

Female Figurines of the Upper Paleolithic

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of

Texas State University-San Marcos

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For Graduation in the University Honors Program

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San Marcos, Texas

May 2008

Abstract

Those depictions of the human female figure found in association with Upper Paleolithic cultures commonly called “Venus figurines” are an extremely varied class of artifacts. Hundreds of these figurines have been found across the Eurasian continent from France to Siberia and have been dated to around 25,000 B.C.E. Generally the Venus figurines are thought to be small, stone sculptures of nude women with pronounced sexual characteristics who are either voluptuous or pregnant with no face, arms, or legs. Although some of the figurines can be stereotyped this way, there are numerous overlooked examples with drastically different features. The overwhelming variety and diversity among the figurines themselves is reflected in the theories that have developed about them. Since the late nineteenth century, the meaning and purpose of these Venus figurines have been interpreted over and over again. Some of the theories directly reflect the biased thoughts of their time, some are religious and symbolic, and still others have a narrowed scientific focus and rely upon detailed technological analysis. The variety of both the figurines themselves and their interpretations has been overlooked as an important part of understanding these very old and widespread carvings of women.

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5	http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Venus_of_Brassempouy.jpg
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22	color: http://www.humanities-interactive.org/ancient/iceage/ex038_06c.html black and white: Absolon 1949:202
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- 37 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Buretj_%28venus_figurine%29.gif
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1. Brassempouy
 2. Lespugne
 3. Laugarie-Basse
 (Drodogne)

4. Laussel
 5. Lascaux
 6. Grimaldi/Balzi
 Rossi

7. Savignano
 8. Willendorf
 9. Brno
 10. Dolni Vestionice-

Pavlov
 11. Ostrava-
 Petrkovice
 12. Avdeevo

13. Zaraysk
 14. Gagarino
 15. Kostenki

Female Figurines of the Upper Paleolithic

Introduction

Across the Eurasian landmass, hundreds of depictions of the human figure crafted by the artisans of various Upper Paleolithic cultures -- especially the Gravettian -- have been unearthed at sites spanning from the French Pyrenees to Lake Baikal in Siberia [Fig. 1]. This extremely heterogeneous body of artifacts has remained a controversial subject in anthropology since the discovery of the first few in the late nineteenth century. In addition to the sheer range of locales at which they have been found, the individual artifacts vary widely in height, from three to forty centimeters or more. An assortment of raw materials have been employed to create both portable and fixed images portraying not only the female form, but also the male body, anthropomorphic characters, and androgynous people. Of the figurines that render the female form, subject matter extends the full scope of womanhood, with representations ranging from pre-pubescent girls to matronly women in various stages of pregnancy to much older, post-menopausal women.

These images are often only briefly mentioned in texts, among an array of Upper Paleolithic art images, and the a small selection of pieces that have come to be more or less popularized limits the accurate study of their true origin and meaning. Commonly, although inaccurately, known as “Venus figurines.” the female images comprise only a small portion of early human art that developed during the period of the last Ice Age. With their initial discovery, many by amateur archaeologists, these feminine representations sparked heated debate that has yet to wane over their origin, use, and meaning. Much of the essential information about many of the images will never be definite because so many of them were

uncovered by people before the development of methods for standardizing the documentation of stratigraphic and spatial provenance. In recent years, though, there has been a drive to focus more closely on these figurines with the aid of newly developed analytical and dating techniques. Archaeologists are now looking at the original discovery of individual figurines and studying the relationships between geographic location, raw material, fabrication technique, morphological appearance, and style. New interpretations are being developed for these figurines as a result of their treatment as separate entities rather than simply a part of a single, homogeneous phenomenon.

The terms used in this paper refer to the earth's last glacial period, the Pleistocene, which extends from about 1.8 million years ago to about 10 thousand years ago. Known also as the Stone Age and the Paleolithic, this period has been divided into Lower, Middle, and Upper, the Lower and Middle Paleolithic being associated with Acheulean and Mousterian tool industries, respectively. The figurines under scrutiny here date back to the Upper Paleolithic, which spanned from about 30,000 to 10,000 years ago. This period can generally be broken down further into five periods of overlapping industries: the Chatelperronian, Aurignacian, Gravettian, Solutrean, and Magdalenian [Fig. 2]. Each industry is defined by a specific tool-type; however, for the purposes of this paper, these will not be outlined here. Although most of the carved representations on record are credited to the Gravettian industry, a comparatively small number have been associated with the other industries.

In any given collection of artifacts from the Upper Paleolithic, the majority is made up of tools and items related to subsistence. What the figurines represent most significantly is the initial cognitive movement toward what we now call art. Ice Age art ranges in type and style from cave paintings and rock-carvings to portable sculptures and figurines to decorated

Number of years ago	Epoch	Age/Period - Industry/culture
1.8 million	Pleistocene	Lower Paleolithic - Olduwan - Acheulean
30 thousand		Middle Paleolithic - Mousterian
10 thousand		Upper Paleolithic - Chatelperronian - Aurignacian - Gravettian - Solutrean - Magdalenian
	Holocene	Neolithic

Figure 2

tools and clothing items. Artifacts that fall into our modern category of Art are commonplace in the excavations of Gravettian and Magdalenian industry sites all across Europe and Asia. Most of the earliest art consists of the instantly recognizable portrayal of animals, but some images are human representations and of these, most are women (Bahn 2000:33). Because the precise gender – or creature – depicted in many of the artifacts remains unclear, I will be restricting this discussion, and my use of the general phrase “Venus figurines,” to those which scholars are relatively certain – or generally concede – to

be female. Although the hundreds of female figurines that have been found since the 1890s are by no means the identical – a point to be emphasized – important stylistic similarities unite them as a group and provide points of comparison and contrast for discussion. For the purposes of this paper, I will be excluding abstract images attributed to the Aurignacian – those “so-called ‘vulvae’ and forms resembling an elongated ‘S’ or upside-down ‘P’” (Dobres 1996) – and those hundreds of fragments that are rough and undefined or too small for one to ascertain what they originally represented. What I will refer to as “Venus figurines” are those specimens classified with the most certainty as portrayals of the female form, itself a controversial task.

According to Marcia-Anne Dobres, “most explanatory theories treat the Venus figurines as a homogeneous class of data and collapse together more than 20,000 years of varied productions” (Dobres 1996). The question of their racial origin dominated intellectual discourse about them from the time of their initial discovery in the 1890s, but by the mid-twentieth century, questions of womanhood, fertility, and religion replaced the earliest racial fixation. Interpretations of these Paleolithic images of women continue to develop, with more recent emphasis shifting toward the study of individual figurines separately, as opposed to as a group. With new tools and methods, researchers are trying to combat the earliest generalizing stereotypes by investigating the relationship between an individual figure and the location in which it was found (including its context within the site) as well as the diverse raw materials, creation techniques, and styles implemented in its manufacture (Dobres 1996; Bisson 1994, 1996; White 2006).

