

HPAH7014



**Miniature People:
Figures of Clay**

“Miniature People”

- Use of small figures in ritualised practices in Bronze Age Aegean:
 - Clay, bronze, faience, ivory
- How were these objects handled, manipulated & perceived
- Which approaches for exploring material culture are more useful for interpreting these objects
- Larger figures (fewer in number): focus of cult?



Mycenaean figurines



Mycenaean idol,
Myceane

Miniaturisation

- “The small is something that fascinates & permeates cultures worldwide” (Smith 2009:19)
- Replicating an object at a smaller scale:
 - Interactive; people can engage with, handle & manipulate object
 - Reduction in detail: accentuating certain features considered to be of primary significance
- Distorts perception of viewer:
 - Evokes processes of memory & also contemplation
 - Seen as from a distance & so lacks immediacy of detail
- “Small things invite us to compare our measure of significance to what is given in nature & culture...the small compels our attention & so is endowed with the worth of time” (Stewart 2005: 160)
- Miniature embodies a shift in viewer’s perception of time
 - Diminution of scale leads to a compression in perception of time

Temple Repositories, Knossos

- 2 large rectangular stone-lined cists containing group of ceremonial objects, carefully deposited (structured?):
 - 3 faience figurines
 - Around 200 other faience artefacts
 - Some 50 ceramic vessels
 - Clay sealings
 - Stone artefacts
 - Sea shells
- Sealed by a gypsum pavement
 - Closure ceremony?



Finds from the Temple Repositories

Evans' Snake Goddesses

- Evans: Great Mother Goddess at heart of Minoan religion
 - Powers centred on fertility & motherhood
 - “her breasts, which are almost entirely bare, are of matronly proportions” (*PM* I: 500)
- Morris: some nurturing aspect:
 - Motherhood is not part of the Minoan repertoire
 - But from EM: breasts associated with liquid nourishment
 - Suckling animal plaques in Temple Repositories



Snake Goddesses



Mochlos vase



Faience plaque, Knossos

Snake Goddesses

- Minoan “poster girls”
- Heavily restored: much of debate circulates around authenticity:
 - “transmuted the ambiguous remnants...into complete, fashionable, & visually arresting images of elite Minoan women, icons of Minoan aesthetics” (Bonney 2011: 175)
- Gender, sexuality
- Clothing, dress & identity
- What is missing in analyses?
- The third figure
 - How objects were used/viewed
 - Significance of snakes
 - Why broken & concealed?



Before restoration



Minoan Clay Figurines

- Large numbers found at the peak & cave sanctuaries
- Typically interpreted as worshippers making gestures of supplication.
 - “It is not difficult to imagine a Bronze Age Cretan making the journey up to his or her local peak sanctuary, clutching in hand a clay figurine of human likeness, & then, as part of the ritual process, leaving the figurine within the rocky clefts of the site. Nevertheless, it is useful to remind ourselves that there is much that we still do not understand about rituals at these sites and the role of figurines in them” (Morris 2009: 180)



MM figurines from Ayios Nikolaos



Minoan Figurines

- Crudely modelled out of clay
- Between 10 & 20cm high
- Male & female figurines
- Mass produced & follow standardised form
- Schematic rendering of clothing:
 - Males wearing a loin cloth & dagger
 - Females wearing high caps on their heads, bell-shaped dresses & jackets with either a low neckline or bare breasts
 - There might be some variation in headdress or elaborate hairstyles



Figurines from Petsofas

Gestures

- Typically standing & making range of gestures:
 - Both arms might be raised
 - One hand might be held to the forehead
 - Both arms might be bent, the hands touching the chest.
 - Arms held away from the body
- Localised production: response to local preferences & needs
- Not necessarily any particularly personal engagement between worshipper & figure beyond the choice of gender & gesture



Figurines from Petsofas

Use of Figurines?

