

Feats of Clay: Rethinking Mycenaean Figurines

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Abstract

This paper considers the materiality of Mycenaean figurines with the specific aim to highlight and address a perceived disjuncture in figurine studies. Archaeological studies of figurines which prioritize the materiality of these portable objects have primarily been drawn from the prehistoric farming communities of the Neolithic. The result is a sophisticated dialogue about the social use of figurines, gender studies, attribute analyses, transformative aspects of materials and material culture and the entanglement of objects and people within complex social worlds. In contrast, figurines from protohistoric urban communities are viewed through the lens of religious action and personal cult; the physicality of the object – its agency and its entanglement in object-person relationships are all but ignored. This paper aims to redress this balance through the analysis of Mycenaean female figurines within the parameters more typically applied to their more ancient cousins.

Introduction

...figurines possess strange attractive powers that seduce and overwhelm archaeologists

(Bailey 2005, 12)

Small terracotta figurines are a typical element of the Mycenaean cultural repertoire from the beginning of the 14th to the 12th century BC (French 1971, fig. 1; Weber-Hinden 2009, 24, table 1). Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines are both represented; this paper focuses on the former. The anthropomorphic figurines are predominantly female. There are some charioteer and bull leaper figurines which might be assumed to be male, but their sex is not clearly indicated; although the gender may have been apparent to the Mycenaean viewer on the basis of the activities of the figure. Furumark (1941, 86-7) categorized the female figurines into three main types, which he termed tau, phi and psi due to their perceived similarity with letters of the Greek alphabet. Their form is based upon distinct gestures made by the arms. A variation, especially for the phi and tau figurines, is the so-called kourotophos, representing a female holding an infant (Olsen 1998, 384-8; Pilafidis-Williams 2009; Budin 2011, 300-02). There are also more naturalistic figurines belonging to the earlier stage of production (French 1971, 109-12, fig. 2; Weber-Hinden 2009, 25). It has been

suggested they developed from Minoan prototypes (French 1971, 105; 1981, 173; Budin 2011, 302).

In contrast to the anthropologically-informed analyses of Neolithic and Chalcolithic figurines cultures around the East Mediterranean (Lesure 2002, 2011; Bailey 2005), the rich vein of anthropological studies of material culture have had limited impact on the interpretation of figurines from Protohistoric societies in the region; instead research has tended to focus on whether or not these should be viewed as ritual objects imbued with religious meaning. The aim of this paper therefore is to highlight the materiality of the Mycenaean figurines.

Previous interpretations

Mycenaean female figurines have been known since the rediscovery of the Mycenaean world in the late 19th century AD; for example, substantial numbers were found during Schliemann's excavations at Mycenae and Tiryns (1878, figs. 8-11; 111-3, 212, pls. XVI-XIX, colour plates A:c-d, B:e-g, C:l-m). Traditionally, interpretations of these figurines have been embedded in narratives of Mycenaean religious practices. Schliemann (1878, 11-13) initially identified the figurines images of the goddess Hera, noting their frequent association with the bull figurines, reflecting the bovine attribute of the goddess. Although Nilsson dismissed their divine identification (1950, 307), their apparent religious association stuck, primarily as objects of popular cult rather than state-sponsored religion. Hägg (1981) for example, draws attention to the large number of these objects found at sites that in later Archaic and Classical Greece developed into major sanctuaries – such as the temple of Aphaia on Aegina (Pilafidis-Williams 1998) – although there is no specific evidence for formalized cult practice at these sites during the Mycenaean period. Budin (2011, 311) suggests the figurines have a divine aspect, noting the increasing popularity of the psi figurines, which she relates to the Minoan goddess with upraised arms, and also relating the gesture of the tau figurine with Levantine Astarte plaques. She attributes this development to increasing contact with Near Eastern and Cypriot cultures, where the divine was frequently represented in clay. Budin (2011, 315-16) also notes an apparent disjuncture between our knowledge of official Mycenaean religion as derived from the Linear B archives and the popular cult to which she attributes the figurines. Indeed, how such objects might have been incorporated within Mycenaean cult practice remains unclear, but they are significantly

different in terms of dimension, production, decoration, and are also far more frequent than the larger, wheelmade anthropomorphic figures (French 1981; Pliatsika 2012) found at cult places. While the larger figures were plausibly cult objects and the object of veneration, the smaller figurines were more likely to have been personal, symbolically charged objects.

In contrast to current interpretations of Neolithic figurines from the Aegean, Near East and the Balkans (Lesure 2002; Bailey 2005; Insoll 2017a) this religious association has not been comprehensively challenged. Persson (1931, 255) contended, on analogy with Egyptian ushabtis, that phi figurines were placed in tombs to serve the dead; reiterated by Nilsson (1950, 305-6), noting their apparent funerary association. Blegen drew attention to a surprising correlation between child bones and figurines in the tombs at Prosymna. He reasoned these represented nurses (significantly not mothers) while bull figurines plausibly provided a symbolic milk supply, although they might equally be considered to be a child's plaything (Blegen 1937, 255-6). A similar correlation is evident at Eleusis (Fig. 1; Cosmopoulos 2015, 120). Mylonas (1966, 115) also commented on the apparent correlation of child burials and female figures, suggesting the phi figurine was a divine nurse, while the psi figurine represented divine blessing. However, the commonly held belief that these figurines were particularly associated with child burials in the Mycenaean world has been challenged (van Leuven 1994; Olsen 1998).

