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Keywords

venus figurines, Upper Paleolithic, gender, art

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Upper Paleolithic Portable Female Imagery: the Masculine Gaze, the Archaeological Gaze and the Tenets of the Archaeological Discipline

Jennifer Kirkness

'Venus' figurines have been a point of interest for antiquity collectors and archaeologists since the late nineteenth century. Their study includes two parts: 1) analyzing the context, distribution, associations, manufacturing techniques, and general description(s) of the figurines, and 2) subjectively interpreting the form, meaning and motivations behind the construction of the figurines (Delporte 1996). Archaeologists have, until recently, engaged only in the interpretation of 'Venus' figurines. I will summarize and deconstruct some of the most influential interpretations of Upper Paleolithic female figurines so as to illuminate their underlying assumptions. I will demonstrate how the social context within which archaeologists are situated, and the tenets and paradigms of archaeology as a discipline, perpetuate gender biased, androcentric and presentist interpretations of objects from the past (Fabian 1983). Also, I will demonstrate how current research on female imagery of the Upper Paleolithic is still biased, despite its attempt to become more gender neutral. I believe this bias continues to occur because the 'academic' engages in non - reflexive interpretations which serve to reinforce his or her position as an objective mitigator of reality, thus securing his or her privileged position as a knower.

Because this paper is a discourse on perspectives it is important to cite my own perspective or standpoint at this point in my academic career. I am a white, lower middle class female. I am a feminist. I think that academics can increase their objectivity by becoming aware of their situatedness in the world. Furthermore, I question archaeology's supposed ability to know objects from the past as their users, producers or associates did. I suggest that one can best 'know' objects from the past (particularly objects that are part of poorly understood contexts) by starting from a holistic view point. Such a view point stresses the utilitarian use of an object, as it informs social, political and economic systems of the past. I am suggesting, therefore, that

archaeologists should strive to comprehend 'how' objects were used and valued and/or what meaning(s) these objects might have conveyed to the various groups of people that constitute a population familiar with the given object.

THE "VENUS" FIGURINES

The term 'Venus' is used to describe portable female imagery from the Upper Paleolithic. It was given to the figurines by Marquis De Vibraye in the mid nineteenth century (Bahn and Vertut 1988). The name was inspired by 'Venus', the Roman goddess of love. Therefore, the name 'Venus' introduces sexual characteristics onto these figurines. As such, I will emphasize how the implied 'sexual' characteristics of these figurines have been central to their interpretation. Moreover, I will use the phrases 'portable female imagery' or 'female figurines/statues' instead of continuing with the use of a sexually charged term.

Marcia Ann Dobres (1992:253) published a table compiling information on all figurines found as of 1992 and organized the data into biological sex and/or gender, site, and regional categories. She cites the total number of female figurines as representing less than half (48 percent) the entire corpus of human figurines. Only .02 percent of the figurines are determined by Dobres to be male. A resounding 49 percent are considered unidentifiable. The figurines were found in Siberia, Russia, France, Italy, and Central Europe. Dobres analysis serves to contradict the heavily laid assumption that all the figurines are female, as well as to illustrate that a resounding number of figurines are not classifiable by gender because this appears not to be a quality that was emphasized during their manufacture. Thus, the supposed sexual purpose of the figures that archaeologists have consistently emphasized is questionable given the androgynous nature of many of the figurines.

The Masculine Gaze

Two interpretations of the figurines have been particularly influential in the research on Upper Paleolithic portable female imagery; the 'Mother Goddess' interpretation (emphasizing a woman's reproductive potential) and the 'Erotic Play toy' interpretation (emphasizing a woman's sexual qualities). Collins and Onians (1978) formulate and perpetuate an 'Erotic Play toy' interpretation of the female figurines. They interpret the figurines as erotic statues used to fulfill the sexual angst of adolescents (a stage in life only recently instituted) - similar to the use of pornographic magazines. The diminutively disproportioned arms and legs of these statues are interpreted as exaggerating the uselessness of those body parts during lovemaking. Collins and Onians state that the figurines "match almost exactly the erotic interests of the sensually alert modern male" (1978:13). While this very directly specifies what motivated the creation of the figurines, it also illuminates itself as a very male oriented perspective. It should be noted that Collins and Onians (1978) assume sex to be unaffected by cultural differences and temporal changes. Collins and Onians (1978) continue the interpretation by aligning the hunt for sex with the hunt to alleviate hunger, thereby orienting men in a hunting community towards women and game animals. In fact, these are deemed as man's "two primal needs" (Collins and Onians 1978:15). Plants and water, comparable necessities, would "always have been easy enough to obtain, never to have taken the same place in his mind; they may also have been the responsibility of women" (Collins and Onians 1978:15). This is the only mention of women existing, other than as sex objects, in the entire article. Why was such a gender biased interpretation tolerated by the academic community and popular culture? I suggest that it was tolerated because it was constructed within a sexist social context that facilitated this misunderstanding and manipulation of data.

