported)

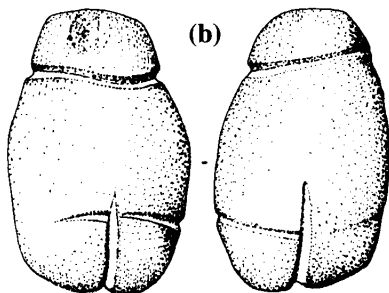
^a See Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 1998 and Kuijt 1997 for alternative views on the development and foundation of the EPPNB in the southern Levant.

^b See Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995 and Kuijt 2000b for estimates for site size and population growth through different phases of the Neolithic.

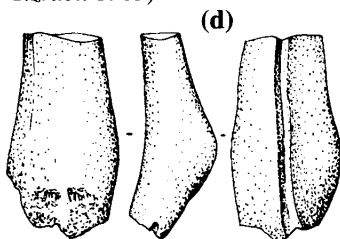
^c See Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995 and Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 1998 for overviews of Pre-Pottery Neolithic economic practices.



Salibiya IX (after Bar-Yosef & Gopher 1997)

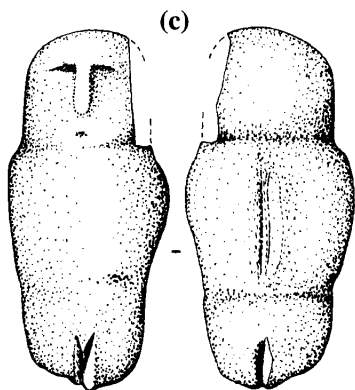


Nahal Oren (after Stekelis & Yizraeli 1963)

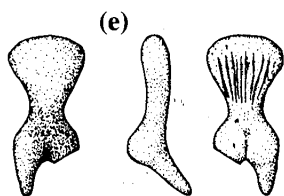


El Khiam (after Echegaray 1966)

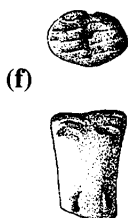
Etched/Carved Limestone



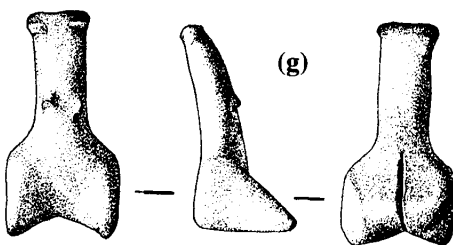
Gilgal I (after Noy 1989)



Dhra' (after Kuijt & Finlayson 2002)



Netiv Hagdud (after Bar-Yosef & Gopher 1997)



Netiv Hagdud (after Bar-Yosef & Gopher 1997)

Molded Clay



Figure 8.2 Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period figurines (sources: a–d: Cauvin 1994: Figure 6; e: Kuijt and Finlayson 2002; f–g: Bar-Yosef and Gopher 1997: Figure 6-1.2; reproduced by permission)

Table 8.2 Sites with figurines from the southern Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic

Objects	PPNA	MPPNB	LPPNB/PPNC	Sources
Human figurines and phalli	WF-16 (1); Salibiya IX (1); Dhra' (2); Gilgal I (1); Nahal Oren (1); Netiv Hagdud (1)	'Ain Ghazal (40); Nahal Hemar (3); Munhata (1); Beidha (1)	Basta (1); 'Ain Ghazal (8)	Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988; Bar-Yosef and Gopher 1997; Finlayson, pers. comm. 2001; Kirkbride 1968; Kuijt and Finlayson 2002; Noy 1991; Perrot 1966; Rollefson 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1998b; Stekelis and Yizraeli 1963
Statues, busts and heads	–	Jericho (1); 'Ain Ghazal (32)	–	Garstang and Garstang 1940; Rollefson 1986, 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1998a
Plastered and painted skulls and masks	–	'Ain Ghazal (8); Beisamoun (2); Jericho (7); Kfar Hahoreh (2); Nahal Hemar (6)	Basta (1); Ramad (2)	Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989; Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988; de Contenson 1967; Ferembach and Lechevallier 1973; Goren et al. 2001; Goren et al. 1993; Goring-Morris 2000; Griffin et al. Rollefson 1998; Rollefson 1986, 2000; Rollefson et al. 1985; Rollefson et al. 1999; Schmandt-Besserat 1998a; Strouhal 1973; Yakar and Hershkovitz 1990
Zoomorphic figurines	–	'Ain Ghazal (151)	Es-Sifiya (215); Basta (5); 'Ain Ghazal (2+)	Hermansen 1997; Kafafi and Rollefson 1995; Mahasneh and Bienert 1999; Mahasneh and Gebel 1999; Nissen et al. 1991; Rollefson and Kafafi 1996
Geometric figurines	–	–	Es-Sifiya (102); Basta (>1); 'Ain Ghazal (3)	Hermansen 1997; Kafafi and Rollefson 1995; Mahasneh and Bienert 1999; Mahasneh and Gebel 1999; Nissen et al. 1991; Rollefson and Kafafi 1996
Amorphous/unknown/undescribed	El Khiam (1)	–	'Ain Ghazal (121); Basta (small numbers)	Echegaray 1966; Kafafi and Rollefson 1995; Nissen et al. 1991; Rollefson and Kafafi 1996
Totals	N = 8	N = 254	N = 464	

Table 8.3 Summaries of figurine data by period

Period	Human figurines	Statues, busts, and heads	Plastered and painted human skulls and masks	Zoomorphic figurines	Geometric figurines	Amorphous or unknown	Totals
PPNA	7 (87.50%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (12.50%)	8
MPPNB	45 (17.72%)	33 (12.99%)	25 (9.84%)	151 (59.45%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	254
LPPNB/ PPNC	9 (1.94%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (0.65%)	225 (48.49%)	106 (22.84%)	121 (26.08%)	464
Totals	61 (8.40%)	33 (4.55%)	28 (3.86%)	376 (51.79%)	106 (14.60%)	122 (16.80%)	726

Finlayson 2002). Similarly, recent excavations at WF-16 and Dhra' have recovered two carved phalli (one at each site) (Finlayson 2001, personal communication). It should be noted, however, that four of the eight PPNA anthropomorphic figurines can be interpreted as ambiguous, without any specific markers of sex or gender (Bar-Yosef 1997; Cauvin 2000a). In the three cases where find context was noted, figurines were recovered in trash deposits (Bar-Yosef and Gopher 1997; Kuijt and Finlayson 2002). No clearly identified zoomorphic figurines are known from the PPNA.