More recent discussion of Mycenaean figurines has focused on typologies (French 1971; Weber-Hiden 2009), context (Richardson 2001; Tzonou-Herbst 2002; 2009; Albers 2009; Shelton 2009) and production (Shelton 2009; Weiberg 2009; Vetters 2011), although many studies are still grounded in an understanding of their religious significance (Albers 2009; Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou 2009; Hammond 2009; Pakkanen 2009). Only rarely have these figurines been viewed from a more theoretical stance. Pakkanen (2009, 155-7) suggests they were active agents within ritual practice; Tzonou-Herbst (2002; 2009) examines the biography of object (Kopytoff 1986), looking at the use-life, destruction and deposition of figurines; and Steel (2013) has explored how these figurines became incorporated within the material world of Cyprus and the Levant, either as items of sailor trade (2013, 144-6, table 5.1) or otherwise as markers of a shared cultural milieu (2013, 35-7, fig. 2.6, table 2.1). The following discussion builds upon these more theoretically informed approaches. It focuses on

the figurines from a materiality's perspective, considering the physical properties of the figurines with a view to determining how they might have been used, held, handled and viewed within their contemporary social context in the Aegean. It does not seek to dismiss ritual associations out of hand, but rather to test these interpretations through a detailed analysis of the materiality of object.

Materiality

Shaping people from clay is a diverse and ancient tradition reflecting fundamental human concerns (Lesure 2002; 2011; Bailey 2005). Through the crafting and handling of miniature beings in clay, people confront what it is to be human; these objects enable us to look at who we are, our sense of self or identity, and as such represents a personal and emotive crafting tradition that inevitably excites a response. Figurines are equally entangled in both ancient and modern social worlds; exploring these objects allows us to examine how people shaped and transformed materials to fashion objects with agency. These representations also provide a vehicle for exploring people's relationship with the human body, how this was perceived, displayed, performed and transformed as a medium of symbolic communication (Bailey 2005, 141-2).

Focusing on materiality emphasizes the physicality (or thingness) of figurines, in particular the quality and character of the material from which they were made – in this case the malleability and sensuality of the clay and its smooth, lustrous, tactile properties once fired. A materiality-centred approach equally focuses on how these figurines were entangled within, and indeed shaped, social and material worlds within a recursive relationship (Boivin 2008, 5). Instead of focusing on the meaning(s) encoded in objects (Hodder 1989; Tilley 1999), a materiality's perspective encourages us to consider 'the realm of the sensual, of experience and emotion' (Boivin 2008, 9) as we explore the inextricably interwoven network of relations between the human agent and the material world, and to examine how these inexorably shape social and cultural worlds. Such an approach considers the agency of the material world and how objects (and matter) impact on people's daily, lived experiences.

Rather than attempting to 'read' figurines, a materiality's-focused interpretation attends first to the tangible object (Ucko 1962, 38), using its formal characteristics – such as medium,

size, decoration, physical attributes and details of clothing – to determine what it is that the figurine represents (Bailey 1994, 323; Lesure 2002, 589). As well as simply describing and typologizing the object, however, a materiality's approach should be grounded as much in our own sensual, tactile and emotive experience of the object as in the more empirically grounded visual observation. We should equally consider the making of the object and the maker's haptic interaction with matter (Ingold 2013) as much as the embodied relationships between the object and those who used and handled it. Finally, we should consider the figurine's archaeological context (Tringham and Conkey 1998), from which we might deduce how it was used, handled, viewed and socialized (Ucko 1962, 38; Bailey 1994, 323).

Materiality of Mycenaean figurines

Mycenaean figurines were hand-crafted from clay – typically a fine, naturally well-levigated, pale buff substance – and fired at a high temperature, highlighting the durability of the object; at their point of origin we might assume these were intended to last, although we might want to reconsider this perspective within a wider understanding of the biography of the object (Kopytoff 1986, Tzonou-Herbst 2002; 2009). The figurines were fairly simply formed, schematic figures, and do not appear to entail much in the way of crafting skill; even so, I would suggest these were the work of craft specialists simply due to their close association with Mycenaean ceramic production. They were made from the same clays, decorated with the same paints and fired at a high temperature, suggesting their production by individuals who had the appropriate knowledges of working with this medium, as well as access to pottery kilns and practical understanding of firing processes. This is supported by NAA analysis of the figurines from Aigina, the chemical signature of which matched that of Mycenae-Berbati clays used in the manufacture of decorated fine ware pottery from the Argolid (Pilafidis-Williams 1998, 166-70). Analysis of figurine fragments from the Potter's Quarter at Berbati (Weiberg 2009), including two apparent wasters, gives further support to specialist production of the figurines within potters' workshops.

In contrast to production of figurines within Neolithic village communities (Lesure 2002; 2011), Mycenaean users were dissociated from the making and shaping of the object, the sensual experiences of sourcing, manipulating and moulding the clay, the choices made in gesture and decorative detail of dress, and the nervous anxiety of firing and waiting to see the

complete and pristine end product. This separation of the user/consumer of the figurine from its production might well explain the apparent uniformity and seeming lack of individuality of the object. These were mass produced, very quickly, possibly from leftover lumps of clay, to fit into a firing; perhaps a side-line to the production of wheelmade pottery. These objects then were made by artisans, who had a good knowledge and understanding of the properties of the materials – clays, slips and paints – they were handling, were also reasonably skilled coroplasts who could shape the clay into the requisite forms, add the painted decoration relatively rapidly and successfully fire them. This has interesting implications for economic interactions, the relations between the craftsmen who created the objects and the individuals who acquired and used them and the agency of object. Rather than a household craft to meet the immediate needs of the family this object had to be acquired, bought in – an observation which informs us of a nexus of social relations embedded in the creation, acquisition and use of these objects. This is further substantiated by the group of 186 pristine figurines from the Petsas House at Mycenae, interpreted as a collection of commodities from the same workshop waiting to penetrate the Mycenaean market (Shelton 2009). We might ask if and when a figurine became imbued with symbolic, ritual meaning, whether this was during the process of making, the choices made in acquisition of the figurine or the devotion involved in handling the figurine, be it at home or in a religious setting. Recognizing these different relationships between the figurine, the person who made it and person(s) who chose, acquired, owned, handled and interacted with a figurine has implications for our understanding of the entanglement of object (Hodder 2012, 24-6).