Jane Ussher, in *Fantasies of Femininity* (1997), discusses a phenomenon called 'the masculine gaze'. Under this gaze, 'woman' is created as the 'other' - to be defined against or to be had physically. Sexuality underlies a woman's identity; she is either worshipped or denigrated

(Ussher 1997). With respect to the forms it takes within Western society, Ussher (1997) emphasizes the embeddedness of the masculine gaze within art, film, literature, pornography, law, psychology and medical discourses. Anthropology and archaeology are no exception. By assuming (without reason) the figurines to be 'art', it aligns them with art forms such as, film, literature, sculpture and canvas, which previously and currently are under this masculine gaze (Conkey 1993). This facilitates sexist speculations on the motivation behind the construction of these figurines. In the Collins and Onians article (1978) the figurines were constructed for a man's sexual needs and gratification.

With respect to Collins and Onians' (1978) article, Mack (1992) criticized feminist arguments that emphasized the role the masculine gaze had in producing the erotic interpretation of the figurines. He suggests that while Collins and Onians (1978) superimposed their own sexist perspective onto the objects of study, described as the "transference of ...subject position onto prehistory" (Mack 1992:239), he considers it beside the point. Mack does not believe that such transference was prompted by a "sex/gender system", but rather the demands placed on the authors as archaeologists within a set method of discourse (Mack 1992:239). In other words, the structure of archaeological representation demands a subject-object relationship within the presentation (Mack 1992). I suggest that both factors work together. Collins and Onians (1978) should not be relieved from the responsibility of putting forward this gender biased, presentist and androcentric interpretation, and the effects it had on anthropology, academics and popular culture. Mack's (1992) discourse is very relevant to other aspects of this discussion and will be referred to again.

Depictions of women in art and film, and in interpretations of portable female images, construct an archetypal 'woman'. She is nude, "exposed in a formalized, languid pose...beautiful...calm... passive and sexually available.... thus disarmed, her danger diluted, her body sanitized" (Ussher 1997:114). A man can turn on or off his gaze at any time, therefore entirely the controlling the 'woman' (Ussher 1997). The common description of Paleolithic figurines parallels nicely: their heads are small, featureless and pointed downward (unable to gaze outward),

body parts associated with sex are emphasized, and body parts typically unassociated with sex are de-emphasized (Dickson 1990).

Another significant interpretation of the figurines emphasizes the portrayal of reproduction and motherhood. Levy (1948) used the term 'Mother Goddess' to describe the figurines. He interpreted the figurines as indicative of predecessors to modern [sic] 'primitives', who participated in the cult of the 'Mother Goddess'. Such a cult included the prominence of women in various image media's (Levy 1948). Thus, Levy's discourse constricts Upper Paleolithic figurines into a homogeneous group defined by their emphasized reproductivity. Evidence for such an interpretation relied on a corpus of female imagery that included large breasts, buttocks, bellies and thighs. Furthermore, Levy (1948) presumed the figurines to be associated with a domestic milieu based on their being absent in burials. It was obvious to Levy (1948) therefore, that the worship of the 'Mother Goddess' began in the Upper Paleolithic by the first modern *Homo sapiens*. He also evaluated the previous interpretation of figurines as erotic play toys and concluded the interpretation to be erroneous because the supposed "attitude" of the figurines was not 'sexy' - they lacked facial features, and their proportions were inaccurately carved (Levy 1948). Levy's argument does not disagree with sexist interpretations of the figurines, but rather, authorizes that Levy himself finds the figurines unerotic.

Neumann (1963) offers an analysis of the archetypal feminine - mother goddess. In his work he suggests that femininity is revered because it offers a fundamental symbol for the situation of human beings; woman = body = vessel = world. Although all beings have a body and therefore are vessels, the female body is special for its experience of four things: menstruation, birth, nursing, and self awareness of the prior three. The ability to bring life into the world and to enter into primary bonds is paralleled in males through their inner femininity. Femininity, the ability to create, is universal. It elicits males to "all the adventures of the soul and spirit, of action and creation in the inner and outer world" (Neumann 1963:33). Thus, all male creations are inspired by their feminine side, including the construction of female figurines. The figurines were worshipped as a

symbol of life creating ability but also revered as agents able to bring about fertility (Dickson 1990). Neumann's (1963) theory however, limits a woman's creative ability to the production of human life only. Furthermore, it is this theory that underlies the assumption that females did not take part in the creation of the female statues or any other cultural activities. It claims that biology inhibits woman's other creative abilities.

