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Morphology, materiality, technology,
function and context

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Problems of Identity for Mycenaean Figurines

Andrea Vianello

Abstract

Mycenaean figurines are the most characteristic material evidence of Mycenaean religion. They appear to have been standardised and have been found in most places where Mycenaean products arrived. Mycenaean figurines did not represent a unique and characterised divinity, and because they appear to have been used by other cultures, it is possible that they were a material tool built to embody the abstract, symbolic meanings attributed to them by their users. Such meanings might have been several and different. Their relative standardisation and anonymity must be interpreted in front of the impossibility to recognise homogeneity of cult within the Mycenaean world. There is no evident continuity from the Minoan tradition, just some influences. As the Mycenaeans had built a broad exchange network, where different religious symbols and cultural identities must have come in contact frequently and globalisation processes started to take place, the figurines probably were a solution to find unity in the difference. This paper will consider the figurines in the light of the Mycenaean exchange networks and especially address the possibility that their ambiguous identity may mirror problems of identity within the broad community of consumers of Mycenaean material products.

Key-words: Mycenaean; figurines; meaning; pottery; identity; art.

Cycladic figurines draw most attention among the public and scholars alike as far as the Aegean Bronze Age figurines are concerned. Since Cycladic figurines happen to be particularly pleasing from an aesthetic perspective, it is little surprise that many studies have approached also the Minoan and Mycenaean figurines from an artistic point of view, largely cataloguing them in as few categories as possible and producing ‘family trees’ showing the relationship of one type with the others. This approach makes sense as it is a good tool to determine the chronological succession. In addition, artistic studies can reveal the spread of artistic techniques among artists, and possibly reveal general patterns of movements across regions. For the Cycladic Islands and Minoan Crete, the natural geographic boundaries of the islands allow the determination of central areas where the figurines were developed and manufactured, so that they can be comfortably studied as regional phenomena and connected to a limited range of sites.

It is important to keep in mind the focus and methods of past research before considering Mycenaean figurines because there are significant differences that divide them from both the Cycladic and Minoan figurines. For instance, Mycenaean figurines are more recent than the others, and the Aegean world has seen dramatic political, social and economical changes since the heyday of Cycladic figurines. The area where we centre the Mycenaean culture is much larger than the Cycladic and Cretan islands, and areas formerly retaining their own distinctive cultures were swallowed by the Mycenaean culture, including the same Cycladic Islands and Crete. Long-distance contacts also took off during the Late

Bronze Age, and samples of the Mycenaean material culture may be found in very distant regions such as Iberia, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Mycenaean figurines also were found well outside the regional boundaries of the Mycenaean culture, especially in the Italian peninsula and the Levant. The artistic value attributed to the figurines also needs to be challenged: the archaeological evidence points firmly towards some artistic appreciation in antiquity only for the Cycladic figurines, and this can be demonstrated by the imitations and derivatives of such figurines found in settlements located outside the Cycladic Islands, such as in Crete (Branigan 1971). However, Mycenaean pottery was well received across the Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age (e.g. Wijngaarden 2002; Vianello 2005), and clay figurines in that style might have found some appreciation for their artistic value as well. Mycenaean figurines were imported in the Italian peninsula and Sicily (e.g. Punta Tonno, Lipari; Vianello 2005) and were also locally produced at some sites (e.g. Iasos in Anatolia; Mee 2008, 373). The evidence from the best known context, Lipari, suggests that the figurines and the other Mycenaean materials were consumed by local people and that no conquest, even if only at cultural level, can be postulated. More importantly, clay statues such as the Lady of Phylakopi (Mee 2008, 366; Crowley 2008, 269) were used in the Cyclades as well as at Mycenae (Crowley 2008, 269), suggesting that clay artefacts were appreciated and highly regarded during the Late Bronze Age; clay replaced marble in contexts previously dominated by marble and other stones. In spite of their standardisation, Mycenaean ‘figurines are generally well made’ (Tamvaki 1975, 258), though the same author contradictorily suggests that the figurines cannot

represent deities because 'they are too cheap and poorly made' (Tamvaki 1975, 235). Thus, modern attempts to assess the artistic value of any type of figurine diachronically, placing side by side chronologically and geographically separate types, are probably misleading when attempting to reconstruct the ancient appreciation for them, and as we have seen, such an approach can produce contradictions.

