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Reading prehistoric figurines as individuals

Douglass W. Bailey

Traditionally archaeologists have read prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines as images of gods, goddesses or ritual supplicants. These readings have neither philosophical nor archaeological support. It is more accurate to read figurines as representations of prehistoric individuals. A new perspective on Chalcolithic society in south-eastern Europe is provided by reading, as individuals, the figurines from a Chalcolithic settlement in north-eastern Bulgaria. With this perspective it is possible to reconstruct a tripartite sexual social structure and to document the sexual restrictions of mortuary and settlement space.

Reading the individual

The inhabitants of Chalcolithic (4900–3800 BC) Bulgarian settlements displayed individual identities in two ways: through burial ritual and through the use of anthropomorphic figurines. While archaeologists have long recognized burial ritual as a reflection of personal identity, they have neglected the study of figurines as a major source of information about the individual inhabitants of the south-east European Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities. By reading anthropomorphic figurines and burials as two separate records of individual identities in Chalcolithic society and by placing these records in the context of the visibility of the individual during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic, our understanding of social life during the fifth millennium BC is substantially expanded and refined.

Traditional misreadings of prehistoric figurines

Previous work on south-east European archaeology has failed to read anthropomorphic figurines correctly. Incorrect readings have resulted from researchers' failure to consider the archaeological and social contexts of individual figurines and from a failure to follow (or even to establish) an explicit methodology for figurine analysis. The most common interpretations claim that figurines were produced in societies which relied on ritual, magic and religious actions to overcome environmental instability and threats to the fertility of plants and animals. Thus figurines represented priests, priestesses, demigods, gods and

goddesses and functioned in rituals intended to secure fertility (Gimbutas 1974; 1982; 1989). Gimbutas and others argue that the most common image of these fertility cults is the Great Mother. The interpretation of figurines as objects in a Great Mother cult rests on unsupportable assumptions of psychoanalysis (e.g. the importance of the collective unconscious and the universality of the Great Mother archetype) as well as on inaccurate reconstructions of preagricultural and early agricultural life in Europe (i.e. that life was a constant battle against famine).

Objective assessments of psychoanalytic method and theory (see Alston 1967 for a general review) criticize the inherent importance and power which psychoanalysts, such as C. G. Jung, attached to archetypes and the collective unconscious (Jung 1938; 1971) and which scholars such as Erich Neumann (Neumann 1955) developed into a universal belief in the Great Mother archetype. Foremost of the criticisms of psychoanalytic theory centres on the difficulty of distinguishing between verifiable conclusions and imagination. Alston questions whether psychoanalytic theory is connected to empirical reality or whether it only serves to satisfy imaginary factors (Alston 1967: 514-15). Without any connection to empirical facts Gimbutas' suggestions of fertility cults and manifestations of the Great Mother archetype remain, like psychoanalytical theorizing, nothing more than imaginative suggestions.

Equally critical, recent work on Mesolithic and Neolithic life in Europe has rejected the belief that the production of food and the fertility of plants and animals dominated the actions and belief systems of pre-agricultural and early agricultural communities (Rowley-Conwy 1983; 1986; Zvelebil 1986). Working in northwestern Europe on the Ertebølle hunter-gatherer culture of the Danish Mesolithic, Rowley-Conwy has shown conclusively that life in preagricultural Europe was not bound to a continuous search for sustenance (Rowley-Conwy 1983; 1986). The Ertebølle people exploited a variety of wild species (eels, harp seals, sea mammals, swans, doves, geese and oysters) available in a range of different locations during different periods of the year. Ertebølle people were so successful in managing wild resources that they preferred their system of existence to the contemporary cereal agriculture and animal breeding which were practised in adjacent areas of northern Europe.

Social anthropologists studying modern hunter-gatherers have shown that the Ertebølle example is not a single aberration of the prehistoric record. Over the past thirty years many scholars have developed and documented examples of a model of hunter-gatherer existence which explodes the myth that hunter-gatherers are simple food collectors living on the edge of starvation. The seminal work of Lee and Devore (1968; Lee 1968) has been supported, clarified and extended in the last twenty-five years (see discussion in Kuper 1988). While much of this work has centered on documenting complexity in hunter-gatherer societies one group of researchers has focused on the ability and desire to store resources. Lewis Binford, James Woodburn, Alain Testart and others have documented the planning strategies, facilities of storage and delayed production among hunter-gatherer communities similar to those inhabiting Europe in late prehistory (Binford 1980; Woodburn 1980; 1982; Testart 1982). The inhabitants of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Chalcolithic Europe were not slaves to the short-term gathering or long-term production of vegetable and animal resources.

