

Cucetani-Trypolye Figurine from Drăgușeni

The most significant finds from the Neolithic Balkans is the sheer number of figurines¹ (Bailey, 2005), however modern-day interest and value in these figurines is often assuaged entirely to their meaning, usually allying their purpose with cult and ritual (Bailey, 2005). However these minute, human figurines are also expressions of art in their own right, especially the Cucuteni-Tripolye figurine from Drăgușeni which is an exemplary demonstration of visual and tactile art from a civilisation that increasingly used clay as a medium of negotiating their place in their new world. The medium of clay and the creation of figurines formed the foundation of *“the new materiality of the Balkan Neolithic [which] provided, if not the recipes then at least the ingredients needed for making expressions of individual, household and village identities”* (Bailey, 2005, pg. 7). The rendering of such expressions as well as the formation of these figurines would have necessitated both technical skill and creativity, making the figurine not just reflections of these forming identities, but art too.

The Cucuteni-Tripolye culture was a collections of settlements from an area covering South Eastern Europe (see map) between 5000-3000BC (Bailey, 2005); settlements could accumulate to several hundred structures that were systematically destroyed and rebuilt every 70-80 years (Bailey, 2005). The early steps into agriculture lead to new exploration of the clay rich soil, facilitating the creation of figurines so extensively that an almost standardised form and decorative style emerged.



Map of the main sites of the Cucuteni/Tripolye culture with Drăgușeni (site 14) highlighted (Bailey, 2005 pg.104)

A Lady from Drăgușeni

The figurine was made in the Cucuteni A/Tripolye B1 phase (Bailey, 2005), made from fired clay, it is one of the few complete figurines found². Despite the lack of obvious

¹ Indeed they numbered in the hundreds of thousands, the largest concentration in the span of European prehistory (Bailey, 2005).

² the majority are found in scattered, fragmentary states around domestic dwellings (Bailey, 2005)



Fig. 1: Cucuteni A figurine from Drăgușeni:
Front View (Amarie, 2013)

sexual indicators, such as breasts, this figurine is female, as evidenced by the enlarged pubic triangle; she is approximately 23.7cm tall and 7.4cm wide at the hips³. The close together legs, exaggerated thighs and buttocks and bend at the waist gives her an “uncomfortable [seated] posture” (Bailey, 2005, pg.94) that could be attributed to practicality; the enlargement of the thighs and buttocks would provide a more stable base. By minimising the bend at the waist, it becomes more structurally sound so as to prevent breakage whilst still implying sitting. The extensive surface decoration of incised fields of close, parallel lines and a focused is disrupted irregular patterns on the buttocks, chest and pelvic area (Bailey, 2005).

The head is distinct from the neck and two vertical sets of holes are bored on either side of the head, which could be representative of eyes and/or ears, whilst the nose is pinched out. The arms are only implied through defined shoulders; judging by the rounded edge at the end of them, it can be assumed that arms were not sculpted or attached. Nonetheless, a gesture of raised arms is implied by the upward curve of the shoulders, if combined with the close together legs and tapered, non-defined feet, it gives the suggestion of the figurine stretching out in both directions. In this way movement can be interpreted despite its presumed sedentary posture (by Bailey, 2005).

Moreover, the figurine is visually disrupted by the patterned fields of closely hatched, parallel incisions covering the front and back, matching up in almost perfect symmetry along a vertical central line. Unique patterning occurs on the chest, shoulders, pubis and buttocks where spirals and other abnormal shapes suggest features of

interest. The use of incisions as opposed to pigment⁴ means this figurine is tactile as well as aesthetic, when considering that this object was probably handled the movement of

³ *using my own calculations and the scaled diagram in Bailey 2005, fig. 5.7, pg.95.

⁴ such as red decorations that can be seen on other similar figurines (Bailey, 2005)

light over this textured surface would probably provide dimension to the figurine causing a dynamic aesthetic effect.