To summarize, the social context within which articles interpreting Upper Paleolithic figurines are published, frame women within a masculine gaze. Women are considered objects to be had or to define one's self against. 'Woman' is essentialized as a body and described as either a Madonna or a Whore depending on the status of her sexuality. 'Woman' is categorized as 'Other': she is other than male.

Within this simplistic view point are, however, anxieties and constraints. They include a fear of a woman's sexuality and reproductive powers. It also involves the fear of women refuting the way they have been interpreted and dominated by men. Men may question their ability to control women, power and knowledge: they are afraid of losing control (Ussher 1997). Given the pervasiveness of the masculine gaze in the past and present, it is not surprising that archaeologists as people should frame portable naked female images in a gender biased and androcentric manner.

As Mack (1992) suggested however, this 'sex/gender system' is not the only system perpetuating biased interpretations. I submit that there is such a thing as an archaeological gaze that does the same. The archaeological gaze structures the contact between archaeologists and objects, parallel to the way in which contact between men and women is structured by the masculine gaze. As such, both the masculine gaze and the archaeological gaze, construct an 'other' considered 'knowable' only through the penetrating use of the gaze itself. Until this gaze is deconstructed and challenged the underlying assumptions it carries with it will continue to predominate anthropological interpretations, as will be discussed below.

The Archaeological Gaze

The archaeological gaze influences the way in which archaeologists interact with objects from the past. Objects from the past are considered knowable, through data and/or research methods (Binford 1987; Hodder and Preucel 1996). Often objects are understood in terms of their similarity or dissimilarity to objects in today's society. Objects which are considered 'similar' are most likely related to in varying degrees of comfort, while objects considered 'dissimilar' may be related to in degrees of fearfulness and uncomfortability. How comfortable the archaeologist is with certain objects may also be triggered by the activity associated with the object. I suggest that the level of comfort to the inferred activity is not inherent to the object, but more so to current social and political sensitivities. Therefore, the socio - political context within which archaeological objects are discussed greatly influences how archaeologists and popular culture think and feel about such objects.

The archaeological gaze sets up a system, whereby interpretations of objects are constrained by the gaze itself. In fact, many anxieties revolve around the archaeological gaze including the fear of deconstruction. Such a deconstruction begins when interpretations are challenged by fellow archaeologists or the particular objects context. Furthermore, the majority of archaeologists at one point or another will be concerned with their ability or accuracy in "knowing" an object as the producers and users once knew it (Tilley 1993). Thus, the anxieties involved with any archaeological interpretation can act to reinforce responsible interpretations as the archaeologist will usually strive for the most "rational" and acceptable explanation. However, such anxieties may also limit the explanations that are deemed rational and acceptable. In today's academic community, explanations that claim gender neutrality are what is considered acceptable, however, this tenet is a relatively new addition and in consequence much gender biased literature is still perpetuated and accepted.

The most obvious limitation in Upper Paleolithic research is the fact no ethnohistorical documents can be used to verify interpretations. Thus, interpretations are linked to the current social and political view point of the archaeologist.

One particular political stand point taken by archaeologists ensures their control over information of the past. This stand point is the belief in the ability of methods and data to eventually tease out the 'true' meaning of an object. Archaeologists make no distinction between their ability to know objects 100 years old, 10, 000 years old or 100, 000 years old. Thus, Upper Paleolithic figurines are researched under the assumption that information can and will be derived from them, in such a way as to illuminate to the researcher the original meaning and/or use of the figurines. It is often believed by archaeologists that by using the 'appropriate' research methods the data will be purged of biases from one's work. In other words, biases have not, until recently, been considered the underlying source of errors. In Upper Paleolithic research gender bias is still a problem, as I have demonstrated.

Finally, Upper Paleolithic female figurines are but objects that made up a part of Upper Paleolithic life. Most Upper Paleolithic archaeologists have, however, extracted the figurines from their context and entered into a subject/object relationship with them. This perspective not only simplifies the figurines relationship in Upper Paleolithic populations, but it also reiterates the objectified relationship archaeologists have to their objects of study as perpetuated by the archaeological gaze.

