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CHAPTER 12

Figurines, Corporeality, and the Origins of the Gendered Body

Douglass W. Bailey

How do prehistoric figurines from the Neolithic (6500–3500 B.C.E.) of central and eastern Europe help us to understand gender constructs and gender roles at that time in that region, and what does a study of these objects reveal about subsequent constructions of gender and the rhetorical power that the body has had in gender construction? In this chapter I argue that figurines were potent elements in the construction of ideas about identities and of gendered bodies (indeed that they mark the origins of the gendered body as we know it today), and that their impact long outlasted their original contexts, chronology, and geography.

At a global scale, anthropomorphic figurines have drawn disproportionate attention among archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians; the prehistory of central and eastern Europe is no exception. Discussions have ranged from the widely influential arguments of Marija Gimbutas and the Mother-Goddess community to more general discussions of cult, ritual, and ceremony, to proposals that figurines functioned as toys, as portraits of ancestors, as teaching devices, and on to more recent, less inflexible, debates over deeper levels of understanding that have examined the material and psychological conditions which powered figurines to function as they did.

I suggest that in all of these debates (including my own earlier work), we may have missed the most significant role that figurines played in the longer trajectory of human social development over the past 8000 years. I suggest that if we step back and take a deeper, broader look, then we will confront a significance of prehistoric figurines that dwarfs the proposals of Gimbutas, myself, and of the others who have dedicated thought to these objects.

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My contention is that Neolithic figurines are important to the study of gender (and indeed of anthropology, political science, feminism, masculinism, sexuality studies, art history, philosophy, and on and on across the humanities and social sciences) because they played a fundamental (though previously unrecognized) role in the elevation of the body as the basic concept of reference with which modern Western societies understand their worlds and frame their systems of understanding. In brief, the body is central to our modern bio-psycho-social reference for being because the body-form emerged as dominant through the creation, use, perception, and presence of anthropomorphic figurines during a 3000-year period starting at 6500 B.C.E. Gender and the power of its construction within society are consequences of the elevation of the body in Western philosophies of being (though it is only one of several similarly influential constructions that are layered onto the surface of the body – race, sex, formism – and which are central to constructed social realities).

To understand Neolithic European figurines as one of the key elements in the elevation of the body (and subsequently of gendered bodies) is to examine figurines as representations and to reveal the underlying (and unsupportable) assumptions at the centers of traditional reconstructions of Neolithic society as statically gendered and matriarchic. Critically, it is important to recognize the emergence of a lifestyle in which there developed a way of thinking that shaped the body as one of the core elements of being in the world.

FIGURINES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Figurines are representations. Every act of representation is an interpretation of a reality or, more likely, every act is one element within many constructions of one of many realities. Every act of representation is a statement (intentional or casual, conscious or subconscious) that interprets a reality through the dimensions of a particular medium (e.g., word, song, poem, photograph, painting, sculpture, avatar). Every act of representation has the potential to affect a viewer (or handler, or listener, or taster) in a different, particular, and distinct way. The composition, content, and intensity of those effects depend both on the experiences and position (e.g., in society, in span of life) of the perceiver and on the particular conditions of the representation (i.e., some materials, shapes, combinations afford particular reactions, in Gibson's [1979] sense). Furthermore, the consequences for an individual perceiving a representation can be conscious, noted, and felt, but they can just as easily be subconscious, missed, not noted, and not felt.

As representations, therefore, prehistoric Neolithic European figurines are not direct reflections of a prehistoric Neolithic European reality for a community, for a household, for a village, or for a culture. Figurines do not provide a direct reflection of a society, or of a social structure, or of political relations. In this sense, Neolithic figurines do not present us with an objective picture of gender relations in Neolithic Europe. They do not enable us to read these communities as matriarchies or, for that matter, as patriarchies, or as any other single entity. Understanding figurines (as with any other image) rests on the realization that they are representations *for* (i.e., they are not representations *of*). By seeing that figurines are representations *for*, one recognizes that they have agency. Though it is possible that this agency follows from an

intention that a figurine maker may have had, it is much more likely (perhaps even unavoidable) that figurine agency is completely detached from any original intention. Figurines do. Figurines act. Figurines affect. Figurines afford. Most critically in the context of the study of gender, figurines construct.

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

Understanding figurines as representations with agency irrevocably affects our perspective on existing interpretations of the Neolithic European material. Particularly affected are the current, dominant, long-accepted arguments made by many local and international archaeologists, art historians, and archaeomythologists about gender (im)balances in Neolithic European villages or cultures. Most critically affected are the claims for a matriarchal society in the Neolithic that are based on the categorization of figurines. These claims are unfounded as, indeed, would be unfounded claims for patriarchies or other claims based primarily on figurine (or other) representations or prehistoric activity (and in the later category I include the burial record).¹ The fact that the matriarchic reconstruction of Neolithic society has remained popular and is still accepted in some communities of scholars and many parts of the interested public derives from the acceptance of several important (though unsupportable) assumptions.

One of the most fundamental assumptions that remains (stubbornly) in academic currency holds that the majority of European Neolithic figurines are female and that male representations are few. This assumption is false. There is now incontrovertible evidence not only for the presence of figurines with penises and with beards (Figure 12.1 and Figure 12.2) but also for a large number of examples that are neither male nor female, but which merely take the shape of the human body (e.g., Meskell and Joyce 2003:95–127; Bailey 2005; Hardie 2007). In addition to these sexless or asexual figurines (perhaps they should be called corporeal figurines) there is also good evidence for figurines that appear to have both male and female body parts, the hermaphrodite or hybrid figurines (Whittle 1998, 2003).

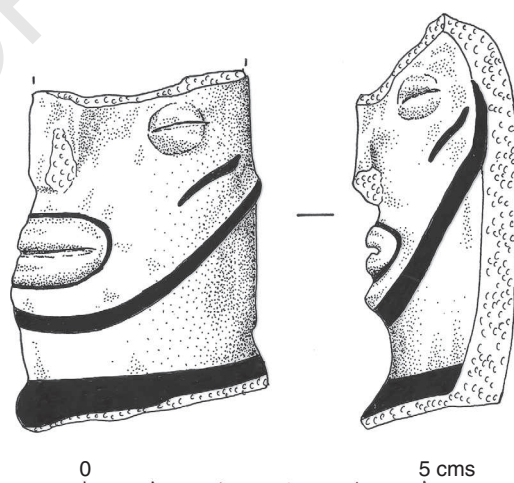


Figure 12.1 Bearded figurine from Achilleion, Greece (drawing courtesy of Howard Mason).