PPNB

The PPNB is commonly divided into three main phases: Early PPNB (EPPNB), Middle PPNB (MPPNB), and Late PPNB/PPNC (LPPNB/PPNC). The collective PPNB assemblage contains at least 718 published zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and geometric figurines. This figure must be viewed as an approximation given the vagaries of published data, and lack of detail in some preliminary reports (tables 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4). We briefly review the data from these three sub-periods.

EPPNB

The EPPNB is traditionally viewed as a transitional cultural phase between PPNA and MPPNB (e.g., Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 1998), but remains poorly understood by researchers. As discussed elsewhere (Kuijt 1998), serious questions have been raised about the validity of this cultural-historical phase. Regardless of one's acceptance of the EPPNB as a cultural-historical unit, there are no published examples of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurines from any of the archaeological sites dating to this period.

Table 8.4 PPN figurines with published contextual information

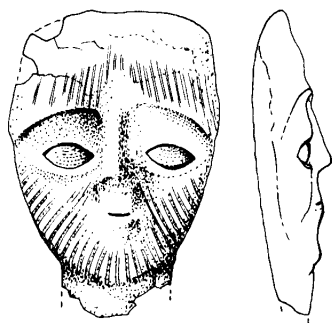
Site	Period	Material culture	Context type	References
Dhra'	PPNA	1 human figurine, 1 phallus	Trash deposit	Kuijt and Finlayson 2002
Hagdud	PPNA	1 human figurine	Trash deposit	Bar-Yosef and Gopher 1997
'Ain Ghazal	MPPNB	36 human figurines	Trash deposit	Schmandt-Besserat 1998b
Nahal Hemar	MPPNB	4 plastered skulls	Cave	Yakar and Hershkovitz 1990; Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989
Nahal Hemar	MPPNB	2 limestone masks	Cave	Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1989
'Ain Ghazal	MPPNB	33 anthropomorphic statues	Caches in extramural locations	Rollefson 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1998a
'Ain Ghazal	MPPNB	8 painted and/or plastered skulls	Caches in extramural locations	Rollefson 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1998a
'Ain Ghazal	MPPNB	150 zoomorphic figurines	Trash deposits, including cache of 23 figurines	Rollefson 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1997, 1998b
'Ain Ghazal	MPPNB	1 cattle figurine	Plaster storage bin, figurine below 3 <i>Bos</i> metacarpals	Rollefson 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1997, 1998b
Beisamoun	MPPNB	2 plastered skulls	Caches	Goren et al. 2001
Jericho	MPPNB	7 plastered skulls	Caches	Kenyon 1981; Goren et al. 2001; Strouhal 1973
Kfar Hahoreh	MPPNB	2 plastered skulls	Caches	Goren et al. 2001; Goring-Morris 2000
'Ain Ghazal	LPPNB/ PPNC	1 human figurine (identified as female)	Found on stone walkway between two buildings	Rollefson 2000; Schmandt-Besserat 1998b
es-Sifiya	LPPNB/ PPNC	101 geometric figurines and 215 zoomorphic figurines	Found in single context: Unit C11, Locus 9, described as a "production context," and interpreted as a workshop	Mahasneh and Gebel 1999; Mahasneh and Bienert 1999
Basta	LPPNB/ PPNC	4 zoomorphic figurines	All found in single cache	Hermansen 1997

MPPNB

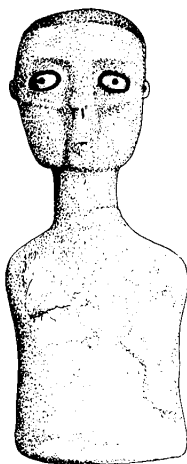
The MPPNB period is characterized by the appearance of developed agricultural villages characterized by free-standing rectangular residential buildings, domesticated plants and animals, and new developments in lithic technology. Perhaps the most dramatic aspect to representational practice in the MPPNB lies in the appearance of many new forms of anthropomorphic representations. These include large, full body anthropomorphic statues, large busts with painted faces, face masks made of clay and stone, plastered/painted and cached skulls and masks, and small anthropomorphic figurines made of baked clay or carved in stone (figures 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, and 12.1). In addition, zoomorphic representations appear in the MPPNB for the first time, including significant numbers of cattle figurines made of baked clay recovered from multiple settlements (Bar-Yosef 1997). In contrast to the limited number of figurines recovered from PPNA sites, there is a remarkable abundance of these objects in the MPPNB (figures 8.3, 8.4, and 8.5; tables 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4). These objects have been recovered from a wide variety of contexts, including public caches, trash deposits, fills, and residential spaces.

LPPNB/PPNC

The LPPNB/PPNC period reflects continuity in general architectural and settlement practices from the MPPNB period. Villages are characterized by rectangular architecture with one and two-story buildings constructed against each other. While there are some important elements of continuity in the manufacture and use of figurines from MPPNB to LPPNB, there are also some clear differences. Elements of continuity include the use of zoomorphic figurines made of baked clay (figures 8.4, 8.6; tables 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4). With the exceptions of one stone human figurine depicting a head and a fragment of a stone mask from Basta, and eight human figurines from 'Ain Ghazal, the LPPNB/PPNC people did not represent humans widely in any medium. Twenty-three figurines from es-Sifiya have been characterized by Mahasneh, Gebel and Bienert as anthropomorphic male (Mahasneh and Bienert 1999; Mahasneh and Gebel 1999). Based on the published examples of the seven classes of human figurines proposed by Mahasneh and Bienert (1999), we disagree with these researchers and categorize these objects as geometric figurines (although we might also entertain their categorization as "Unknown" or "Unidentifiable"). There are no clear indications of human features (much less "male" characteristics), even highly stylized ones, and thus we argue that these figurines are not demonstrably anthropomorphic representations. While we see a remarkable decline of human representations in the LPPNB/PPNC, we witness a marked increase in the number of geometric figurines found at several LPPNB/PPNC sites. Furthermore, while zoomorphic figurines continue to be used in these communities, the number of these is much smaller compared to the MPPNB period.