The apparent success of Mycenaean pottery across the whole Mediterranean was a manifestation of a sincere appreciation for an artistic style, and Mycenaean figurines can and should be interpreted as part of that phenomenon. Like other Mycenaean vessels, the figurines were mass produced, fairly standardised, and used in multiple contexts. To some extent, this was also the case for the Cycladic marble figurines, which were highly stylised and produced in large quantities (e.g. Keros hoard; Getz-Gentle 2008) and found associated with other vessels made of the same material and probably manufactured by the same artists. The debate on what the Cycladic figurines represented is quite open, and ongoing research and excavations are actually adding to the available evidence year after year. Being one of the earliest forms of Aegean figurines, the Cycladic marble figurines may have changed their meaning as time passed and more people appreciated them. However, their geographic area of distribution was still limited and therefore it is unlikely that they were ever consumed by people with sets of beliefs substantially different from those of the artists that manufactured them. It is probable that they were used in similar contexts as they spread across the Aegean, and that they were consumed in lieu of local figurines, even if the actual rituals performed in different places might have been different from those performed in the Cyclades.

In the case of the Mycenaean figurines, all problems in identifying what they represented persist, but because the area of diffusion is much larger and the contexts of the findings more variable, it is even more difficult to think of common types of perception or uses that might explain the evidence in most contexts. Their association with Mycenaean pottery also adds several specific problems. For instance, Mycenaean pottery appears to have been appreciated and consumed as a neutral style, easily accepted by any foreign culture. Mycenaean pottery appears to have been the first pan-Mediterranean cultural style, which could and still can be clearly distinguished and yet it cannot be firmly linked to one society or culture, as the name would imply. At least in the southern Italian peninsula (Vianello 2005, 96-97) and the Levant (Philistines; Dothan 1968, 1995, 2003), and possibly elsewhere (e.g. introduction of wheel made pottery in Iberia; Almagro-Gorbea and Fontes 2002), Mycenaean pottery was pivotal to the formation of local identities. Mycenaean figurines may have benefited from the same cultural neutrality of the Mycenaean ceramics.

Mycenaean figurines are accessories primarily employed for ritual and religious purposes. Anthropomorphic artefacts can have special meanings simply because they represent the human body, but they are also often vehicles for the mind to embody supra-human entities such as divinities. And yet they can also be toys (Tamvaki 1975, 236), which might acquire

symbolic meanings as the individuals grow up, be it a simple nostalgia of childhood or be representations of ancestors or ancestors-related entities. In the latter case, the memories of the ancestors would also remind individuals of the culture or society they belong to. In just these few examples we can notice how figurines may have carried variable symbolic meanings not just from community to community, not even from individual to individual, but from one period in the life of a single individual to another period of the life of that same individual. Ultimately, the figurines are both the product of the embodiment of symbolic concepts operated by the mind and the vehicle for the mind to dimensionally perceive (materialise in the physical world) symbolic and abstract concepts (new studies are presenting the relationship between mind, hands and tools as an integrated network, where one influences the others; see Seitz 2000). Thus, it is impossible and also methodologically incorrect to try to determine one reason for the use of such figurines, or to presume that they can be associated to just one symbolic meaning.

Mycenaean religion may have not been a coherent and sharply defined religion as more recent religions based on written texts may be. Even within Greece, practices may have been changed from sanctuary to sanctuary (Marinatos 1993). The Mycenaean pantheon was polytheistic; some names of recognisable divinities appear in Linear B, and all archaeological evidence points towards that conclusion. Yet, we are unable to associate specific types of Mycenaean figurine to individual divinities. Identifying all figurines as the representation of one entity might be out of question, but identifying what they embody in individual contexts should be possible, depending on the state of the archaeological context. However, the standardisation of Mycenaean figurines and pottery favoured both their appreciation among differing cultures and make it more difficult for archaeologists to identify their original meaning.