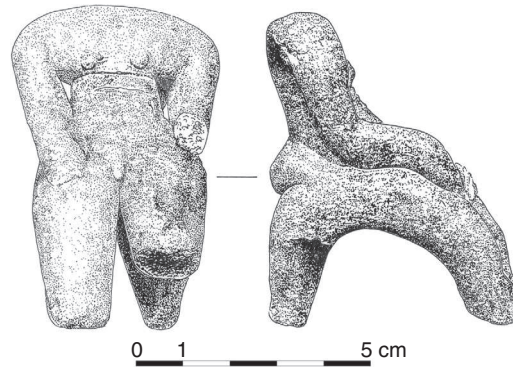


Figure 12.2 Figurine with penis from Koutsouro, Greece (drawing courtesy of Howard Mason).

What emerges from an accurate assessment of the presence and absence (and in some cases co-presence) of sexualized body parts is the recognition that the reality of the figurine population of Neolithic Europe in central and eastern Europe is much more varied than is commonly admitted in the standard syntheses, most of which conclude that female representation dominated. There is no question that the number (and weighted percentages) of figurines with female body parts or surface decoration is greater than those that can be identified as male. However, when played across the entire inventory of Neolithic European figurines, the majority of examples are sexless or asexual. If anything, the total population of figurines from this period and region speak not of male or female, but of the human body in a way that does not have a clearly sexed depiction.

A second assumption that has given authority to the standard interpretation of Neolithic Europe as matriarchic holds that the attribution of sex to a figurine is straightforward. This assumption is also false. Anyone who has worked with figurines in the flesh, who has been faced with boxes and boxes of figurines and (as is more often the case) of fragments of figurines, will have been faced with the simple (yet unavoidably annoying) realization that it is not always easy (or in many cases possible) to determine if a figurine (fragmentary or complete) is male or female. Unquestionably, there are figurines on which, for example, genitalia are clearly and conspicuously depicted (Figure 12.3) and, for such, identifications can be quickly made. Many more, however, are the cases where the clarity and conspicuousness of features are substantially reduced. The classic questions of morphological typology emerge (e.g., when is a nipple female and when is it male? when are hips female and when are they male?) but are seldom addressed. The problem of “sexing” a fragment (“is this leg male or female?”) is equally, if not more, problematic.²

Let us assume (even having just noted the danger or at least difficulty of doing so) that it is possible to sex individual figurines and figurine fragments. In doing so, we confront another assumption: that the concepts male and female were singular, unchanging, and shared within and across communities. Standard work on the Neolithic material has assumed that any definition of sexuality or gender (of male and female) that can be determined and read off from one assemblage, site, region, or culture, was static and homogeneous across geography and chronology. To a certain

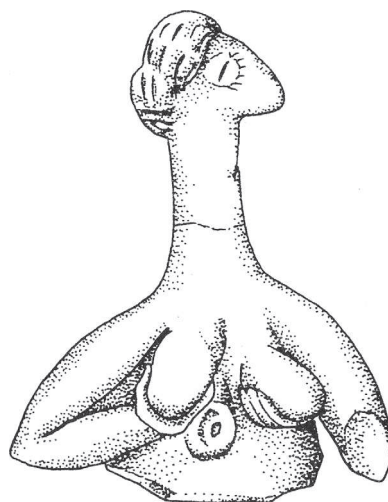


Figure 12.3 Figurines with displayed breasts from Achilleion (drawing courtesy of Howard Mason).

degree this assumption is useful as it allows synthetic interpretation across periods, regions, and even continents; its value is highest in the approaches of culture historians. However, in the light of what is now uncontroversial anthropological, sociological, and other social science research, the assumption that concepts such as male and female were static across time and space is unsupportable. Our error (and in my own earlier work, I was equally culpable) has been to oversimplify the ways in which people thought about identity and indeed about what it meant to be human in the Neolithic. We have been reducing prehistoric reality to fit within the limits of narrow (and now seen as unsophisticated) modern perceptions.

The problems of typologizing and sexing figurines and of conceptual stasis and homogeneity are less worrisome than originally it might seem because the very categories that are being defined and sought in standard assessments of a figurine are themselves unstable (and thus the sexual typologizing has little relevance). Their use rests on the acceptance of a third assumption: that there was something that was conceived of as “female” and another thing understood as “male” in the European Neolithic. This assumption is also false. Having recognized that the majority of figurines have neither male nor female body parts, but are asexual, sexless, or perhaps most accurately “corporeal,” it is less easy to accept that there were clear and stable Neolithic concepts of male and female. Indeed, it is difficult to find evidence that the Neolithic understanding of human identity was restricted to any static concept. The recognition of an expanded set of sexual body definitions (i.e., male, female, sexless, and bisexual or hermaphroditic) suggests that the reduction of Neolithic society to two dimensions (male and female) is misguided. It seems much more likely that there were many more categories in play, and that such categories were much more flexible, permeable, and contested.

Another critical question emerges: of those we think we can identify in the Neolithic, are any concepts or beliefs universal for a person, a household, a village, a region, or a culture?³ Are we justified in making statements that generalize so baldly about belief

and thought that we are comfortable to assign one meaning to a set of objects that most probably were used in different ways, for different purposes, and by different people through a single day in the prehistoric past? I suggest that the answer is no. As archaeologists of the prehistoric past, we have sought to provide answers and easily digested interpretations at a time when we should have known that in doing so we were practicing an unethical sleight-of-hand. Thus, just as we realize that in the modern world there is no longer support for essentialist claims for static definitions of person, sexuality, or gender, so also must we acknowledge that there is no support for them when we engage the prehistoric past.