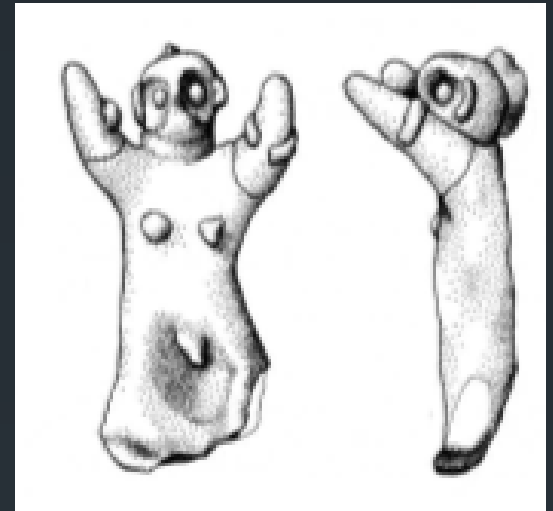
- How were these objects incorporated within ritual action?
- Context: associated with sanctuaries, implying religious symbolism
- Peak sanctuaries: typically found in the rock fissures & niches at peak sanctuaries
- Cave sanctuaries: might be deposited in pools
 - Psychro Cave: figurines found in the subterranean lake together with other offering, such as seal stones, bronze pins, knives & rings
- Dedicated as votives?

Gestures

- Interpretation as gestures of devotion reflects modern practices & perceptions rather than a comment on ancient practice (Morris & Peatfield)
- Varied gestures made by the figurines might open a window onto embodied practices of human worshippers
 - Range of postures comprising incorporated practices integral to Minoan ritual action
 - Gestures illustrate people in altered states of consciousness – embodied ritual practices through which the worshippers experienced the divine
- “Rather than being somewhat weak & generalised expressions of worship, they seem to have had a much more dynamic function to access the experiential domain of Minoan ritual exaction” (Morris & Peatfield 2006: 53)

Thinking About Gesture

- Atsipades figurines: range of gestures is more varied than usually assumed
- Altered state of consciousness:
 - Bodily state where perceptions, cognition & emotions are modified
- Shamanism: use of body as a vehicle to communicate with supernatural realm
 - Minoan gestures: focusing repetitive actions to achieve this state
 - Postures used in shamanistic religion to achieve trance



Figurine from Atsipadhes

Mycenaean Figurines

- Typical element of ritual practice from LH IIIA – LH IIIC
 - Anthropomorphic & zoomorphic
- Female figurines:
 - All clothed, mostly obscuring the female form
- 4 main types: most significance defining characteristic is their gesture:
 - Psi figurines
 - Phi figures
 - Tau figurines
 - Kourotrophos



Phi figurine



Psi figurine



Tau figurine

Materiality

- Simply formed clay objects
- But also the products of craft specialists. Clear links with Mycenaean pottery production:
 - Procurements of clays, slips & paints, the working of the clay & the firing at high temperatures
- Accessible, cheaply (& mass) produced
- Designed to be held in the hand (although equally they are self-supporting & can stand)



Kourotrophos

Reading the Figurines

- How were female figures objects used?
- Emphasis is not on female sexuality or the female form
 - A small number are associated with a female nurturing role
- Emphasis is on repeated patterns of clothing, dress & gesture:
 - Non-verbal modes of social communication & memory
 - Incorporated practices (Connerton 1989)
 - Embodied practices which are culturally informed & which convey information of status & identity
- As such these would have been understood subconsciously by the Mycenaeans who used these objects



Psi figurine

Contextual Analysis

- Found in a wide variety of contexts:
 - Tombs
 - Ritual sites
 - Domestic context
- Apparent association of figurines with hearths:
 - More than a means of heating the home & preparing food: focus of social action within Mycenaean world from palaces to the ordinary Mycenaean household
 - A place for social gathering, feasting, oral recitation & probably other embodied practices: nexus of social reproduction in the Mycenaean world
 - The apparent figurine/hearth association suggests that these practices included the handling & display of Mycenaean figurines
- Also with thresholds