French (1971) and Tamvaki (1973, 1975) have studied Mycenaean figurines (Fig. 1) in greater detail than anyone else, have produced analytical studies of the details of individual figurines and have suggested many interpretations. It is possible to summarise our knowledge of Mycenaean figurines in a few sentences. Possibly the earliest known Mycenaean figurine dates to the LH III A 1 period and comes from a tholos at Pylos. Some of the earliest figurines are probably inspired by Cretan dark-on-light models (e.g. two found at Korakou and Mycenae), but soon the Mycenaean production distances itself and can be considered original. There is no apparent continuity between Early Helladic figurines and those dating to the Late Helladic. The case of no clear continuity and some initial influences from Crete matches that of Mycenaean decorated pottery. The apparent lack of continuity is also reinforced by the Shaft Graves at Mycenae, unparalleled even in later periods, suggesting that the Mycenaean culture emerged very quickly partly due to the sudden availability of wealth. The figurines were not consumed in clearly separated or distinguishable archaeological contexts before the Late Helladic period and therefore there is no recognisable type of figurine that may be

connected to local cultural practices. Thus, the change in material culture cannot be directly connected to a change of religious practices, which would suggest a change in the population. The progressive stylisation of the figurines can be followed in later periods well into the Greek Geometric. The figurines develop fast in their typical models (Fig. 2) during the LH III A period, again in a similar manner as decorated pottery. All figurines are female, with the possible exception of one from the Acropolis of Athens.

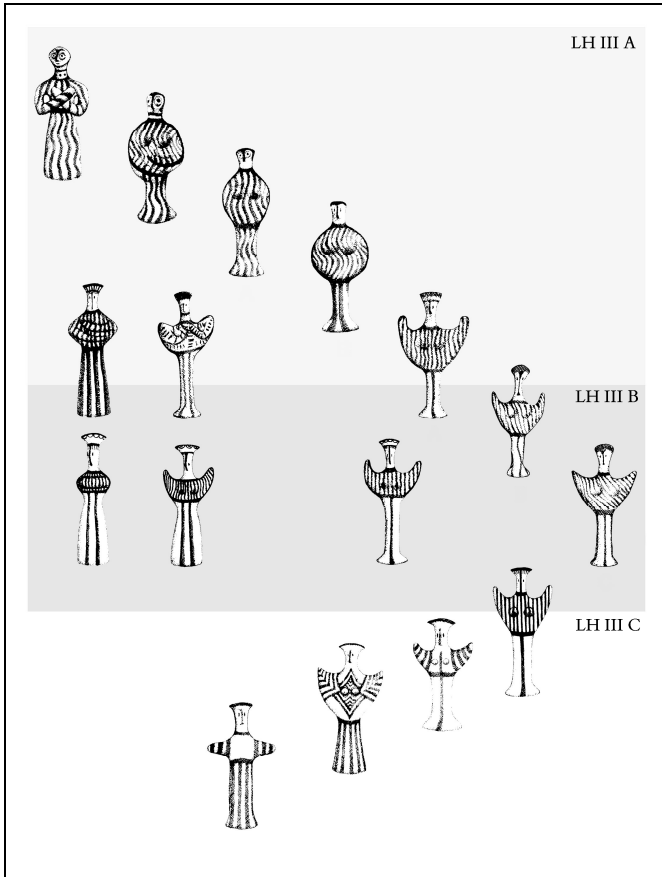


Fig. 1: Diagram of the development of female Mycenaean figurines (after French 1971).

The figurines are generally well made and some variations in form exist. However, these were often subtle enough that the overall standardised appearance is not compromised. There are no substantial changes throughout their history. The figurines lack any evident sexual characterisation. All types of figurines are randomly found in all types of contexts.

The principal contexts in which they are found include sanctuaries, where the figurines have been interpreted as divinities. Different types of figurines were employed to represent a single divinity in some Near Eastern sanctuaries (e.g. Ishtar), and the same use is possible in Mycenaean Greece. Blegen (1937; Mylonas 1966, agrees) noted that in Prosymna 11 out of the 19 tombs contained figurines associated with children's bones, and consequently he proposed that they were either pictures of divine nurses or the children's cherished possessions, playthings or toys, the latter being particularly clear in the case of the chariots. His interpretations are acceptable for figurines securely

associated with children's bones. The figurines are also found in other graves and therefore they probably carried some religious meaning as well. Picard (1948; French 1971, agrees) suggested that they represent alternatively divinities and worshippers. Nilsson (1950, 292) also suggested that Aegean figurines may have been used in more than one way.