Having noted these unsupportable assumptions and recognized that we cannot read figurines as a simple reflection of Neolithic society and gender dynamics (matriarchic or otherwise), there would seem to be little that could be learned from figurines about gender in the Neolithic or in a broader context. Following the argument that they are representations *for* (and not representations *of*), one might conclude that figurines have nothing at all to tell us about the Neolithic people who made, held, used, and discarded them. That is not the case. First, I suggest that figurines tell us what Neolithic people were thinking about. Second, I contend that figurines tell us how people constructed conceptions of themselves and of other people (gendered and otherwise). Finally, I argue that Neolithic European figurines reveal one of the ways in which our modern understanding of being human has become gendered and has been dominated by the body as the central frame of reference for understanding our place in the world.

THE PARADOX OF ABSENCE AND CONSTRUCTING BEING

It is one of the paradoxes of Neolithic figurines that in their patterns of morphology and surface decoration, the elements that are depicted (the body shapes, body parts, and surface decorations) are of least importance to our interpretation of them (Bailey 2007). The making and decorating of a figurine were processes of selection and abstraction. No figurine depicts every aspect of a human body; some parts and features are selected for depiction and others are left out. Other features are applied in only the slightest recognizable form. Thus, many figurines do not have detailed facial features – the head is fashioned with the slightest protrusions of clay for a nose, shallow impressions for eyes, a slit for a mouth, nothing for ears; some have no arms, others no feet. Many of the earliest figurines bear the slightest of similarities with the human body, appearing as nothing more than a vaguely human shape. On the other hand, some figurines pay particular attention to the torso or the hips while others have faces that are full of living expression, eyes with eyelashes, or ears with holes for earrings. In all of this there is no overarching pattern that accommodates all of the different regional or chronological variations of figurines; indeed, there is considerable variation within any one phase or culture. The only constant is that no figurine fully depicts the biology of a human body; the creative process of selection and abstraction is present everywhere.

Understood in this sense of selection and abstraction, we can define figurines in terms of what is missing, of what is not depicted; in other words, we can define them in terms of absence. Absence is a potent phenomenon and has the power to play a

major role in the processes of constructing meaning, especially through the desire to rejoin and regain a seemingly lost sense of wholeness (Freud 1899; Lacan 1966, 1973; Fuery 1995). Absence is a powerful and central constituent of being, but it is also a paradox: that which is not present is more fundamental to understanding our existence and to our conceptions of reality than that which is present. To understand how [his](#) works requires an understanding of how our brains (and the brains of Neolithic people) react to the absence of information.

The psychologist Richard Gregory has investigated what happens when our brains are confronted with challenges to sensory perception, particularly when we see a recognizable image that has a part missing (Gregory 1977, 1980, 1997, 1998; Gregory and Harris 1975; Gregory and Heard 1979). The brain solves these types of problems by calling on its record of our previous experiences and then efficiently providing the missing information. In most situations this is not a problem and our brains are so good at doing this that we don't even notice that it has happened. However, when a significant amount of information is missing, our brains struggle to fill in the gap(s). Our brains search our experiences for the missing information with increasing intensity. In the most extreme situations, when the amount or type of missing information is substantial enough, our brains fail to fill the vacuum.

Even in their failure, however, they continue to try, devoting more and more energy (literally more and more thought) to solve the problem. The search for the missing information takes on greater and greater significance in our minds as does the particular information that is missing and as does the context from which it is missing. In this way, what is not depicted becomes the focus of increasing amounts of our attention and thought. If what is missing is a part of the body, then that part of the body takes on heightened significance. None of this is to claim that the leaving out of a bodily feature was intentional or that the stimulus to thought was planned. The intentions of modeling and decorating are irrelevant; the effects (unintended) that they had on the person looking at and handling the figurine are what matter. The importance of a figurine is to be found in how it is perceived.

The absence of features of the bodies or faces of Neolithic figurines is important because their absence tells us what people are thinking about. Paradoxically, people are not thinking about those body parts that are depicted; they are thinking about those parts that are not present. At another level, the argument about the paradoxical importance of what is missing casts the shadow of another concern over the way that we understand clearly sexualized figurines: are the sexualized body parts of importance, or are they epiphenomena, and do they thus have little significance for the meaning of the artifact? The argument from absence suggests the latter. Gregory's conclusions about the intensity of the significance that is given (subconsciously) to the more substantial absences leads to the suggestion that those figurines with the least amount of bodily detail had the greatest role to play in emergent Neolithic negotiations of identity politics, including (though not limited to) the gendering of the body.

My argument is that the combination of presences and absences of body features (particularly sexual body parts and personal facial features) from Neolithic figurines is important because it tells us that when people were looking at and handling these objects, they were (probably subconsciously) wrestling with different ways that the human body could be or should be depicted. They were filling in the gaps and the blanks as they imagined that they should be filled. They were constructing the body,

and in doing so they were defining the corporeal definition of being in the world. What emerged was a particular corporeal definition of being in which different body parts took on unequal significances; this process created what we recognize as gendered bodies, sexualized bodies, racialized bodies, strong bodies, successful bodies, attractive bodies, clean bodies, dirty bodies, and all kinds of other bodies. Without doubt, this process was gradual and followed an uncharted and unplanned trajectory; many events and many engagements with many objects by many people over many centuries led to the gradual sedimentation of norms of perceptions based on the body and its shape and surface variation.

TOUCH AND THE PROXIMAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE BODY

By thinking about Neolithic figurines with the suggestions presented by the paradox of absence, it is possible to begin to see figurines in a less secure, less static, and less fixed way. What one saw is not necessarily what one got: body parts that were depicted were less important than those that were absent. Critically, the thought processes that were stimulated by absence opened up complex, though not necessarily conclusive, conceptualizations of what were the important physical parts of being human. This argument could be applied to any representation of the human body: graphic, oral, written, three-dimensional and material, or of other media. Figurines, however, are not just any medium of representation; they are material and three-dimensional. These material conditions are vital; figurines were representations that afforded being touched and handled.