Miniaturization and three-dimensionality are key to understanding how figurines were handled, viewed and socialized, creating 'encounter[s] of intimate proximity' (Bailey 2005, 38). Mycenaean figurines are small, on average around 10cm in height, freestanding and fashioned from clay. As fired they are smooth and inviting to the touch. These are objects which might easily be held in the hand and their tactile form might suggest that handling them created a close personal relationship between figurine and owner. The figurines are not accurate copies of the human form; instead specific characteristics, primarily clothing, have been emphasized in some detail with fine lines of brown-black paint, while the actual physical form of the human body (facial features, arms, legs etc) are reduced and schematized. This compression of detail and abstraction is typical of miniature objects and

requires the viewer/handler to draw inferences from their own personal knowledge (Bailey 2005, 32; Foxhall 2015, 3).

The figurines stand upright in a rather rigid stance, with no implied movement other than the gestures made by arms. The proportions emphasize the upper body and head. The lower body is tubular and may have a splaying flat foot suggesting a long robe. The figurine is typically high-waisted, the upper body is flattened and the face is pinched to give the impression of a prominent nose. Additional schematic facial features might be added in paint. Breasts might be indicated by rounded pellets of clay and some figurines have an applied or painted band down the back, representing braided hair (Fig. 2). The head might be slightly flattened (typically phi figurines) or the clay might be splayed out into a wide flat-topped headdress; the phi figurine is most likely not to have this headdress. The figurines face forwards and direct their gestures frontwards, towards the viewer. The form of the upper body of the figurine was predicated by the gesture made by the arms:

- The upper body of the tau figurine (Fig. 3) was pulled out horizontally, in a T-shape, over which two flattened horizontal strips of clay were placed (occasionally crossed), indicating arms folded or crossed over the chest. This gesture was sufficiently culturally significant for it to be integrated within Linear B as a female logogram (Fig. 4). Weihartner (2012, 292) suggests the gesture, touching or holding the breasts, communicated nurturing and fertility, emphasizing these as important female social roles, perhaps corroborating Budin's interpretation of the tau figurine as a copy of Levantine Astarte plaques (2011, 311);
- The upper body of the phi figurine (Fig. 5) was formed from a flattened disc and typically no arms were indicated, although the shape of the body suggests arms lowered in a *bras bas* position. The arms of the phi kourotraphos figurines, however, are indicated with applied pieces of clay across the front of the body;
- The clay forming the upper body of the psi figurine (Fig. 6) was pulled upwards on both sides, suggesting raised arms. The hands are not usually indicated and their exact position, whether facing each other or facing forwards, is not clear. The probable Minoan derivation of this figurine type does not resolve this query – there are examples with hands facing each other, for example from Kavousi (Gesell 2004, fig. 7.2), and also facing forwards, such as the figure from the Shrine of the Double Axe at Knossos (Borgna 2012, pl. LXXVb). A rare example of a figurine from Hala Sultan

Tekke however, has hands indicated by flattened, forward-facing discs (Fischer and Bürge 2017, fig. 31.1).

That the figurines represented females was important, as this is clearly indicated; however, the sexuality of the female form is not emphasized. Instead, the body was fully covered in clothing and hidden from the gaze, suggesting it was inappropriate to depict the naked female form. Instead, the emphasis was on clothing and personal adornment.

Performing bodies, gesture and posture

The body...recognizes and receives communication directly from other bodies, allowing posture, gesture, and imagery to develop as alternative means of transmitting knowledge

(Norris 2001, 117)

Although highly schematized the figures clearly make distinct gestures that would have been meaningful to the Mycenaean viewer. Gombrich (1966, 394-6) notes how artists use conventional gestures that convey meaning within human interactions, especially those performed in ritual. He also highlights problems modern scholars might have using ancient art forms to make sense of gesture, posture and movement; namely art is static, depicting arrested movement(s) and is somewhat restricted in capturing the essence of how these gestures were incorporated within a flow of bodily movements. Any attempt to make sense of the figurines' gestures therefore should consider that while these conventions made visual sense to the Mycenaean viewer they might not present us with a full understanding of how such gestures were incorporated within everyday embodied practices.

Different groups of people have their own culturally-learned body practices, socially accepted postures and ways of moving, handling objects, ingesting food and drink, gestures and ritual actions (Mauss 1935/1973, 72). Connerton (1990, 22-3) identifies these embodied practices as **habit-memory**, an important aspect of habitus (Mauss 1935/1973; Bourdieu 1977).

Repeated bodily acts performed unconsciously, frequently within ritual contexts, are a means through which social order is reinforced. Kendon's detailed work on gesture as a form of non-verbal communication highlights the distinction between unconscious or inadvertent body movements (including nervous habits, such as twisting rings, playing with hair) and

more structured, deliberate motions that are intentionally communicative (2004, 7-8, 11). The latter Kendon identifies as **gestures** – culturally learned ways of holding the body, positioning arms, hands and head to communicate meaning. Such gestures are distinct from unconscious, socially learned embodied practices, such as the correct way to hold tools and utensils. Connerton's habit-memory, or incorporated practices, elides with Kendon's gestures specifically in the realm of ritual or ceremonial performance. The ability to read gestures underpins social exchanges and communication.

Three gestures were consistently repeated within the corpus of Mycenaean female figurines, indicating they were habitual patterns of behaviour that were socially significant. These, I argue, were a culturally constructed medium of expression deployed within certain contexts to communicate distinct messages to a specific audience. The gestures would have been embedded within repeated actions immediately recognisable to the individuals who used these figurines, although we ourselves might not be able to decode the meaning. The repeated, formulaic gestures of the Mycenaean figurines presumably mimicked gestures used repeatedly within specific embodied, ritualized practices, be it in the household, at the graveside or in a religious environment, comprising an important aspect of social reproduction within the Mycenaean world.