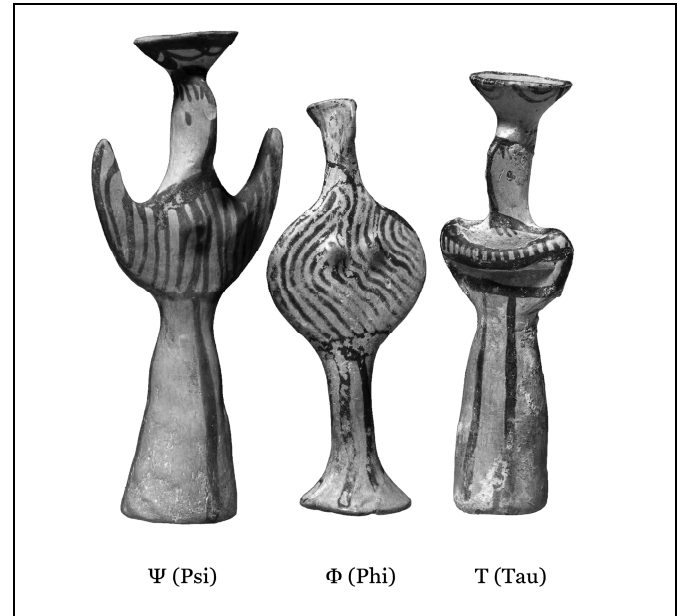


Fig. 2: Examples of the three main types of Mycenaean terracotta figurines (© British Museum).

Some additional hypotheses can be formulated considering that the Mycenaean built a broad exchange network, where different religious symbols and cultural identities must have come in contact frequently and globalisation processes started to take place. It is possible that the figurines helped in identifying local divinities with existing divinities in the Mycenaean pantheon. This practice is well known in later times, especially in Rome and is known as *interpretatio Romana* (Tacitus, *Germania*, 43.4). Most ancient cultures had comparable practices, including the Greeks (e.g. Herodotus, II, on the correlation between Egyptian and Greek divinities). Although local practices, beliefs and some differences did not disappear, the resulting convergence played an important part in the cultural integration of the two cultures and societies (Wissowa 1902; Ando 2005; Lund 2007). It is also possible that the uncertain, ambiguous identity of Mycenaean figurines may mirror problems of identity within the broad community of consumers of Mycenaean products. In such a case, the figurines would be exportable artefacts in no way different from pottery. Another ceramic vessel typically associated with religious practices is the rhyton, which is nearly absent in the west Mediterranean, but is present in the Levant (Wijngaarden 2002). Such a different pattern of consumption rules out the possibility that Mycenaean individuals had a specific religious set of vessels that they carried with them. This is also supported by the evidence found in the Uluburun shipwreck: probably two Mycenaean officials were aboard, as deduced from daggers and seals, but the ceramics found were utilitarian and common and because of this difficult to date. The number or rank of the

Mycenaean individuals aboard the ship cannot be determined using ceramics, and no Mycenaean figurines have been found (Pulak 1998; Bachhuber 2006). Thus, it seems that the fine decorated pottery appreciated in Mycenaean palaces, and perhaps even more so outside Mycenaean Greece, was largely an export item comparable to perfumed oil (Shelmerdine 1985). Mycenaean figurines should therefore be understood within this framework: they were standardised, mass-produced and consumed when they could be functional for a purpose, but they did not carry special or distinctive meanings (e.g. some Cycladic marble figurines or the Minoan Snake Goddess). Like figurines deposited at peak sanctuaries or in other sanctuaries, they could function as offerings, representations of worshippers, or any other suitable function. In other words, they were anonymous enough to fit different situations, in contrast with Egyptian and near-eastern figurines which were clearly characterised and represent specific divinities.