As a mechanism of engagement with the senses, touch is distinct from sight because it allows a particular type of relationship to knowing to emerge. Touch takes a person beyond mere physical connection and provokes a complex engagement which is unmediated and where an intimate proximity is reached (Levinas 1969, 1978, 1990). Touching invokes a relationship which extends beyond simplified and generalized knowledge of an object (or of a person); touching is intertwining, intersecting, and crossing-over (Merleau-Ponty 1968:138). Touch is intersubjective and transcendental (Derrida 2005:146–147). Following these understandings, touching a body (in the flesh or in mediation) raises questions in the mind. Where does one's being end and where does that of another being start? How am I distinct from an Other? What is the surface of my being and what separates that surface from the surfaces of Others? In fact, how does one define Other? At its most incisive, touching a body calls into question the surety of the entity that in the modern Western world we call person (and even body: somebody, anybody, nobody). In posing these questions, touching a body opens up understandings of the world that one inhabits in exciting and disturbing ways.

In critical work on the sense of touch among blind museum visitors, Kevin Hetherington has demonstrated that touch decenters the subject (Hetherington 2003). Hetherington's work with Sarah, a blind museum visitor, revealed Sarah's understanding that touch is a way of knowing that is distinct from the way of knowing that comes with vision (and with the other senses). Most critically, touch is a way of knowing that displaces Sarah from the assumed position that she is a singular, representing subject. In this sense, for her there is no one correct knowledge of a museum object or exhibit (such as that which is normally acquired by a single glance) nor one

authoritative viewer. Experience by touch opens perception to multiple impressions and knowledges obtained by many different perceivers.

Along with Hetherington, David Appelbaum (1995) has argued further that understanding by touch is distinct (particularly from vision) in that it is productive: vision consumes knowledge; touch makes and produces it. To engage an object (or a body or a figurine) through touch is to acquire proximal knowledge of it: an understanding that is context-specific, fragmentary, mundane, and performative, which allows for fluidity, uncertainty, incompleteness, which is always partial and precarious, and which opens up interpretation and denies finality (Appelbaum 1995:239). Hetherington draws the distinction with distal knowledge: the provision of broad, detached understanding based on knowing at a distance, concerned with the big picture, focused on the object in a static and completed state, reliant on preconceptions, and illustrative of boundaries and separation, distinctness and clarity, hierarchy and order (Appelbaum 1995:239; Cooper and Law 1995; Josipovici 1996).

The critical relevance here is that because of its material three-dimensionality (of its small size) a figurine affords (demands even) a particular engagement with the person encountering it: touch promotes a set of understandings that have fundamental consequences for how that person thinks about the body and about being. These understandings, in a similar way to those provoked though engaging with the absence of body features, push that person away from thinking about bodies and people in a preconceived, static, closed, and predetermined way. Both processes (confronting absence and engaging via touch) provoke the person encountering the figurine to open up his or her conceptualizations of the role of the body in defining a person. Further, figurines become potent sites for contemplation about what it means to be human at a particular time and place.

STEREOTYPES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF OTHERS

This reconsideration of touch raises important questions of the ways by which people understand (and question) how they are distinct from other people. In combination with the similar stimuli to question and conceptualize what it means to be human that came with encounters with the absence of body parts, our understanding of how Neolithic people thought about being, about the body, and about conceptualizations such as gender (but also race and sexuality) has started unraveling, and we are left in a position from which we resist (justifiably) making definite statements about identity or issues such as gender in the Neolithic (or for any other period for that matter). Relief from this discomfort comes from the very materials that originally stimulated those thoughts: the figurines themselves. One of the most powerful ways in which people started to answer these subconscious questions was by defining themselves as distinct from others, and I suggest that we can see this at work if we look at figurines in terms of stereotypes and the process of stereotyping (Bailey 2008). Thinking through the processes of stereotyping helps extend our understanding of how figurines worked within the gradual emergence of body-based identifications of people in constructed terms such as gender.

Stereotypes are conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conceptions or images that propose a set of fixed, unvarying ways to understand the world around us

(McGarty et al. 2002:198). Founded on simplification, generalization, exaggeration, or distortion, stereotypes (re)present culturally constructed attributes as if they were natural essences. As simplified representations, they create fixed morphologies by smoothing otherwise naturally occurring irregularities. They are critical tools with which people make sense of the world around them. Stereotypes work with people's conceptions of what is normal or natural. They reduce complexity to artificial categories. They erase or hide ambivalences; they categorize people (Pickering 2001:43, 45). Critically, stereotypes are fictions and illusions; they are one of the most reliable materials with which people construct social groups and by which false senses of order are imposed on otherwise unordered worlds. Critically, stereotypes prevail when distinctions and order are otherwise unstable (Pickering 2001:43). Gender is one such stereotypic illusion, and figurines were an essential part of ~~their~~ creation.

Critically, stereotypes reveal very little (if any) information about the people or group who are the target of the stereotyping (Messick and Mackie 1989; Hamilton and Mackie 1993; Haslam et al. 1996a, 1996b). The perception constructed by a member of one group (i.e., the in-group) about another (i.e., the out-group) tells us much about the in-group but provides little information of merit about the out-group or about how other people might view that out-group. To study stereotypes is therefore to study the in-group, particularly the insecurities, fears, concerns, and worldviews of the in-group. As represented in the form of a stereotype, the out-group has no objective reality; it does not exist (or at least it does not exist as an entity that can be found in reality). The stereotype lives in the mind of the in-group and not in the flesh. Furthermore, the importance that comes from the study of stereotypes is the recognition that one of the main reasons that stereotypes work (i.e., they gain currency and authority over reality) is because they appear in multiple iterations; they are repeated over and over for public consumption.

For figurines, the significance of thinking through stereotyping is that we see more clearly that what is represented in figurine form may actually not depict any physical group of people or any individual. From the perspective of stereotyping, figurines are the products of the anxieties and insecurities of the figurine maker. The body/bodies of an Other are represented according to the particular perceptions of the person fashioning the clay and decorating the clay surface. The particular depictions selected are the products of the maker's mind (and of that person's conception of body, of similarity, but most especially of difference and distinction). Equally significant is the importance that iteration and multiples of stereotypes have for the success with which (or the failure by which) a version of the bodied human comes to prominence among representations: these are the rhetorical mechanics of how a stereotype gains authority over reality. The ubiquity of figurines throughout central and southeastern Europe during the Neolithic takes on an interpretive significance that goes well beyond statements of the dominance in number of female representations (or of sexless or hermaphroditic depiction). Gender is a fundamental stereotype of modern Western society, and I suggest that one of the critical moments (though it was a moment that lasted 3000 years) in its emergence as such was during the Neolithic; figurines are one of the most potent materials in the construction of gender and in its adhesion to body and body form.