The rejection of the belief that small-scale societies in European prehistory needed

ritual and religious beliefs to ensure their nutrition base complements the invalidation of the universal importance of the archetype and the collective unconscious: it is clear that the philosophical basis and the archaeological context of the interpretation that figurines were linked to fertility cults are unsupportable. Research by Peter Ucko on Neolithic figurines from Crete, Egypt and mainland Greece has also rejected the hypothesis that figurines functioned in a Great Mother belief system (Ucko 1968). Recent research on south-east European prehistoric figurines has concluded that no archaeological evidence exists to support claims for a ritual function of the anthropomorphic figurines from Bulgaria (Bailey 1991).

Methodology for figurine analysis

Traditional studies and interpretations of prehistoric figurines have wandered in the realm of psychoanalysis and imaginative reconstruction because no method has existed to guide research. A robust methodology for reading figurines addresses two parts of the archaeological record: the figurine and the prehistoric object which the figurine represents. First, the archaeologist investigates the figurines themselves and identifies what a figurine represents (e.g. a woman, a man, a child, an adult, a highly costumed and jewelled individual, a pregnant woman, an animal). Next, the archaeologist locates the prehistoric object which the figurine represents by analysing figurine form (e.g. sexual characteristics, body decoration, size) and by reviewing the associated material record (e.g. what non-figurine evidence exists for the represented image). For example, if a figurine has a beard and a penis it is identified as male and the archaeologist searches the archaeological record for other representations of male images. The search will lead though each category of material culture, although it is clear that certain things are more likely to produce related representations (e.g. pottery form and decoration, wall painting, burial patterns).

In the second phase of the methodology, the focus shifts from the figurine to the prehistoric context of the object represented. For example, if it is clear that a particular figurine represents a pregnant woman, then the analysis continues by investigating the role of women, pregnancy and reproduction in the community in which the figurine was used.

Whereas the first phase of analysis is founded in the formal characteristics of a figurine and its referent in the archaeological record, the second is based on social and community contexts. An accurate reading of figurines from south-east Europe follows the application of an explicit methodology to a corpus of figurines recovered from well documented archaeological and social contexts. Figurines without provenience are not open to direct investigation: their interpretation becomes an indirect practice in which meaning is assigned on the basis of formal, temporal and geographic similarities between figurines without context and provenienced figurines.

Therefore the methodology for accurately reading prehistoric figurines depends on the visual examination of the figurine, the identification of the subject of representation and a thorough knowledge of the archaeological and social context of both figurine and its represented subject.

Chalcolithic figurines from Golyamo Delchevo

Excavation of the Golyamo Delchevo tell in north-east Bulgaria revealed a Late Chalcolithic settlement and necropolis (Todorova et al. 1975). The excavation of the tell was complete; all seventeen levels of habitation were investigated and one hundred and eleven clay and bone anthropomorphic figurines were recovered (Fig. 1). The cemetery used by the inhabitants of Golyamo Delchevo was located to the west of the settlement. Excavation of the cemetery revealed thirty burials.

Examination of Golyamo Delchevo figurine form revealed two principal categories of variation: one based on sexual characteristic and one based on body and facial decoration. Three types of sexually specific identities were represented: female, male and asexual. Female figurines have breasts, pubic triangles, pregnant abdomens or all three elements. Male figurines have penises or beards. Asexual figurines have neither breasts, pubic triangles, beards nor penises. Of the seventy-five figurines complete enough for sexual identification: fifty-one (69 per cent) were female, twenty-three (31 per cent) were asexual and one (<1 per cent) was male. Thirty-six figurines were fragments and did not represent a sexually distinctive region of the body; e.g. a foot).

Five methods of decoration were used on the figurines: incising, piercing, painting, piercing and painting, and non-decoration. Most common are decorated figurines (73 examples; 61 per cent); thirty figurines (25 per cent) were incised, twenty-two (18 per cent) were pierced, twenty (17 per cent) were pierced and painted, and one (<1 per cent) was painted. Forty-seven figurines (39 per cent) were undecorated.

