

Art and Representation |



**Portable Art in Pre-Urban
Communities**

Art and Social Life

- 'Primitive art is highly socialized' (Firth 1951)
- Objects of everyday use are recipients for decorative designs in many small-scale societies:
 - Art objects found in domestic contexts
- Close relationship between 'art' / visual representation & craft production at a household level
- Decorated objects need not necessarily have a pragmatic function:
 - Production of art objects as vehicles for communication of ideas within a system of social relations



Neolithic pot, Hacilar

Social Context of Art

- What does art **do** in a small-scale society?
- Situated within context of belief systems & cultural values
 - We need to think about the production & consumption of art objects within society?
 - And the nature of values being expressed by objects?
- Figurines do not perform constant functions between different cultures
- The meaning of “art” is embedded within particular social systems



Red Polished Plank figurine

Neolithic Figurines

- Miniature representations of humans / animals
- Traditional interpretations of **female** figurines:
 - Mother Goddess debate
 - Marjia Gimbutas
- Can we hope to understand why these objects were made?
- Found in variety of cultural contexts across time/space:
 - Might expect a multiplicity of function & signification
- Do anthropomorphic figurines illustrate human self awareness, awareness of the body, sense of self?
- Do figurines encode important cognitive elements in the modelling & representation of the human form:
 - Choice of which features to model or conceal

Why Figurines?

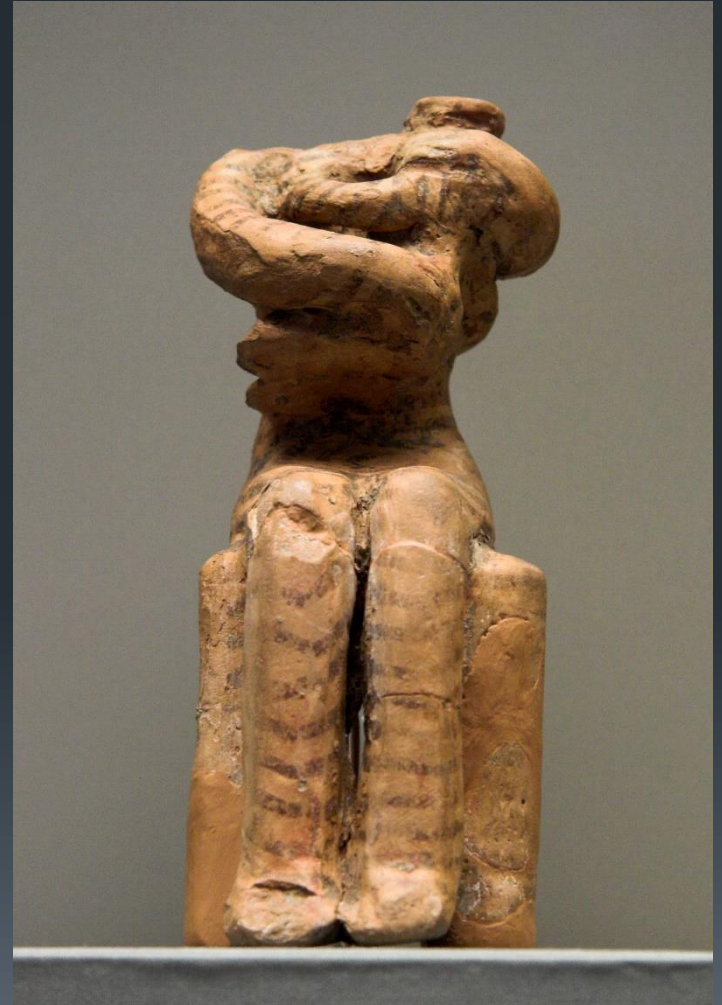
- Shaping people from clay is a diverse & ancient tradition
- It reflects fundamental human concerns:
 - Through the crafting & handling of miniature beings in clay, people confront what it is to be human
 - Figurines provoke people to look at who they are & enhances a sense of self & identity