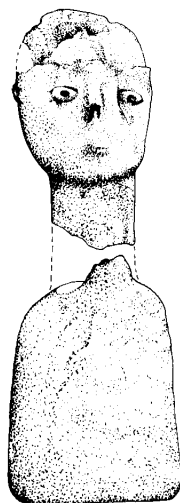


(a) *Jericho (after Garstang 1940)*



(b)

'Ain Ghazal (after Rollefson 1983)



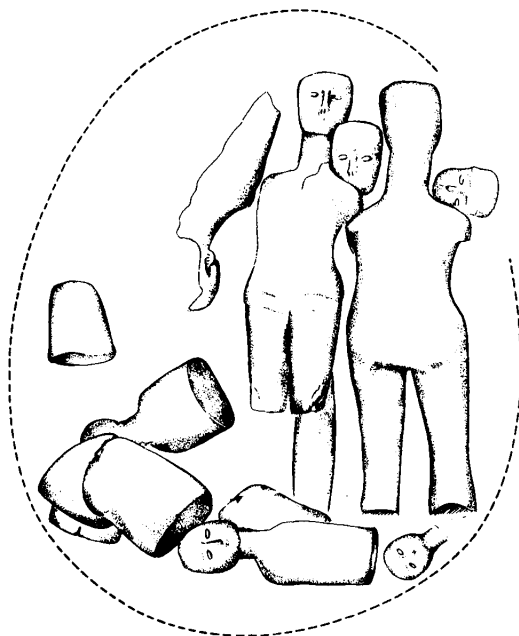
(c)

'Ain Ghazal (after Rollefson 1983)

MPPNB clay anthropomorphic statues/busts

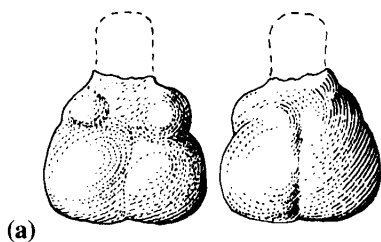


*'Ain Ghazal
(after Rollefson 1983)*



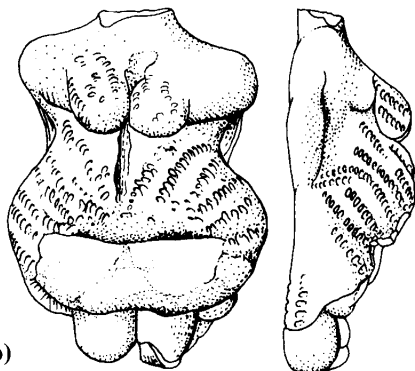
MPPNB cache of clay anthropomorphic statues/busts from 'Ain Ghazal

Figure 8.3 Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period anthropomorphic busts and statues, and cache from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan (source: Cauvin 1994: Figures 39–40; reproduced by permission)



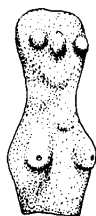
(a)

MPPNB Beidha (after Kirkbride 1968)



(b)

LPPNB 'Ain Ghazal (after Rollefson 1983)

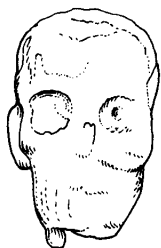


(c)

MPPNB Munhata (after Perrot 1966)

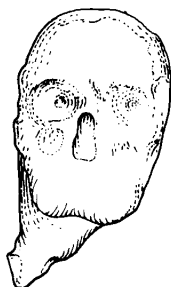
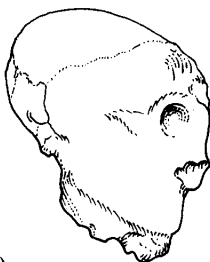


Baked clay anthropomorphic figurines



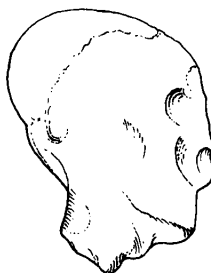
(d)

Ramad (after de Contenson 1967)



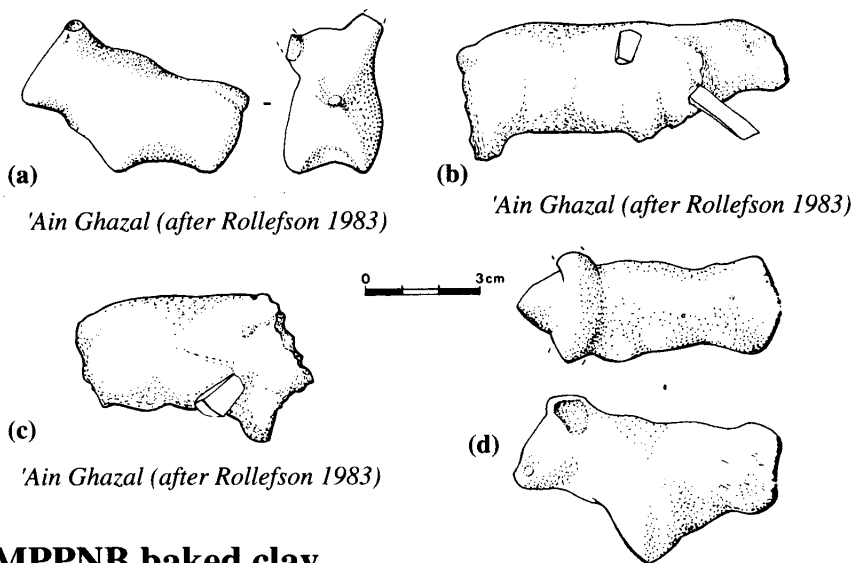
(e)

Ramad (after de Contenson 1967)

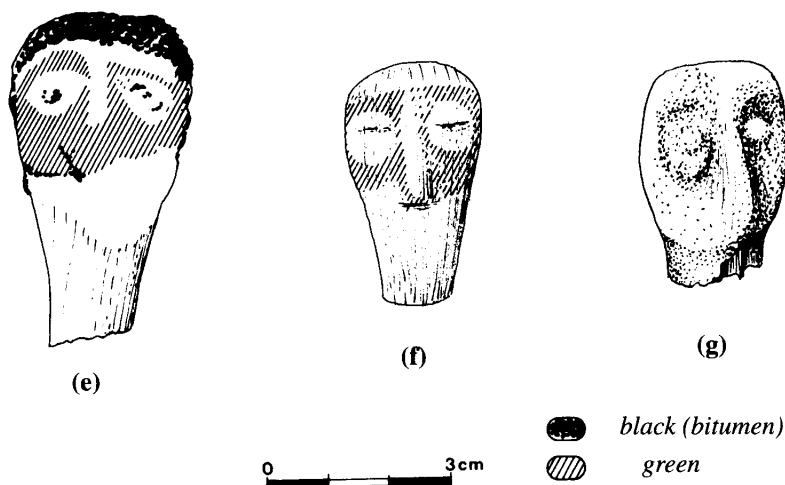


LPPNB Skulls plastered with clay

Figure 8.4 Middle and Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period anthropomorphic figurines and plastered skulls (source: Cauvin 1994: Figures 36 and 41; reproduced by permission)