The Archaeological Community

Just as the masculine gaze essentializes 'woman' apart from society into a 'thing' composed only of characteristics, it also fundamentally constructs the category 'woman' into a dichotomy; 'woman' is opposed to 'man' and world. I suggest that the archaeological gaze essentializes objects (some more than others - for various reasons) apart from their context. Thus, researchers may presume themselves to have the ability to study productively decontextualized objects without being influenced by socio - political factors. However, decontextualization prompts dichotomy - structured research and allows socio - political influences to permeate such research. Given that socio - political factors are likely to influence research on decontextualized objects, such as that on female imagery, it is very

important to know who the majority of archaeologists are and thereby understand what cultural understandings are most likely to be promulgated in their research and how such understanding affect their research.

I suggest that the sex, class and ethnicity of practicing archaeologists has and does influence what and how materials are studied. I demonstrate below that the majority of archaeologists are white, middle class males. Thus, the discourse surrounding archaeological objects will be guided most likely by the interests of these majority practitioners. Consequently, objects will be understood in various sets of dichotomies by middle class, white males according to their social and academic values. Therefore, the discipline of archaeology can be used to naturalize and make universal, white, middle class, western, male interpretations of objects. I in no way wish to perpetuate a deterministic model, nor do I want to reduce all male or female opinions into one. I hope instead to demonstrate that objects are understood in terms of dichotomies based on similarity and dissimilarity. I also want to illuminate the fact that the various opinions of lower class, minority, and/or female archaeologists are not as pervasive within the archaeological discipline, nor within popular culture, as interpretations that are based on the long - standing community and discourse of the upper or middle class white male.

It is rare when feminist critiques get injected into interpretations of female statues, because women have not been able to participate, until very recently, in archaeology to the same extent as men (Hutson 1998). Fewer women than men are employed as archaeologists, fewer women receive doctorates in archaeology, women on average receive lower salaries, women are less likely to hold tenure, women generally receive less grant money and women's research is less prestigious (Hutson 1998). Also noted by Hutson (1998) is a bottleneck in academia with respect to the ability to control and monitor contributions to journals. A few select archaeologists are in the position to screen the publications of an entire discipline and are therefore in a position to protect their own values (social and academic) from being challenged. While women editors sit on two of the most important physical anthropology journals, the *Journal of Human Evolution* and the *American*

Journal of Physical Anthropology, the values of the editors (social or academic) could still be over represented. For instance, not all women are feminists. Feminists may project classist biases or perpetuate origins research. The values held by the majority of archaeologists and those in editing positions will be the ones that are most often projected. Internalization of this phenomenon perpetuates particular paradigms and discursive practices within the discipline, at the expense of certain research topics, presentations, representation styles and formats (Hutson 1998).

The Importance of Context

Unfortunately many of the Upper Paleolithic figurines were excavated without proper documentation, and therefore the context of the figurines has largely gone undiscussed (Gamble 1982; Von Koeningswald 1972; Gimbutas 1989). There are two directions which Upper Paleolithic figurine research can take: 1) analyzing the context, distribution, associations, manufacturing techniques, and general description of the figurines, and 2) subjectively interpreting the form, meaning and motivations of the figurines with, or without, reference to the first type of research. That the context of most of the female figurines is unknown facilitates subjective interpretation of the objects themselves without reference to context. The problem with this research method is that the meaning of an object is usually not inherent to the object but comes from the objects use and interaction between people. Suggesting to know the figurines purpose and use without understanding how the figurines were found within Upper Paleolithic sites or without proper dating information is premature. Furthermore, presuming to know or understand Upper Paleolithic portable female imagery apart from its context impedes further research on the Upper Paleolithic.

The Prestige of Origins Research

The tenets of the archaeological discipline encourage certain types of research at the expense of others. I have already mentioned Hutson's (1998) description of a bottleneck controlling the publication of articles. It follows that the few archaeologists who have control over publication

would also favour and encourage certain types of research. One of the most prestigious types of research is 'Origins Research' (Conkey and Williams 1991). The 'Venus' figurines are commonly thought to signal the beginning of 'art', thus becoming the focal point of art origin research. The fact that the concept of 'art' (other than indicating skilled craftsmanship) did not exist in Western society until the eighteenth century is not confronted (Williams 1976). The lure of origins research, as described by Conkey and Williams (1991), is its capacity to be a reference point for all subsequent research. The prestige in owning a point of reference is obvious.

The implications of such research, with respect to women in association with Paleolithic art, have been disturbing. The areas applicable to origins research, are, according to Conkey and Williams (1991), centered on the "techno - environment domain". For example, tools, fire, hunting, language, and agriculture are all 'hot' topics among archaeologists. Archaeologists not only study the control of fire, they give it importance by studying it, and they themselves control the control of fire. In all of the discourses within origin research, women have been written as non - participants.