I will begin my own exploration into the origin and meaning of these artifacts by briefly describing each figurine in as much detail as possible before addressing the historical evolution of interpretations that have been suggested for each. All of the details presented

in this paper are secondhand descriptions based on those printed by researchers who have had intimate contact with the pieces. I will chronicle the interpretive frameworks that have developed since the initial discovery of these figurines in a way as to chronicle the progression of ideas over time.

The Figurines

The images are, in most cases, naked portions of the female anatomy that follow a certain artistic style and are carved from different soft stones, ivory, or bone. A few rare examples are formed from clay and then fired, representing some of the earliest examples of ceramics (Baring 1991: 11). The most often pictured figurines are those that are carved so that certain parts of the anatomy are emphasized while others are deliberately neglected. The hair-styles, breasts, abdomen, hips, thighs and vulva are often exaggerated while the extremities (heads, arms, hands, legs, and feet) and facial features are often lacking. Of course there are many depictions of females that do not adhere to this form and therein lies one of the essential interpretive conflicts. Since there are over a hundred of these figurines, it would be difficult to examine each one in detail, but the goal here is to show that there are many examples of feminine representation in early art with both surprising similarities and drastic differences.

How to group the figurines when discussing them has presented something of a challenge since there is no single, widely accepted categorization system for the figurines. I have chosen to follow a grouping based on the least controversial list, devised by Henry Delporte (1993), which breaks the figurines down based on their location of discovery. There remains much argument whether or not there are cultural connections between each geographic group as well as whether they should be distinguished between portable or fixed art or categorized by body type, raw material, and/or age. Any of these categorization

methods can be used when discussing these figurines, but grouping them geographically seems most comprehensive and the easiest system to follow.

Pyrenees-Aquitaine Group

This group includes those pieces from Southwestern France along the edge of the Pyrenees. France has some of the richest Gravettian deposits in Southwestern Europe and the first figurines ever found are from this area. Many of the figurines from this group are well known and have been studied more extensively than other groups. This area is generally considered to have been densely populated at the end of the last Ice Age, and it is this area that is also known for its extensive examples of cave art. Perhaps the best known Paleolithic site in France – or even Europe – is



Figure 3



Figure 4

Lascaux, one of many rock-shelters and natural caves in limestone along the western edges of the Massif Central and the northern slopes of the Pyrenees. The cave of Lascaux is famous for its stunning paintings and frescos of animals like bulls, horses, and stags [Fig. 3]. The cave art here dates to about 15,000 B.C.E. and is much younger than our principal subject, the figurines more than 22,000 year old.

The first female representation that was found is known as *La Vénus impudique* [Fig 4] (“the immodest Venus”) by its discoverer the Marquis de Vibraye (the figurine is also sometimes called the *Vénus de Vibraye*) (White 2006:253). In 1864, Vibraye found the headless, footless, armless, and breast-less figurine with a strongly incised vaginal

opening at Laugarie-Basse (Dordogne), France. He interpreted the 7.7 cm tall ivory figurine to be the rendering of a pre-pubescent girl (White 2006:253). He dubbed the figurine with the term “Venus” as a contrast to the “modest Venus” of classical art who keeps one hand over her private parts, and it since has become an umbrella term for the entirety of female figurines from the Upper Paleolithic.

Thirty years later, in Brassempouy, France, archaeologist Edouard Piette found the tiny ivory head of a woman [Fig 5] (White 2006: 252). Carved exquisitely from mammoth-tusk ivory, what Piette named *La Dame a la capuche* (“the hooded woman”), measures a mere 3.65 cm (White 2006:269). Others have called her the Venus of Brassempouy (Piette 1895) or simply “Head of Goddess” (Baring 1991: 9) and she has been dated to around 22,000 B.C.E. (Baring 1991: 9). This carving is very different from many of the other



Figure 5

statuettes in that it has very delicately carved facial features and lines representing either hair or a headdress. Initially, the lines were interpreted as an intricate headdress resembling the head of an Egyptian doll which Piette interpreted as a connection between these Upper Paleolithic people and the Egyptians (White 2006:274). This figurine was contrasted to other grotesque Venuses as a “search of beauty” (Osborn 1919:433), and it was cast as an example of the white, Cro-Magnons of Piette’s two-race theory which will be discussed later in detail.

Lespugue (Haute-Garonne), France yielded what is known as the Venus of Lespugue [Fig 6], from the Rideaux cave in 1922 (Witcombe 2003). This statue was also carved from

mammoth-ivory and has a height of 14 cm. The figurine was broken during excavation and has been reconstructed to show the original shaping of the breasts [Fig. 7]. It is dated to 20,000 – 18,000 B.C.E. and is described thus: “the head of this figure is small and oval and is bent forward over the thin arms which rest on enormous pendulous breasts. The buttocks, breasts and abdomen are strongly emphasized [and] the Venus wears a grooved apron over the backs of the legs which are without feet” (Coles 1969: 230). The interpretation that the figurine shows an apron or skirt has itself become quite controversial, Soffer, Adovasio, and Hyland use



Figure 6

this interpretation as evidence for their theory on clothing (2000) while others have described the same feature as hair. Looking at the back of the statuette, the outlines of two

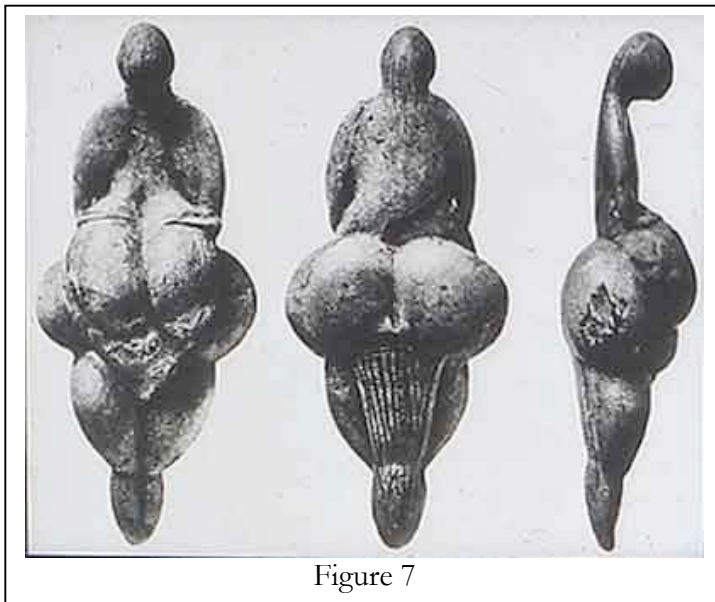


Figure 7

women, playing-card-like can be detected with the lines representing the long hair of the second figure (Delporte 1993; Coppens 1989; Mussi in comments of Soffer et al. 2000).

