

## DIANAS OR DRUDGES? WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE LAST ICE AGE

¿DIANAS O DOMINADAS?  
EL ESTATUS DE LAS MUJERES EN LA ÚLTIMA ÉPOCA GLACIAL

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent decades there have been a number of endeavours to re-examine women's lives during the last Ice Age. For far too long, the view of 'man-the-hunter' and woman as 'gatherer, cook and child minder' was an unchallenged hypothesis, and without doubt, this simplistic view of early hunter-gatherers' division-of-labour practices was ripe for revision. Unfortunately, it led to a number of over-zealous assertions: that women were big game hunters too, and as such, could not have been dominated by men. Breaking such stereotypes about prehistoric women is the message delivered in a recent documentary and accompanying book called 'Lady Sapiens.' But are such views about the roles of men and women in prehistory based on anything more than wishful thinking and do they result in fresh mythologising? Is there any archaeological evidence that allows us to assume anything about the economic activities of men and women in these early prehistoric cultures?

**Keywords:** Women; Prehistory; Last Ice Age; Division of labour.

**RESUMEN:** En los últimos años han proliferado intentos de reexaminar la vida de las mujeres durante el último periodo glacial. Durante demasiado tiempo, la visión del "hombre cazador" y la mujer como "recolectora, cocinera y niñera" ha sido una hipótesis indiscutida y, sin duda, esta imagen simplista de las prácticas de división del trabajo entre los cazadores-recolectores antiguos debía ser revisada. Desafortunadamente, esto ha llevado a un exceso de celo en algunas afirmaciones: las mujeres también practicaban la caza mayor y, por tanto, no podrían haber sido dominadas por los hombres. La ruptura de esos estereotipos sobre las mujeres prehistóricas es el mensaje que articula un reciente documental, al que acompaña un libro homónimo, llamado "Lady Sapiens". Pero ¿están esas visiones sobre los papeles de hombres y mujeres en la Prehistoria basadas en algo más que pensamientos ilusorios que derivan en nuevas mitologías? ¿Hay alguna evidencia arqueológica que nos permita asumir algo sobre las actividades económicas de hombres y mujeres en esas culturas prehistóricas antiguas?

**Palabras clave:** Mujeres; Prehistoria; Último Período Glacial; División del trabajo.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2021 a documentary called *Lady Sapiens* was broadcast on French television (with 1.5 million people tuning in) and was accompanied by a book of the same name as well as a video game (Ciotteau *et al.* 2022). All three promulgated a view of our prehistoric ancestors which was both feminist and somewhat controversial. The book and the documentary are due to be released in Great Britain this year. They are the work of two journalists (Thomas Ciotteau, an author and film-maker, and Eric Pincas, a historian and author) and an archaeologist (Jennifer Kerner, who specialises in prehistoric funerary practices).

The English version of the book bears the subtitle “Breaking Stereotypes about Prehistoric Women” draped over the ample curves of the Venus of Willendorf! (Fig. 1). The publisher’s blurb claims, rightly, that researchers have long underestimated the role of prehistoric women in society – they had become imprisoned by clichés, and, in contrast to men who hunted, invented, created and drew, women’s role was limited to domestic chores and educating children. “Over the past fifteen years a new generation of researchers – many of whom are women – have shaken up this model. By establishing groundbreaking analysis protocols and defining new excavation methods, these scientists are finally able to make the invisible visible. It is thanks to their tenacity that the essential and even prestigious role of prehistoric women is emerging. For the first time ever, these ancient women are being resurrected before our very eyes”. The book supposedly debunks the simplistic division of roles by highlighting advances in the study of bones, graves, art and ethnography.

