

## **A Comparative Perspective on Figurines from Early Villages**

Richard G. Lesure  
University of California, Los Angeles

Paper given at the Sixth Gender and Archaeology Conference  
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Oct. 6-7, 2000

Final Version of October 16, 2000  
© Richard G. Lesure, 2000

In many parts of the globe, small figurines of clay or stone are the most common surviving art of early agricultural villages. Discarded with other household refuse, they appear to have been common objects used in peoples' homes. As political organization became more centralized and villages developed into cities, these household traditions often disappeared.

In many early assemblages, female imagery predominates. There is growing interest in using figurines to study ancient gender systems. Drawing on a long-standing tradition of interpretation from the Mediterranean Neolithic, archaeologists all over the world have linked figurines to fertility cults or identified them as mother goddesses. Recent feminist scholarship critiques these as facile interpretations that perpetuate our own society's assumptions concerning gender, nature, and culture (Conkey and Tringham 1995). Older interpretations view female figurines as part of a vague "natural," ahistorical religion that has not appeared to require analysis of variability in cultural terms. Diversity in representations has either been ignored or lumped too quickly into all-encompassing concepts like "mother goddess."

The new work has brought a greater level of sophistication to figurine analysis by emphasizing diversity and focusing on the meanings and uses of figurines in particular

times and places. For instance, Lynn Meskell (1998: 47), in a study of changing interpretations of the imagery of Çatalhöyük, says, "today, rather than trying to embed sites and cultures within broader, universal classifications, archaeologists examine them in their own individual context, so that local variation and character is stressed." This is a productive direction to take, but it is not without problems. Because the kinds of representations that appear, and the contexts in which they are found, are similar from region to region, analysts routinely borrow interpretations from each other. Such borrowings are fundamentally comparative, but comparison is currently done almost covertly, under the banner of emphasizing local variation. I argue that the nature of the material demands some kind of comparative perspective. But is it possible to be comparative without falling back on a simplistic essentialism?

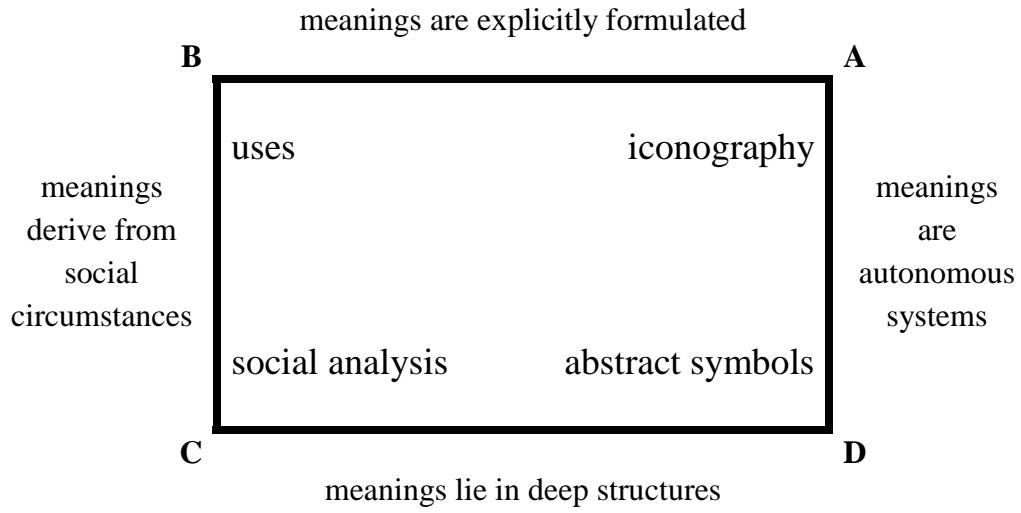
The answer lies in the point to chosen for departure. Previous comparative approaches start with the imagery itself. If female imagery predominates in Formative Mexico and in Neolithic Anatolia, then that must be the result of the same set of causes. Now that possibility is interesting to think about, but it can also be a quick route to essentialism. I would like to put off addressing issues of that sort until a more sophisticated framework for assessing both similarities and differences is developed.

I therefore propose to start, not with the imagery, but with the analysts -- or, more precisely, with the engagement of analyst with imagery. I have read through lots of figurine studies from across the globe, looking for patterns in the perspectives analysts employ, the problems they encounter, and the solutions they devise. That study forms the basis for a rudimentary synthesis of diverse approaches. My goal here is to describe that synthesis and propose it as a framework for thinking comparatively about figurines.