A unique image from the Dordogne region of France is the Venus of Laussel or

Femme a la corne (“Woman with horn”) [Fig 8]. It is unique because it is a fixed rock carving in the wall of a limestone rock shelter (Baring 1991:2). Discovered by a physician named J.G. Lalanne in 1908, this rock-relief has been a mainstay in prehistoric art textbooks ever since (McDermott 1996:233). The Gravittain image is the largest of the Venuses at forty-three centimeters tall (Baring 1991:2) and was created between 22,000 and 18,000 B.C.E. (Baring 1991:2; Witcombe 1998) The form of the section of rock chosen by the artist for this piece was utilized cleverly in the carving:



Figure 8

The block had a slight overhang, so that the figure swelled forward gently. When seen from one side, the curve appears as taut as a strung bow. It swells up to a supreme point, the maternal belly, then falls away at either end and sinks slowly into the rock, in which the feet seem to melt. The upper part of the body curves gently backward, and the head, resting between two rock projections, seems to be reclining, as though on a cushion. (Giedion 1998 qtd. in Witcombe 1998)

Alexander Marshack describes the piece as a “bountiful, fat-layered and face-less” woman who is holding a “bison horn that is marked with thirteen lines” (1972:335). He also mentions that at one time or another, the carving was “ochered red” (Marshack 1972:335).

He conjectures that this figurine could be indicative of a goddess who was a predecessor of the “Mistress of the Animals,” a later Neolithic, agricultural goddess who was associated with “lunar mythology,...the crescent horns of the bull,... the vulva,...[and] the naked breasts” (Marshack 1972:335). Although a second bas-relief from Laussel shows a woman carved in the same tradition [see Appendix I for this and others from this group], he admits that this evidence is too limited and only “hints at a relation” (Marshack 1972:335) without excluding it.

Mediterranean Group

Many of the earliest excavators and antiquarians in Europe considered this area to be devoid of Gravettian artifacts. Italy was initially thought to have an Aurignacian layer and a Neolithic layer, skipping the Gravettian and Magdalenian periods altogether (Osborn 1919:434). A little later, after large-scale construction projects began accidentally unearthing large caches of artifacts, researchers found that this area was in fact one of the richest on the continent. Because the circumstances surrounding the findings of these artifacts is general and sketchy at best, there exists no “adequate record of the excavation[s] or even a systematic catalog of the archaeological discoveries” (Bisson 1994:459). Most excavations done in this area were conducted by wealthy men unconcerned with the details of gathering meticulous stratigraphic evidence and more excited at the prospect of finding something to acquire money or fame. Other figurines from this area that are not expressly mentioned here can be seen in Appendix II of this paper.

In northeastern Italy, at the site of Savignano – which is not

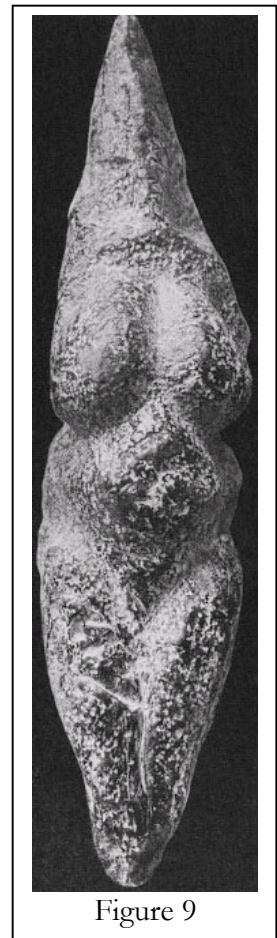
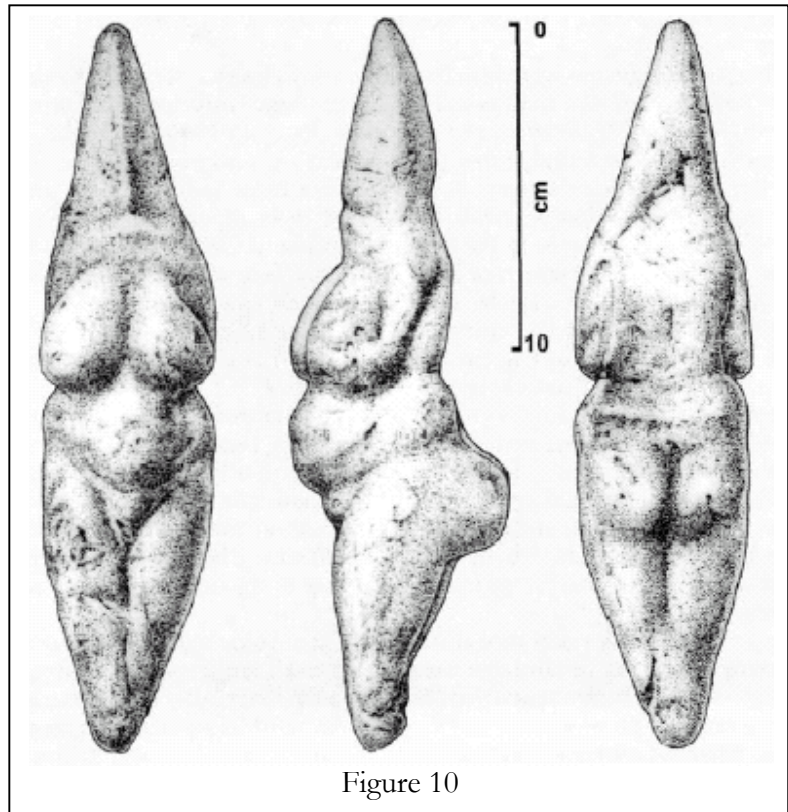


Figure 9

far from Modena on the edge of the Po Valley (Mussi 2002: 262) – the Venus of Savignano [Fig. 9] was a single artifact of the Upper Paleolithic period found. Also known as “*Venere di Savignano*” (Mussi 2002: 262), the figurine measures 22.1 cm long and is “made of a soft stone closely related to steatite” (Mussi



2002: 263). Discovered accidentally in 1925 (Mussi 2002: 262), the figurine is very obviously a woman with large pendulous breasts, a rounded abdomen, and large curved buttocks. This piece is actually one of an “ambiguous sexual character” since, although it has very clear female body attributes, it also has a rounded, elongated cone-shaped head and its feet taper into another rounded cone shape. These features make it so that it appears to be, “if split in two longitudinally, a double phallus” (Mussi 2002: 263). This feature of the artifact has been considered both interesting and confusing because it is impossible to tell whether the artist intended to represent both feminine and masculine organs [Fig. 10]. Margherita Mussi concludes that this piece is “clearly related to a sophisticated and now vanished cosmogony, in which a feminine and masculine principle were somehow interrelated into a superior oneness” (Mussi 2002:263).