Last year no less than nine eminent French specialists – four male and five female, anthropologists and prehistorians – published a joint, virulent response to what they felt was a wishful-thinking approach to the past (Augereau *et al.* 2021). As they argued, at first sight one might think that any attempt to emancipate females in the past should be welcomed. However, they felt that the views presented in *Lady Sapiens* were extremely biased where gender relations in the Palaeolithic are concerned. Although the book claimed that it was “nuanced” and had avoided being militant in order to achieve greater objectivity, the specialists insisted that it painted a

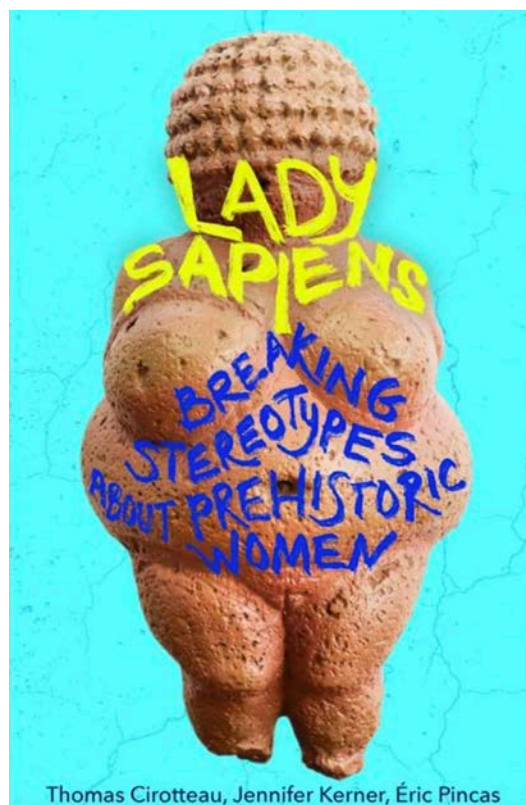


Figure 1: The British cover of *Lady Sapiens*, Legend Press Ltd.

picture of female status that is contemporary fantasy rather than based on scientific evidence.

Upper Palaeolithic females are presented as emancipated modern working women, choosing their partners, controlling their fecundity, taking part – more or less – in the same activities as men, and with the same degree of social influence as men. Far from being a balanced account, it in fact systematically dismisses all evidence that might suggest the probability – or even the simple possibility – of male domination, by either distorting or ignoring it. Studying the role of women in prehistory is by no means easy, especially in the Palaeolithic, where the material traces are partial and hard to interpret. But the evidence which does survive needs to be examined with great care, and not omitted. *Lady Sapiens* rightly emphasises the importance of ethnographic comparisons in producing hypotheses about the past, but the specialists pointed out that it ignores the numerous observations which contradict its chosen view. For example, where the sexual division of labour is concerned, contemporary feminism aims to abolish

this aspect of male domination, and the book claims that the evidence for it is weak, or even non-existent, in the Upper Palaeolithic. It claims – probably correctly – that woman must have hunted small animals or took part in collective hunts. However, studies of all hunter-gatherers known to ethnology, on all continents, have shown clearly that women are consistently subjected to a series of prohibitions – such as using the most lethal cutting or piercing weapons, like spears and bows. Yet throughout its text, *Lady Sapiens* erroneously presents women's possible participation in hunting as evidence for the absence of a sexual division of labour.

When *Lady Sapiens* evokes a possible male domination in prehistoric societies, it is primarily in terms of polygyny and the abduction of women. Abduction is presented as, if not totally unknown, then highly exceptional, and of little significance in gender relations. In reality, as the French specialists emphasised, abduction (usually individual rather than collective) is a banal reality in hunter-gatherer ethnology, such as in Aboriginal Australia, and shows that men have unilateral rights over women. The specialists also contested the book's claim that, as a general rule, hunter-gatherer societies maintain a peaceful existence inside the group and with other groups – numerous ethnological studies attest the opposite!

As for polygyny – where a man has several wives which, in itself, constitutes a lack of equality between the sexes - *Lady Sapiens* claims that polygamy is little known in hunter-gatherer societies, and that monogamy predominates. Yet the specialists pointed out that, according to the *Ethnographic Atlas*, only 16 of the 178 recorded hunter-gatherer groups practised monogamy. And in most cases, polygamy was exclusively the preserve of men: in other words, polygyny rather than polyandry!

Finally, *Lady Sapiens* claims the existence of a few matriarchies such as the Minangkabau of Sumatra and the Yanzi of Zaire; but whereas both these peoples are certainly matrilineal, and the Minangkabau are matrilineal, they cannot seriously be considered matriarchies – no society in which women have power over men has yet been recorded anywhere.

