



Maraliaty the creator ancestress giving birth to the northern peoples
Yirawala of the Kunwinjku People
Australian National Gallery, Canberra

PROBLEMS IN GREEK PREHISTORY

Papers Presented at the Centenary
Conference of the British School of
Archaeology at Athens, Manchester
April 1986

Edited by E.B. French
and K.A. Wardle



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*Cover illustration: Mycenaean warrior, from a Linear B tablet found in the House of the Oil Merchant, Mycenae.
(Drawn by Diana Wardle.)*

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the evidence from Crete which was now complemented by N. Marinatos' work; the material was difficult to quantify but this could be sought in future work. Niemeier stated that he now agreed with the link of the pendant petal to the crocus and pointed out that it had been confirmed by the Ship fresco from Thera. Dickinson could not accept this interpretation of the Double Axe pattern on the mainland in Early Mycenaean where it was very common in settlements and was not combined with other special motifs, these later were directly derived from Minoan prototypes. D'Agata called attention to the recent identification of a LM IIIB cult room at Hagia Triada to which some of the material quoted belonged. Warren felt that quantification of the types of context (i.e. sanctuary/non-sanctuary) would be useful, ignoring tombs which do not help. Dumas expressed doubts about the interpretation in this way of plant motifs on Thera; many occur on specific types of non-cult pottery, e.g. on strainers and storage jars. Gesell reminded that the Double Axe and Horns of Consecration were still used in sanctuaries as cult symbols in LM IIIB and IIIC.

THE LARGE MONOCHROME TERRACOTTA FIGURES FROM MYCENAE: THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

Andrew Moore

A brief description of the excavation of the so called 'Room with the Idols' and the Temple building in the Cult Centre of Mycenae has been given in interim reports by the excavator (Taylour 1969 and 1970). There were two main assemblages of material within the Temple complex, one from Room 19, the 'Room with the Idols', the other from the Alcove to the north-west of Room 18, the 'Temple' (see Fig.1). These assemblages, especially that from Room 19, were made up of a variety of different classes of material. The following discussion, however, will be limited to only one of these, the large monochrome terracotta figures¹.

There are some twenty-one restorable examples of these figures and although they vary considerably in size and shape, they form a distinct group, the Type B of E. French's classification (French 1981, 173). As E. French points out this class of figure is so far known only at Mycenae. We are thus denied the use of comparative study as a tool in the discussion and interpretation of the figures and it becomes necessary to rely primarily upon an examination of their physical attributes and qualities. The following discussion will concentrate on this aspect, beginning with a study of the poses of the figures.

The simple, roughly cylindrical bodies of the figures suggest only that they are apparently standing and stationary; the heads too are merely upright with their eyes staring forward. In these areas then, there is little indication of pose beyond a total lack of any attempt to indicate body movement. However, in the positions of the arms obvious and dramatic variations are to be found. Not all of the figures are sufficiently well preserved for their arm positions to be known. Amongst all of the twenty-one restorable figures, however, only three arm poses or gestures can be observed. The uniformity of the body and head poses serves to emphasise the variety observable in the arm gestures. Yet only three gestures appear which are repeated again and again. These are as follows (see Fig.2): Pose 1: Both arms are raised and brought forward somewhat. (See Pl.13a, also Taylour 1969, pl.XIIC & d and Taylour 1970, pl.XXXIXa and pl.XLb.)

Pose 2: The right arm is raised, approximately vertically, whilst the left is brought forward in front of the body, (see Pl.11a&b).

Pose 3: Both arms are brought forward in front of the body, on an approximately horizontal plane, and with the hands together. (e.g. Taylour 1969, pl.XIIIa.)

None of the partially preserved arms indicate any other pose, and whilst some of the figures cannot be proven to lie within these three groups, none can be positively shown to be adopting a different attitude. In only five cases are both of the arms missing or broken so close to the shoulder that their pose is totally unclear.

The hands of the figures also vary considerably, although in all examples the thumb is separated from the fingers. They may, nonetheless, be divided roughly into two groups. In general, in the first group of hands the thumb and fingers are splayed wide apart and the hand may be said to be 'open'. In most cases the palm is upturned (for an example see Taylour 1970, pl.XXXIXa). In the second group the fingers and thumbs although separate usually begin to turn inwards towards each other in a gripping manner. The palm is usually turned inward. These hands are 'clutching' (for an example see Pl.11a).