The Curvy Conduit

Having established that the incisions and would have made for a tactilely engaging object, it is reasonable to believe this item was meant to be held. Figurines themselves are a tactile art and it has been shown that holding scaled-down representations of the human body has a profound effect on the human psyche, resulting in a sense of slowed-down time and increased personal loci of control (Bailey, 2014). It is argued that this has a calming effect and therefore such emotional engagement with the textured figurines could act as a bridge between the imagination and meaningful experience, with the figurines themselves being the conduit (Collingwood, 1925). Firth argues that the satisfaction from visual patterning can result in pleasure, the emotional engagement making a subject art (Firth 1994), tactile pleasure from handling this texturally diverse object would thus have a similar effect. Furthermore the tapering of the legs and narrow waist of this figurine allow for it to be enveloped by the hand and in doing so, this figurine allows for haptic apprehension that could have lead to a deeper form of understanding of the human identity as projected upon the imagery of the human body (Bailey, 2014). Therefore this three-dimensional figurine is empowered by its own agency to bring the human body into human apprehension through touch (Bailey, 2014) such agency and provocation of emotional engagement making this object an effective art piece.

An Enchanting Figure

Clay is an impermanent material made permanent by extreme heat and therefore pottery could be considered a transient and magical process that may have been performed by perceived magicians, shamans or possessors of this special knowledge (Bailey, 2005). Therefore the very matter of the figurine itself could be considered enchanting within this social context. Furthermore, it is a key example of the 'beautifully made; made beautiful' (Gell, 1994); working to such a minute scale would require great technical skill to produce such symmetrical, even lines. It can be argued that the application of technical skill on an object of no obvious, pragmatic use is, in itself, an act of art (Firth, 1994). A good example is the interlocking spirals on the buttocks which are almost perfectly circular and run evenly parallel at a curve, requiring great technical skill; the results are quite hypnotising as they spiral in perfect mirror image. The very symmetry of the decoration is mesmerising, it draws and occupied the eye, both due to the pattern of the interlocking spirals as well as the exaggerated size of the buttocks that ensnares the beholder to engage with the object.

The figurine's enchanting agency could further be enriched by the cultural network around such figurines; it is known from finds in settlements such as Dumești and Poduri that figurines of a similar style were made expansively in the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture (Bailey, 2005). The assemblage at Dumești and the discovery of hora-pots with similar

assemblages, has lead to the proposal that such figurines are associated with gatherings of people and ritual dance (Bailey 2005, and references therein). Their identity as representative of ancestors (Gheorghiu, 1996) or a goddess (Marinescu-Bîlcu, 2000) associates the figurines with cult/ritual, giving them an enchanting aura and social agency. This social connotation with ritual would also suggest there was a symbolic communication model to the decoration of such a figurine (Bateson, 1973).

Symbolism on the Skin

The suggestion that the incisions could be representative of tattoos has been proposed by Marinescu-Bîlcu (1981); whereas she associates it with magic symbols, I believe these marks could be a reflective of the changing landscape around Neolithic communities projected upon the human image. In the Neolithic, when people physically built their own social environments and created place (Bailey, 2005), links between identity, culture and landscape could be reflected in the body; where the landscape is being permanently scarred by human settlements, such changed could be replicated in markings on the body, as reflected in figurines. If we consider art as a symbolic 'code' with which to communicate from and about the subconscious (Bateson, 1973), then tattoos and figurines could be used to communicate a new permanence to identities as the expression of membership (be it to settlements or family) that was now more intrinsically tied to a permanent sense of place (Bailey 2005). The figurine could be intended to be a likeness to such outwardly expressed identity as tattoos, or function as a proxy through which to explore and process identity in this new, established environment using the cheirotic touch (Bailey, 2014); symbolic communication is therefore expressed in this scaled down representative. It is not evident if tattooing of the body itself was a practice in Cucuteni-Tripolye culture, nonetheless we cannot dismiss the potential for such decoration of figurines to be representative of scarring, demarcation or tattoos of the physical bodies of people.