To conclude, we know that Mycenaean figurines were purposefully manufactured the way they were and were appreciated as they were. We are perhaps asking the wrong questions when we study them in the light of the contemporary artistic sensibility or attempt to recognise in them specific religious meanings or some precise ritual significance that they might have carried. Their key characteristic, evident by looking both backwards and forwards from their time, is that they were mass-produced and shared many characteristics with the coeval decorated pottery, without receiving any special treatment. They were anonymous, easily produced and very functional, all these being positive qualities. The question of what they represented, their identity, is central to their understanding. One of the reasons for the appreciation of Mycenaean pottery in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean was its weak connection with ethnic identity, and contextual studies of that pottery in the west Mediterranean, the Levant and Cyprus (Wijngaarden 2002; Vianello 2005; Bell 2006) show how local beliefs and behaviours determined their appreciation and consumption. We also know that the Mycenaean polities never played any significant role in the Levant, as is demonstrated by the surviving archival documentation. In spite of many known writings dating to the Late Bronze Age, including the 'Amarna letters' and Linear B tablets, the evidence of contacts is very scanty and uncertain. Yet, considering the ceramic evidence alone, the Mycenaean political power in the Mediterranean should have been comparable to that of Rome many centuries later. As the Uluburun shipwreck demonstrates however, Mycenaean ceramics do not correlate well with the physical presence of Mycenaeans. It is unusual for a class of pottery to be dissociated from the culture it produced it. Some cultures are indeed defined by ceramics. In some of those cases the pots carried some meanings or were associated with particular practices that help defining cultural groups and very probably ethnic groups. This does not appear to be the case for Mycenaean pottery. It might seem wrong to speak of 'pottery' when the subject is the figurines, but in the Mycenaean case it is not possible to divide them as sharply as in other cultures. Mycenaean figurines appear to have been

just another type of ceramic vessel, with their own distinct function. To fully appreciate this view, I should recall that Cycladic figurines were made in marble and some identifiable Minoan figurines such as the Snake Goddess were often made in faience-- their material distinguished such artefacts from everyday ones. Mycenaean figurines are instead always made in clay and intentionally undistinguished from the remaining ceramic production, so why should we interpret them as separate from the remaining ceramic evidence?

Tamvaki (1976, 995) concluded her study of figurines and Mycenaean art unable to decide between Mycenaean art being an 'intrusive phenomenon' or the product of 'some economic and social conditions'. She understood that the figurines were just another manifestation of an artistic style but could not understand the reasons for its apparent difference from the previous material culture. Today we understand that Mycenaean figurines are the product of a cultural style appreciated by different communities across the Mediterranean Sea, and to achieve such a distribution pattern they had to carry weak associations to specific cultural and religious practices, as they became embedded in different regional material cultures, albeit at individual levels. There is no reason to suggest that within Mycenaean Greece the figurines played any different role from the preceding Cycladic and Minoan figurines, which also could carry different sets of meanings depending on the context. Therefore, I do not postulate any significant hiatus with preceding and contemporary Aegean cultures. However, the appreciation of the Mycenaean ceramic style within 'foreign' communities and markets also must have produced an impact on figurines, which were deliberately manufactured to be uncharacterised and to leave to the carrier the freedom of embedding meanings or consuming them within regional practices that might have been unknown to the artists producing them. Because of this, any interpretation of the figurines will have validity only within the contexts examined, and general interpretations need to admit that one of their key characteristic is the lack of specific identities or meanings. The apparent lack of appreciation of both 'Mycenaean' fine pottery and figurines by Mycenaean individuals, as revealed by the evidence from the Uluburun shipwreck, can be explained by the simple fact that the style was not charged with any strong ethnic or cultural meanings, perhaps unlike other objects also usually interpreted as 'Mycenaean', such as daggers, clothes, and seals. As a result, the Mycenaeans seem to have appreciated Mycenaean style ceramics only as utilitarian vessels and therefore used them as an asset in intercultural exchanges. Since the Uluburun ship was sailing towards the Aegean at the time she sunk, we can safely assume that the Mycenaean objects found aboard represented the leftovers of exchange or what the owners did not want to part from. Perhaps the Mycenaean people aboard the vessels had departed from their homeland carrying some figurines, but then they exchanged them for Levantine figurines that were found on the shipwreck. Most importantly however, we know that even in such a long and perilous journey, they did not carry one figurine. This means that these objects were not used as portable cult tools or as part of

portable shrines, a type of use which would make them unsuitable for exchanges and unlikely to have held multiple symbolic meanings.

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