Handling figurines in the Ashmolean

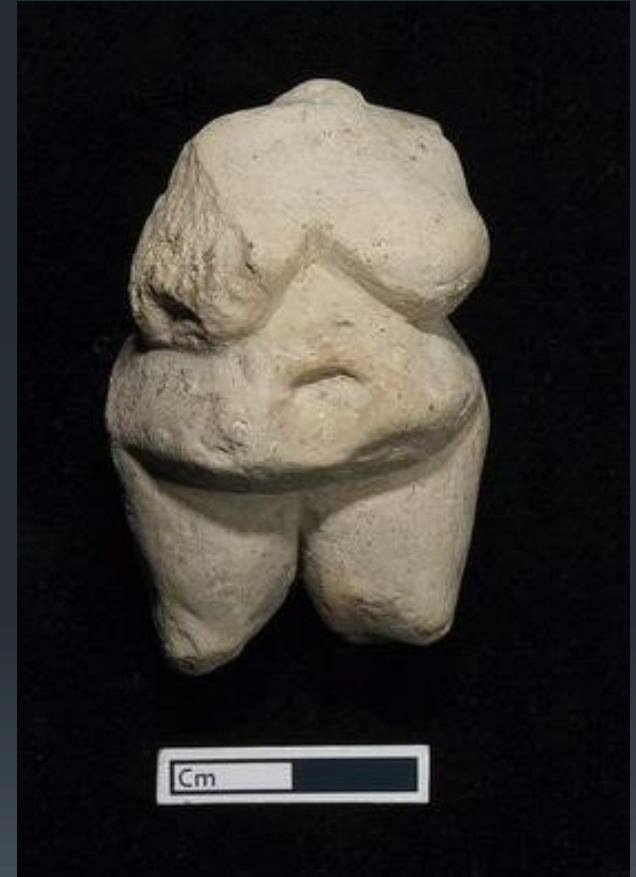
Interpreting Figurines

- How useful is the anthropology of art?
 - Aesthetics
 - Symbolic communication
 - Technology of enchantment
 - Art and agency
- What about figurine studies?



Early Figurine Studies

- Social evolutionary perspective
 - Early, less complex societies characterised by matriarchy
 - Mother goddess narratives
 - Increasing social stratification characterised by patriarchies
 - Social position & value of women plummets
- Neolithic female figurines fitted into this perspective
 - Evidence for matriarchy & a female oriented cult based on fertility & sexuality



Figurine from Çatal Höyük

Figurine Studies

- Usually closely associated with gender archaeologies:
 - Are modern sex / gender roles permanent & cross-cultural?
 - Is the primary social role of women reproductive?
- More recent approaches focus on archaeology & materiality:
 - Context of use/discard
 - Attributes of the figurine
 - Use-wear analyses (handling & display)
 - Fragmentation theory
 - Biography of the object