This division of the hands is not absolutely clear cut and is based upon a relatively small sample of surviving examples. Some of the surviving hands could on their own be considered hybrids of the two types. Nevertheless the distribution of hands of each type amongst the figures is of interest. It can be observed that where both arm and hand poses have been preserved, figures in Pose 1 have hands with characteristics of the first group of hands. Figures in Poses 2 and 3 have hands of the second group.

If the Group 2 hands are indeed clutching the question is, what is being clutched? This seems to have been made clear by the makers of the figures. One figure of Pose 2 holds aloft a shaft which terminates at its head in what appears to be an axe-hammer, (see Pl.11b). The shorter projection facing forwards is in the shape of a hammer head, whilst the longer one to the rear is flattened by squeezing to the shape of an axe. It should be noted that a similar axe-hammer was found in Room 19, but this was a separately modelled piece and not attached to any figure. Three other figures, two of Pose 3 and one of Pose 2 have evidence of similar objects. One slender Pose 2 figure clutches the base of a shaft to its body with its left hand, (see Pl.12a). A Pose 3 figure has a shaft which moves up vertically from the body and is clasped by the two hands before it breaks (Taylour 1969, pl.XIIIa). Another Pose 3 figure has a break on its right hand where some object was held in front of the body between the hands. On the grounds that the axe-hammer is preserved on the figure mentioned above (Pl.11b) and that a further axe-hammer was found separately in Room 19 it seems extremely likely that the broken shafts of the other two figures terminated in axe-hammer heads, and furthermore that the object broken from the hands of the third figure was an axe-hammer. Thus I would suggest that all the figures in Poses 2 and 3, with their 'clutching' hands, were grasping axe-hammers. Where they no longer survive, these were perhaps modelled separately from the figures, like the example found in Room 19, added to the figures during use and subsequently lost.

What then of the figures in Pose 1, where both arms are raised and brought forward? The pose itself is highly suggestive of either the classic 'epiphany' pose or one of offering and supplication. If the attitude of the hands is also taken into consideration then it is the second option which becomes more attractive. This arm pose is associated with the first group of hands. In the hands of this group the thumb and fingers are splayed open and arranged in a manner which suggests that some object or other was slung between them.

As with the axe-hammer bearers the question is again, what was slung over the hand? If we remember the considerable number of beads that were present amongst the jewellery deposited in Room 19 then a very feasible answer presents itself. It would appear

very likely that necklaces or strings of beads were either laid across the hands or hung from them, as E. French originally suggested (Taylour 1970,277).

Thus it seems that through an analysis of posture the figures may be divided into two groups. Firstly those with raised arms and secondly the axe-hammer bearers. The arm poses, which are the basis of this division, are the most emphasised element of posture in the figures. It is of great importance that amongst the total of twenty-one restorable figures there are only three demonstrable arm poses. This 'redundancy' is our clearest clue as to the iconographic information that the figures were meant to convey. The poses are repeated again and again, the emphasis is clear. The general impression that one receives is one of formalisation of poses drawn from the experience or knowledge of the creators of the figures.

Within a cult context, there are two possible hypotheses for the source of these formalised poses, each of which implies a different function for the figures. The first would place it in the belief system and mythology of the cult, the second in its practice and activities.

In the first hypothesis the figures are interpreted as deities. Those of the first pose group would then be accepting rather than offering gifts. The two axe-hammer bearing poses would be interpreted as well known iconographic representations of deities, who would be identifiable through their poses. These poses are perhaps repeated because different figures with the same pose would be in use in different areas of the site. This hypothesis, however, seems less feasible than the second for the following reasons. Firstly, those figures with both arms raised and their open hands also bring their arms forward. The impression is very strongly one of offering rather than of acceptance and possession. Secondly, if each pose of the figures is intended to aid their identification as different deities, it would seem strange that different figures with the same pose vary so considerably in size, shape and appearance.

Thus we turn to the second hypothesis, that the poses of the figures are drawn from the practice of the cult and activities associated with it. Thus the figures served as formalised iconographic representations of cult practice. Those with both arms raised and brought forward with the hands open, Pose 1, would appear to be bearing aloft and offering forward, votive gifts. The axe-hammer bearers should possibly be seen as involved in some form of sacrificial activity.

Thus an examination of the poses of the figures suggests that they represent not deities, but cult celebrants. We are now in a position to examine other aspects of the figures and to consider whether they support this hypothesis. Specifically, do these aspects indicate a sexual division of the figures, whether or not the figures may be considered as individuals, and whether any other evidence regarding the function and identity of the figures is present?