Having minimised or ignored the sexual division of labour, the abduction of women and polygyny, the book's authors proclaim that “Lady Sapiens” was a

woman of action and possibly a woman of power – Upper Palaeolithic women were “generous, skilful and daring, but also had a privileged status; they were respected, honoured, venerated.” This led the French specialists to consider the causes and mechanisms of male domination, as observed in the great majority of human societies, and especially hunter-gatherers. This domination was particularly expressed in terms of sexual and matrimonial rights – the husband could lend out or disown his wife, whereas she had no equivalent rights. In some societies, men's social superiority was legitimised by initiation religions, in which they were informed of secrets that no uninitiated person or child or adult woman could learn without incurring a death sentence. The specialists pointed out that *Lady Sapiens* says nothing of these practices; certainly they would leave no archaeological trace, but it is highly probable that such customs have remote origins. The mere absence of direct archaeological evidence of male dominance in no way proves that it did not exist.

The message of *Lady Sapiens* is that Upper Palaeolithic women were so involved in numerous everyday activities and so indispensable to survival that they simply could not be dominated; their economic importance excluded the possibility of their subordination. As the specialists pointed out, this is a truly naïve idea that is contradicted by the whole history of gender domination. One need only consider our own society to notice that doing useful work is no guarantee of gratitude, let alone social standing or power. In short, the book's message is a modern version of the myth of a primitive matriarchy, in which childbirth gave women pre-eminence, and their productive activities led to an equality of the sexes. It was a lost golden age of relations between the sexes. However, as we shall see, it is far more probable that Upper Palaeolithic societies were characterised by a sexual division of labour.

## 2. EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE ICE AGE

In our own book – written before we became aware of *Lady Sapiens* - our approach to these problems is somewhat different (Fig. 2). While we agree with some of the basic ideas in the French book, we find many of its claims to be unfounded, and some important facts and examples are missing from it.



Figure 2. The cover of *Everyday life in the Ice Age*. (Ed. Archaeopress).

In *Everyday Life in the Ice Age* we were determined from the start to provide a fully rounded and complete view of every aspect of life in the Upper Palaeolithic – including the different roles of men, women and children. We worked primarily from archaeological evidence, but turned to ethnographic evidence to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge with possible scenarios. We strove to use ethnography judiciously and objectively, and where we simply do not know what the situation was in prehistory, we say so – rather than choose a pet theory.

*Lady Sapiens* stresses the early sexism, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which always presented Upper Palaeolithic women as the inferior sex. This is generally true, but it is important to note that there were some important exceptions: for example, the book neglects to mention that the very first novel about the Palaeolithic, Adrien Arcelin's *Solutré ou les chasseurs de rennes de la France centrale* (1872), featured a young woman who was both chief and artist! Moreover, while most early researchers tended to dismiss the possibility of women making stone tools, no less a figure than the abbé Henri Breuil depicted female toolmakers in a book of 1949, *Beyond the Bounds of History. Scenes*



Figure 3. Henri Breuil, in a book of 1949, was one of the few scholars to depict ice age women making stone tools.



Figure 4. A now lost painting by Paul-Joseph Jamin (1853-1903) showing an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century view of a Cro-Magnon artist at work – in such works the artist is always a white bearded male, while female admirers are topless or naked! ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul\\_Jamin\\_-\\_Un\\_peintre\\_décorateur.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Jamin_-_Un_peintre_décorateur.jpg)).

from the *Old Stone Age* – another pioneering contribution which is not featured in the book (Fig. 3).