In her study of European Palaeolithic figurines, Schebesch (2013) developed an approach to explore the emotional content of the figurines' posture and gesture. Her aim was to devise a methodology for decoding the emotional information contained in objects depicting the human form and how this information invites an emotional response from the viewer. Schebesch (2013, 68-9) reiterates that people learn habitus and body language through imitation, a process through which our motor neuron system transforms visual information into social body knowledges. As a corollary, she reasons that the gestures and actions of people, in particular their visual expressions, elicit an emotional response in the observer. Thus, Schebesch theorizes body language contains emotional and emotive messages. As Norris (2001) observes, emotions provide a link between the body and mind, and should be considered another form of body knowledge: '[j]ust as postures and gestures of a given culture are learned through imitation, usually during childhood, so are emotions and feelings' (Norris 2001, 113). Accordingly, culturally prescribed gestures, postures and movements

make up a grammar of the body used in communication transmitting shared somatic, emotional experiences as much as cultural meaning (Norris 2001, 116). From this we might extrapolate that figurines not only tell us about the gestures, posture and potentially even movement within culturally-learned actions, but also that the body language(s) concealed within these objects provides us with a means to access possibly the sensory experiences of ancient populations and potentially some of their emotional responses.

Using Schebesh' methodology (2013, 70) I undertook a pilot study of the three Mycenaean gestures. The aim was to articulate emotional responses provoked by making the gesture, with the ultimate objective of better understanding the significance of the figurines. A random sample of twenty-one participants was drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic colleagues and acquaintances, all with limited or no knowledge of the Aegean Bronze Age. Prior to the experiment the goal of the exercise was explained and, given the importance of the clothing in the Mycenaean context, we briefly discussed what the figurines might have been wearing, focusing on heavy woollen clothing, flowing linen garments – both textiles used by the Mycenaeans (Nosch 2012, 51) – and large headdresses where appropriate. The participants were then asked to mimic the gestures and to answer a series of questions concerning their emotional response. As with the original study, the emphasis was on immediacy and 'spontaneous and simple answers' (Schebesh 2013, 71). Although the figurines under consideration are female, to avoid modern western gender-age biases the respondents were drawn from a mixed group of participants – two-thirds women and one-third men as a control – and from three broad age groups (20-30; 31-50, and 51-70). They were asked to react according to their own emotional responses rather than assumed ancient gender constructs. The original questions (Schebesh 2013, 72) were adapted in this study:

1. Is the position extrovert or introvert?
2. Is your emotional response overall positive or negative?
3. Do you feel a mix of emotions? If so are they ambiguous or harmonizing emotions?
4. Is this a static gesture or do you sense movement? If movement how would you categorize this?
5. Are there possibilities of communication?
6. How do you perceive the status/social role of the individual making this gesture?
7. What does this gesture represent?

The posture of the three figurine types is at first glance very similar. They are all standing upright with their legs (and probably their feet together) and their torso and head held upright, tilted back slightly. As already noted, the defining characteristic of the figurines is the gesture made with the arms. Intriguingly, there were substantively different emotional responses to the three gestures and, in one instance, a clear gender divide.

The arms of the tau figurines are folded across the chest, or sometimes crossed, and the pose of the figurine appears very upright and rigid, with legs together and head held high. The closed posture and seemingly taut, static pose of the tau figurine was primarily viewed as introverted and negative. The gesture was perceived to be ambiguous and closed in, described by one respondent as 'defensive and contained, holding thoughts in....no intrusion from outside'. One response described the pose as 'a bit scolding and "school-marmish", slightly angry, slightly withdrawn...Old, an old person. Old age, closing in and shrinking' and 'inaccessible, closed in, swaddled'. A small number of responses highlighted a possible funerary association: 'recalls ancestors in tombs', 'death pose, the pose of a corpse', and 'like Egyptian sarcophagus'. Several respondents however, viewed the stance more positively, commenting: it 'feels like a queen' or the 'head of the household' and 'feeling a sense of importance and an aura of authority'. These individuals cited being influenced by the very upright posture, and in particular the position of the head, as much as the idea of balancing a heavy headdress. All but two of the participants perceived the pose and gesture to be high status and the overall consensus was that it represented some sort of religious role or authority, perhaps a priestess.

The placement of the arms of the phi figurines is less clearly indicated, but the hands appear to be clasped in front of the body, the elbows jutting out slightly, more or less in a *bras bas* position. Most of the participants felt this to be a more fluid, relaxed position, in contrast to the rigid posture experienced for the tau figurine. This was perceived for the most part to be positive, open and extrovert, with the potential for movement, and was variously described as a feeling 'of movement, more of a flow... and a tendency to sway in this position', 'there is movement, swaying. Controlled motion – forced to stand in position', a 'light, gentler, kind posture', 'gentle and flowing'. One (male) respondent suggested this was a more feminine

pose: ‘...men are quite brutish and more aggressive in movement. This is more gentle, like bamboo flowing’, while another described it as ‘graceful, balanced and poised’.

There was a clear gender divide in response to this gesture and a shared sense that, while this was an easy, contented and relaxed pose for most of the female participants, the position was unnatural and even uncomfortable for some of the male participants, although one experienced the gesture as ‘non-threatening and welcoming’ and a second described it as ‘providing’. One male respondent commented he felt ‘quite exposed’ with his chest out and his hands ‘pointing to genitalia; quite uncomfortable because quite exposed’, also observing this pose was ‘quite illustrative of fertility and female/“womaness”’; at the same time, objectified and quite vulnerable as a collection of bits. Very exposed and out there in a sexual way and very uncomfortable’. This sexualized perception was echoed by a second male respondent, who described the stance as that of a ‘breeding mare, wife... subservient and sexually available’. Intriguingly, this fertility aspect, albeit framed more positively, was picked up by a majority of the female participants, several of whom commented specifically on ‘fertility’, ‘motherhood’, ‘womanhood’, ‘nurturing’, and ‘comfort and protection’. The overwhelming response therefore was that this was a specifically gendered gesture, which invokes an almost visceral reaction to female fertility. Intriguingly, the phi figurine was frequently associated with the mother and child motif, further reiterating the importance of female social roles centred around fertility, nurturing and motherhood to the Mycenaeans who would have owned and handled these figurines.