Taylour credits Henry Hodges with having established the sex of the figures on purely technical grounds i.e. that the upper bodies of the females are flattened whereas those of the males are barrel shaped, and that the females have hair, whilst the males have

none, these criteria leaving two hermaphrodites (Taylour 1970, 278).

I do not feel however that hair style may be claimed as an attribute of sex as it is a culturally defined gender attribute rather than a biologically defined sexual attribute. Social mores rather than genetics determine how hair is worn. Furthermore, although barrel chests may arguably be suggestive of the male physique this is too subject to artistic convention and interpretation to be considered a reliable criterion. A figure from Aegina which has a very similar body shape to the 'barrel chested' figures from Mycenae also has very prominent breasts and a polos hat which suggest that it represents a female, (see Nicholls 1970, pl. 2a).

A third, purely anatomical criterion can be added to these: the breasts. The range in size of the different figures' breasts can be seen in Fig. 3. Along the way there is no dramatic leap in size which might be claimed as marking the division of the sexes. Figures defined under Hodges criteria as female, however, lie at one end of the scale and his males at the other. Because of this correlation I guardedly accept a sexual division of the figures, but I place little importance upon it. As E. French (1981, 173) has pointed out, the male figures from Phylakopi show that the convention existed to portray undoubtedly male figures if required. Sex, on the grounds that it is given little emphasis, seemed not to have been given much importance by the creators and users of the figures.

I suggest that this is a further argument against the apotheosis of the figures. If they were meant to represent a deity or deities then it is likely that sex would be a fairly important attribute to emphasise. It may be argued that perhaps sex was not an important attribute of the deity or deities represented. If only one deity is represented, however, why do the figures vary so tremendously? What then if one god and one goddess are represented? This seems unlikely if the iconography of the figures is considered. The principal iconographic attribute, which would presumably aid the identification of the deity, is the axe-hammer. This attribute is found on both the 'female' figures and on the 'males', thus any identification would be confused. Finally, if it is argued that each figure represents a separate deity, then it would seem unlikely that a clear indication of sexual identity was an unimportant attribute to any of them. Thus it would seem that sex, if it is indicated at all, is not a very significant attribute of the figures. This in turn makes the possibility that they represented deities seem less likely.

It has been claimed that each of the figures has an individuality of its own and that they thus represent different, recognisable deities (Taylour 1969, 92 and Taylour 1970, 271 and 278). In detail it is true that each of the figures has certain, usually facial, features which make them recognisable. However, whether this individuality was sufficient to make each figure recognisable in a dimly lit room, such as the Temple must have been, is an altogether different matter. In my own view, the similarities in size, shape, colour etc. of many of the figures is such that it would have been extremely difficult to make much of a distinction between certain figures except at close distance and by individuals who were more than a little familiar with them.

This lack of clear individuality is another means of emphasising the pose of the

figures rather than any other attribute. It would seem that what they are doing is more important than who they are. This emphasis on action rather than identity indicates in my view that the figures should not be seen as deities. If this had been the case then surely individual identity would have been of great importance. They should be seen as an anonymous class of being in the service of the deity.

The question of whether or not the figures were given any added attributes which would have enhanced their individuality and thus aid individual identification is of significance at this point. This is, however, an unknown. I do not feel that the 'firing holes' which can be found around the chests, necks and faces of most of the figures served as anchors for any such additional attributes, as has been suggested (Taylour 1969, 92 and 1970, 272). In many cases these seem to have been placed carelessly and irregularly and it seems unlikely that they were made with such a use in mind, (see Pl. 12b). The only case in which the addition of an attribute, beyond the physical components of the body, can be positively identified is in the case of the axe-hammer. This fact is surely of importance. It strongly suggests that where the axe-hammer is present, it was seen by the makers of the figures as an integral part of their identity. The association with the axe-hammer is the only provable additional attribute and would therefore seem, along with the fact of their existence, and the poses they adopt, to be the most important aspect of those figures where the association can be demonstrated. The axe-hammer is an aspect of pose, not of individual identity, and thus once more emphasis is placed upon the pose or action of the figure rather than its identity.

Thus the evidence of the figures themselves seems to suggest that they represent not separate individuals but a class of being. It would seem more sensible to interpret the actions of such an individually anonymous class as cult activity, poses drawn from the ritual.