Another interpretation, given the tightly 'wrapped' appearance of the decoration is that the markings were symbolic of fabric, combined with the obscured face and lack of arms is reminiscent of a body wrapped in a burial shroud (Gheorghiu, 1996). The find context of figurines as almost entirely in the domestic areas within the boundaries of village life leading to Chapman (2000) suggesting that the figurines were deposited to be burned with houses at their 'death' every 70-80 years when they were systematically destroyed. Whether the surface decoration communicated tattoos or a shroud, this figurine could have been used as an expression of symbolic communication.

Look No Further than Nature

There is an "implicit assumption that figurines are essential components of life" (Bailey, 2005, pg.13). I would expand this to say they are not just essential components of but fundamental representations of life, figurines could be perceived to be literal translation of

the human form and thus a recreation of incipient art. I propose that these incisions are the human eyes' understanding and recreation of their natural patterning of the body, a phenomenon that is in itself a form of "incipient art" (Firth, 1994). The hatching, and in particular their grouping and direction could be representations muscle groups and natural contours available to the naked eye and hands, recreated to be visually and tactilely explored. If these figurines are recreations of the body as it looks and feels, boney features such as the clavicles and shoulder blades are patterned fields radiating from around them, perhaps the stylistic irregularities reflect the sensual differences between muscle and bone. The back in particular is broken up into sections that are similar to the rhomboid and the external obliques (Fig. 2). The latter neither meet in the middle or line up with the patterning on the front, such a deviation from the rest⁵ of the figurine is perhaps intentionally representative of this muscle group. Similarly, the figurine as a portrayal of the female body could explain the overly enlarged pubic triangle (fig. 1) that encompasses the entire lower abdomen and stretches above each of the thighs, this is reminiscent of a reclining female's stomach pouch and is supported by the reclining posture of the figurine, as if leaning against something (Bailey, 2005). If further analysis of the decoration of this area is then applied to such a gendered interpretation of the body, then the dot central to the top could be perceived as a navel, the swirls coming in to centre on both sides could be pubic hair or stretch marks and the small circle at the bottom a stylistic rendering of the vagina. The idea of the portrayal of stretch marks with the incisions would explain their symmetry, spacing and placement. The incisions are also lighter than the rest of the surface of the clay figurine, whether or not this is from handling or intentional pigmentation is uncertain however the effect can be likened to stretch marks on skin. Thus the figurine can be interpreted as a recreation of a female body after going through the changes of child-bearing and is thus a reproduction of the incipient art of the human body.



Fig. 2: Cucuteni A figurine from Drăgușeni:
Rear View (Amarie, 2013)

⁵ which tends to meet and match up along the vertical central line

Conclusion

“Figurines possess strange attractive powers that seduce and overwhelmed archaeologists and editors. It is as if figurines, on their own, out of context, in publications or museums displays, function with an intangible, inherent and perhaps unquantifiable rhetoric” - (Bailey, 2005, pg. 12)

The decorations and style of this figurine appears to be a standardised practice and therefore analysis of the art will have deep cultural connotations that cannot solely be explained as a personal, creative expression of an individual. It is nonetheless an act of art, it holds the potential to purvey strong symbolic communication due to such a common practice and the perceivable abstract design to the decorations covering the entire body. As Bailey critiques of Neolithic figurines, their meaning cannot be proven or disproved (Bailey, 2005) but that does not negate their agency as art. After all art is often removed from its social context where it cannot be interpreted as intended by its creator (Firth, 1994). Whereas some may say that this subtracts from its value (Firth, 1994), the aesthetic and tactile enchantment of this figurine as well as its incipient likeness to the timeless human form means that it is a piece of art that can still be appreciated by a modern day audience.

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Visual Materials

Fig. 1 & 2

Amarie, M. (2013) 'Ceramic Female Figurine'. Available at: <https://www.archaeology.org/issues/109-1311/features/1349-cucuteni-figurine-romania-neolithic> [Last accessed: 10/03/2023]

Map: "Figure 5.12, Main Sites of the Cucuteni/Tripolye cultures mentioned in the text" in Bailey, D. W. (2005) *Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and corporeality in the Neolithic*. Oxon. Routledge, pg. 104