The psi figurine with upraised arms was viewed by most respondents as a positive and extrovert figure who exuded authority and confidence. The gesture was largely perceived to be communicating and proclaiming a message, ‘a pose that calls attention’, ‘really forceful...a clear positive symbol’, one designed to draw attention to the viewer, making the performer taller and more visible. A few participants commented that the actual gesture, holding the arms high in the air, was ‘a difficult position’, an uncomfortable and difficult pose to hold, which took a lot of discipline and hard work to maintain: ‘a lot of self-control in pose’, ‘not a natural gesture...not a natural pose’, ‘I can’t hold the gesture – a very heavy gesture’. This was related by one respondent to the effort involved in learning to hold their left arm up when learning the violin.

There was also a degree of ambiguity in emotional responses to the psi gesture. Although primarily perceived to be a dominant, commanding gesture, several respondents also experienced a more negative response: 'a feeling of subjugation – you don't greet your inferiors in this way', 'hands up is submissive', 'surrender', 'hands up can mean despair', 'I give up!' and it was likened by one respondent to the masonic hailing sign of distress. For the most part however, responses to this gesture were positive. It was viewed as religious, representing supplication, prayer, oratory, 'some form of worship, praise. Some expression of cultural appreciation', representing some form of intercessory. The figurine was identified by several as a priestess and one participant suggested she was 'always interceding, making prayers for the owner or household'. This emotional response to the gesture made by the psi figurine ties in neatly with the traditional interpretations of these figurines previously outlined.

The results of this study are intriguing, revealing very different emotive states invoked by mimicking the gestures of the Mycenaean figurines. They clearly encode body language and invite an emotional response. The question remains then how we might be able to extrapolate this information to interpret the underlying significance of these figurines. As observed by Schebesch (2013) our emotional responses to body language, in particular the conscious and deliberate performance and imitation of gestures and postures, are embedded physically and mentally through the stimulus of the circuits of mirror neurons. The body uses gesture and posture as a means of transmitting knowledge, including emotive states of being (Norris, 2001, 14). Arguably, the participants' unconscious and visceral emotional experience to the deliberate performance of the Mycenaean gestures is meaningful and might allow us to access some of the emotional experiences of the Mycenaeans who used and handled the figurines, and perhaps also performed these gestures in certain social situations.

'Meaningful action in social and individual contexts is stored through our figurines' body language. It can be said that the figurines store social memory' (Schebesch 2013, 87) and this is something we can explore experientially. Our results indicate the psi gesture of upraised arms to be clearly performing and communicating; the actor is performing an otherwise unnatural gesture to make itself visible and proclaim a message. There was some ambiguity

as to the nature of this message, reflecting various cultural influences on the modern participants; similarly, the recipient of the message – human or divine – remains elusive. The obvious way to explore this is through the context and associations of this specific form. It is worth noting that this pose is most typical for the large wheelmade figures, which served as cult images in the Mycenaean sanctuaries (Pilatsika 2012, 611) and it has typically been interpreted as the greeting or blessing of a deity or a sign denoting power, authority or even epiphany of a deity (Moore and Taylour 1999, 91). Ambiguity also surrounded the emotional responses to the tau figurine. In contrast to Weihartner's (2012, 292) emphasis on female sexuality, the participants (both male and female) invariably experienced this as an introverted and closed pose; it also communicates calm, dignified control and status, reiterated by the clothing of the figurines. I would argue it was intended to cover and conceal female sexuality and the emphasis was on the social stature of the individual, revealed through their posture and clothing. The clearest somatic message was expressed by the gesture of the phi figurine; although the physical, sexual attributes of the female form are concealed by clothing, this gesture embodied a general idea of fecundity, mothering and womanhood. This highlights the importance of women for ensuring the continuity of the family line and nurturing the next generation and is reiterated by common association of the kourotraphos, or 'mother and child' figurines, with the phi figurine. We might even conclude the phi figurine had an apotropaic aspect, protecting women, children and childbirth.

Clothing, dress and identity

One of the ways in which ancient figurines might be considered socially important was as a means of representing gender ideals; the viewer/handler was able to explore culturally situated notions of identity and social roles 'through the agency of miniature three-dimensionality, object intimacy and tactility' (Insoll 2017b, 8). Textual evidence tells us Mycenaean society was rigidly gendered with sexually segregated workforces (Olsen 1998); therefore, we might assume these mimetic clay models of women performing culturally significant gestures will throw some light upon Mycenaean gender constructs. The commonality of the figurines indicates these to be everyday objects produced for and consumed by Mycenaeans in daily household, and possibly ritual, practices rather than signifiers of wealth and status. Mycenaean figurines therefore have the potential to reveal ideal female social roles in the Mycenaean world, opening a window onto the lived experiences of women. Particularly significant in this respect is the information they might

provide on dress and bodily adornment, a subject for which we are otherwise largely dependent on the palatial arts – namely items extraneous to the daily reality of most Mycenaean.

Aegean Bronze Age textiles and clothing have been the subject of considerable discussion (Barber 1993; Jones 2000; 2009; 2015; Nosch 2012), primarily focusing on evidence from the wall-paintings, although Borgna (2012) and Pliatsika (2012) have extended discussion to the Mycenaean wheelmade ceramic figures. The numerous smaller Mycenaean figurines, however, have largely been overlooked, other than occasional observations in passing by French (1971, 111, 124, 126, 128, 138, 169, 175-6; Pliatsika 2012, 613). Nonetheless, these small objects have much to reveal about Mycenaean dress. While diminution in scale inevitably entails reduction in detail, it follows that the aspects emphasized by the figurine maker will be culturally significant (Bailey 2005, 32; Foxhall 2015, 3). Mycenaean figurines did not overtly celebrate the female form or sexuality; instead, the body was entirely covered and obscured, down to the feet, including the arms. Although it was evidently important that these were female, there is only schematic representation of their primary sexual characteristics (breasts), albeit covered by clothing. This was the norm for Mycenaean depictions of women; other than Minoan-inspired representations of bare-breasted women in the palatial arts, the female body was not meant to be displayed and female primary sexual characteristics were hidden from view, in contrast to the ithyphallic clay figure from Phylakopi (French 2009, fig. 4). Instead, the emphasis was on textiles and garments that swathed and concealed the body. As in other media, Mycenaean female social roles were primarily indicated through hairstyle, apparel, adornment, gesture and posture (Weilharter 2012, 287, pl. LXVI.1).