HOW AND WHY DID BODIED GENDER EMERGE IN THE EUROPEAN NEOLITHIC?

Why was it that bodied gender emerged at this time and in this region? Why had it not happened before (the earliest tradition of body imagery in Europe dates well before the Neolithic, to the so-called Venus figurines of the Upper Paleolithic, 20,000 to 26,000 years ago)? Furthermore, what is it that brings this moment to an end with the start of the Bronze Age (3000 B.C.E.) when fired clay figurines disappear from people's daily lives? The answer is that the Neolithic presented a conflux of social, political, technological, and linguistic-conceptual conditions in central and southeastern Europe that had not happened before or elsewhere. Though some of these individual conditions had been present in earlier millennia (and others were present afterwards), the significant combination of elements only developed from 6500 B.C.E. with the Neolithic.

What was missing from the Upper Paleolithic was the regular use of a ceramic pyrotechnology to create large numbers of highly durable tangible objects. Material culture, of course, is a fundamental part of being human (from our *hominid* ancestors through the present) and that is no different for pre-Neolithic (or better non-Neolithic) periods such as the Upper Paleolithic. The critical difference that distinguishes the Upper Paleolithic from what followed is that its material culture was almost exclusively created through subtractive processes in which a raw material was reduced through cutting, flaking, chopping, engraving, or other action. While one can refer to the presence of multi-part tools (and their significance in terms of cognition and functional efficiency) as an exception, there is no question of the greater position in daily life occupied by objects created by the reduction of unaltered natural materials such as stone, bone, flint, ivory, or wood.

In addition, the figurines that have survived from the Upper Paleolithic were constructed in fundamentally different ways from those of the Neolithic: the latter were shaped from a malleable material (soft clay) in an additive (literally constructive) process during which temper was added to produce an object that would survive being heated in a fire. The controlled application of heat, then, transformed what had been malleable into what became permanent and unchangeable. It is not a coincidence that the earliest experimentations in transforming soils (particularly loam) with water and then with heat (i.e., the early attempts to make fired clay objects), as has been documented at Dolní Věstonice 26,000 years ago, were made to construct the human form.

The fact that material culture created through ceramic pyrotechnology was not in use in non-Neolithic Europe is significant although the significance may be as much a technological (and preservative) advantage as a conceptual one: the capability (and desire) to create a material form that lasted. It is also significant that although Upper Paleolithic figurines were indeed of durable material (i.e., the ivory and stone has survived), they were made in far fewer numbers. Their paucity (compared to the numbers of Neolithic figurines) may be the result of preservational factors as well as the number of sites that have been excavated (and originally occupied). More important, however, is the realization that making fired clay objects in the Neolithic was a task that would have taken place frequently for other reasons (to produce containers and other vessels). Furthermore, the skill and experience required to carve and engrave an ivory Upper Paleolithic figure would have been a less commonly possessed technical ability across a community, at

least when compared to the skills required to model a clay figure: anyone could take a bit of clay, shape it, and place it in the fire of a pit-kiln, but not everyone had the experience and manual dexterity to handle a flint burin or point to a degree of skill required to carve a Venus. Clay afforded modeling by anyone; ivory and bone to only a few.

The consequence of these distinctions is that while material manifestations of the human spirit existed in the Upper Paleolithic, those figurines did not influence human conceptions of being (and the body) to the extent that figurines did in the Neolithic. More important, however, is the distinction in the wider context of significant developments in other daily activities and the consequences of the adaptations of these new technologies and coincident ways of thinking.

A series of vital background conditions made the Neolithic a world that was more conducive to the emergence of the material body as a fundamental element of people's understanding of what it meant to be human. One of these differences was the adaptation of plant-growing and animal-breeding technologies: the intentional transformation and manipulation of raw materials to produce food. Another difference was the adaptation of sturdy and enduring architecture to construct built environments: the transformation of naturally occurring materials such as trees, branches, stone, clay, dung, and vegetation into structures for shelter but also for activities, and perhaps with more significant consequences for the bringing together of people into groups (whether they should be called households, families, or something else is less relevant at the moment). Similarly important was the construction of larger physical entities (villages) by congregating individual boxes of built space in close proximity to each other.

All of these Neolithic developments share the same additive, constructive processes, and they all exploit otherwise naturally occurring raw materials. Together they form a set of conditions under which there occurred the regular construction (and reconstruction) of social and political entities: of collaborative kin-networks and labor-sharing cooperatives (as had existed elsewhere and at other times) but also of more exploitive alliances which were able to manage labor, investment, and return in the production of foodstuffs or in the construction of buildings or in the management of surplus and deficit. My argument is that within this emerging way of life (that we now term the Neolithic) there came into being a distinct way that people lived their lives and, critically, a distinct set of new contexts within which people interacted. Along with these processes (the creation of food, of buildings, or material culture) developed fundamentally new ways of understanding what it meant to be human, most particularly of new conceptions of the form that the human spirit should take. In their daily, serial, mundane repetition, each of these processes played an unscripted (and thus unintentional) role in constructing a distinct Neolithic understanding of the world. People came to see things in new ways, and fundamental to those new ways was the location of the human spirit within the vessel of the body.