The preference for techno - environmental research is based on four factors: 1) ontologically, the techno - environmental domain is considered an effect of cultural change; 2) epistemologically it is considered more knowable; 3) knowledge can be acquired about the techno - environmental domain through 'preferred' data such as bones, stone tools and can be easily pushed further back in time to increase antiquity and naturalize its effectiveness, and 4) it assumes males are the innovators of techno - environmental acts and objects (Conkey and Williams 1991:122). This last element hints at tacit activity categories that are referred to when doing origin research. For example, until archaeologists find evidence of a task tacitly associated with women, they are considered non - participants. These tacit categories are problematic and are perpetuated by origins research. However, origins research also decontextualizes research by demanding research focus to on and thereby extract one particular aspect of a culture from its time and context. Thus it becomes easier to superimpose a gender bias onto an object because the context of the

object if not considered, or studied, can not refute a researcher's hypothesis.

Archaeologists are people who participate in and are influenced by the assumptions society perpetuates. Archaeologists are also academics who are influenced by the structure and tenets of their discipline. It has been demonstrated that the act of superimposing gender biased perspectives onto the past reinforces those perspectives in the present and makes them appear more 'natural'. Today some researches are specifically trying to participate in less biased research - especially less gender biased and androcentric. I will now review some recent interpretations of Upper Paleolithic imagery and discuss how the masculine and archaeological gaze, as well as, origin - slanted research still permeate Upper Paleolithic interpretations.

Present Interpretations: Questioning their Objectivity

McDermott's Theory: A View from Self

LeRoy McDermott suggests in the abstract to his article that the "first images of the human figure were made from the point of view of self rather than other" (1996:227). This 'self' was pregnant females who crafted disproportionate objects in response to the way their body appeared to the eye when looking downwards. The limbs are unrealistically small or missing. The face generally lacks features, and most of the figurines are nude. McDermott's corpus of data is restricted to the Pavlovian (Czech Republic), Kostenkian (Russian), and Gravettian (French) sites, which he refers to as PKG. He rationalizes this association on the presence of a widespread 'techno - complex' within those areas and the general similarity of the figurines. Dates range from 30,000kya to 20,000kya, but particularly between 29,000 - 23,000kya (McDermott 1996).

In response to McDermott's hypothesis, thirteen scholars offered comments and criticisms. They all applauded his attempts to give agency to Paleolithic women rather than partake in a sexist interpretation. His research assumes the figurines represent the production of the first human images and according to his article they all appear female. McDermott's research gives itself authority because it organizes the data into origins research.

However, the research itself has flaws. Several people criticized McDermott for exaggerating the presence of certain types of figurines (Cook 1996; Bisson 1996; Jelinek 1996; Svoboda 1996; Tomaskova 1996) which actually constitute a numerical minority (Dobres 1996; Bahn and Renfrew 1996). Pregnant-looking figurines with large breasts, buttocks and stomachs actually comprise a small portion of Paleolithic portable figurines. Indeed, less than half the total number of portable human figurines are unquestionably female. Most portable figurines are actually animals (Bahn and Vertut 1997). McDermott (1996), Collins and Onians (1978) and Levy (1948) constructed broad hypothesis that ignored the variable morphology within the corpus of figurines (Dobres 1996). Why was the data so obviously misconstrued?

I would again emphasize the prestige of manufacturing an origins hypothesis (which demands simplifying and essentializing a group of objects or ideas into a beginning point), but also mention the importance of the socio-political context in which the interpretations of Paleolithic figurines occurred. Research can easily be persuaded by such contexts. If society frames women within a masculine gaze, those figurines that fit easily into that gaze will be considered similar and therefore more readily engaged with. However, in McDermott's defense, the figurines were made over tens of thousands of years and scholars should not forget this when they chastise their peers for not developing a broad enough explanation. A problem occurs only when one applies a single explanation to the entire corpus of figurines.

Despite the fact that McDermott gives women from the Upper Paleolithic agency in the production of statues, Dobres (1996) is still critical of the interpretation because it relies on women's biological status rather than admit their participation in cultural activities. McDermott's (1996) article situates Paleolithic women in present sociobiological norms in order to provide evidence for his hypothesis. He refers to 'normal sized' and 'average' women, without considering the bias in these assumptions (Dobres 1996). What is the normal or average size of pregnant woman? Does this differ within age, culture, or term of pregnancy experienced? Dobres suggests that it does and that speculation on the experience of pregnancy 20 - 30

000 years ago is inappropriate. Although pregnancy may have changed biologically, more importantly, the experience of pregnancy has to be understood as culturally mitigated and therefore has almost certainly changed. Even if body forms were biologically similar to today's bodies, the way one sees one's own body is based on the culture within which one is situated.