The one example which we have of a figure *in situ* gives a final piece of evidence in support of this view, (Pl. 13a and Fig. 4). This figure stood before a table of offering in the north-east corner of Room 18. It was turned away from the door to the room and towards the table of offering. Its base was embedded in the plaster covering of the bench. Thus it was a permanent fixture of the room. The figure is tucked away. As one entered, it would have been partially hidden by the northernmost of the columns in the room. Thus its identity was not considered of sufficient importance that it should have been in clear view. It is the action it performs, not its identity, which is important; the action of offering, of permanently making the gift. This action would presumably be clearly 'visible' to the recipient deity, if not to human celebrants entering the room. Thus this would appear to lend considerable weight to the interpretation of the figures of Pose 1 as offerants and by implication of all the figures of Type B as representations of cult officiants.

We may now look briefly beyond the figures themselves in order to highlight just two interesting parallels which may lend support to this hypothesis. Firstly, it may be noted that the bodies of the figures, especially the barrel chested ones, are reminiscent of the priestly robes depicted on various Aegean objects. In a gem from Mallia a robed figure can

be seen which bears a strong resemblance to the barrel chested Mycenae figures, (see Platon and Pini, 1984, 181 No. 147). The pose too is similar to that of the figures of my pose group 2 and the object which he carries appears to be a mallet or double axe of some sort. Secondly, the hair of many of the figures is closely paralleled in certain of the Akrotiri frescoes. Hair and its treatment are often considered to be of cultic significance (Marinatos 1984b, 172 and Säflund 1981) and many of the Mycenae figures have very distinctive hairstyles, (see Pl. 13b). Most of the head is shaved but three plaits are left, one to the rear and one to each side of the head. In addition two curls are left on the forehead. This same pattern can be seen on one of the young cult celebrants from the Saffron Gatherers fresco from Akrotiri, a fresco generally accepted as being of religious character (see Marinatos 1984a, fig. 55). These two parallels have been made with objects which come from different areas of the Aegean and from earlier periods than the Mycenae figures. To suggest an interpretation of the figures based primarily upon such comparisons would thus be methodologically unsound. The hypothesis, however, arises from observation of the figures themselves. This is merely supportive evidence and may reflect iconographic elements held in common throughout the Aegean.

It has been the aim of this paper to endeavour to overcome the problem of interpretation of a group of material which has no good parallel which might have enabled comparative study. Thus an analysis of the attributes and iconography observable in the Mycenae figures has been the main tool of the above discussion. Only when an interpretative hypothesis has been reached by this means has recourse been made to possible parallels.

Through an analysis of the 'intrinsic' characteristics of the Mycenae figures it has been possible to come to a conclusion regarding their interpretation. By examining the poses of the figures the stress on action, rather than identity, becomes apparent. No added attributes beyond the axe-hammer can be demonstrated and this again emphasises action. There is a lack of clear sexual identity and of individuality. Furthermore there is an apparent lack of care taken in the modelling of the figures. The relative unimportance of the identity of the figures is stressed by the position of the figure *in situ* – hidden away and definitely not a focus of attention. The evidence of the figures themselves indicates that they functioned as representations of cult celebrants rather than as representations of deities. Their role was to perform certain of the activities of the cult in perpetuity. This perpetuity is graphically illustrated by the example of the figure *in situ*; embedded in the plaster covering of the bench, a permanent fixture of the room, and making a continual offering. These figures then should be regarded not as idols but as celebrants and thus the title 'Room with the Idols' appears to be a misnomer.

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NOTES

1. This paper is based upon examination of the terracotta figures from the excavations made as part of an analysis of Temple and Room with the Fresco Complexes as material for my Ph.D. thesis (University of Manchester) and for publication in the 'Well Built Mycenae' series. It has been necessary to condense some of the discussion of the figures in order to keep to the required word limit. It is intended that a fuller discussion will appear in the final publication.

DISCUSSION: Kilian pointed out that this useful classification did not preclude the carrying of figures in procession as appeared in frescoes from Mycenae, Tiryns and Tanagra; he also wondered whether the object held could be a sword not an axe-hammer as it could be carried by either a man or a woman for sacrifice. Moore replied to the first point that the Tiryns representation showed a Type A figure not one of Type B and the Mycenae one is shown naturalistically and not as a 'figure' at all. To Warren's query about the interpretation of the figure found *in situ*, Moore reiterated that, when all the evidence of the find spot given in the notebooks is considered, the figure seems to be an 'attention focussing device' and not the actual focus. Rutter asked why there were two carrying positions and could not the second group have carried something else. The problem with this was that there was no evidence of anything else nor any explanation of the two poses.