Contextual Analysis

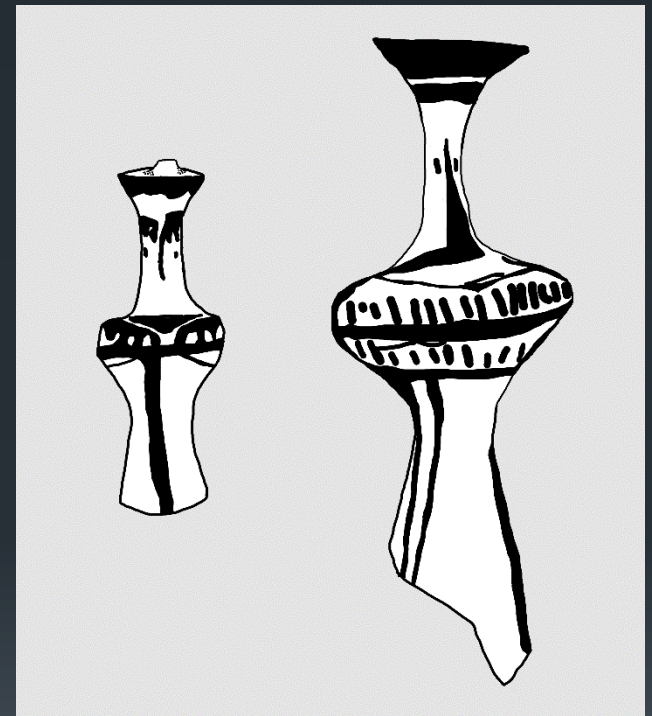
- Settlement figurines tend to be fragmentary – repeated use within the household?
- Objects handled & used on a regular basis:
 - Possibly broken fairly regularly, so entering the archaeological record
- Alternatively we might consider this to be part of the biography of the object:
 - Breakage might be the result of structured activity & patterns of consumption



Fragmented phi figurine

Use of Mycenaean Figurines

- Small items associated with private devotion & household cult:
 - Very personalised engagement between figurine & the person who used it/it belonged to
- Personal possessions:
 - Potentially might reveal much about individual praxis
- Association with beads & kylikes
- Open a window onto embodied social practices within Mycenaean communities



Tau figurines

Mycenaean Idols

- Clay Mycenaean figures found in sanctuaries:
- Two types:
 - Type A: cylindrical bodies, elaborately adorned details on body & painted faces
 - Type B: monochrome bodies with reserved areas for the facial characteristics & added plastic features (only known at Mycenaean)
- Type A: identified as female but with high level of individuality (not a repeated formula)
 - Over 100 identified, 22 restorable



Lady of Phylakopi

Type A Figures

- Identified as cult images: focus of cult practices?
- Small & portable (14.5 – 25-30cm) with hollow bodies
 - Carried in processions on pole?
- Freestanding & intended to be viewed frontally
- Pronounced chins:
 - Later Greek sources: the suppliant touches the chin of a votive
 - Figures represent recipients/ intermediaries in acts of supplication?
- Significance of jewellery: beads embedded in Mycenaean offering practices



Idols from Tiryns and Midea

Monochrome Figures (Type B)

- 21 restorable examples from Cult Centre
- Freestanding, forward facing & variability in gesture
- Identified with celebrants of cult?
 - Moore: bodies reminiscent of priestly robes in other Mycenaean depictions
 - Moore: to perform activities of cult in perpetuity?
- Grotesque: attention focusing?
- Handled or left to stand in for worshipper?



Monochrome figures, Mycenae

Summary

- Miniature people of clay (bronze & faience) variously incorporated within social & symbolic worlds of people of the Bronze Age East Mediterranean
- Ways of interpreting have focused on attributes & in particular gesture, materiality, portability & context
- Sense that in the urbanised communities of LBA these are increasingly standardised & mass produced
- What about people's personal engagement with these objects?
- Distinction between votive figurines & cult statues (used in processions?)