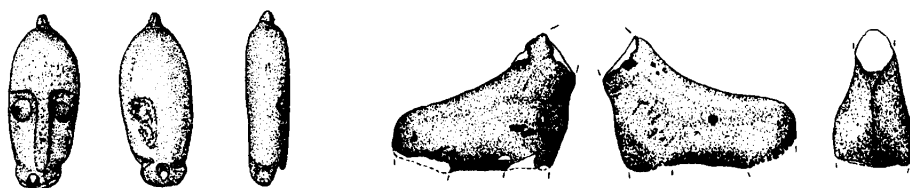
MPPNB baked clay zoomorphic representations



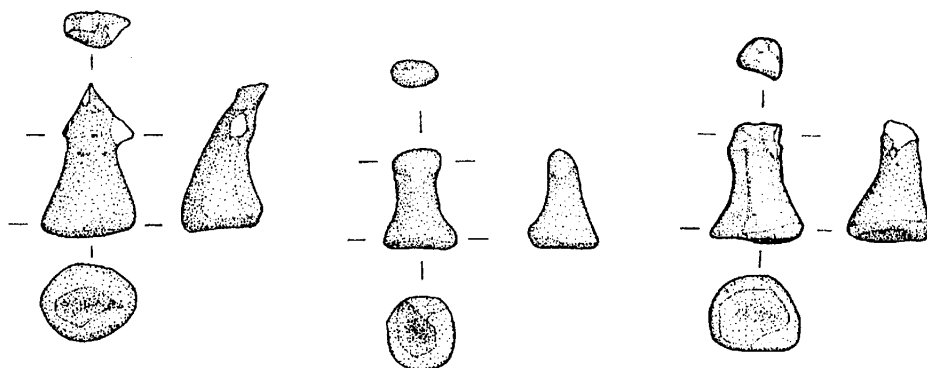
MPPNB Nahal Hemar anthropomorphic / facial representations on bone

(after Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988)

Figure 8.5 Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period zoomorphic figurines and facial representations
(source: Cauvin 1994: Figures 37–38; reproduced by permission)

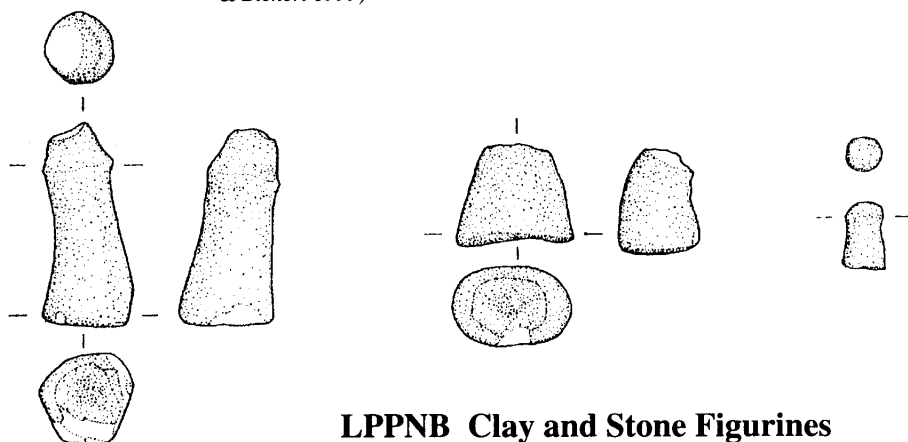


Basta (after Nissen, Muheisen, & Gebel 1991)



es-Sifiya (after Mahasneh & Bienert 1999)

0 5cm



LPPNB Clay and Stone Figurines

Figure 8.6 Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B/Pre-Pottery Neolithic C zoomorphic and geometric figurines (sources: Nissen et al. 1991: Figure 6, reproduced courtesy of the Basta Joint Archaeological Project; Mahasneh and Bienert 1999: Figures 4–7, reproduced by permission)

Meaning and Current Interpretations of Neolithic Figurines

With this brief outline of the shifts in frequencies of the manufacture and use of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and geometric figurines in the southern Levant, we now turn to a discussion of how these patterns have been interpreted by researchers. Moving beyond the realm of primarily descriptive reports, the studies of two researchers, Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1997, 1998a, 1998b) and Jacques Cauvin (1994, 2000a, 2000b), have understandably received considerable attention from prehistorians, professional archaeologists, and the general public. Focusing upon archaeological data from 'Ain Ghazal in Jordan, Schmandt-Besserat has published a series of reports that are among the most detailed descriptive treatments of Neolithic anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines from the southern Levant. On the basis of these descriptive foundations, Schmandt-Besserat has developed an interpretive framework for analyzing the materials from 'Ain Ghazal, and by extension, arguments for the meanings and ritual use of similar figurines from other Near Eastern Neolithic settlements. Adopting a similar approach, Cauvin (1994, 2000a, 2000b) draws together archaeological data from different periods and places of the Neolithic and attempts to develop a structuralist argument for meaning and symbolism for the entire Near East. Collectively, these works serve as our most detailed considerations of materials from an individual archaeological settlement and an attempt to situate these data and others into a regional context.

Schmandt-Besserat: figurines from 'Ain Ghazal

Schmandt-Besserat's research provides our most detailed treatment of the manufacture, use and meanings of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations of MPPNB and LPPNB communities. As described earlier, the MPPNB people represented humans in several media, including statuary, masks, small figurines, and cached painted, plastered and undecorated human skulls (Bar-Yosef 1997; Cauvin 2000a; Rollefson 2000, 2001a; Kuijt 2001). Even more numerous and common are the clay zoomorphic figurines. The majority of these zoomorphic figurines come from the MPPNB occupation of 'Ain Ghazal. As outlined by Schmandt-Besserat (1997), zoomorphic objects are remarkably uniform, with the quadrupeds represented as standing, and varying in size from 3 to 15 cm in length. These animals are portrayed with horns, recovered from caches, and are widely interpreted as being bovine. Many of the animals were beheaded, and in the case of a few (the exact number remains unreported), apparently stabbed with several small pieces of flint.

Schmandt-Besserat (1997) envisions the continued appearance of animal depictions as part of an age-old Near Eastern art tradition from the Paleolithic period to the third millennium B.C. Like Cauvin (1994), Schmandt-Besserat accepts that the frequency and endurance of these motifs is linked to a symbolic tradition that reflects ancient Near Eastern thought and meaning. Drawing upon historical accounts of third millennium B.C. Mesopotamia, she argues that there are a number of shared elements between the historical accounts and the figurines

recovered from 'Ain Ghazal and concludes that these are a by-product of magic practices.