LINGUISTIC CHANGE AND THE BODY AS A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Important as were the changes in economy, technology, architecture, and material culture, I suggest that the most significant element that set the Neolithic apart has its basis in linguistics: the adaptation of Proto-Indo-European language. The introduction of Proto-Indo-European into Europe is not uncontroversial; the main debate is

whether it was introduced with the adoption of farming (i.e., at the start of the Neolithic) or whether it was introduced with the invasion of horse-riding warriors at the end of the Neolithic (i.e., at the start of the Bronze Age). In this debate I follow the work of Colin Renfrew (1987, 1999) and others who have argued that the appearance of Proto-Indo-European occurred with the Neolithic.⁴

Why are linguistics important to understanding gender, figurines and the emergence of a gendered body in European prehistory? There are two reasons. First, the traditional arguments that propose a matriarchic Neolithic place heavy emphasis on the introduction of Indo-European, horse-riding, male warriors at the beginning of the Bronze Age: a male-dominated world-view violently destroys and replaces the pre-existing peaceful matriarchic one. Thus, the date of the arrival of Indo-European is important for clarifying and, if necessary, readjusting that traditional argument. Second, linguistics is important, is more pressing, and brings new information to the debate, and, I contend, transforms our understanding of the Neolithic, of Neolithic figurines, and indeed of the role played by the body as a locus for gender in proto-historic, historic, and modern Western society. For the most part, the focus of research (such as the debate noted above) on the emergence of Proto-Indo-European language in central and southeastern Europe has highlighted issues of female- and male-dominated society and particular aspects of technology (such as the introduction of wheeled transport and the use of the horse) and of the chronology of invasions and migrations of language dynamics. Recent work by a team of linguists at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (The Netherlands), led by Stephen Levinson, suggests another significance: that compared to other languages, Indo-European languages hold the body in a place of specific importance for the way that Indo-European speakers conceptualize the world that they live in and for the way that they locate themselves in that world (Levinson 2003:10, 14).

For many modern Western communities, the body is the central element in people's frame of reference. It is at the core of how they understand the world. Indeed the body has been essential to the last 500 years of thinking within the humanities and social sciences. The question that Levinson and his colleagues have raised is this: what if the body is not an essential, hard-wired part of human perception, present in all peoples' perceptions regardless of local culture or context? More specifically, what if the body was not central to a pre-Indo-European, non-Neolithic central and southeastern Europe? If this were the case, then the consequences would be substantial for our understanding of the appearance of figurines in the archaeological record of the Neolithic (and of their relative absence in non-Neolithic contexts) and for the role that they played in elevating the body to a level of primary significance during this period. On a larger scale, the consequences would be significant for research and writing across prehistory (European and otherwise): we would have to rethink (and probably discard) all of the work that has assumed that the body was an essential element of human thinking throughout time and across cultures.

THE LINGUISTIC BODY AND INDO-EUROPEAN: FRAMES OF REFERENCE

In a linguistic work of fundamental significance for the humanities and social sciences, Levinson (2003) made the case for the non-essentiality of the body in human perception, and thus undercut the widely held assumption that the body is central to the

ways that all people think. Significantly, he has argued (and demonstrated) that the belief that the body is the primary frame of reference is not supportable across all languages (and thus communities), and that in fact it has its roots in the “linguistic prejudice of the Indo-European tongues” (Levinson 2003:10). He continues this argument as follows: “In the matter of frames of reference, the tradition in which the human body is the source of all our notions of orientation and direction is a major ethnocentric error. It is not only that there are languages that do not use the bodily coordinates to construct a relative frame of reference, but there are also many other aspects of such languages, and of the interaction and cognition of their speakers, that point to a fundamental demoting of the body as a source of spatial concepts” (Levinson 2003:14).

Levinson’s work was initially focused on an investigation of spatial frames of reference, but the significance of his conclusions has much wider application. He demonstrated that there are three distinct frames of reference with which people understand the spatial relationships among objects in the world: relative (or viewer-centered), intrinsic (or object-centered), and absolute (or environment-centered) (Levinson 2003:32 after Carlson-Radvansky and Irwin 1993:224). With the intrinsic frame, people use the properties of an object (e.g., its shape, orientation, characteristic motion, use) in order to comprehend where that object is (1993:42). With the absolute frame, people use the object’s orientation in the environment (e.g., cardinal directions, north/south, east/west, coastal/inland) (1993:47). With the relative frame, people use a system of references based on the viewer him/herself (e.g., up/down, back/front, left/right) (1993:43). Not all languages use all three frames of reference: some use one, some use two, and some use all three (1993:53). The intrinsic frame is nearly universal, although there are languages that only use it minimally (1993:81). In addition, because language is a system of public representation (i.e., it is shared frequently and overtly), a frame of reference that can be recognized in language will have a central place at the core community activity and perception (1993:113).

Of the three frames of reference, the relative is the one that takes the body as the primary measure of position, and as Levinson points out, this is the reference frame that one would assume is fundamental to all human beings. Levinson shows, however, that the body-based frame of reference is entirely dispensable. Many languages do not use it at all or only use it in ways that are marginal to one of the other two frames (1993:46). As an example, Levinson reviews in detail the linguistic frame of reference of Guugu Yimithirr (1993:114–118), a language spoken by an aboriginal group living over a 10,000 square kilometer area north of Cooktown, Northern Queensland, Australia. Spatial description in Guugu Yimithirr is more or less completely absolute (1993:115), and there are no relative (body-centric) terms. Thus, in order to tell someone where you left your tobacco, one might say “it is on the southern edge of the western table” (1993:114). Levinson goes on to show through an exhaustive study that these people have, as it were, a “mental compass” that operates constantly in the background of their minds. Their way of thinking about the world is something that must be “constructed during socialization and language learning” (1993:129). It is not some sort of essential capacity that is hard-wired into these people.

Levinson’s work fits into a wider debate over the concept of “body.” Across the Western social sciences, the assumption exists that the human body is a basic pre-linguistic source for conceptual structure. Many have claimed that all languages

have a term for body (Brown 1976; Andersen 1978; Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard 2001). However, linguistic reality is more complex than this. Thus, words that are used for bodily change over time often have many different fields of reference (e.g., to skin, to trunk, to person as well as to body) (Wilkins 1996; Evans and Wilkins 2001). Significantly, a major cross-linguistic study and comparison of the semantics of body vocabulary brings into question the assumption that all communities have a term for body (Enfield et al. 2006:146).

Fieldwork by Levinson's colleagues at the Max Planck Institute examined descriptions of body part terminology in a set of geographically, genetically, and typologically distinct languages: Jahai (Malaysia), Lao (Laos), Kuuk Thaayorre (Australia), Yélí Dnye (Papua New Guinea), Punjabi (Pakistan/India), Tiriyó (Brazil/Surinam), American Sign Language (USA), Lavulaleve (Solomon Islands), Tidore (Indonesia), and Savosavo (Solomon Islands). Of the ten languages studied, two did not have general terms for body: Kuuk Thaayorre and Tidore (Enfield et al. 2006:145).