The broad variation documented in sexual identification and the range of methods of body and face decoration illustrate the wide range of very distinct figurines. The range of variation between figurines increases when other formal variables are considered (e.g. material of manufacture, size and body position). A cluster analysis based on all formal variables documents the extent of the variation: many small groups of similar figurines



Figure 1 Anthropomorphic clay figurine from the late Chalcolithic settlement at Golyamo Delchevo (after Todorova 1986).

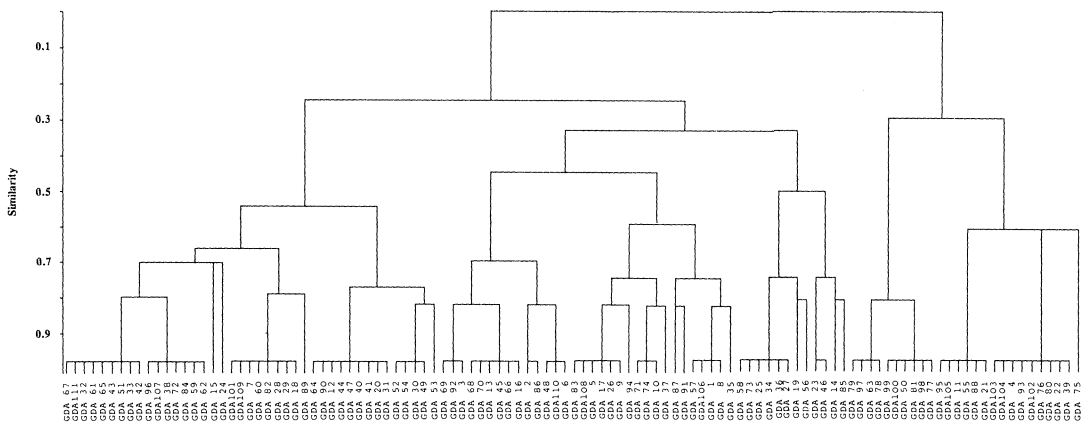


Figure 2 Dendrogram of cluster analysis of formal variables for anthropomorphic figurines from Golyamo Delchevo.

(Fig. 2). In terms of form, it is clear that figurines from Golyamo Delchevo are very diverse. A similarly diverse population is represented in the pattern of burials in the Golyamo Delchevo cemetery.

The Golyamo Delchevo cemetery consisted of thirty Chalcolithic burials. Three sexual distinctions are evident: male, female and asexual (i.e. childrens' burials and the previously misnamed 'cenotaphs'). Of the burials for which sexual identification could be determined, eleven (44 per cent) were male, eight were asexual (32 per cent) and six (24 per cent) were female. Grave goods ranged from single small ceramic pots to *spondylus* jewelry, a gold bead and copper axes. In terms of total grave inclusions per burial no goods were found in seven burials (23 per cent), one inclusion was found in four burials (13 per cent), two were found in six burials (20 per cent), three were found in seven burials (23 per cent), four were found in three burials (10 per cent), five were found in two burials (7 per cent) and six were found in one burial (3 per cent) (Table 1). A clear relation exists between the number of grave goods and the sex of the corpse in that burial: males were buried with more goods than females. In addition, all prestige grave goods (i.e. copper, gold and *spondylus*) accompanied male burials. Assuming that the number and type of grave inclusions is related to the identity of the individual inhumed, the Golyamo Delchevo cemetery represents a diverse group of individuals. The similarity in the degree of the variation between burials and figurines supports the proposition that figurines were used to represent individuals at Golyamo Delchevo. Furthermore, the different combinations of figurine sex, decoration, size, material of manufacture and body position represent a diverse population from Golyamo Delchevo.

The emergence of the individual in north-eastern Bulgaria

The evidence from the Golyamo Delchevo cemetery and the figurine corpus documents widespread display (i.e. in both domestic and burial contexts) of personal identity at

Table 1 Burials from Golyamo Delchevo arranged in order of grave good frequency (M = Male, F = Female, A = Asexual, ? = Intermediate) with data on age and grave good description (after Todorova et al. 1975; Bailey 1990).