As with small solid clay anthropomorphic figurines, the appearance in the MPPNB of large statues has been widely discussed by researchers as a major symbolic development within Neolithic villages. With regards to 'Ain Ghazal, Schmandt-Besserat (1998a:9) agrees with Rollefson's (2001a) suggestions that the large jump in size of human figures from the PPNA to the PPNB illustrates the appearance of public ritual use of the figurines. Specifically, she suggests that the small PPNA figurines were designed for use in homes, while the large statues were presented in public contexts, and that the statues are unlikely to be related to ancestor worship (1998b:11). Instead, her interpretation stresses that the significance of the figures is seen in the magnitude of the statues and the transition from domestic figurines of the PPNA to the use of large statues to be seen by the entire PPNB community. As with the development of clay zoomorphic figurines, she sees the monumental figures as powerful symbols that help foster community cohesion, a largely functionalist explanation.

In exploring the predominance of clay anthropomorphic figurines in the MPPNB and a rare stone statue from the PPNC period, Schmandt-Besserat (1998b:111) argues that both types depict females, but there are qualitative differences between the stone and clay figurines. For example, she notes (1998b:111–112) that the stone figurine is executed with careful planning and that the rarity of stone figurines highlights the importance of work in this medium. In contrast, the clay figurines were made of a common material, required little time investment, were discarded with other refuse, and were therefore probably related to magic-making activities in brief periods of domestic use. Thus, the stone statues' material, rarity, and aesthetic composition denote a valued artifact destined for a formal public function (see also Foster 1993:33).

Although separated by several thousand years, Schmandt-Besserat (1998b) argues that the antecedents for the PPNC stone statue are found in the earlier Natufian and PPNA period stone figurines. Drawing upon the ideas of Gopher and Orelle (1996), she finds that most stone carvings in the PPNA were sexually ambiguous or even dual-gendered representations that can alternatively be viewed as representations of male genitalia (she argues that these objects appear to be stylized phalli, from another viewpoint a stylized human female). From her perspective these stone images belong to a pan-Near Eastern Neolithic phenomenon, linked to earlier Natufian and PPNA figurines focused on sexuality or reproduction and appear to reflect pregnancy rather than conception (Schmandt-Besserat 1998b).

Jacques Cauvin: symbolism, models, and interpretations

In what is unquestionably the most provocative consideration of Neolithic figurines in the Near East, Cauvin (2000a, 2000b) has written several articles and books exploring the potential links between the origins of agriculture and ritual/religious changes. From the perspective of archaeological data his interpretations and recon-

struction of the birth of gods in the Neolithic are centered almost entirely upon changes in figurines, and more specifically zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines. With the exception of some limited material from the site of Mureybet for the PPNA, Cauvin's interpretation of symbolism and its relation to the origins of agriculture is based on figurine data from the southern Levant, examining changes between the PPNA and PPNB.

Developing arguments for the first phase of his interpretation of the revolution of Neolithic symbols, Cauvin contrasts the PPNA period with the Natufian of the southern Levant, arguing that Natufian art was essentially zoomorphic (Cauvin 2000a:25). Unfortunately, Cauvin provides a highly generalized treatment of these materials, failing to recognize that some Natufian art is anthropomorphic, including carved human heads, and in one case, a couple engaged in intimate physical contact, often interpreted as representing sexual intercourse (Perrot 1966; Noy 1991; Weinstein-Evron and Belfer-Cohen 1993; Bar-Yosef 1997). Focusing on the Levantine Khiamian, viewed by Cauvin as a sub-phase of the PPNA period predating the Sultanian, he argues that there was a revolution of symbols (i.e., figurines) that predates the origins of agriculture. Cauvin suggests that it is at this time that we see the emergence of two dominant symbolic figures: the woman and the bull. He argues, moreover, that female figurines are representations of a Goddess, found in PPNA sites in the southern Levant as well as at Mureybet. The Bull, representative of a male God, is indicated by skulls of aurochs buried complete with horns in houses at Mureybet. While Bull symbolism is not found in the southern Levant, he suggests that the Goddess and the Bull form a separate, yet related, symbolic system for the Khiamian.

Having described these two lines of symbolism, Cauvin (2000a:29) argues that these objects represent material culture associated with a new religion. Interestingly, he does not directly address the nature of this religion in the Khiamian; rather he describes it through the perspective of archaeological materials from Çatal Höyük, occupied some 2,000 years later and situated in central Turkey. Guided by the Çatal Höyük analogy, Cauvin (2000a:32) argues that a form of Neolithic female monotheism existed in PPNA. His treatment of this religion is, however, brief and presented in a way in which one has to ask how such perspectives were developed.

For the southern Levantine PPNB period, Cauvin argues that we see a full-fledged emphasis and important shift from female figurines as representations of goddesses to bull figurines, representing a masculine God (Cauvin 2000a:124). While baked and stone figurines viewed as female (due to secondary sexual characteristics, including breasts, large buttocks and abdomen) continue to appear, Cauvin sees bull figurines in the PPNB as complementing and even overtaking the authority and power of female figurines. Their increased importance, moreover, is reflected in their high frequency. Interestingly, Cauvin also views the plastered MPPNB statues from Jericho and 'Ain Ghazal as males, although there is no clear indication that these representations are anything but ambiguous and unmarked bodies. In the case of the Jericho example (figure 8.3a), he accepts Garstang and Garstang's (1940) interpretation that the painted lines on the face represent a bearded rather than a tattooed or painted face. Considering the statues cached at

'Ain Ghazal, he accepts that one of them is female but states, "The absence of sexual distinctions could have been intended to make the representations either asexual, or as is more probable, masculine by default" (Cauvin 2000a:111). As with Schmandt-Besserat, Cauvin's approach to figurine interpretation leans heavily upon materials from later periods and from a broad geographic area, decontextualizing materials and weakening his interpretive framework.