McDermott's article highlights two assumptions held by contemporary Paleolithic scholars. First that previous and present interpretations of female figurines have lacked a female perspective that gives women agency in creating and mitigating culture and secondly, that the corpus of figurines is reducible to a single explanation even though the figurines are highly variable. There will always be figurines that will not fit interpretations and thus the inappropriateness of a reductive approach, like origins research, is emphasized.

Establishing Context

So far the discourse surrounding the corpus of female figurines has focused on interpretations of the data and not on the archaeological context, associations or distribution of the figurines (excluding Levy's point that the figurines were absent from burials). The recent work by Bisson et al. (1996), Detev'anko (1998) and White (1998a;b) illuminate the amount of contextual information that can be derived from specimens dug in the early 1900's or late 1800's and the importance of this information. I suggest despite these advances, the context of the figurines usually remains as evidential footnotes to subjective interpretations.

Henri Delporte (1993) divides the corpus of female figurines into four zones based on style and similarity of 'art form': Western European (France, Italy, Central Europe); Moravian (Czech Republic and Slovakia); Russian Plain; and Siberian. The Moravian, Russian and Siberian sites have been dug and documented fairly extensively by archaeologists (Detev'anko 1998). Of the Western European finds however, only one of the sites (Grimaldi) was documented (Bisson et al. 1996). Bisson et al's (1996) attempt to extract contextual information from decontextualized objects illuminates the importance of expanding

the time and cultural boundaries of a style of female figurines.

Very little stratigraphic information survives from excavations of three Grimaldi caves in Italy, where female figurines were found (Bisson et al 1996). Some notes were made on a few contextual finds, such as the presence of hearths, burials, stone tools, animal bones, and shells. Also, depths were labeled on some animal bones (Bisson et al 1996). As such, a sketchy outline of the stratigraphy of one of the caves, Barma Grande, can be made.

The Grimaldi caves originally produced thirteen figurines, seven of which were lost for the better part of this century, until 1993 (Bisson et al 1996). When the missing seven were found, a collection of tools, lithic debitage and animal bones were found with them. Depth labels were on some of the animal bones. Three samples of animal bone were chosen for radiocarbon dating: The first from a depth of eight meters (but thought to come from seven meters as the figurines were covered in charcoal from a hearth); the second from a depth of six to six and a half meters (also thought associated with a hearth); and finally the third from an unknown depth presumed to be from the final Epi-Gravettian time period because of the residue on it. Very generally, the dates corresponded to the established Gravettian sequence, ranging from eight meters at 19 280 +/- 220 B.P., six to six and a half meters at 17 200 +/- 180 B.P. and unknown at 14 110 +/- 140 B.P. The tools in the collection correspond to this sequence also. Bisson et al. (1996) concluded the cave, and therefore the figurines found within it, were occupied during the Epi - Gravettian period, rather than Aurignacian or Gravettian period as was previously assumed. Therefore, the typically Gravettian style figurine (large bust, buttocks, belly, no facial features and small limbs) found at Barma Grande is from a more recent time period (17 200 +/- B.P) than expected (26 000 - 23 000 B.P). Thus, certain female images (large breasts, buttocks, and belly) were not restricted temporally or spatially as was originally thought (Bisson et al 1996). Thus, this reconstructed contextual information illustrates that one interpretation cannot be used to understand figurines created over a span of 15,000 years. Nor should this newly created context be used to verify monolithic forms and therefore motivations, as when

compared to the very different kinds of figurines found elsewhere. In fact, it should be used to emphasize the variability in female imagery forms.

Due to this contextual research, new information on the figurines was produced. Subsequently a new avenue for the interpretations of the figurines has been opened. This does not assume that the 'right' interpretation will eventually be formulated from this new information, however, I am suggesting that this new information should be used to open up the discourse on Upper Paleolithic female imagery, not to reduce it. Thus, an interpretation like McDermott's (1996) may be useful in understanding the production of some of the figurines at one point in time. However, if such an interpretation assumes itself to be universally applicable to all Upper Paleolithic figurines, or suggests that it marks the beginning of constructing portable human forms, it is no better than previous sexist interpretations. Therefore, it is unfair to criticize interpretations of female figurines based on the fact not all figurines fit within the particular interpretation.