At first glance, it appears there is little detail on the figurines, however, the lines of paint over the bodies of the figurines draw attention to their clothing, as does the body form and some applied features. All three types wear long robes, reaching down to the floor and covering their feet. The robes of the tau figurines (Fig. 3) fall straight and appear heavy, suggesting a thick and weighty woollen garment. In contrast, the base of the phi and psi figurines flares out more (Fig. 1), suggesting a lighter, more flowing garment, perhaps woven from linen. As in other media, femaleness was represented through long robes, covering the entire body, and

seemingly static (seated or standing) posture. The upper body of the tau figurine was covered by a closely fitting high-waisted garment, seemingly belted just below the breasts. Two long tassels hang from the belt over the front of the skirt. The arms appear to be covered by sleeves indicated by short vertical strokes over the applied arms (French 1971, pl. 17a), or in some cases as though wrapped in a shawl (French 1971, pl. 18a). Rippling wavy lines over the upper body of the phi figurines give the impression of a loose-fitting, flowing linen blouse, belted at the waist, with a loose skirt (Fig. 1). The psi figurines wear a similar, high-belted flowing garment, represented by lines loosely painted over the upper body and arms (Fig. 6). Sometimes the rippling wavy lines cover the torso and lower body of the phi figurine, with no indication of a belt (Fig. 5), suggesting a single sinuous garment woven from linen. Presumably the loose garments suggested for the phi and psi figurines would allow a certain freedom of movement; this would allow them (or their real-life counterparts) to make the upraised arm gestures, or equally to perform daily household tasks (including nursing children) on the part of the phi figurine. Such freedom of movement was seemingly not considered an issue for the female social roles indicated by the more closely fitted garments of the tau figurine. The clothing worn by the phi and psi figurines is reminiscent of that worn by women depicted on Mycenaean pictorial pottery, such as the charioteers on the krater from Pyla Verghi, Cyprus (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, III.13). A similar costume to these belted garments is also painted onto some of the larger wheelmade figures (Pliatsika 2012, 612-13). Personal adornment might be indicated by dotted lines at the neck, representing a beaded necklace (French 1971, pl. 14/39-29, 39-206).

The phi figurines are typically bare-headed, but might have an applied plait painted with short horizontal lines hanging down the back (Fig. 2). The tau and psi figurines habitually wear a large headdress, formed out of clay into a flattened cone splaying out from the head and with painted decoration of rays, bands or festoons (Weiberg 2009, fig. 6.2-3). Tau figurines might have an applied braid of hair attached over the top of this or simply indicated by dashes in a vertical band painted down the back of the neck (French 1971, 125); similarly, the hairstyle of the psi figurines might be indicated by a painted fringe peeping out from below a headdress and a braid of hair down the back, either painted or an applied strip of clay (French 1971, 126). Parallels to the (polos) headdress are worn in other media by goddesses, sphinxes and priestesses (Pliatsika 2012, 614). Within the Mycenaean artistic canon these polos headdresses were an indicator of status and (divine) authority. Their recurrent

association with the tau and psi figurines reiterates our observations concerning their pose; for these two figurine types their very materiality (form, gesture, painted decoration of costume) suggests they embodied some cultic or ritual meaning. Such a conclusion cannot be drawn from the phi figurine, which appears to represent real female lived experiences, perhaps pointing to a more personalized meaning for these objects and their owners.

Connerton (1990: 12) highlights appropriate clothing and ‘the grammar of dress’ as a significant element of embodied practices, a means by which societies create structures and meanings which are at one exclusive and inclusive. The emphasis on the clothing of these figurines highlights the importance of cultural competence in reading dress codes within Mycenaean society. There is a clear correlation between choice of gesture and the requisite form of clothing, which further suggests these objects mirror real Mycenaeans performing actual embodied practices within specific social settings; these objects then provide an insight into the reality of being Mycenaean and a woman. Although fertility, reproduction and mothering were important female social roles, the physical female form was not celebrated and female nudity appears to have been a taboo. Instead women were expected to be fully covered, swaddled in long garments of linen or wool, and the only bare flesh on display was their faces. Hair was bound up in long braids. Practicalities of performing certain tasks allowed for some clothing with movement, at least for the phi and psi figurines and presumably their human counterparts. Specific types of clothing were important in organizing society and undoubtedly served as an indicator of status or social role, in particular the polos headdress. This headdress and the stiff, heavy clothing specific to the tau figurines suggests restriction of movement for some women; this appears to be status related, associated with mimetic representations of women who exercised, or at least embodied, some form of authority. This authority was articulated physically through the sheer presence woven into their clothing, stately posture and imposing headdresses. Female display of wealth and status through elaborate clothing and costly textiles was undoubtedly their prime significance in Mycenaean society, possibly as dowry wealth or reflecting the wealth and position of a patriarchal family. Unfortunately, in contrast to the Near East, where there is plentiful textual evidence for control and ownership of female property including dowries (Dalley 1980), this important aspect of Mycenaean women’s lives remains unknowable to modern scholarship (Olsen 2014, 42).

Context

In her seminal study of Mycenaean figurines, Lisa French (1971, 107; 1981, 173; 2009, 19) asserted that context is fundamental to any discussion of their use. In particular, she cautioned that these objects should only be attributed ritual or ceremonial significance if they are found in a religious context; although, their incorporation within domestic contexts need not preclude a symbolic connotation, and these figurines might equally reflect personal piety within the household. Figurines in fact have been found in a wide variety of contexts (Richardson 2001; Tzonou-Herbst 2002; 2009), including domestic, religious and funerary, implying a very personalized engagement between an individual figurine and the person who used it, or to whom it belonged. Tzonou-Herbst (2002, 17-18, 95) argues for fluidity of meaning of the figurines, which she suggests changed according to who was using it, what activities they were engaged in and where these were being performed.