The Grimaldi or Balzi Rossi sites in Liguria, Italy consist of a series of caves (and a few rock shelters) in the cliffs along the Mediterranean coast adjacent to the French border

(Bisson and Bolduc 1994:459) [Fig. 11]. These sites have yielded some of the richest Gravettian deposits in this

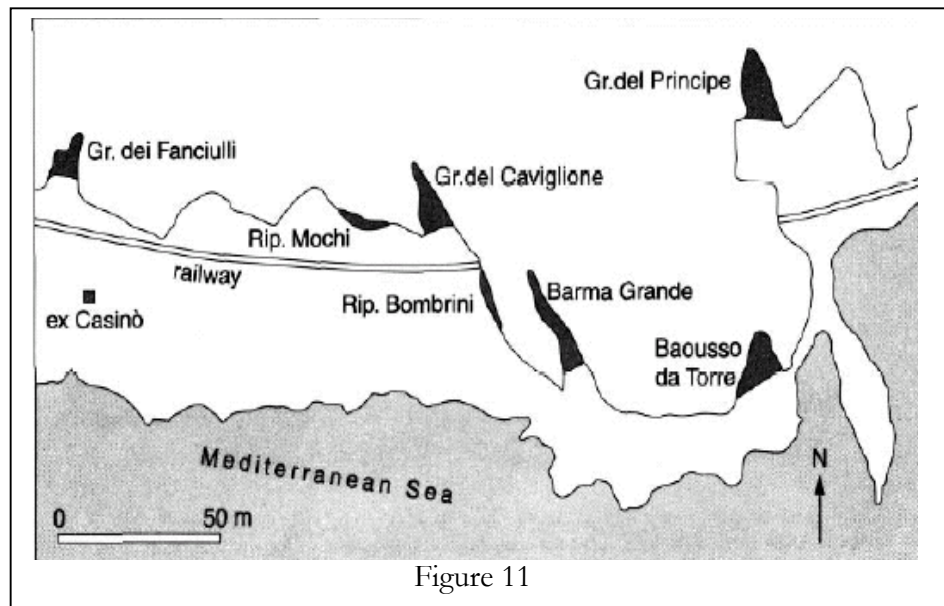


Figure 11

geographical group and many of them deserve individual attention although others are included in Appendix II.

Between 1883 and 1895, an amateur prehistorian named Louis Alexandre Jullien discovered fifteen figurines, the largest series ever found in one place in Western Europe, at the Grimaldi caves (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:458). His intermittent excavation of this area yielded substantial Upper Paleolithic material in addition to the female statuettes, most of which he kept in his private collection. Jullien sold some of these artifacts one by one between 1896 and 1914 to other researchers – like Henri Breuil – and museum collections. With the advent of World War I, Jullien moved his family to Canada and took the rest of his collection with him. It wasn't until the 1940s that the collection resurfaced again when one of Jullien's daughters sold one of the statuettes to Harvard's Peabody Museum. Again, a World War hindered the re-unification of the entire collection, and it wasn't until the late 1980s and early 1990s that these figurines were all back together in the same place. In 1987,

Jullien's granddaughters decided to sell some of the remaining collection (various stone tools and five of the figurines) to an antique dealer in Montreal. Montreal sculptor Pierre Bolduc bought these artifacts and managed to locate two other figurines that were still in Jullien's family members' possession, and the collection was finally reunited and cataloged in 1994 (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:460). Although the entire collection is quite impressive, I will only be discussing ten of the figurines at length.

The carving known as *the Bust* [Fig. 12] was done on a dark soft stone known as “dark-green chlorite” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461) and it consists only of “a head and

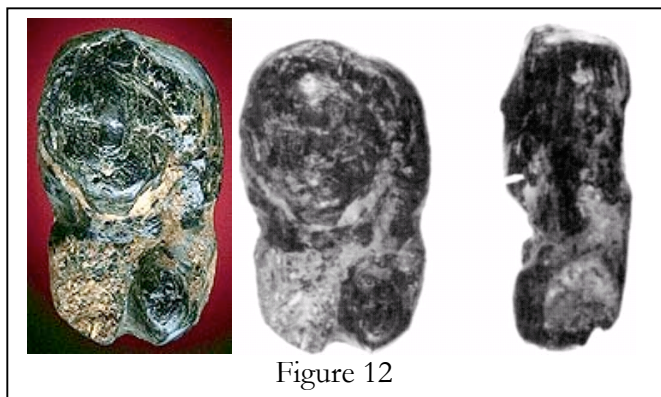


Figure 12

upper torso” (Bisson 1996:158 in footnote). Because of the lack of details surrounding its exact excavation, scholars are unsure as to whether this small – measuring only 2.92 cm – figurine is from Grotte du

Prince or Barma Grande (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461). The head is circular and, although the eyes and nose are carved, the mouth exists only in a “color variation in the stone [that] creates the false impression of a horizontal incision where the mouth should be” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461). The right breast has been broken but “the surviving breast is oval” and “a notch between the breasts makes it appear pendulous with the nipple pointed downward” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461).

One particularly intriguing figurine from this area is the 4.72 cm “double figurine” [Fig. 13] or what is also called *La Belle et la Bete* (“the Beauty and the Beast”) (Mussi 2002:261). This specimen is “a small pendant with a female figurine paired back-to-back with an animal” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463). Made from “a pale green-yellow

serpentine,” the two carved creatures are “connected at the backs of the heads, the shoulders, and the feet” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463). The female portion of the figurine has “an erect head and an arched back which thrusts her breasts and abdomen forward” and a face which seems to have been “intentionally obliterated” since “the entire center of the

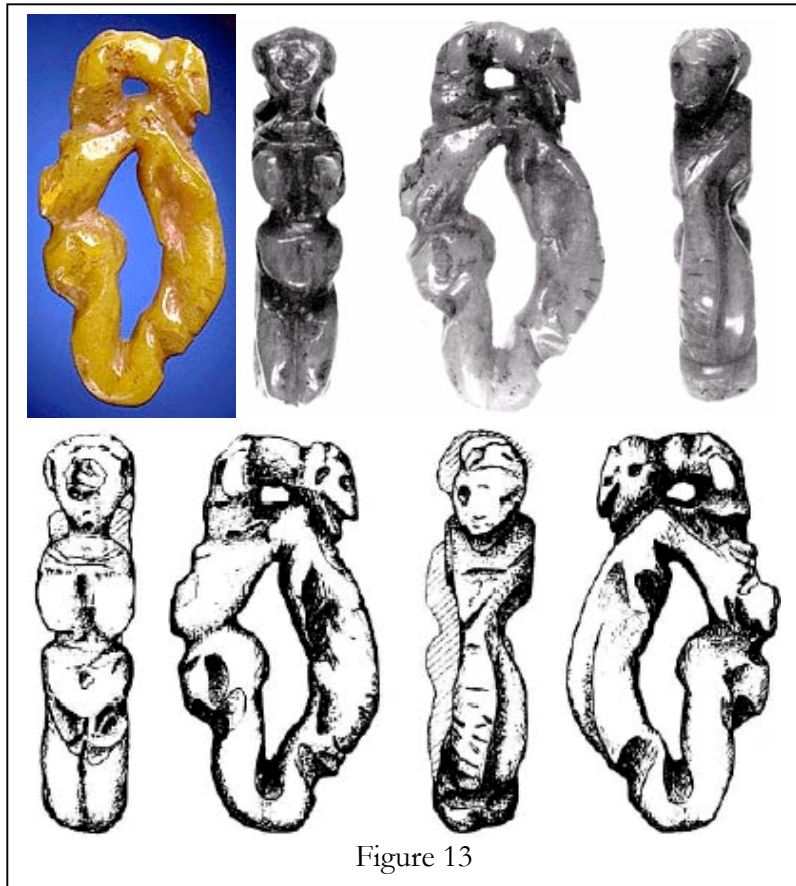


Figure 13

face [has] been chiseled away” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:464). The woman has “cylindrical and pendulous” breasts and “the abdomen is wider than the hips and protrudes” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:464). The pubic area is carved with detail and the vulva is indicated by a vertical groove (Bisson and