Kuuk Thaayorre and Tidore

Kuuk Thaayorre is a Paman language spoken by about 350 aboriginal people living in the Aboriginal Community of Pormpuraaw of Cape York Peninsula, Australia (Gaby 2006:202). In her study of the Kuuk Thaayorre, Alice Gaby could not identify any Thaayorre term that referred to the thing that we think of as the body. The closest was true-man (or *pam-minj*), which refers to the specifically physical presence of a human, but also to non-corporeal components of a living person such as his or her voice (*kuuk*), shadow (*man-nganp*), or the tracks that a person leaves behind (Gaby 2006:206). Furthermore, in Kuuk Thaayorre it is not easy to distinguish between mind and body, and it is difficult (unlike in English and other Western languages) to clearly separate the physical from the non-physical elements of a human being (Gaby 2006:207).⁵

Of further interest are the Kuuk Thaayorre lexemes for shadow (*man-nganp*) and footfall (*thamr-rathr*); both are used in conversation to stand in for the whole person, and thus come closer to (though still remain distinct from) what we understand as that thing to which the word and concept body refer. Other Kuuk Thaayorre terms that come close to a Western reference to body, refer to body products: blood (*kam*), faeces (*kun*), sweat (*nbumurr*), semen (*pirp*), pus (*thangk*), urine (*thiyy*), snot (*koo-nhij*), and menstrual blood (*yin-kam*). With the use of these terms, a person's identity may be determined by his or her voice or footsteps (Gaby 2006:216) or by their excrement, urine, blood, or pus.⁶ This idea of person or essence is fundamentally distinct from the one that we are most at ease with when thinking about ourselves and when we think and write about the prehistoric people we study and onto whose backs we load our notions of body. Gaby and her colleagues' work on Thaayorre is important because it forces us to question the standard assumption that all communities share our understanding of the concept that we call body.

Another language community that has a distinct and noteworthy lexical understanding of the body is Tidore, a Papuan language spoken by 40,000 people living on the island Tidore and on neighboring islands in the North Moluccas of Indonesia. In her examination of body and body part terms among the Tidore, Miriam van Staden found no Tidore term for body (van Staden 2006:330). Instead Tidore has a term

that refers to person or human (e.g., *mansia*) or child (*ngofa*); otherwise they use an Indonesian loan word (*badan*); its use itself is unusual, as loan words, though common in most parts of the language, are not usually used in relation to the body (van Standen 2006:332). Furthermore, Tidore speakers often use Malay words (or highly Malayified versions of Tidore words) when discussing ill health or similar subjects that are body-related (van Standen 2006:332).

In her discussion of Tidore body language, van Standen positions Tidore in the broader context of Austronesian and Papuan speakers in Eastern Indonesia; she notes the close relationships among the usage of terms for human body, the house, the boat, and the family (Jansen 1977; Platenkamp 1988, n.d.). For example, in Tidore, *yora* means spine in the human body, but it also means keel of the boat, ridge of the roof of the house, and a person's ancestors (van Standen 2006:341). Furthermore, van Standen describes how social and political relations are expressed in terms of parts of a boat, or in terms of people and their functions on a boat (2006:330–331). In her view these different models for social-political relationships are mapped onto each other. The body is the house is the boat is the unity of the family. In this multi-system process of mapping-on, one term works in different domains and one wonders how one connection (or even if one) is dominant or becomes dominant over the others.

In light of the Tidore example, we can begin to imagine that it is just as likely that we might now be talking and thinking about the human spirit in the terms that are used for the form of the house or of boat and not in the form (or using the terms) of the body. The critical question emerges: why and how is it that the body arrived (and remained) at the center of our thinking and of the thinking of most Europeans? What factors might have turned chance into long-term reality? I suggest that a significant factor was the durability of fired clay and the repeated creation of many anthropomorphic shapes in this medium.

Linguistics and the Neolithic

The relevance of Levinson and his colleagues' work is that all communities do not talk (and I suggest therefore think) about the world in terms that are based on the body.⁷ Indeed, as Levinson shows, there are non-body-centric ways of thinking and talking about how people see themselves in their worlds. Furthermore, the way one thinks about the world is a frame of reference that is learned (and thus can be done and undone, constructed and reconstructed): it is plastic. Finally, such frames (when expressed in language) are a highly efficient way of sharing perceptions of the world across a community. The significance for European figurines, therefore, is that we are wrong (or should at least be cautioned) to assume that people of the non-Neolithic (or even the Neolithic) held the body to be an essential, central part to their understanding of the world around them.

Following from Levinson's connection of body-centric language (and thinking) with Indo-European languages (and from the conclusion that Proto-Indo-European speakers arrived in central and southeastern Europe with the Neolithic), I contend that body-centric conceptualizations developed during the Neolithic. Within this linguistic-conceptual context, there gradually emerged material manifestations of the concept of body as a new essence of being human: figurines were those manifestations and they occurred within the conflux of other conditions (e.g., development in burial

rites, construction of buildings, domestication of plants and animals). Furthermore, these figurines were layered with varying definitions of human characterization (or identity) and one of these was what we now call gender. The argument I am making is not that the body and thus figurines and thus gender arrived as items in a parcel called the Neolithic; rather I suggest that through a dynamic and long-running series of daily activities that took place within a particular set of conditions (material culture, pyrotechnology, the built environment, and linguistics) there emerged a sedimented understanding that it was appropriate to locate the human spirit within the human body and that onto that body should be found forms and surface variations that had set and shared values and meanings within a community. Figurines are one of the records of that emergence, of that process of sedimentation, of that locating of being onto the body, of the layering onto the body of particular characteristics of identity, and of the origin of gender as a body-based institution. While the consequences of these developments are specific to the European prehistory (and of proto-history and history in the region), these conclusions raise important questions for other regions and other periods. For example, what is the relationship (linguistic, cultural, chronological) with the fashioning of small human-shaped objects in the Near East and the emergence of body-based ways of thinking? What of more distant traditions of figurine making in central America? While there may be some general cross-cultural similarities, it seems most likely that the particular context-specific conditions of each region and period will have combined in specific and different ways to affect the prehistoric and subsequent historical location of the body within communities' conceptions and of the way that gendered bodies have been constructed and, in many cases, manipulated.