Although the concentration of figurines from the area of the Cult Centre at Mycenae stands out – at least 1507 fragments from Wace's excavations alone – Richardson (2001, 50) cautions against attributing these to activities performed in and around the Cult Centre, noting that many were not *in situ*, but rather represent redeposited materials. Only two figurines were actually found in the LH IIIB Temple in the Cult Centre, one of which (a Proto-Phi figurine) had been curated over several generations (Tzounou-Herbst 2002, 161, 254). Although animal figurines were commonly used in Mycenaean cult – found in large numbers at the Apollo Maleatas sanctuary, Epidauros (Lambrinudakis 1981) and the sanctuary at Methana (Konsolaki 2002) – female figurines were not commonly represented in such contexts. Only one hollow psi figurine was found at Methana and Konsolaki observes that the 'dearth of the ubiquitous Phi and Psi female figurines was a striking feature of the deposit' (2002, 31). While animal figurines were embedded within Mycenaean cult practices, their female counterparts did not appear to have a specifically religious function prior to LH IIIC. There are, for example, no female figurines earlier than the Late Psi types in the sanctuary at Phylakopi; a small number of these late figurines (LH IIIC) were found in association with platforms in the West Shrine, but there is no evidence for the use of figurines at the sanctuary in earlier phases (French 1985, 236). Likewise, at Tiryns figurines from cult room 117 in the Lower Citadel date to LH IIIC (Tzounou-Herbst 2002, 173).

A place for communal gathering and the deposition of votives has been identified at the so-called Great Poros Wall at Mycenae – the retaining wall supporting the mound over the so-called Tomb of Clytemnestra. This comprises large quantities of complete pottery, namely kylikes and stirrup jars, together with figurines (Tzounou-Herbst 2002, 145, 151), presumably used together within some form of ceremonial performance and subsequently intentionally placed at the east face of the Great Poros Wall. These activities plausibly included anointing the body and/or textiles with perfumed oils, drinking wine and pouring libations, alongside handling figurines and placing these directly on the tamped earth surface. Accepting the figurines as mimetic sculptures of Mycenaean women might inform us of some of the physical actions performed in these ceremonies, such as the clothing worn and the gestures made. Of the female figurines, the earliest in LH IIIA were predominantly phi figurines, but by LH IIIB2 psi figurine were predominant, with a small number of tau figurines (Tzonou-Herbst 2002, tables 1 and 5). Extrapolating from our previous discussions of gestures and dress, these changes in figurines deposited at the Great Poros Wall might reflect shifts in performance, and possibly even participants, over time. While the phi figurines represent the experiences of the average Mycenaean woman, being household objects associated with some aspect of fertility or motherhood, the gesture and clothing of psi and tau figurines make reference to Mycenaean official cult; consequently, these shifting patterns of dedication might indicate formalization of ceremonial performances and possibly even their integration within official cult.

Figurines were also a common item of funerary furniture. Although Blegen (1937) and Mylonas (1966) highlighted their apparent association with child burials, there is no discernible evidence these were gendered or age-specific objects. They are found in all tomb types, but were not a prerequisite element of the funerary paraphernalia (Mylonas 1966, 115). Tzonou-Herbst (2002, 160) notes an apparent association between figurines and individuals wearing beads, which we will come back to. They might be placed at the entrance to the tomb, frequently with kylikes, suggesting an association between the handling of the figurines and drinking at the graveside. Phi figurines predominate in earlier tombs but from LH IIIA2-LH IIIB2 psi and tau figurines become more popular (Tzonou-Herbst 2002, 254, 257).

Figurines were common household objects and more than 1000 have been found in habitation levels outside the walls of Mycenae (Richardson 2001, 51). Richardson's (2001) comprehensive contextual analysis indicates the majority of figurines turn up randomly within the settlement and do not appear to have a fixed position, indicating these portable objects were a significant part of the daily lived experiences of Mycenaean communities, being frequently handled and moved around within the household space. Of particular interest is the apparent association of figurines and hearths in domestic buildings (Hägg 1997, 167; Pilali-Papasteriou 1998, 29-30; Richardson 2001, 46-7). The hearth was more than a means of heating the home and preparing food; indeed, there is significant evidence the hearth was the focus of significant social practices and possible cultic significance (Richardson 2001, 38). It was a place for social gathering, feasting, oral recitation and probably other embodied practices which formed the nexus of social reproduction in the Mycenaean world. The apparent figurine-hearth association suggests these practices included the handling and display of figurines. The significance not only of this social space but also the practices enacted therein to Mycenaean communities is reiterated by their transmission to the fringes of Mycenaean society – such as the hearth buildings excavated at Khania on Crete (Hallager 1997). Intriguingly, at Mycenae phi figurines were most common in the settlement, which our study of gestures and clothing has related to the lived experience of Mycenaean women. Embodied practices around the hearth, entailing gatherings, eating, drinking, and the handling of figurines presumably were a significant aspect within the Mycenaean habitus and underpinned social reproduction at the household level.

Figurines also are found in association with doorways and thresholds (Richardson 2001, 38), typically with kylikes and beads (Tzonou-Herbst 2002, 17, 219-21; 2009, 168-9). From this we might infer embodied activities involving all three classes of object – consumption of wine, a toast or libation, handling or wearing of beads and handling the figurines. Entrances into the settlement, as well as into individual households were essentially liminal places; in Mycenaean Greece, these might be marked by monumental conglomerate thresholds, propylaea and presumably also imposing gates and doors, although the latter have not survived. Eriksen (2013, 188) highlights '[t]he near-universal metaphorical significance of the door ... because of [its] vital role as a border between the inside and outside of inhabited space'. The doorway/threshold is not only a physical boundary marker but equally controls access into private spaces, thereby making possible social interactions and communicating

messages of privacy, belonging and exclusion. Doorways and thresholds therefore are powerful, transformative spaces that are frequently ritualized and consequently require protection (Eriksen 2013). We might conclude therefore, where Mycenaean figurines were placed in or near doorways these small objects had an apotropaic, protective function.