A fundamental premise is that the meanings of objects like figurines are multidimensional. When figurines appear in social interactions, a lot of complicated things are going on simultaneously. The upshot is that a variety of analytical perspectives can be applied to the study of meaning, and these are actually complementary rather than antagonistic. The chart in Figure 1 identifies two important choices made by investigators concerning "meanings." First, do meanings reside in "surface" phenomena explicitly recognized by social actors or in "deep structures" only imperfectly perceived by participants? Second, should meanings be treated as autonomous systems of ideas to be understood in terms of their internal relationships or, alternatively, as social products that require study in terms of their relations with external circumstances?

Actual choices made by analysts are not so categorical. In fact, in studies of rich representational systems, you will often find all of these views at play. Nevertheless, for clarity of presentation it is possible to consider the alternative responses to these questions to form four "corners" of an analytical field. Studies in which meanings are taken to be surface phenomena explicitly formulated by social actors may treat ideas as either autonomous systems or social products. The former are iconographic studies that ask, "What do the images depict?" (Figure 1, A). Social context approaches ask, instead, "What were the figurines used for?" (B). Studies of this latter sort consider figurines as objects deployed in social life for particular, often very practical, purposes. An

**Figure 1.** Analytical perspectives used in figurine studies (in box) and their relationships to choices investigators make concerning the nature of meaning



alternative pair of perspectives view meanings as embedded in deep structures or generative principles. Here figurine analysis is no longer an end in itself. Instead, the representations are but symptoms of a set of abstract principles that form the true object of study. Again, however, studies differ according to whether they opt for an autonomous or socially determined perspective on meanings. Among the former are attempts to characterize the abstract symbolism of figurine imagery (D). The latter include works of social analysis that use figurines as a window on ancient systems of differentiation such as age or gender categories (C).

To reiterate: my idea here is that this framework might help distinguish the different kinds of conversations archaeologists have about figurines. Once we have them separated, we may be in a better position to understand the logic involved in each perspective and assess the strengths and weaknesses of particular arguments. What I will do for the rest of the talk is visit each of the four corners of this diagram in turn and consider some of the questions asked and challenges encountered in that analytical mode.

I begin with those perspectives that view meanings as sets of ideas that were explicitly recognized by the people involved and which can be isolated and studied on their own. The major analytical approach here is iconography, the study of the subject matter of imagery. Now, there are lots of things we could talk about here concerning the iconographical interpretation of figurines, but I consider only one important theme, the challenge of assessing the prototypes of images.

Did the figurines depict deities, the characters of myths and legends, ancestors, particular individuals -- or were they more generic depictions of categories of people? Few existing studies can be considered definitive on this point, but there are a lot of

potential clues out there. The first and most obvious step is to assess any important themes, including gender, age, posture, clothing, ornamentation, and activity. In some cases a few particularly elaborate pieces may provide keys for the interpretation of many other figures (e.g., Cauvin 1994). What features have been ignored or subject to special attention (e.g., Lesure 1999)?

One productive line of investigation is to see how far it is possible to pursue a traditional iconographic analysis in which the goal is to distinguish specific conventional subjects, identified by visual clues or attributes. For instance, in an assemblage I have worked on from southern Mexico, we have a number of images of fat, seated individuals that seem to be depictions of people wearing masks (Lesure 1997) . There are repeated attributes among the masks, as if different figurine makers in different villages were depicting the same mask. It seems possible to say that there was a code here through which specific, widely recognized subjects were identified. That tells us something important about the representational system and needs to be taken into account when it is analyzed from other perspectives.

I now move to the upper left corner of the diagram. Here we are still interested in surface meanings but we emphasize the social context of ideas. Our guiding question becomes, how were figurines used? Are they ritual objects? Toys? There is much interesting work out there on this topic, but one particularly noteworthy approach has developed in the Mediterranean, inspired by Peter Ucko's (1968) pioneering comparative study of figurines. Based on ethnographic literature discussing the use of small human figures, Ucko identified common functions of figurines, such as cult figures, vehicles of magic, teaching devices, or toys. He then took a stab at identifying archaeological

signatures of these different uses, either in terms of figurine morphology or archaeological contexts. Ucko's work continues to provide inspiration for figurine studies. Lauren Talalay (1993) has updated and expanded Ucko's comparative ethnographic approach, and Mary Voigt (2000) has made significant strides in the realm of archaeological signatures. Although the archaeological signature approach threatens at times to become overly formulaic, it is the most promising current approach to the study of figurine use. Reviewed in the context of a chart such as Figure 1, where it is seen as one among a number of different perspectives, any discomforts we have with the approach may perhaps be quieted.

As we move to the lower part of the diagram, our analytical interest begins to diverge from those of the original users of the figurines. Imagine going around asking people the meaning of a Barbie doll. They will reply that its name is "Barbie" (iconography) and it is a toy (use). But Barbie also has deeper meanings involving gender identities and body images that are not always going to be explicit in the minds of children and their parents. It is this second kind of meaning we are interested in here.