Bolduc 1994:464). At one angle, the lower legs of the woman appear to be purposely detailed as the knees appear to be “sharply flexed” but “the incision that separates the two legs does not continue past the knees” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). The animal portion of the statuette has a “superbly detailed head but a body that is stylized and difficult to interpret” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). If the head and body are the depiction a single creature, then the head, which is turned back over the shoulders, is attached in an anatomically impossible manner (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). According to Bisson and

Bolduc, the facial features are not reptilian but indicative of a mammal, and although the identification of this animal is highly uncertain, their guess is a small carnivore – specifically a “canid (fox, wolf) or mustelid (marten, wolverine)” (1994:465).

Similar to the Venus of Savignano, the figurine known as *Polichinelle* (Mussi 2002:259) or Punchinello [Fig.14], is made of green steatite and was “carefully carved and polished”



Figure 14

(Mussi 2002:262). The name Punchinello, the short fat buffoon or clown in an Italian puppet show, comes from the pronounced buttocks and projecting belly. This same figurine is also sometimes called the Venus of Monpazier (although another figurine also has that title), after the site where it was found. Since the figurine was found in 1970 the area of Monpazier has switched between French and Italian control and is now considered part of Italy, meriting the figurines’ inclusion in this geographical group.

Dated to the Upper Paleolithic of the Barma Grande

Grimaldi cave are at least three figurines found by Louis Jullien [Fig.15]. First is a “highly stylized specimen made of antler” known as the “woman with goiter” (Bisson 1996:158) or “*Femme au goiter*” (Mussi 2002:259) [Fig. 15a]. The famous “yellow steatite figurine” (Bisson 1996:158) [Fig. 15b] is also included here with the “Janus” figurine [Fig. 15c]. Also known as

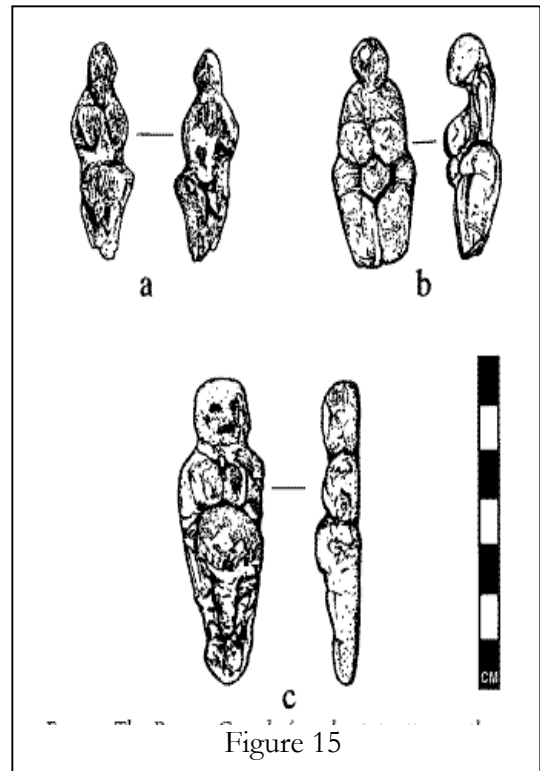


Figure 15

the “woman with the pierced neck” (Bisson 1996:158), the “very roughly carved” figurine has “an unusual face repeated on both sides” (Mussi 2002:262). The so-called ‘Janus’ figurine was named by Jullien in a letter he wrote to Eouard Piette in 1903, after the mythological Greek god of dreams who was considered to have two heads.

One of the seven sculpted objects recovered from the Grimaldi caves of Liguria, Italy by Louis Jullien is known only as the “flattened figure” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461) [Fig.

16]. It is a roughly oval pendant made of “dark-green, slightly translucent chlorite” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461). It doesn’t have any obvious facial features on its circular head other than “two very shallow pits on each side that may indicate ears” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461-462). There are lines on the head that appear

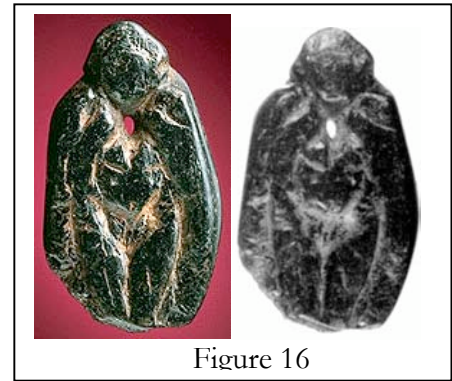


Figure 16

to “form a hair pattern”. Although the figurine is probably female, the fact that the figure lacks any “pronounced secondary sexual characteristics” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:461-462) leads Bisson and Bolduc to conclude that this “may represent a juvenile” (1994:462).

The nearly complete female figurine known as either “the brown ivory figurine” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994: 463) or “*Abrachiafè*” (Mussi 2002:259), is made from “partially fossilized ivory” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994: 462) and measures 6.76 cm high [Fig. 17]. A thick coat of varnish applied by Jullien “has given it a red to yellowish-red color” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:462), making it impossible to tell if red ochre had ever been applied to its surface. The nearly circular head lacks any indication of facial features or hair and “no arms or hands are present” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:462). The roughly hemispherical breasts are large and “separated from each other by a deep groove” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:462); protruding even more than the breasts is the oval-shaped enlarged abdomen (Bisson and