Figurines from Sha'ar Hagolan

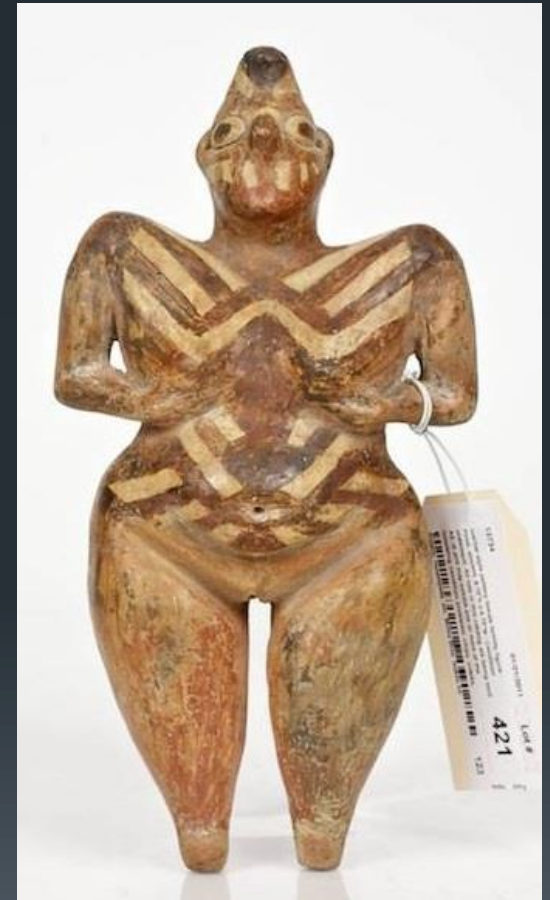
Gender and Figurines



- Can the gender of the figurine be assessed & is this important?
- Do figurines give us an insight into the construction & structure of gender & social hierarchy?
 - Is this their primary archaeological importance?
- Multiplicity of uses & meanings should be emphasised:
 - Attributes of figurines, medium, context, & 'biography'
- Figurines: might be an important source of information on past social practices such as tattooing, dress (gender & identity)
- Simplistic "mother goddess" interpretation is not adequate for prehistoric figurines
 - Their use to identify ancient matriarchies should be treated with caution

Attribute Analysis

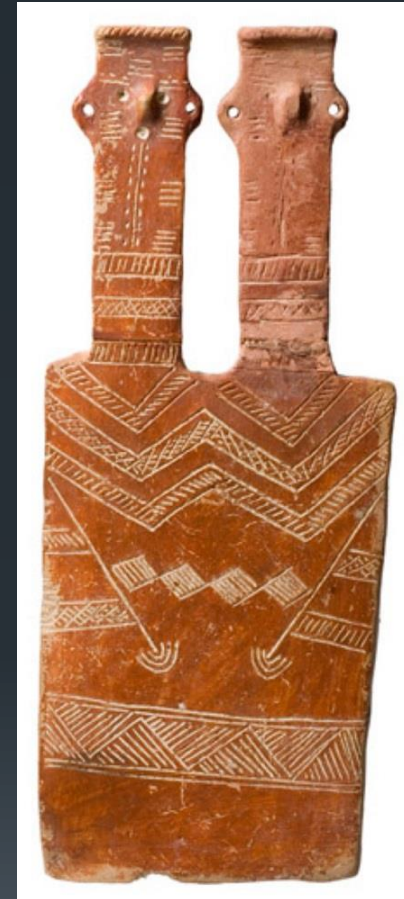
- Medium:
 - Fired clay, stone, plaster etc.
- Size:
 - Are these portable, hand held objects?
 - Are they larger, possibly attention focusing devices?
- Decoration:
 - Painted, modelled, incised?



Figurine from Hacilar

Attribute Analysis

- Sex:
 - Is this indicated?
 - Is it important?
- Single or multiple figurine?
- Posture, gesture, activity:
 - Standing, seated, kneeling
- Body markings:
 - Clothed, naked, tattooings, body painting?



Red Polished double-headed figurine

Context and Completeness

- Is the image placed within a specific context?
 - Household
 - Ritual
 - Funerary
 - Midden
- Associated contextual data
 - What was it found with?
- Is it deliberately broken?
 - Was this an intentional aspect of the figurine: fragmentation
 - Or was it broken / killed as a form of “deconsecrated”
 - Or broken by accident?



Figure from En Gedi

Figurines & the Individual

- 1990s focus on the rise of the individual in society & personal wealth
 - Dramatic elaboration in burials
 - Increase in personal prestige objects
 - Increase in household storage
- Reflects changing social relations
- Decoration & display of figurines in domestic contexts interpreted as an important means of displaying identity



Folded arm figurine

Miniaturisation

- Miniaturization & three-dimensionality are key to understanding figurines
- How they were handled, viewed & socialized
- Creating “encounter[s] of intimate proximity” (Bailey 2005, 38)



Sha'ar Hagolan
pebble figurines

Miniaturisation

- Inevitably involves some abstraction:
 - Choice between what should be included & what can be omitted
- Stereotypes:
 - Simplified & formulaic representations of the human form
 - Repetitive pose & gesture
- Compression of detail requires the viewer/handler to draw inferences from their own personal knowledge