The idea is that some deeper principles cause figurines to look the way they do. We can locate such structural causes either in an autonomous symbolic system or in society itself. Again, I will consider just one important theme. A common practice is to take the representational variability of an assemblage to be a sort of window on society (see, for instance, Cyphers 1993, Di Capua 1994, Lesure 1997). However, the results of the question I posed when I considered iconography are critical to any such analysis. My iconographic question concerned the prototypes of the images. If the images are rather generic depictions of social categories, then they may provide a kind of window, however

narrow and crooked, on society. Where, instead, more specific prototypes can be identified -- especially when traditional iconographic analysis leads to the identification conventionalized themes -- social analysis of the kind considered here will be on shaky ground. For instance, Marija Gimbutas (1982, 1989, 1991) and other authors have made the iconographic argument that female figurines from southeastern Europe depict deities and then reasoned that women held positions of power in those societies. Quite a number of critics have pointed to historical cases in which female deities were prominent, but women themselves were greatly disadvantaged in distributions of power and prestige (Meskell 1995, Voigt 2000). Where figurines depict deities we will not get very far by trying to interpret society directly in terms of the imagery. We will need to devise alternative strategies for social analysis.

My last topic is the lower right hand corner of the diagram, where analytical perspectives such as symbolic analysis are located. The signification of an image doesn't end with its subject matter. That subject may itself stand for or evoke other ideas. Attempts to reconstruct this more abstract dimension of figurine meanings are quite common. Indeed, traditional attempts to link figurines with fertility properly fall in this domain. Recently, a variety of alternatives have been proposed. Gunnar and Randi Haaland (1995, 1996) have presented the most sophisticated recent attempt to develop an interpretation emphasizing abstract symbolism. They suggest that the female imagery of the Mediterranean Neolithic was a metaphor referred to in ongoing social relationships. Specifically, motherhood, or the mother-child relationship, might have stood for an ideal of trust in other relationships. Although a step above most interpretations emphasizing

abstract symbolism, their paper suffers from a common problem. It overgeneralizes about figurines from a very wide area, ignoring considerable local variability.

My final consideration is: what about gender analysis? How can I justify coming to a conference on gender and archaeology and only mentioning gender in passing? I would argue that this sort of attention to the inferential structure of arguments concerning gender will increasingly become the norm as gender studies enter the mainstream in archaeology.

## References

- Cauvin, Jacques, 1994. *Naissance des divinités, naissance de l'agriculture: la révolution des symboles au Néolithique*. Paris: CNRS.
- Conkey, Margaret W., and Ruth E. Tringham, 1995. Archaeology and the Goddess: Exploring the Contours of Feminist Archaeology, in *Feminisms in the Academy*, ed. D. C. Stanton and A. J. Stewart. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 199-247.
- Cyphers Guillén, Ann, 1993. Women, rituals, and social dynamics at ancient Chalcatzingo. *Latin American Antiquity* 4(3), 209-224.
- Di Capua, Constanza, 1994. Valdivia Figurines and Puberty Rituals. *Andean Past* 4, 229-279.
- Gimbutas, Marija, 1982. *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images*. New and updated edition. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Gimbutas, Marija, 1989. *The Language of the Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Gimbutas, Marija, 1991. *The Civilization of the Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Haaland, Gunnar, and Randi Haaland, 1995. Who speaks the Goddess's language: Imagination and method in archaeological research. *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 28, 105-121.
- Haaland, Gunnar, and Randi Haaland, 1996. Levels of Meaning in Symbolic Objects. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 6(2), 295-300.
- Lesure, Richard G., 1997. Figurines and Social Identities in Early Sedentary Societies of Coastal Chiapas, Mexico, 1550-800 b.c., in *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*, ed. Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary A. Joyce. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 225-248.
- Lesure, Richard G., 1999. Figurines as Representations and Products at Paso de la Amada, Mexico. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 9(2), 209-220.
- Meskell, Lynn, 1995. Goddesses, Gimbutas, and "New Age" Archaeology. *Antiquity* 69, 74-86.
- Meskell, Lynn, 1998. Twin peaks: The archaeologies of Çatalhöyük, in *Ancient goddesses: The myths and the evidence*, ed. L. Goodison and C. Morris. London: British Museum Press, 46-62.

- Talalay, Lauren E., 1993. *Deities, Dolls, and Devices: Neolithic Figurines from Franchti Cave, Greece*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ucko, P. J., 1968. *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete with Comparative Material from the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece*. Royal Anthropological Institute Occasional Papers 24. London: Andrew Szmidla.
- Voigt, Mary M., 2000. Çatal Höyük in context: Ritual at early Neolithic sites in Central and eastern Turkey, in *Life in Neolithic farming communities: social organization, identity, and differentiation*, ed. Ian Kuijt. New York: Plenum, 253-293.