Another point where we disagree with *Lady Sapiens* is its assertion that far more hand stencils in Palaeolithic caves were made by females than had hitherto been thought. Contrary to this claim, it is by no means easy to “sex” the hand stencils in the caves – modern studies of hand stencils made by Australian Aborigines, European students and other groups have all shown that there is a tremendous overlap between those made by females, adolescents and small males. It is therefore a myth that the ice age hand stencils were made either by predominantly men or predominantly women. It is very hard to obtain reliable measurements of Palaeolithic hand stencils, and the sexing of hands is also difficult due to differences caused by the technique, the position

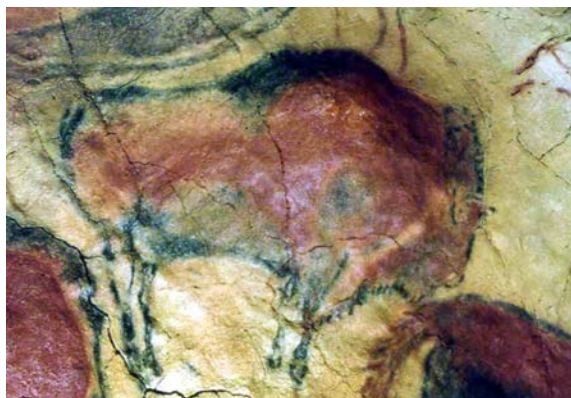


Figure 5. One of the bisons on Spain's Altamira ceiling.



Figure 6. One of the lively horses on Spain's Altamira ceiling (Breuil and Obermaier, 1935).

of the hand, and the shape of the wall, etc. Experiments in making hand stencils have resulted in varied measurements which might suggest different sexes - in short, one individual can produce very different stencils!

Where cave and rock art is concerned, it was traditionally assumed – by the almost exclusively male scholars – that only men were artists, and that the imagery reflected male preoccupations of hunting and sex (Fig. 4). We now know that this is nonsense, and since women do produce rock art in other cultures – such as in Australia – there is no reason whatsoever to assume that all, or even most, ice age imagery was created by men.

There are, however, rare instances where the sex of the artist can be assumed: for example, the great bison on the Altamira ceiling were drawn with such extensive and sweeping lines and domination of space that the artist was almost certainly a man (alt-

hough one cannot rule out the possibility that it was an unusually big woman) (Fig. 5).

This was the joint opinion of Pedro Saura and Matilde Múzquiz, the husband-and-wife artists who produced the facsimile of the ceiling. On the other hand, Matilde's intuition was that the bouncy, bendy horses painted in an earlier phase on the ceiling (Fig. 6) were the work of a woman because they embodied such *joie de vivre* – but of course she could not prove this in any way!

In most cases we simply do not know the sex of the artists. The carvers of the “vulvas” and female figurines could just as easily have been female -- it is known that women do sometimes produce rock art and sacred art in some indigenous cultures -- and one can extend this argument to the whole of Paleolithic art, invoking initiation ceremonies to explain menstruation, with lunar notation as supporting evidence, but with no certainty whatsoever.

We do, however, have one site where a plausible case can be made for a female artist. The Magdalenian sculpted frieze of Cap Blanc (Dordogne) comprises six horses, several bison and one or two deer heads. Close examination of the carvings and the direction of tool-blows had suggested to some researchers that the artist had been left-handed. An adult skeleton was found buried beneath the centre of the frieze; it was dug up in 1911, and subsequently sold to the Field Museum in Chicago.

Long thought to be a male, it was subsequently identified by more detailed analysis as a female, probably aged between 25 and 35. In 2001 a cast of her skeleton was acquired and placed in its rightful location beneath the frieze; the anthropologist who positioned the cast noticed that she had greater muscular development on the left and was thus left-handed. So, it is possible that she was the sculptor, buried in a place of honour in front of her work. A fine facial reconstruction of this woman was produced a few years ago (Fig. 7).

In addition, it is worth noting that some cave art is in such cramped and narrow spaces – such as in the *Diverticule aux Bisons* in France's Bédouilh cave, with its small crawlway and narrow chimney – that the sophisticated figures must have been drawn by a very small adult, rather than a child – and this could well have been a woman. It would have been impossible for anyone else to reach them with a lamp. (Fig. 8).