Figurine from Çatal Höyük

Miniaturisation

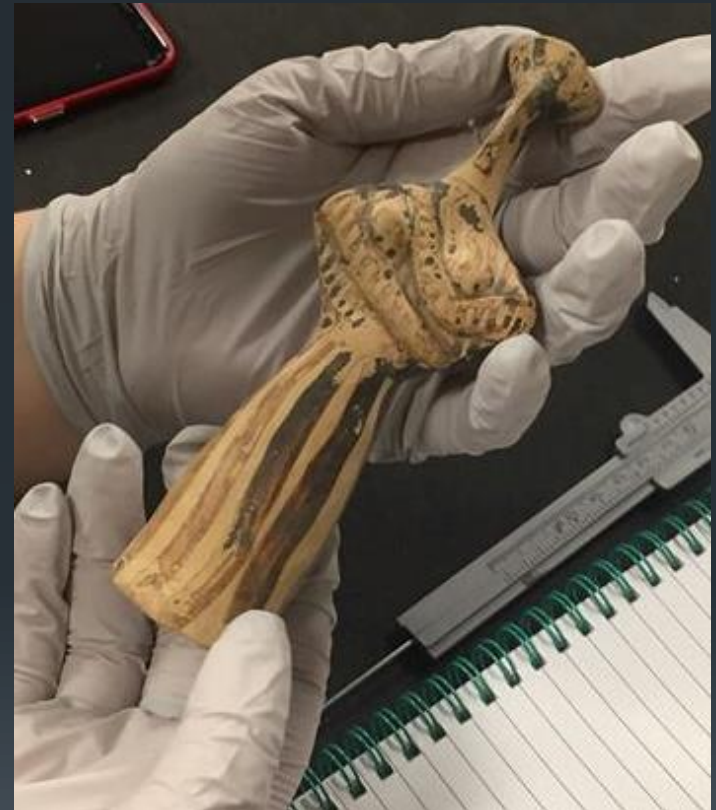
- Miniaturization has a sensory affect on the human brain
- Cerebral efforts involved in making sense of the visual illusion of the miniature alters perceptions:
 - Distorting perception of time for example
 - Allows
 - people to access alternative realities
- Imposes order on the social world



Figurine from Hacilar

Cheirotic Approach

- Focuses on haptic engagements with moulded clay
 - Integral to embodied practices of holding & handling the object
- Creates an immediate & personal relationship
 - Soothing
 - Sense of well being
 - Sense of empowerment
- Limits of the body & Material Engagement Theory



Handling figurines in the Ashmolean

Articulating Gender in Neolithic Greece

- Materiality of figurines:
 - Recursive relationship between figurines & people
 - Role of figurines in shaping identities
- Gender identity:
 - Focuses on the represented body & how gender is embodied
 - Posture, manipulation of physical appearance & body markings etc.
- Greek figurines: primarily female but some male & asexual figures



Neolithic figurine

Articulating Gender in Neolithic Greece

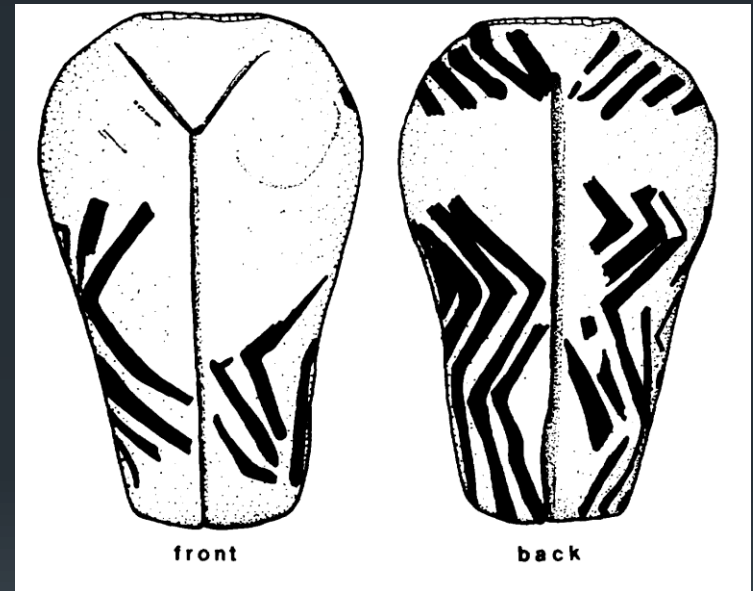
- Extensive range of postures: standing, seated (on ground or stool), squatting, kneeling
 - Female figurines – gestures focus on area of breasts
 - Male figurines gesture focus on genitalia