Decontextualization and the use of texts and illustrations to understand the Neolithic

Beyond some of the specific concerns raised above, several additional questions should be raised about the approaches that Cauvin and Schmandt-Besserat have adopted in their analysis of Neolithic figurines. Interestingly, despite the very different focus and intent of these two authors, both share a remarkably similar approach to interpreting the meaning and importance of figurines to communities in the past. Their interpretive approach is founded on the assumption that analogies from later cultures can be read onto the Neolithic on the basis of historical symbols from highly complex societies from thousands of years later and across significant geographic distances. Cauvin provides his readers with no rationale for this; rather he appears to assume that such an approach can be adopted with no consideration of potential weaknesses (Hodder 2001; Rollefson 2001b). Schmandt-Besserat (1997) does directly explore why such an approach can be adopted. She notes that the foundation for her approach is centered on the earlier work of Postgate (1994), arguing that our understanding of the third to first millennia B.C. (through textual accounts) allows researchers to project into the past. Moreover, she accepts van Dijk et al.'s (1985:1) assumption that later texts were transcriptions of a long-lived oral tradition that had its roots in prehistory. While this may be correct, it seems remarkably premature to accept her argument that magic is universal, and as implied in her work, that the repetitive and formal nature of ritual and magic mean that the practice and meaning were largely unchanged from the 13th to the third millennium. While recognizing the important contribution of her descriptive work, Schmandt-Besserat's (1997, 1998a, 1998b) social interpretations of Neolithic anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines are undermined by considerable interpretive decontextualization and a version of orientalism in which the nature of the ancient Near East is unchanged.

Both of these researchers are heavily influenced by a structuralist or structural functionalist perspective; both ask what figurines "do" in these Neolithic communities and how figurines reflect the underlying social, ritual, and economic structures of Neolithic society. Schmandt-Besserat sees figurines as tools in magic activities. She argues (Schmandt-Besserat 1998b:111-112) that the find context of the PPNC stone figurine (lying face down on a stone-paved walkway between two buildings, which she interprets as a "deliberately formal" context) and the material (stone) suggest that this figurine had been displayed in a special location, "destined for a formal, public function." In considering the potential uses and

meanings of this figurine, she states that it can be understood (now and in the past) as a metaphor for creation, as a reflection of how the 'Ain Ghazal community members understood the nature of their origins, the birth of their people.

In many ways Cauvin interprets the meaning and function of Near Eastern Neolithic figures from a structuralist perspective, particularly Lévi-Strauss's ideas about duality and societal structures. In his model of figurines reflecting a dual religious system focusing on the Goddess and the Bull, Cauvin "reads" the figurine data from southern Levantine sites as indicating a system of opposing female and male structures. The assumption of an essentialized duality of males and females, and relating these structures to Neolithic peoples' concepts of nature and culture, finds only tenuous support from the figurine data. Neolithic people may have understood their lives and cosmologies in terms of a dual system of essentialized maleness and femaleness, but Cauvin is approaching the data with this assumption as the foundation for his argument, rather than demonstrating the presence of this belief system.

While in many societies a structuralist or structural functionalist paradigm may provide accurate insights into why people behave in certain ways and how they understand the world, we believe that imposing a dual set of structures onto Neolithic cosmologies is an approach that does not resonate well with the data. Instead, we suggest that researchers approach the question of what Neolithic figurines mean, and how people used them, by integrating questions of function with those of the nature of representation and their context. Most archaeologists, and indeed most anthropologists, are interested in questions of function in any society. Archaeologists in particular use functional questions about material culture as a foundation for examining questions of social, economic, and political organization. As outlined by Voigt (2000), questions of function must always be concerned with context, and interpretation of one without the other is extremely limiting and problematic.

Neolithic Figurines: Analysis, Methods, and Interpretation

In her detailed treatment of context and Neolithic figurines, Voigt (2000) draws upon ethnographic literature to consider how patterned distributional data and figurine form and breakage from Hajji Firuz and Gritille Höyük aid researchers in interpreting figurines. Her integration of contextual reconstruction (focusing closely on disposal patterns), combined with ethnographic insights, provides a productive means of evaluating alternative interpretations of the possible uses and social contexts of figurines in Neolithic communities. Echoing her arguments, one of the major methodological concerns we have with current interpretive approaches centers on the issue of archaeological context. Any interpretation of the social and ritual context of figurines from any stage of the Neolithic requires archaeologists to work backwards in time from the spatial and depositional context of the object, through consideration of the possible use of the figurines in the past, to the methods of construction, and broader social meaning(s) behind these objects. Of these stages

it is only the locus of manufacture and/or eventual discard that archaeologists are able to directly reconstruct. Our ability to accomplish this goal, however, is often undermined by the limited contextual and associational information recorded and published by archaeologists. In other cases, moreover, these associations are largely assumed rather than demonstrated in a systematic manner.

Compilation of published figurine, statue, skull, or mask data with contextual information (table 8.4) illustrates the limited nature of this assemblage. Clearly, the most commonly reported objects are those associated with "special" contexts, such as a dedicatory cache, while the provenance of figurines from fills, refuse, or other contexts are not mentioned. In this way, certain objects are given more interpretive weight, though the meanings attached to items found in "less-than-special" contexts might have been as powerful as those objects found in caches. Without attention to all figurines, found in all types of contexts, we will never be able to understand in a broad sense how people used figurines in Neolithic communities.

A second concern focuses on the necessity for researchers to conceptually decouple anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines in their interpretations. Beyond the descriptive treatments of these materials, it is often assumed that Neolithic figurine manufacture and use was static through time, with unchanged meanings, and that different types of figurines can be treated as components of a single interpretive analysis (Cauvin 2000a). For example, Cauvin (2000b) treats zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines as being integrated and part of some larger pan-Near East cosmological system. While systems of MPPNB and LPPNB anthropomorphic figurines may have been interrelated in meaning, organization, and expression, it is likely that different figurine forms were conceptualized by Neolithic community members as being symbolic manifestations of different social and ritual realms. Research by Voigt (2000) and Ucko (1968) indirectly raises this issue when they highlight that ethnographic use of figurines and their life histories are remarkably varied and often include conceptual divisions of cult figures, vehicles of magic, teaching figurines, and toys (Voigt 2000: Table 2). From this perspective, it is possible that different types of figurines, such as clay cattle and anthropomorphic figurines from 'Ain Ghazal, were material and symbolic manifestations of very different realms (e.g., hunting magic or toys vs. seated female figurines employed in birth rituals).

Frequency and symbolic ambiguity in figurines

The incorporation of new perspectives on Neolithic figurine use forces us to confront several important issues that have largely been avoided by researchers. One of these is the question of why there was relatively little use of certain types of figurines. For instance, why are there so few anthropomorphic figurines in the MPPNB? Secondly, why did people use other figurines more frequently? Bar-Yosef (1997) raises the same issue for earlier periods. Considering this general question, he provides a functionalist explanation for the relative paucity of symbolic art, and

argues that imagery is related to ritual; in the case of rock art, the absence of Natufian parietal art may be linked to differences in social structure and variation in subsistence resources (Bar-Yosef 1997:176). Addressing the possible meanings and symbolic uses of Neolithic art and figurines, Bar-Yosef defers to Cauvin's (2000a) interpretation of the emergence of female figurines as being related to issues of human reproduction and soil fertility. On the question of why there are so few artistic representations from the LPPNB and early Pottery Neolithic, Bar-Yosef suggests that increased use of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines may have been related to the emergence of complex symbolic behaviors for enhancing group cohesion and resolving inter-group conflicts.