The Chaines Operatoires

A newly applied research method relevant to the study of the female figurines is used by Randall White (1998a;b). In his research report summary on ice age studies he describes some of the work he has done on the Grimaldi figurines from Italy (White 1998a) and the double figurine from Gagarino on the Russian Plains (White 1998b). His theoretical orientation is influenced by the work of Marcel Mauss, translated by Leroi - Gourhan, on the chaines operatoires (White 1998a). The chaines operatoires is described by White as a "conventionalized, learned sequence of technical operations implicated in all cultural productions from the manufacture of stone tools to the painting of the underground cavities to the modern assembly line" (White 1998a). Therefore, the method of manufacture is an element of culture and not its byproduct. He states that regional cultural variation acts as the bases for regional technical systems manifested in style. Thorough observation and experimentation of the chaine operatoire underlying the manufacture of the figurines will lead to new interpretations of the "social, economic and ideational contexts" (White

1998a). This method tries to appear more objective, scientific and technical because the archaeologist is interfacing with the figurine closely and exclusively. I will argue that this is not always true.

White enters into an very detailed examination of the fifteen figurines from Grimaldi, including the seven figurines recently rediscovered (1998a). Several observations are used as evidence for a new interpretation of the female figurines: tactile qualities; perforations for possible suspension; carved furrows for suspension; location within the site away from the living area (questionable given the above discussions on the problems with the excavation record and dating of the seven rediscovered figurines); and ethnographic analogies to modern circumpolar people's motives in creating figurines. White suggests that the figurines were used as individually - owned amulets to ensure the safe completion of childbirth (White 1998a). I question White's use of technological analogies that appear to contradict his previous claim that stylistic differences mimic cultural differences. The ethnographic analogy is used to indicate the figurines were used within a reproductive and childbirthing context, but not in the form of fertility cults. White uses the site of Avedeevo on the Russian Plains as an example. Partial and whole figurines were found there, buried in several different pits. This is interpreted to mean that the figurines were thought to be powerful: they were able to ensure the safety of a mother and/or child through the birthing process (White 1998a). White at no time refers to the bodily proportions of the figurines except to state that variation within the corpus may indicate individualized manufacture, or clan or guardian spirits. He explicitly states that his theory is a good one because it "satisfies the demands of the feminist critic" (White 1998a). White suggests that his interpretation does not require a generalized notion of womanhood and it does not imply the subordination of woman as has occurred in previous interpretations (1998a).

However, using the *chaîne opératoire*, he has only concluded that the Grimaldi figurines have tactile qualities, and could have been suspended. References to the archaeological context of Grimaldi figurines are dubious for reasons stated previously. The use of ethnographic

analogies when researching the Upper Paleolithic is questionable, as is the use of the figurines from Avedeevo given the different time periods represented and dissimilar figurine style. Although White (1998a) tried to enter into a technical, therefore 'objective' discourse with the figurines, his interpretation was not based on technical observations. Therefore, White's creative compilation of evidence exemplifies how well intentioned research may become faulty if the assumptions within the discipline of archaeology are not confronted.

White's study of the "double statuette" from Gagarino on the Russian Plains, is much more productive and insightful than the one just described (1998b). It does not offer a broad explanation or interpretation of all figurines but focuses in on just one - the 'double statuette'. The 'double statuette' is an ivory baton with two incomplete figurines head to head. One figurine appears to be closer to completion. Thorough examination of all discernible markings on the statuette reveal different morphological characteristics associated with each figurine. The *chaîne opératoire* is thought to be revealed in the processes of completing the figurines. White suggests that given that the baton was worked in segments, and another statuette found at Gagarino is very similar morphologically, technologically, and structurally, it is possible that the baton was meant to produce three figurines (1998b). Thus, several figurines may have been sequentially produced and detached from the same baton. The legs, which appear to be broken at the ankle, are actually intact except for post depositional breakage (White 1998b). Because one craftsman is implied within this analysis, it tries to challenge the theory that variation between figurines is due to variation between crafts persons (White 1998b). Reference is made to the context in which it and other statuettes were found, to propose that no area of the site was specified for figurine production. Again, this is consistent with individual craftsmanship. Unfortunately, fragments of figurines distributed throughout the site's periphery go unexplained (White 1998:b).

Overall, White's (1998b) analysis is useful so far as it explains possible manufacture techniques of the figurines at the Gagarino site, though no attempt has been made to infer their purpose within the culture, or their meaning to

individuals. The desire to assign meaning to Upper Paleolithic objects, I suggest, is what prompted White (1989a) to offer the flawed interpretation of the Grimaldi statues. Although he worked under a potentially useful techno-analytical theory, it was not useful with the Grimaldi figurines. Inadequate archeological discourse around objects not 'easily' knowable (i.e. not functional) occurs, I suggest because of the expectations put on archaeologists to assign meaning to the objects of their study. White tried successfully to produce a predominately gender-neutral interpretation, but his work also tries to reduce a large and variable group of figurines to a single motivating explanation. This was demonstrated even in his 1998b research when he suggested that none of the morphological variety between the figurines was due to individual manufacture. I had personal communication with Dr. White and his assistance prompted me towards additional articles explaining the *chaine operatoire*. Unfortunately, I could not access the material because of the University of Western Ontario's limited resources and the time period in which I had to write this essay. Also, I am unable to read French, and due to the fact much Upper Paleolithic research is published in French, I admit my comprehension of the material is limited. White's techno - analytical theory is potentially useful but what is needed most is a discourse on the assumptions within Upper Paleolithic research and how they effect knowledge procurement.