Neolithic figurine,
[Koutroulou Magoula](#)

Articulating Gender in Neolithic Greece

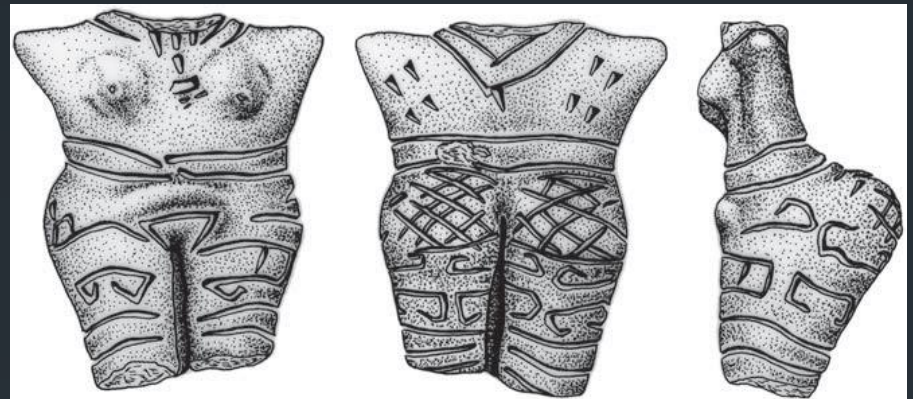
- Around 43% with painted decoration
 - Tattooing, body painting, scarification
 - Clothing: headdress, belts, strips of fabric & woven textiles covering upper & lower body
 - Adornment: amulets or necklaces
- Primarily female figurines
 - “manipulation of external appearance played a central role in the dialectic performance of gender identity” (Mina 2008, 223)



Figurine from Lerna

Neolithic Thessaly

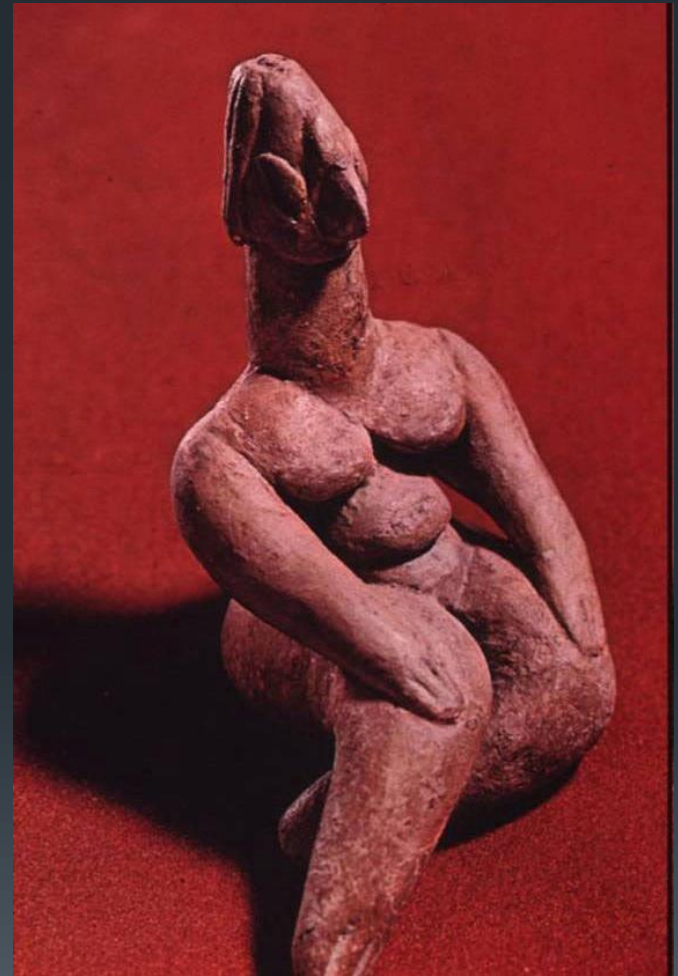
- Numerous representations of human form in clay & stone
- Literally hundreds found in settlements
 - Maybe in discard deposits
- Tendency to depict body in detail