While in general agreement with Bar-Yosef, we feel that there are other dimensions that need to be considered to gain insights into how Neolithic social systems were organized. First, we believe that in the process of developing broader interpretations of Neolithic figurine use, researchers have not addressed how the frequency of these objects might be related to their use. It is important to consider how few anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines have been recovered from the PPNA and to address the implications for this paucity vis-à-vis current interpretive models. There are a number of possible explanations, including the low population density at these settlements and the social contexts of use. Reconstruction of population levels (site size, number of human burials, total roofed floor area) (Kuijt 2000b) compared to the number of figurines illustrates that figurine frequency is not a function of population growth, and by extension, suggests that the frequency of figurines is probably related to the social context of use.

The relative scarcity of PPNA figurines in Neolithic villages also highlights another possibility: that figurines served very different social roles in different phases of the Neolithic. Both their low frequency and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that southern Levantine PPNA figurines were cached or buried in ritual or dedicatory contexts, supports the argument that figurines served a very different social role in the PPNA compared to the MPPNB/LPPNB. At Netiv Hagdud and Dhra', the only PPNA settlements with relatively convincing female figurines, these figurines were found as single objects and in extramural midden deposits. The frequency and burial context of MPPNB and LPPNB figurines, plastered and painted skulls, and statues illustrate a very different phenomenon. Large anthropomorphic figurines and statues were found in spatially discrete caches while smaller figurines were found in trash deposits and discrete caches.¹ In some cases, like es-Sifiya, several hundred clay figurines were found in a single context. At other settlements, such as Jericho and 'Ain Ghazal, community members buried large anthropomorphic statues in caches. The depositional context of these figures, the placement of these caches in public contexts, and the frequency of objects buried suggest that they were important material and symbolic expressions of the views and beliefs of members of Neolithic communities.

A third question centers on why people in the past deliberately marked or obscured the gender and/or sex of human representations when constructing figurines. In light of the frequency of these objects in the MPPNB and their

apparent burial in public contexts, it is surprising that most, but not all, of the large anthropomorphic statues have no clearly marked secondary sexual characteristics. The recovery of some large anthropomorphic figurines with breasts and enlarged buttocks illustrates that Neolithic artists sometimes chose to represent morphological differences of humans in clay. Thus, we have to ask why they depicted female secondary sexual characteristics on a minority of large anthropomorphic statues while deliberately constructing the majority of these statues as ambiguous with limited, if any, indications of sexed or gendered identities?

Ambiguity and mortuary practices

While the answer to this question will never be fully known, it is interesting to note that the patterning of deliberate ambiguity is also seen in mortuary practices in the MPPNB and LPPNB periods, and that similarities in these practices may reflect deliberate attempts to mask or control differences at the individual, household, and community level. As illustrated in several recent syntheses of MPPNB mortuary practices (Goring-Morris 2000; Kuijt 2000a, 2001), burials were organized in such a way that deceased males and females of any age above approximately 12 were treated in the same manner: skulls of adults were removed sometime after the primary burial, and no grave goods were placed with the bodies (Bonogofsky 2001). Interestingly, all but one of the small human figurines found at 'Ain Ghazal were found with their heads removed (Rollefson 2001a, pers. comm.). Rollefson has suggested that this decapitation of human figurines mirrors the practice of skull removal in mortuary practices (Rollefson 2001a). Rollefson (2001b) and Kuijt (2001) have both suggested that the MPPNB and LPPNB secondary mortuary practices of skull removal, plastering, painting and caching may be related to some ritual structure of ancestor veneration.

Following several ethnographic studies (Hertz 1960; Kan 1989; Schiller 1997), we envision secondary mortuary practices in MPPNB communities as reflecting two interrelated, yet distinct, social dimensions: (a) the recognition of the individuality of the deceased; and (b) the idealization of links between the living, the deceased, and collective ancestors. While recognizing that variation is likely to exist within communities and through different regions, we believe that overall the acts of homogenous grave preparation, burial of individual dead, and absence of mortuary goods can best be interpreted as reflecting a means of controlling/limiting displays of identity, privilege, or wealth within these communities. The widespread use of secondary mortuary practices in the PPN probably served as community events in which memories of collective and individual ancestries were actively negotiated and defined. We suggest, moreover, that the efficacy and power of these practices physically and symbolically relied on the creation of social memory by ritual practitioners, who employed a shared set of symbols understood by community members.

We believe that this creation of social memories in mortuary practices offers a potential analog for understanding the use of figurines in the PPN period, particu-

larly in the MPPNB. The homogeneity of mortuary practices appears to emphasize the deconstruction or masking of individual differences and focus on collective identities. Furthermore, the removal of heads of human figurines and the stylized representation of the human features may suggest that the people of 'Ain Ghazal understood the relationship between the physical and the social body very differently than we do. The ambiguity, in choosing to not mark sexual differences in human representations, fits this same pattern, with the vast number of anthropomorphic objects unmarked by secondary sexual characteristics. The deliberate manner in which the majority of large anthropomorphic statues and figurines from 'Ain Ghazal were crafted provides no indication of sex or gender, masking any sense of individuality, with most statues conforming to a stylized set of features (enlarged heads with marked facial features, especially eyes; frequent omission or diminution of legs and arms). In masking differences, the MPPNB people stressed a collective, community identity, and emphasized egalitarian values and limited social differentiation within the community, just as we see in mortuary practices and in the built environment (Kuijt 2001).