The repeated occurrence of beads and figurines together in both settlement and funerary contexts is intriguing. This phenomenon is discussed at length by Tzonou-Herbst (2002, 207-19; 2009, 167-8), who suggests these objects were entangled within complex gendered performances, primarily within the female domain. She demonstrates how beads were associated with processions, offerings, adorning of buildings and also marked identity and status in funerary ritual. Their recurrent association with figurines demonstrates the figurines were likewise embedded within such performances.

Settlement figurines are frequently fragmentary. We might view this simply as a result of their repeated use; figurines were handled on a regular basis and thus were liable to be broken, so entering the archaeological record. An alternative viewpoint might be to consider the breakage as part of the biography of the object, an integral part of its life history. Indeed, to fully understand the agency and entanglement of figurines, we need to consider their full life-story from their original creation, through their use, to their possible breakage and eventual discard. Not all figurines were placed with burials, kept in the household or dedicated within ceremonial performance. Large numbers in fact were broken and simply discarded in household refuse, or were simply lost, sometimes randomly being incorporated into construction fills, floors and walls of buildings (Tzonou-Herbst 2002, 235-7). The evidence seems overwhelming that these were not innately religious objects; this is not to deny their potential agency as personal objects which played important roles in people's lives, but rather this should emphasize their individuality and their object-owner intimacy, allowing us to better understand how they were integrated within daily life in unique and very personal ways. Individual figurines held different meanings for different peoples (Tzonou-Herbst 2002, 301), dependent on time, place and many other variables which remain hidden in the archaeological record.

The evidence for inclusion of Mycenaean female figurines within cult practices at religious sites is equivocal. This appears to be a later development (LH IIIB2-IIIC) and the preferred figurine in such practices was typically the psi figurine, reiterating the evidence of the gestures and clothing discussed above. There is plentiful evidence for the use of figurines in daily life, and also that these objects might be placed in tombs with the dead. Occasionally, a 'special' figurine might be carefully curated over several generations and perhaps dedicated at a cult place. The figurines therefore might be viewed as intimate personal objects people could handle at home or in liminal spaces, sometimes choosing to 'dedicate' them, or bury them with the dead (presumably their owner). People's emotions and understanding of the spiritual world might be mediated through the figurines, but equally these objects were used broken and discarded along with household debris, indicating their very everydayness, entangled in the lives of ordinary Mycenaeans.

Use-wear Analysis

Goring pioneered use-wear analysis of Cypriot Chalcolithic figurines, observing different patterns of wear on clay and picrolite figurines suggesting different body parts were repeatedly rubbed (1991a; 49-52; 1991b, 158-60). Application of such an approach to the Mycenaean figurines might help us better understand how these objects were handled. To this end I completed a preliminary macroscopic examination of Mycenaean figurines in the Ashmolean Museum (Fig. 7). Evidence for use-wear is tenuous, in part due to the nature of the pigment, which has a tendency to crackle and appear fugitive. Nonetheless, there was consistent wear on the edges of the torso, plausibly where the figurine sits nicely in the hand and where the holder might gently rub their fingers. It is otherwise difficult to demonstrate that certain parts of the body were consistently rubbed or touched, although there is some evidence for wear on the breasts and the back. We might infer that rather than consistent, repeated formulaic actions, tactile engagement with these objects was unpredictable, reflecting very personal handling practices. The figurines might have been held, but they could also be stood upright when not being handled and were perhaps also intended to be displayed and viewed, reflecting a very different object-person engagement.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the materiality of Mycenaean figurines, the physicality of object and the attributes emphasized by their makers. Focusing mainly on gesture and costume, the figurines have proven to be a rich source of information, throwing light on embodied practices as much as the social roles and lived experiences of Mycenaean women.

Investigation of context, notably the repeated association of figurines with beads and drinking equipment, and use-wear analysis further illustrate the 'life' of Mycenaean figurines. The actions of the people who owned, handled and discarded these objects demonstrates how the figurines were entangled within the lives of ordinary Mycenaean. The figurines themselves shaped sensory experiences (sight as well as touch) alongside consumption of wine at home by the hearth or as part of the final offering of personal grave goods within the tomb. We have seen how some figurines were carefully curated, usually to be offered at tombs, less frequently in ritual contexts, but the majority were simply lost, or broken and discarded with the daily detritus of the household. How the figurines were entwined in people's lives was fluid and very personal to the owner, but these objects clearly played a mediatory role within social processes through their unique and prized physical properties.

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Biography

Louise Steel is Reader in Mediterranean Archaeology at UWTSD. She has worked extensively in Cyprus, focusing research on the consumption of Late Bronze Age pottery, and has directed excavations at al-Moghraqa (Gaza) and Arediou (Cyprus). Louise is the author of *Cyprus Before History: from the Earliest Settlers to the End of the Bronze Age* (Duckworth) and *Materiality and Consumption in the Bronze Age Mediterranean* (Routledge), which explores the integration of objects in people's social worlds. Louise is co-editor of the new *Materialities in Anthropology and Archaeology* series for Wales University Press.

Illustrations



Figure 1. *Phi and Psi figurines from Eleusis. Photo L. Steel.*



Figure 2. *Detail of figurine fragment, showing braided hair (AN1966.585), courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum. Photo. L. Steel.*



Figure 3. *Tau figurine, Kara Hymettos (AE309), courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.*



Figure 4. *Mycenaean logogram making tau gesture, after Weilharter 2012, pl. LXVI/9j.*



Figure 5. *Phi figurine, Kara Hymettos (AE 311), courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.*



Figure 6. *Psi figurine, Kara Hymettos (AE310), courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.*



Figure 7. *Detail of figurines showing possible wear (AE315, AE315, AE310, AE311, AE315, AN1952.394.13), courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum. Photo L. Steel.*