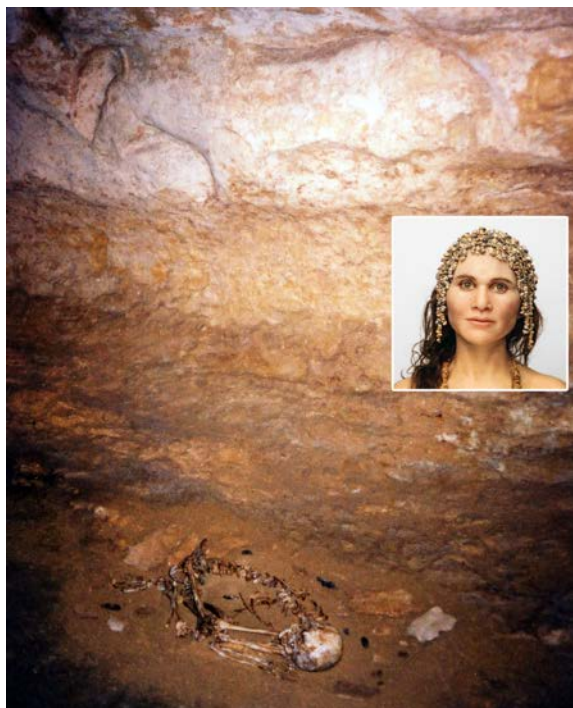


Figure 7. Cap Blanc (Dordogne). Cast of the female skeleton found beneath the horses frieze and its facial reconstruction (Img. E. Daynès).



*"Does it strike anyone else as weird that none of the great painters have been men?"*

Figure 8. "Does it strike anyone else as weird that none of the great painters have ever been men?" (Lorenz 1980).

### 3. SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

The most crucial questions to consider are those of the sexual division of labour, and of dominance. The only Palaeolithic female burials covered in *Lady Sapiens* are from two old excavations – the Dame du Cavillon (Italy), and that of Saint-Germain-la-Rivière (France). In both cases the women were carefully buried with grave-goods and jewellery, doubtless de

noting some kind of status. In our book we have not only included the burials of a number of women who died in or shortly before childbirth, but also a remarkable more recent discovery in Spain. In 2010 the incomplete remains of a female buried in El Mirón cave in Cantabria were uncovered. She has become known as the "Red Lady" due to the unusual ochre used in her burial – it is rich in haematite crystals, giving it an intensely sparkling effect. To date she is the only adult ice age burial found anywhere in the Iberian Peninsula. Osteological analysis revealed she was about 35-40 years old when she died, and she was buried sometime around 18,700 years ago. It seems likely that she was highly respected during her life to warrant such an elaborate interment, but we have absolutely no idea why she was singled out for burial or if she was in any way exceptional or unusual. Indeed, we have so few well-excavated burials for the European Upper Palaeolithic that it is impossible to know if their funerary treatment was special or normal for the period – hence inferring status from them is inevitably subjective.

Of course, strong, agile women would have been just as capable of hunting as men, but despite this reality, among modern hunter-gatherers the hunting of big game is almost entirely a male pursuit, and it is quite possible that the same applied in the past – but when and where and why this first occurred remains a mystery. It makes absolute sense that both sexes would have to be competent at every skill necessary for survival: females would need to gain expertise in hunting, tracking and toolmaking, along with the men in these communities. So, it is perhaps simplistic to assume that hunting was confined to men. Women, as we know, are perfectly capable of the many skills that are required: knowing the possible location of herds, following tracks, good listening and sight and smell, co-ordination and long-distance accuracy with weapons – and last but not least physical endurance.

Where human remains are concerned, any sexual division of labour is unlikely to leave much trace on skeletons, and future archaeologists would be hard pressed to detect modern women's professional specialisations from their bones. The problem is especially acute for the Upper Palaeolithic where we have so few human remains for the 30,000 years in question, most of them poorly preserved. And yet one 2014 study by Villotte and Knüsel, showed that a sexual division of labour can sometimes be strongly



Figure 9. One of the engraved stone plaquettes from Gönnersdorf (Germany, c. 12,600 BP) depicts what seem to be four highly stylized women, one behind the other, with a small form behind the back of the second one. It is generally interpreted as the representation of a baby carried and tied to the back of a woman.

indicated in prehistoric populations, when they detected evidence of “thrower’s elbow” in the right elbows of men – and only men – which suggests repeated throwing of spears; this certainly matches numerous ethnographic observations which thrown weapons are exclusively the province of men.