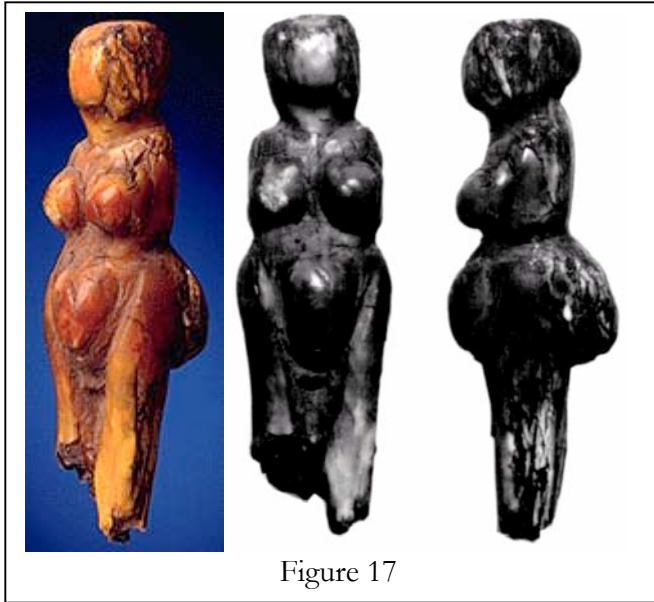


Figure 17

Bolduc 1994:462). Bisson and Bolduc note that the pubic region of this figurine is “highly unusual” because “a deep U-shaped groove 8.5 mm wide extends from the mid-thigh into the crotch [and] centered in this groove, at the base of the abdomen, is a small, carefully carved ridge in the form of an inverted crescent” which

is “in the correct position to represent enlarged labia minora” (1994:463). The figurine was carved in ivory which raises interesting problems since mammoths were not living in Italy and finding even their remains is rare. Scholars have speculated that “the ivory figurines were either carved far from Italy and then transported to the Mediterranean shores or carved on the spot (or near it) using imported raw material” (Mussi 2002:262). As a result of this scarcity, ivory items of any kind are exceedingly rare in Liguria, Italy, and southeastern France (Mussi 2002:262).

The “ivory figurine with red ochre” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463) or “*Dame ocrée*” (Mussi 2002:259) is a 7.52 cm tall female figurine made from either ivory or bone [Fig. 18]. The oval face has no facial features and the “head and torso were originally covered with a very thick layer of red ochre” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463).

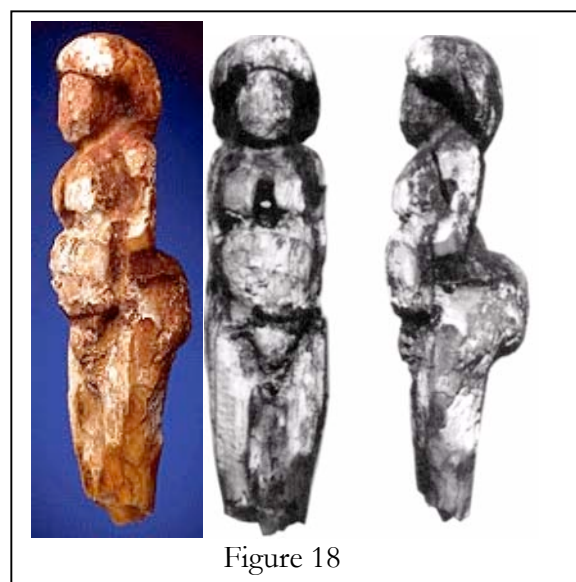


Figure 18

The hair “forms a thick coiffure framing the face and tapering to two points that end on the backs of the shoulders,” which Bisson and Bolduc interpret as being braids (1994:463). Although the upper arms are clearly carved at the sides of the figurine, there is “no trace of forearms or hands” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463). Although the breasts are “oblong and in profile appear cylindrical,” they do not rest on the round and protruding abdomen (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463). The enlarged pubic triangle “extends well forward of the plane of the thighs” and lacks the indication of a vulva (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:463). The simplified legs taper but are also broken at the knees, making it impossible to tell if there ever were any legs.

The “smallest complete figurine in the Grimaldi collection” is a tiny (27.5 mm) pendant made from “pale green-yellow serpentine” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465) [Fig 19]. Called the “female with two heads” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465) or *Bicéphale* (“a woman with a double head”) (Mussi 2002:262), this female specimen “was broken at the waist, probably during

excavation, and has been glued together” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). There remain traces of red ochre still

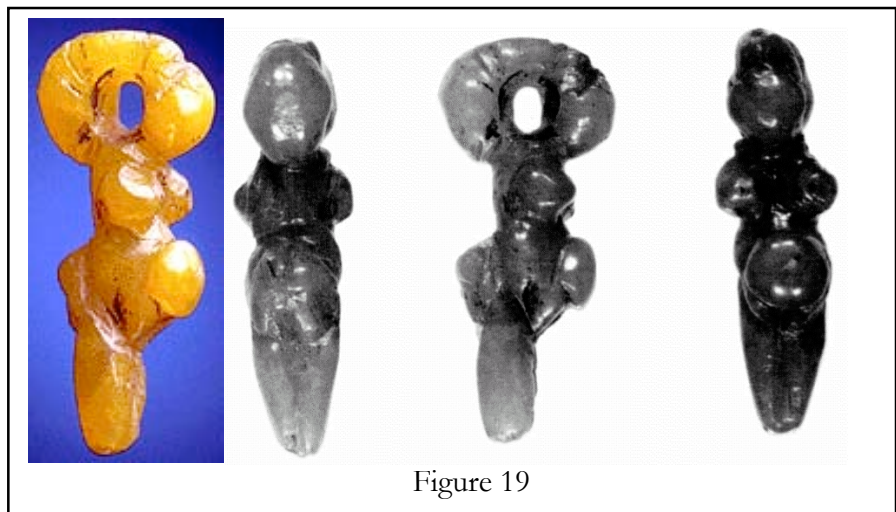


Figure 19

visible in a number of incisions on the highly polished figurine. The head that faces forward is ovoid with “no facial features” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). It lacks any deliberate markings except for a deep incision that marks the top of the forehead and “fine

perpendicular incisions that terminate in a second deep incision marking” indicating thick hair (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). On the other side of the connecting circular bridge is the second ovoid head that faces in the opposite direction. Also featureless, the second head is “slightly larger than the other” head and is “tilted in the same angle as the first” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). An oval suspension hole was carved between the two heads and “a waxy, fibrous mass” found lodged here “may be the remains of some form of mount employed by Jullien” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). The body of the figurine is made up of a narrow torso, no arms, projecting breasts and belly, and legs that taper to a point at the knees (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). The breasts are pointed, extremely large, projected forward, and “extend laterally beyond the edge of the torso” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). Unlike the right breast, the “left breast has two grooves circling it and a hole pecked in the tip, presumably representing a nipple” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). It has a flat back with “a faint groove indicating the spine,” a narrow waist, and wide hips. The center of the abdomen is protruding and almost perfectly round and has a small navel in the center (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). The large and circular buttocks are marked by a top crease and there is a pit carved at the approximate position of the anus (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465). The very large pubic area contains a vulva that is “indicated by a vertical groove” (Bisson and Bolduc 1994:465).

Rhine-Danube Group

This geographic section includes those sites that are in what is today Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. Many of the figurines found in these areas are some of the most well known and easily recognized Venus figurines. Many scholars have considered artifacts and sites from this area to be culturally connected to each other as well as with many artifacts from the Russian group. This possible connection will be discussed more

with the examination of the Russian group. The wide variety of figurines, in style and age, from this area has puzzled scholars as to the role that this particular vicinity may have had in the creation and distribution of the figurines.