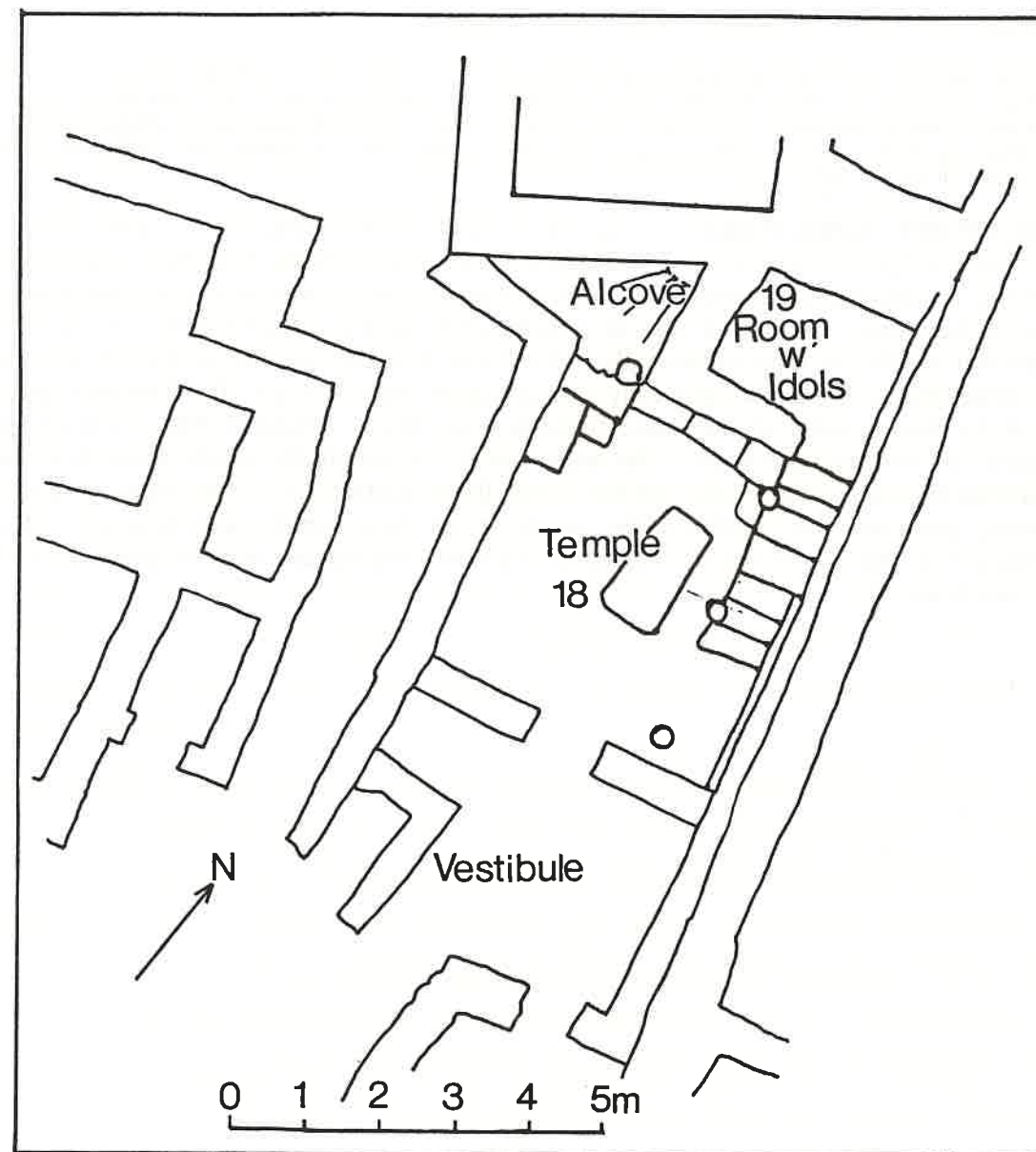


FIG.1: Mycenae: Sketch Plan of Temple Complex.