Although *Lady Sapiens* mentions this study, it places much greater emphasis on the recently reported discovery of a female big-game hunter in South America. The 9000-year-old remains of a young adult were excavated at the Andean highland site of Wilamaya Patjxa (Peru), buried with a “hunter’s tool kit” comprising projectile points and animal-processing tools. Osteological analysis revealed this young person had been around 18 years old at death -- but unfortunately the claim that it is a female remains inconclusive, and of course the simple presence of the toolkit is no proof that the deceased used it – though the same is true of all burials, whether male or female!

However, modern hunter-gatherer women (and this may also have been the case in the past) like to join a hunting expedition for the excitement of tracking and flushing out animals, but do not take part in the actual killing of large beasts.

Killing a large animal such as a wild reindeer or bison, after it has been wounded with spears and

hand-held implements and is struggling to escape, requires enormous strength, and is usually the most dangerous part of the hunting process. Butchering and transporting parts of the carcass back to the home site are also no mean tasks, and the physical demands required should not be underestimated. Anyone proposing that women in the remote past hunted large animal with basic weapons needs to fully consider the enormity of the process of killing large beasts.

There may have been several reasons why women opted out or were excluded from hunting. Keeping women and children safe from the dangers of hunting large animals would have been a good strategy for the survival of our species. Also, if a woman is carrying a child in a sling or cradleboard (Fig. 9), she would, presumably, be at a disadvantage and somewhat vulnerable during hunting activities. Most modern hunter-gatherer women report that hunting is not compatible with their child rearing roles, and instead prefer fishing and the necessary daily task of “gathering” a nutritious and more reliable supply of food.

These women also report that their contribution is just as valued as bringing home parcels of meat – which is by no means guaranteed. The Agta women of the Philippines are one of the few modern hunter-gatherer populations that hunt for wild pigs, deer and monkeys as often as their male counterparts. This is by no means considered a dangerous activity, and they state that pregnancy in no way limits these activities. It is certainly possible that women also hunted in the past, but at some point, in prehistory they “chose” to keep themselves and their offspring safer by staying close to home.

Choosing which “jobs” they preferred to take on would, therefore, have nothing to do with male domination, and even if child rearing became a priority, surely women would still have been capable of hunting and butchering animals and be self-sufficient in order to survive if (worst-case scenario) men failed to return from hunting excursions, and women were left to fend for themselves and their children.

The logical conclusion is that ice age women could hunt and make tools, even if these activities declined during times of pregnancy and rearing their young Ice age men could also have been efficient and proficient at all the tasks listed in the box: able to cook, process hides and sew, and care for and teach

## Economic activities other than hunting

Who did these jobs?

And does it matter?

Butchering and skinning animals  
 Processing skins & furs for clothing, etc  
 Netting animals  
 Fishing and gutting  
 Collecting wood, bones, animal dung for fires  
 Keeping the fires going continuously  
 Gathering seasonal foodstuffs like roots and plant food, eggs, berries & nuts  
 Collecting water  
 Cooking  
 Processing food for storage  
 Making textiles for clothing, ropes and nets  
 Making containers  
 Collecting stone, bone and antler & ochre  
 Processing ochre  
 Making stone, bone and antler tools  
 Making tools for sewing and skin processing -- needles, awls  
 Making beads and jewelry  
 Nursing and child minding  
 Teaching children the skills they need to survive  
 Exploring/trading away from home

their children survival skills. Presenting ice age men merely as tool- and weapon-makers and as hunters is to portray them in a very one-dimensional way.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Hunter-gatherer populations live in environments they feel no need to tame or shape to their own ends, a natural world that they know they can neither control nor dominate, and they depend entirely on one another for survival. In this milieu the pattern of daily life and concerns seems to have little need of gender politics, although observing rules/taboo regarding specific male/female roles is often present and ritualized, and not without consequences for those who fail to observe them. Sexual and identity politics have become an important issue in our modern culture, but is it likely these concerns were relevant or ever discussed during the ice age? One would imagine that essential everyday activities took precedence over gender politics -- although, of course, we will

never know what traditions different cultural groups observed over tens of thousands of years.