The Mal'ta Site: A Non - Origins Research Approach

Derev'anko (1998) provides us with an example of contextual research on the Upper Paleolithic (which happens to include female figurines) that does not take on an origins slant. A newly compiled book on the Paleolithic of Siberia includes a section on several sites producing female figurines and how their characteristics, distributions, and associations can illuminate their importance to people 23, 000 years ago (Derev'anko 1998). Relevant to this discussion is the Mal'ta site, documented by Derev'anko (1998). It is an Upper Paleolithic site within which was found the largest number of female figurines as compared to any other site in Eastern and Western Europe.

The Mal'ta site is dated between 24 - 23 000 B.P. Although it was excavated between the years of 1928 to 1958, fairly detailed records were made on some aspects of the excavation. At Mal'ta, all female figurines were noted to be carefully placed in six positions: 1) surrounded by animal bones or artifacts; 2) in a cache covered by mammoth tusk and dolomite slabs; 3) vertically facing a hearth; 4) on a pedestal within an accumulation of debris; 5) within a mobile storage and placed on a pedestal outside an accumulation; and 6) in an unsystematic, or rather, any other, context (Derev'anko 1998). The figurines varied in 'plumpness' and 'shapeliness'. Some were clothed, others were not, their legs were not individually carved but joined in a diminutive progression, and pubic triangles are present on some of them (Derev'anko 1998). Because of the care that was taken in positioning the objects in the places where they were found, it is suggested that the figurines should be understood in either a ritual or storage context (Derev'anko 1998). Thus, at the Mal'ta site, despite the potential for Derev'anko (1998) to do a detailed analysis of the figurines themselves, he interpreted the figurines meaning from their distribution and associations.

Although present interpretations are actively trying to avoid producing gender biased interpretations, these biases still occur. But gender biases are not the only issues that need to be addressed. Assumptions made by archaeologists, such as the necessity to assign meaning, the unquestioned prestige of origins research, and the use of ethnographic analogies, needs to be confronted within Upper Paleolithic research. Archaeologists are slowly realizing the important role of self and discipline reflexivity but much work still needs to be done.

Conclusion

The study of Upper Paleolithic female imagery has been, and is fraught with biases and assumptions. It has been demonstrated that one interpretation cannot be used to understand all of the figurines, as origin research perpetuates, because the corpus includes wide morphological, species, gender and time variability. Not until a reflexive and comprehensive study of Upper Paleolithic imagery and associated context takes place, will the figurines be better understood.

Indeed, Upper Paleolithic imagery should be a part of a study on the Upper Paleolithic in a particular location, as it relates to other Upper Paleolithic sites. Upper Paleolithic female imagery should not be a researcher's focal point. Such an undertaking could include studying the relationship between Upper Paleolithic settlement patterns, economy, ecology, and the manufactured items, such as tools and the variety of symbolic figures. The very definition of Upper Paleolithic figurines needs to be confronted. Why have female figurines been discussed so much? Why are figurines from Europe dated at 26,000 B.P. and 17,000 B.P. considered in the same corpus of data (Bisson et al. 1996)? Are there figurines from other areas of the world dated in the same time frame? Why are such figurines discluded from Upper Paleolithic discussions? Archaeologists need also, to confront the possibility that such objects may not be knowable in the same sense that the users, producers and associates of the figurines knew them. We may not be able to find the object's 'meaning' but could examine how sense can be made from such objects.

In conclusion, advocating a "limited, and carefully nuanced, commitment to empiricism" is considered a much more productive methodology by some (Trigger 1989). It is hoped that archaeologists will seek awareness of their own, and their discipline's biases, and address these biases prominently in their work, so as to better account for their own interpretations. The contextual discovery of the Upper Paleolithic female statues is also sorely lacking from Upper Paleolithic research and this needs to be remedied. Despite the many problems with Upper Paleolithic portable figurine data, I do believe that research such as that done by White (1998b) will only further our understanding of the meaning of these figurines, as it is framed within their prehistoric context.

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