Figurine from Makriyalos

Neolithic Thessaly

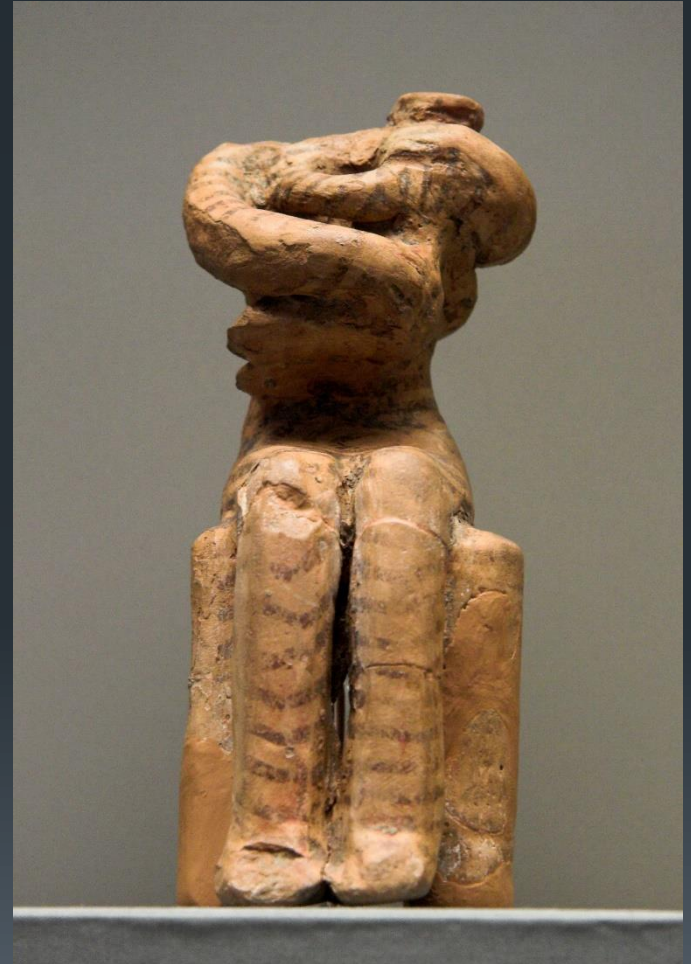
- Focus on posture, gesture & action:
 - Lying, standing, placing hands on chest, grabbing an object etc.
- More than just a body:
 - Active agents...



Figurine from Sesklo

Neolithic Thessaly

- Some figurines in groups:
 - Gestures & postures were meaningful in relation to each other
- Emphasis on action:
 - Reflection of people's embodied practices:
 - Identity materialized & performed through clay figures' actions
- More than just the imagining the human body:
 - Also considers social praxis



Thessaly figurine

Summary

- Neolithic figurines tend to be interpreted within social framework rather than as art object
- Emphasis has been on their use as vehicles for symbolic communication
- More recently examined as social agents that play a significant role in the mediation of social relations:
 - Expressions of individuality, personhood & gendered identity
- More recent studies have focused on their materiality – especially Bailey's cheirotic approach.