<i>Number of grave goods</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Description of grave goods</i>	<i>Grave inventory number</i>
6	M	13–15	Large pot, small pot, flint point, flint blades (2)	1
5	M	25–30	Large pots (3), small pot, copper axe	24
5	M	30–35	Large pot, small pot, gold bead, awl, copper axe	25
4	M	18–20	Large pot, flint blade, stone chisel	3
4	M	35–40	Large pot, small pot, animal bones and teeth	22
4	A	?	Large pots (3), lid	12
3	M	10–12	Small pots (2), <i>spondylus</i> bead	8
3	M	?	Large pots (2), lid	11
3	M	30–40	Large pots (2), copper axe	29
3	A	?	Large pots (2), small pot	15
3	F	40–50	Large pots (2), bone pin	27
3	A	9–10	Large pots (2), small pot	21
3	?	?	Large pots (2), small pot	6
2	M	25–30	Large pot, small pot	4
2	M	30–40	Large pot, small pot	5
2	A	7–8	Large pot, small pot	7
2	A	11–12	Large pot, small pot	17
2	F	45–50	Large pot, small pot	20
2	?	?	Copper awl, bone pin	31
1	F	25–38	Large pot	2
1	M	30–35	Small pot	9
1	A	6–7	Large pot	23
1	A	?	Stone pestle	30
0	F	30–35	None	10
0	F	18–20	None	14
0	F	18–20	None	18
0	A	10	None	26
0	?	?	None	13
0	?	?	None	16
0	?	?	None	19

Golyamo Delchevo. The display of personal identity is one component of a long-term rise in the social importance and visibility of the individual in north-east Bulgaria during the Chalcolithic period.

During the Neolithic (6500–4800 BC) few, if any, representations of individual identities were made in north-east Bulgaria. Burials are not common and where they do occur they contain few if any grave goods. No effort is made to inhumate the deceased in a special extramural cemetery; burials occur in domestic rubbish pits or under house floors. Few of the objects of personal ornament which characterize the Chalcolithic (e.g. bone and clay pendants, shell beads, bracelets and rings) are found on Neolithic sites. Evidence for personal or community storage of resources or possessions is absent. Habitation is in pit dwellings and is of short duration (i.e. less than one generation); reoccupation of pit

houses is not documented. Although figurines were produced during the Neolithic, they are few in number, relatively undecorated and simple in form.

Three phenomena document the rise in the importance of the individual in the Chalcolithic: a dramatic elaboration of burial ritual, an increase in personal prestige objects and an increase in household storage of resources. Treatment of the deceased in north-east Bulgaria during the Chalcolithic varied radically from the previous period. Where Neolithic settlers buried unadorned corpses in the floors of houses and in domestic rubbish pits, Chalcolithic corpses were, in many cases, highly decorated and accompanied by prestigious grave goods. All Chalcolithic burial took place in extra-mural cemeteries. While the sensational concentrations of gold on the Black Sea Coast at the Varna necropolis (I. Ivanov 1978; 1988) and at Durankulak (Todorova et al. 1981; Todorova 1984; Todorova and Dimov 1982; Dimov et al. 1985) speak most strongly for individual wealth and prestige, inland cemeteries, at Devniya (Todorova 1971), Golyamo Delchevo (Todorova et al. 1975), Turgovishte (Angelova 1986b), Omurtag (Angelova 1989, 1990, 1991), Vinitsa (Raduncheva 1976) and Ovcharovo (Todorova et al. 1983) also reflect marked material differentiation between individuals.

In addition to the emphasis placed on individuals in Chalcolithic burials, other markers of individual identity (e.g. shell and ceramic pendants, rings and bracelets) are found in domestic contexts. Settlement space is clearly differentiated by rooms and house complexes and the storage of resources (e.g. grain in silos; concentrations of large storage pots) is increasingly restricted to individual houses. The control and ownership of habitation space and access to regional resources formed a major part of Chalcolithic social strategies. Management of animal and cereal production, the use of calendars and early forms of record keeping (i.e. stamp seals and symbols incised on the bottoms of pots) argue for an increase in the ownership of resources and products during the Chalcolithic (Bailey 1990; 1993).

An investigation of the social context of settlement and burial at Golyamo Delchevo and at other contemporary sites in north-eastern Bulgaria (Ovcharovo: Todorova et al. 1983; Turgovishte: Angelova 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1986a; Radingrad: T. Ivanov 1981, 1982, 1984; Vinitsa: Raduncheva 1976; Polyanitsa: Todorova 1976, 1982b) reveals widespread evidence for the increasing importance of the individual during the late fifth millennium BC. The dramatic increase in the visibility of the individual in the Chalcolithic (documented by the shift in burial tradition, the control of resources and products and the increased use of personal ornamentation) is mirrored by an increase in the production and use of figurines. While anthropomorphic figurines appeared at a few sites in low numbers during the Neolithic, they are found in large numbers at every settlement in the region during the Chalcolithic. Where Neolithic figurines were mainly undecorated and simple in form, Chalcolithic figurines were impressively decorated, like the contemporary burials. Like burials, figurines document the rise of the individual in the fifth millennium BC.