Future considerations

In considering the general trajectory of figural representations of humans over the PPNA and PPNB, there is an interesting shift in marking or not marking secondary sexual characteristics on figurines, or representing portions or entire bodies. While clearly in need of further research and subject to revision, we offer these observations as preliminary interpretations. First, while the numbers of human figurines in the PPNA and LPPNB/PPNC are small in comparison to zoomorphic and geometric figurines from the PPNB, some intriguing patterns seem to be emerging. During the PPNA, figurines are very rare, and there is a relatively even proportion of marked female figurines (displaying breasts and enlarged hips), unmarked human figurines, and figurines of phalli; interestingly, there are no zoomorphic or geometric figurines. In the MPPNB, by contrast, the vast majority of human figurines or statues are unmarked. A few of the statues from 'Ain Ghazal display breasts, but there are no "corresponding" representations of male genitalia or phalli. Moreover, the majority of MPPNB figurines are zoomorphic. Finally in the LPPNB/PPNC, the overwhelming majority of figurines are zoomorphic or geometric, but in the human figurines found we see once again the representation of breasts and hips on full body representations of females or female gendered figurines and a rare example of a phallus from Basta (which has been interpreted by the excavators as deliberately ambiguous, displaying a phallus or a ram's head). From this list of general characteristics by period, several patterns beg to be investigated. For example, representations of female bodies, with hips and breasts, are complemented by the representation of male phalli in only a few rare cases. So why are males not represented in full-bodied form? Why do the proportions of human, zoomorphic, and geometric figurines shift through time, with the PPNA and LPPNB/PPNC more similar

to each other and markedly different from the MPPNB corpus? The vast majority of MPPNB figurines do not mark secondary sexual characteristics: why this emphasis on ambiguity?

Aside from the representation of secondary sexual characteristics, there are some omissions, emphases and deliberate alterations of human representations that also raise some interesting issues. In the MPPNB in particular, the statuary often omits legs and arms or portrays them in smaller proportion than the torso and head. The heads of these figures are enlarged and emphasized in the depiction of facial features, particularly the eyes. Additionally, the deliberate removal of heads from human figurines at MPPNB and LPPNB/PPNC 'Ain Ghazal coincides with the practice of skull removal in mortuary practices: what could be the relationship and significance of these symbolically similar behaviors? Finally, what does it mean that we find the vast majority of all figurine types in trash deposits?

Drawing upon the broader social, economic, and political context of PPNA, MPPNB, and LPPNB/PPNC communities, we offer a provisional interpretation of figurine use and meaning during these periods. We realize that this scenario is purely conjectural and is affected by sample size and publication gaps. At the same time, it is important to note that size and frequency of figurines in itself is an interesting question. We believe that the higher proportion of ambiguity in human figurines in the MPPNB and the marking of secondary sexual characteristics in the PPNA and LPPNB/PPNC may be related to the socioeconomic structures of lifeways in these communities. During the MPPNB people lived in larger, growing communities, building up the scale of established subsistence, residential, and ritual practices. During this period we witness an emphasis on ambiguity and masking of individuality in figurines as well as in mortuary practices and the built environment. Both the PPNA and the LPPNB/PPNC encompass periods in which subsistence, settlement, and scales of social complexity shifted radically. In the PPNA period many people were moving from a hunting/gathering/foraging to a fully sedentary food-producing lifeway. For the first time, they lived in large, sedentary communities, experimenting with and establishing their food production system. With the advent of storage and sedentism, these communities also began to negotiate and develop mechanisms for limiting social differentiation. Similarly, the LPPNB/PPNC people were dealing with stresses on their subsistence and social structures at the other end of the spectrum. Very large and densely populated communities struggled with overcrowding, sufficient food production, and resource depletion. Essentially, both of these periods could be viewed as times in which society struggled greatly with changing residential patterns, stress from living together in sedentary settlements, and subsistence changes. It is during these shifting and stressful times that people represented male and female sexed bodies (or portions of bodies), although to a limited extent. Perhaps during periods when social, economic, and ritual practices were under contention, aspects of individuality and social differentiation entered into the negotiation of everyday life. Importantly, the built environment and the mortuary practices in LPPNB/PPNC and PPNA show more diversity, underscoring the ways that people worked to live together in sedentary settlements despite the pressures socially, economically, and politically.

Final Thoughts

With so little contextual information published, it is important to highlight the unresolved nature of figurine research: specifically, how little we understand about the interrelationship between the size of communities, ritual and political action, and the social context of figurine manufacture, use, and discard. Any attempt to formulate a synthesis of "What Neolithic Figurines Mean" is very conjectural and potentially premature. Nevertheless, we hope that this work highlights the challenges that Neolithic researchers face in interpreting figurine use in the world's earliest agricultural communities, and offers a limited critique of existing interpretive approaches. We conclude by returning to two points that need further exploration.

First, why did Neolithic people represent ambiguity in the majority of their human figurines, and alternatively mark or not mark sex or gender attributes on a small percentage of human representations? There are several possible interpretations, including the masking or emphasis of individual or structural differences to help negotiate social and economic changes experienced by these early agricultural communities in which we witness the initial development of storage technologies, surplus economy, and social differentiation. Similarly, these people may not have conceptualized male and female bodily differences as important aspects in their worldviews in understanding what it meant to be a person in a body. Conversely, these differences may have been crucially important in everyday interactions, and therefore they found it important to mask them in creating idealized social memories of the way life should be.

A second question that future researchers should address is one posed by Ucko (1996): why make figurines at all? We can draw on ethnographic analogies of bodily representation in ritual and non-ritual contexts to help us address this question, as the topic obviously holds important implications for functionalist interpretations. In a related way, we can also ask, "Why make different types of figurines (human, zoomorphic, or geometric)?" We argue that there is a definite shift in the manufacture of these figurine classes through the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, and that future exploration of this issue may enhance our understanding of the Neolithic.

Posing this last question leads us to our second point for consideration: the continued need for contextual analysis of figurines. We hope that it is clear that our own ability to make interpretations of these figurines is limited by the paucity of published contextual information. It is unfortunate that in many cases, the development of grand models and interpretations of Neolithic figurines is founded on a remarkably poor consideration of context and archaeological data. There is, for example, only limited understanding of the manufacture, use, and discard of figurines. While many interpretive models of the Neolithic use figurine data from secondary sources and there is very little contextual data published from the southern Levantine contexts, we do not feel any need to be pessimistic. Among others, Voigt (2000) has demonstrated the utility of contextual studies of Neolithic figurines from Turkey and Iran, and has established a strong analytical approach that focuses on context. In conclusion, we believe that studies sensitive to context will provide new

insights into the social, economic, and ritual world in which figurines were used in the past.

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NOTE

- 1 The context information for the human figurines from 'Ain Ghazal is currently available on Schmandt-Besserat's webpage (<http://link.lanl.gov/utexas.edu/menic/ghazal/>). While the context information is very helpful, most of the objects are identified as PPNB (as opposed to MPPNB, LPPNB, or PPNC) and therefore we could not incorporate specific data from these tables into this analysis.

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