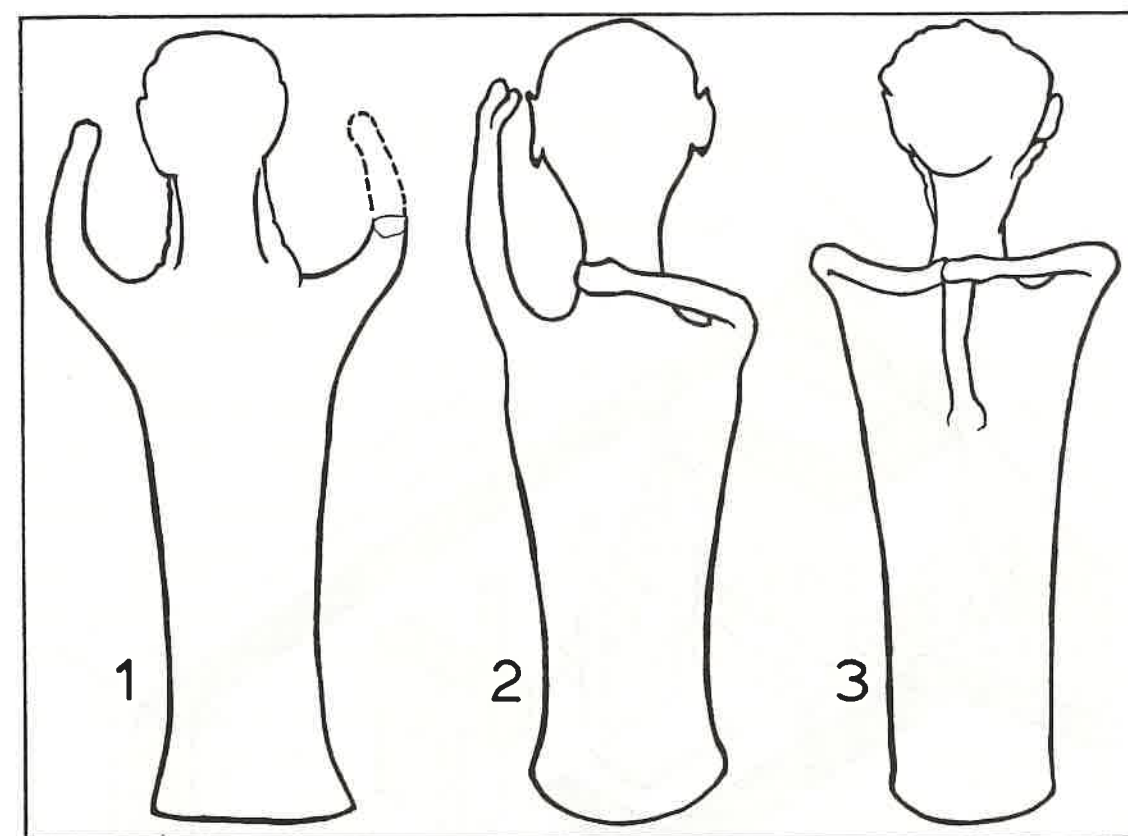


FIG.2: The three poses of the figures.

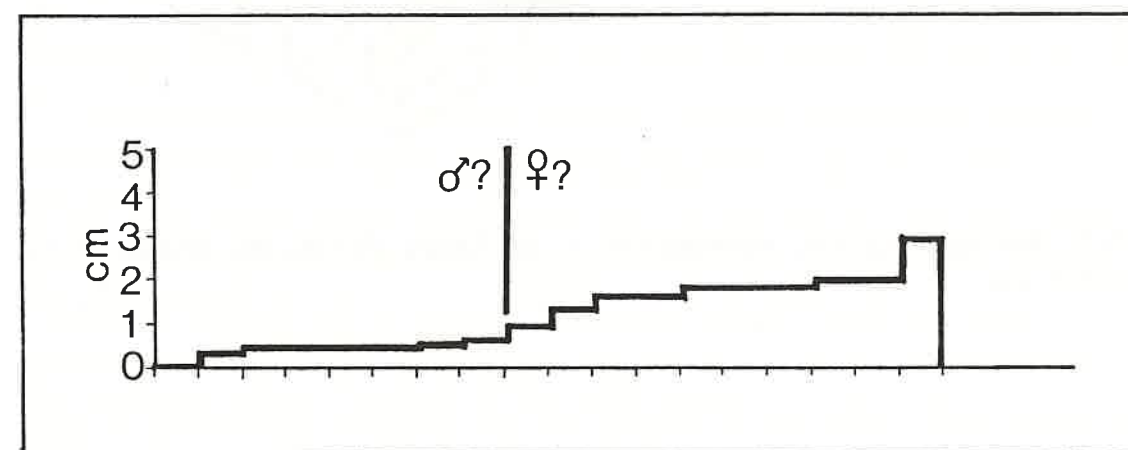


FIG.3: Graph showing the relative sizes of the breasts of the figures.