Possibly the most widely known female figurine, the Venus of Willendorf [Fig 20] is an 11 cm limestone sculpture with a detailed hair-style and featureless face (Dickson 1990: 101). It was discovered in Austria “in an Aurignacian loess deposit in a terrace about thirty meters above the Danube river near the town of Willendorf” in 1908 by Josef Szombathy (Witcombe 2003; McDermott 1996:233). The creation date for this figurine is currently under debate. According to Baring, the Willendorf statuette can be dated to 20,000 – 18,000 BCE (1991: 10), but other sources contend that it may in fact be even older than that (24,000 – 22,000 BCE; Witcombe 2003) or even one of the earliest. After some analysis, it was obvious that it had once been “painted with red ochre” (Marshack 1972:288) a symbolic substance commonly found in connection with burials and grave goods from the same time period. The figurine has an extremely detailed and realistic vaginal area but thin arms



Figure 20

resting on the breasts, legs that end in knobs below the knee, and no facial features. The detail on this figurine’s head is an especially interesting feature since it is very similar to some of the Russian Venus’. Both the Willendorf statuette and others from the Russian group have heads decorated in vaguely concentric patterns that are commonly interpreted as hats or symbolic headwear, although others maintain that it represents a kind of hair-style. This specific statuette has been cited by Marshack as central to the understanding of the other

Venus. He considers it to be geographically, chronologically, and stylistically between those figurines found to the east and west of it (Marchack 1972). Many scholars disagree with this idea, but still the Venus of Willendorf popularly remains the delegated representative of the entire collection of female figurines.

Another extremely well known figurine is also from Austria and is known by her discoverers as Fanny, the Dancing Venus of the Galgenberg (Bahn 1994:124) [Fig. 21]. It is the earliest female figurine ever found – dating to about 30,000 B.C.E. – and it was named after Fanny Elssler, a 19th century Austrian ballerina (Rudgley 1999:192). The statuette of a nude woman is turned to the left with one breast jutting out to the left, the other facing forward, the vulva clearly indicated, the left arm raised, and the right hand resting on the thigh, posed as though in a ritual or dance position.

Found on September 23, 1988 during the excavation of a site near the town of Krems, the figurine is very different from its Gravettian counterparts. It was found broken in at least five fragments that, when joined, formed a 7.2 cm high statuette of a woman. At first glance, the figurine appears to have three arms or something inhuman like that, but it is in fact the position of the body showing a shorter, upraised arm and the profile of the left breast. Although the facial details are absent, the carver took great care to carve a thin vaginal opening and represent breasts. Since the figurine is made of greenish, very shiny amphibolite slate, a very brittle material, the carver had to have employed a very delicate technique to bore the two



Figure 21

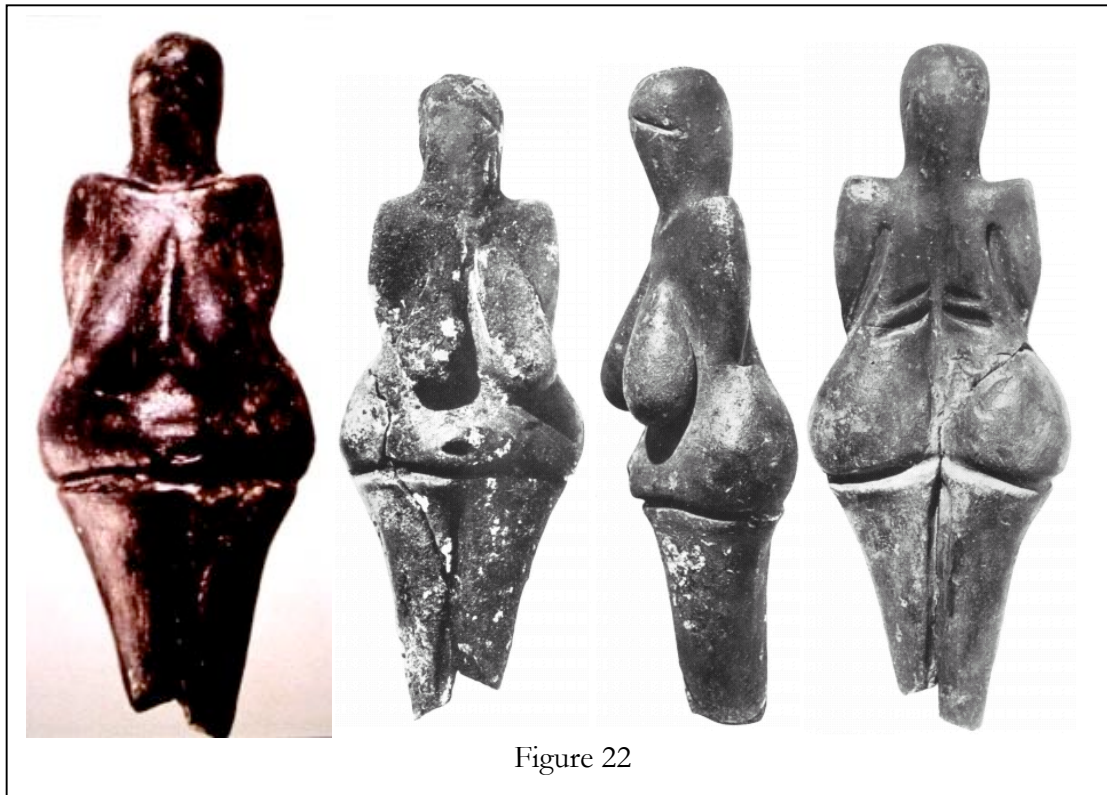


Figure 22

openings (between the torso and right arm and between the legs) and to fashion the free-standing left arm. Two different conventions were used in the process of carving the arms: “the right arm and the legs are structurally supported (and thus braced) at both ends, while the left arm is shortened to half the anatomical length by being depicted in a folded-back position” (Rudgley 1999:192). This figurine represents an advanced carving skill that was previously not considered to have developed until much later in the Paleolithic.

Although most of the figurines are made of soft stone or ivory, the Venus of Dolni Vestonice [Fig 22] – also called the black Venus – caused a stir when it was found at the site of Dolni Vestonice in what is now the Czech Republic on July 13, 1925 (Baring 1991:11; Coles 1969:296). An archaeological team led by Karel Absolon found this Gravettian figure in a “prehistoric settlement inhabited by mammoth hunters” (Coles 1969:291). The figurine was modeled from a mixture of clay and tempered bone and then fired and – since the site was occupied from about 29,000 to 25,000 B.C.E. (Coles 1969:298) – it immediately became

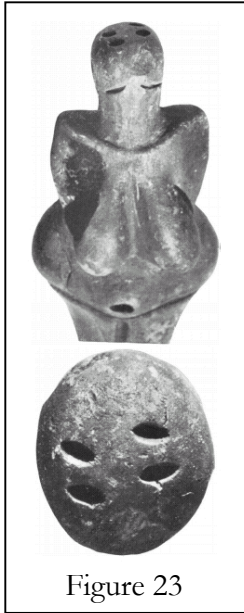


Figure 23

one of the first examples of ceramics (Baring 1991:11). The head is featureless aside from two shallow slits for eyes, a single stroke for a nose, and four holes in the top that were made when the clay was still wet [Fig. 23]. These holes have been viewed as holders of flowers, leaves, or feathers to serve as hair (Marshack 1972:300). The small black figurine (a torso height of 11.5 cm (Baring 1991: 11)) has long, pendulous breasts and arms shortened to the elbow on a wide, but not pregnant, body. A deep groove separates the legs and the body – which has been interpreted as a schematic belt (Marshack 1991:24) –

while paired grooves extend across the lower back on either side of the spine (Coles 1969: 298). Interestingly, there is no indication of a vulva on this figurine, only a deep groove separating the legs. Some scholars have found this piece to represent, with its highly schematic and “ghostly” face (Marshack 1991:24), a belief in “a non-human female ‘spirit’” (Marshack 1991:21) or, more specifically, a mythologized female that “represented the spirit of ‘death’ as an aspect of rebirth” (Marshack 1999:24).