Burials, figurines and individuals

The display of individual identity was a major social strategy during the Chalcolithic period in north-east Bulgaria. While one way of displaying identity was the inclusion of particular

objects with inhumation, a second way was the decoration and display of figurines in domestic contexts. The two systems of displaying identities refine and expand our understanding of Chalcolithic social structure and the distinction between mortuary and settlement space.

The decoration of individual corpses and their inhumation into community specific cemeteries provided a public display of individuals in a particular place: the mortuary sphere. The decoration and display of figurines in houses provided a public display of individuals in a second particular place: the domestic sphere. While the degree of variation of individuals in both systems is similar, a comparison of the identities represented in the cemetery with those represented in the figurine corpus reveals three discrepancies. The first discrepancy is the difference in the proportion of the sexes of the representations. The majority of burials are male while the vast majority of figurines are female: eleven male burials (44 per cent) compared with only one male figurine (<1 per cent). The second discrepancy is the difference in the frequency of representation: figurines are almost four times as numerous as burials (111 figurines; 30 burials). The discrepancies of sexual proportion and frequency are supplemented by a discrepancy of provenience: figurines are absent from burial contexts; burials are absent from domestic contexts.

In light of the discrepancies of sexual proportion, frequency and provenience, the identities represented in the figurine corpus and the burial record document a distinction between domestic and mortuary space. On the one hand extramural burial space is dominated by males: they outnumber female burials (44 per cent to 24 per cent), they contain more grave goods (58 per cent of grave goods are found with males, 9 per cent with females) and they are associated with all of the prestige goods. Where females are included in the cemetery, they are accompanied by few grave goods, none of which can be recognized as prestigious (e.g. all copper, gold and *spondylus* is found with males). On the other hand it is equally clear that in intermural domestic settlement space male representation is almost completely absent: of all figurines recovered from domestic contexts less than 1 per cent of figurines are male.

While females are underrepresented in the burial space, female identities are most visible in the domestic space. Conversely, while males are almost completely absent from the settlement space, they dominate the cemetery and control all of the prestigious grave goods. It is clear that domestic space is female dominated and burial space male dominated.

Interestingly, asexual burials account for 32 per cent of burials and asexual figurines make up the same proportion of figurines (Table 2). In burial contexts asexual and

Table 2 Designation of settlement and mortuary space at Golyamo Delchevo in terms of sexual representations (figurines and burials combined) (after Todorova et al. 1975; Bailey 1990).

		<i>Sexual representation</i>			<i>Total</i>
		<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Asexual</i>	
Space	Settlement	51 (68%)	1 (<1%)	23 (31%)	75 (100%)
	Mortuary	6 (24%)	11 (44%)	8 (32%)	25 (100%)

presexual burials accompany both rich and poor assemblages of grave goods (from burials with four inclusions to burials with no inclusions; Table 1). Asexual figurines are found in all domestic contexts. Thus while male and female imagery and representation are spatially restricted, asexual representation is unconstrained, occurring in both burial and settlement space.

Conclusions

The first important consequence of reading figurines, together with burials, as indicators of individual identities is the documentation of a sexual distinction of domestic and burial space during the Chalcolithic in north-east Bulgaria. The second important consequence is that the structure of Chalcolithic society was not limited to a simple male–female division but included individuals who were identified neither as male nor female. Thus the sexual characterization of space includes not only a clear male–female opposition, which was tied to burial and domestic space, but also an asexual element which transcended the sexual barriers demarking mortuary and domestic space.

Reading figurines as individual identities provides a new perspective on Chalcolithic society in south-eastern Europe. This perspective demands a review of the simplistic schemes previously proposed concerning the sexual social structure of Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities in the region, i.e. that Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities were organized along matriarchical lines. When read in the context of the burial record, the figurine evidence illustrates Chalcolithic social reality as a complex of multi-sexual and multi-gendered spaces.

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Abstract

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Reading prehistoric figurines as individuals

Anthropomorphic figurines from the Chalcolithic settlement Golyamo Delchevo are most accurately read as representations of the settlement's inhabitants. In the context of the changing social structure of south-eastern Europe during the fifth millennium BC, figurines and burials document a tripartite social-sexual structure and a sexual restriction of domestic and mortuary space.