We know absolutely nothing about ice age language or thinking, but undoubtedly both must have been advanced to communicate thoughts and desires to each other, and in order to organize complex everyday activities. The lives of ice age populations necessarily required advanced levels of mental processing.

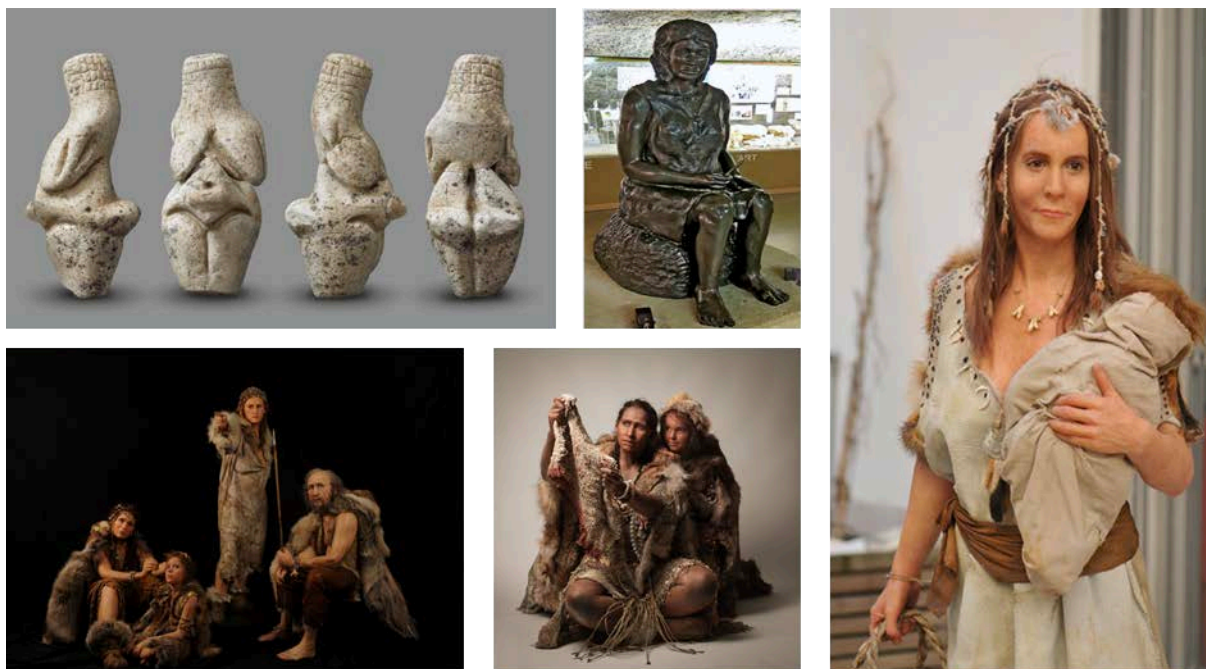
But what of dominance? We cannot confidently assume anything about the roles of men and women in prehistoric cultures -- it is challenging enough trying to grasp the values of cultures that are significantly different to our own; but would ice age cultures have even understood the concept of male or female dominance or superiority? Is it not more likely that men and women gained "status" by certain achievements, or fulfilling their obligations to the group's wellbeing? The issue of whether men alone, or both men and women hunted during the ice age is a conundrum that is unlikely to be resolved, and it is no more important than the question of who did any of



the other essential activities over this period of our long cultural development. Whatever activities men and women participated in, separately or together, it still does not follow that there would have been a direct link between men hunting and their dominating women. We simply do not know!

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Additional images

Clockwise, from top left:

- One of the recently discovered chalk female figurines from Amiens-Renancourt (Somme, France) (Photo S. Lancelot, INRAP- Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives, France).
- Statue of a young Upper Palaeolithic girl in the Abri Pataud Museum, France).
- Reconstruction of a final Upper Palaeolithic woman (By Elisabeth Daynès).
- Reconstruction of an Upper Palaeolithic woman and child (By Elisabeth Daynès).
- A group of Upper Palaeolithic people, reconstruction (By Elisabeth Daynès).