CONCLUSION

It is no longer valid to speak of the Neolithic of central and southeastern Europe in terms of a matriarchic society in which figurines provide an easily read, direct reflection of gender identity and politics. As representations, figurines were diverse, active, subjective constructions of Neolithic conceptions of the world and of the locus for the human spirit within that world. If there is a pattern among figurines, then it is that examples that lack depictions of sexual body parts are the most numerous. Even in this simple statement, however, uncertainty remains: the sexing of body parts (as depicted) is not a straightforward process: when is a breast male and when is it female? To make matters worse, there is little confidence that the concepts we recognize as male or female existed in the Neolithic. Even if they did, there is no reason to assume that such terms remained static over time in any one community, let alone that they meant the same thing in different communities at the same time or in different regions or through time in separate places.

The realization that the elements of the body that are depicted on a figurine (such as facial detail or genitalia) may be the least important component of their representation further disrupts our attempts to understand these artifacts, but it starts to open up a new perspective: that figurines were active (though subconscious) stimuli for people's thinking about the physical shape of being. In a similar way, by recognizing the specifics of the way in which one can comprehend a figurine (via touch), we begin

to understand figurines within the performative creation of new (Neolithic) ways of defining what it meant to be human, and we recognize the potential that these objects would have had in the construction of stereotypes of identity that were layered on the body, such as gender, but that also included other constructed definitions of person and groups.

Emerging from the disruption of the assumptions that underlie the standard interpretation of Neolithic figurines is a recognition of the importance that the body started to have after 6500 B.C.E. The process was an extended one without any individual moments of specific origin; Neolithic people's conceptualizations of being and the appropriateness of its location within the human body developed over a 3000-year period within the contexts of other significant social, economic, and political re-orientations of life. There was not a predetermined trajectory. It was just as likely that the appropriate location for the human spirit could have become the body of an animal or in the walls and roof of a building. Both zoomorphic and building figurines were made, handled and thought about (and with) in the Neolithic; both shared many of the affordances (e.g., to be held, to be modeled differently, to have surfaces decorated) that were inherent in body figurines. It is just as likely, therefore, that we might now be discussing the sedimenting of gender (and other stereotypical identity constructions) onto sheep or houses.

One of the contemporary conditions of the Neolithic developments that ran along with the making of figurines from 6500 to 3500 B.C.E. was a development in the ways that human bodies were manipulated and disposed of after death. At the beginning of the Neolithic little attention was paid to dead bodies (or at least we have little record of activities that left lasting traces and that took place on site). A few body parts were buried within the area of a settlement, usually the skull. With time, complete skeletons were inhumed, some with particularly selected grave goods (such as beads or flint tools or ceramic vessels). Local patterns in the association of specific grave goods with bodies of one sex or the other (or of one age range or another) began to emerge, so that by the end of the Neolithic (in the fourth millennium B.C.E.) large cemeteries were in use with extraordinary concentrations of exotic grave goods often associated with adult male burials, as at Varna on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.

The pattern with graves, grave goods, and mortuary performances bears similarities to the creation and decoration of figurines; in both media (fired clay and social ceremony) the body emerged as the one entity (of the many that were available) in which to locate the human spirit and onto which to inscribe proposals of social and political differentiation and categorization. The gradual nature of these developments can be taken even further with the recognition that already in the later phases of the Upper Paleolithic, at sites like those in the Danube Gorges (e.g., Lepenski Vir), people were working through new conceptualizations of body and representational art – the former through multiple inhumations among small timber and stone structures on the banks of the Danube, and the latter through boulder and pebble art with abstract, human, and fish depictions. These earlier, isolated experimentations accelerated within the contexts and conditions of the Neolithic.

By the end of the Neolithic, there had come to be established, with repeated and regular public, physical manifestations (i.e., figurines, though also through treatment of the deceased), one set of understandings of the appropriate form for the human spirit to take: the body. With this sedimenting of understanding also emerged an

acceptance that the form and surface appearance of the body were the appropriate (and most potent) media onto which definitions (and contestations) of identity were to be proposed, thought out, contested, and accepted. Among the fundamental categories that took residence on the body was gender.

NOTES

- 1 Burial is a political act that is no more an accurate reflection of society, politics, or economy, than are figurines a reflection of social demography.
- 2 Important work by John Chapman (2000; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007) has investigated the potential significances and consequences of the fragmentation of artifacts, including Neolithic figurines, and has argued that people, places, and objects are linked through processes of breaking and depositing objects into the ground.
- 3 This itself assumes that the social political entity that we understand as “household” (or village or culture) had any conceptual traction among the people who made, held, discarded a figurine that we study. See Thomas Dowson (2000) for a discussion of the heteronormativity of the term “household” and the way that it is applied to archaeological reconstructions.
- 4 The literature is vast and the interested reader is referred to it: Mallory (1989, 1997); Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1990); Gray and Atkinson (2003); Anthony (2010).
- 5 There are other interesting linguistic things among the Thaayorre: they don’t have a simple label for face (the closest is *koo-miing* or nose-daytime); anus is *kun-thaaw* (or bum-mouth); collar-bone is *man-verngr* (or throat boomerang); toe-nail is *thamr-rirkr* (foot-shell); sole of foot is *thamr-thip* (foot liver); heart is *man-ngeegk* (or throat-belly); heart beat is *punth-nerp* (arm-spirit); foot print is *thamr-kamp* (foot blood); and brain is *paant-thuur* (head marrow) (Gaby 2006:table 2).
- 6 There is, of course, a large literature on substances (e.g., Busby 1997).
- 7 The debate over whether speech determines thought or vice versa (i.e., the Worfian debate) is put to one side here, as for the purposes of this article, whether one determines the other is not of great importance; the significant thing is to question how and why people thought/spoke about being human in terms of the body.

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