Also found at Dolni Vestonice was a carved female head with what has been interpreted as a purposefully asymmetrical face [Fig 24 a-d]. The tiny, ivory head is “worn with time” (Marshack 1972:302) and consists of “a delicate face with realistic eyes, mouth, and a hairdo” (Marshack 1972:302).

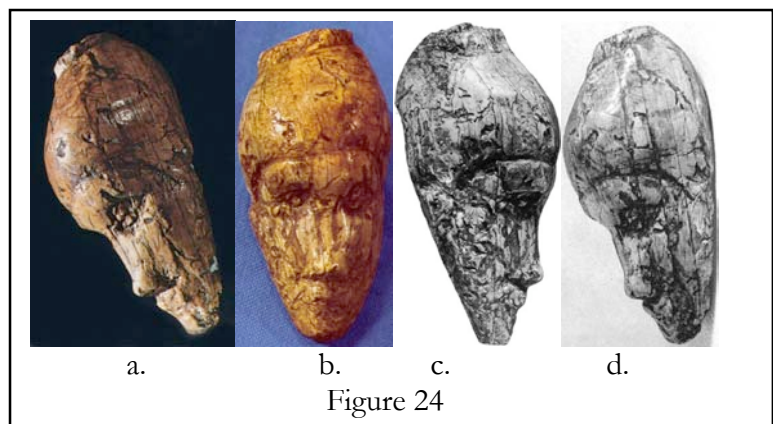


Figure 24

Although most researchers

invariably consider this ivory figurine to be the rendering of a woman, Margarita Mussi has

challenged this, saying that she has found “a protuberance between the mouth and nose that could well be a moustache” (Mussi comments on Soffer et al. 200:528). Her interpretation lacks much weight since the ivory is nearly too deteriorated for accurate study, but microscopic evidence may yet come to light, illuminating this delicate head to be that of a young man rather than a woman. The detail of the face leads researchers to assume that this image “may have been made for some use involving a real person, living or dead” (Marshack 1972:302). This piece stands out as an example of careful facial feature depiction against the numerous examples of females lacking faces and is therefore an important part of the collection. Although I have only included two Dolni Vestonice figurines here, many other debated images have been found at these sites [for images see Appendix III].

Sometimes known as the Ostrava Venus [Fig 25], this miniature female torso – only 5 cm in height – was carved from “a piece of black hematite iron ore” (Marshack 1972:302). It comes from the Gravettian camp site of Ostrava-Petrkovice in Moravia, the Czech Republic. It is described as the “realistic form of a young, pregnant woman, stomach bulging, with small, almost youthful, breasts (one of which has broken off) and with the vulva region clearly carved” (Marshack 1972:302). The figurine has occasionally been thought to appear incredibly modern with the pubic area looking like “the bottom half of a modern bikini” (Hitchcock 2006). Some see figurines such as this one to be contradictory to the fertility goddess theories since it has much thinner features and does not appear to be pregnant.



Figure 25

There are dozens of other fragments from this group that remain under heavy debate about what they might represent; females, males, or some other anthropomorphic figures?

This group is also known for a least two male figurines: at the site of Brno, near Dolni Vestionice, were found pieces of a statuette with a clearly etched penis and the ivory head of a man with very heavy brow ridges. These two images are perhaps the clearest depictions of males from the time period, the rest are ambiguous at best.

Russian Group

This geographic group encompasses those artifacts found in parts of southwest Russia and the Ukraine near the Black Sea. The sites from this area show remarkable similarities between each other – enough to qualify them for their own cultural subcategory – as well as similarities to many of those artifacts from the Rhine-Danube Group. The specific artifact that sparked the idea of this cultural connection was the fragment of the head of a large marl figurine [Fig. 26]. Found at the site of New Avdeevo, this piece is

broken along the base of the neck, lacks the front part of the face, and is of an indeterminate gender. The connection lies in the elaborate head decoration of concentric horizontal bands that is nearly identical to that

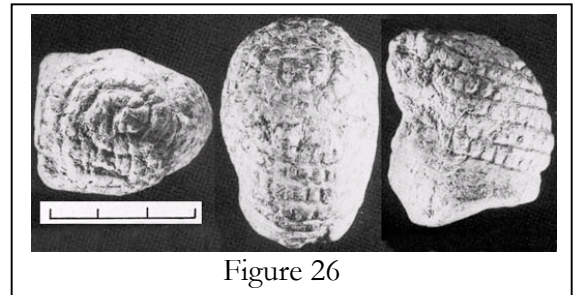


Figure 26

of the Venus of Willendorf [Fig. 21]. The generalized archaeological culture that arose as a result of these stylistic connections is sometimes referred to as the Kostienki-Willendorf culture, but it is more often – and more accurately – understood as the Kostienki-Avdeevo culture. The conservative definition of the Kostienki-Avdeevo culture is composed of artifacts from the Russian open-air sites of Kostienki (also spelled Kostenki), Avdeevo, Zaraysk, and Gagarino. Both stone and bone tools have been found at these Upper Paleolithic settlements as well as stone and bone sculptures and large mammoths bone dwellings. Although there are frequent stylistic similarities, the figurines associated with the

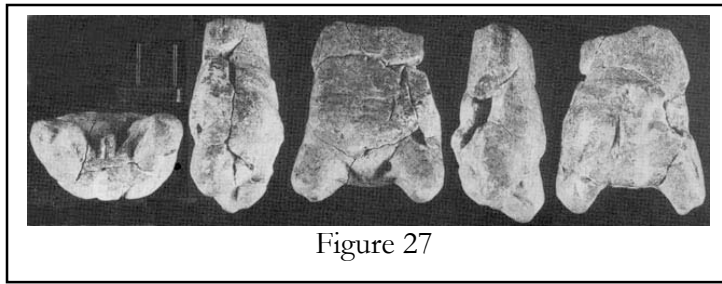


Figure 27

Kostienki-Avdeevo culture are quite varied in their portrayals of women. Mature women in various stages of the

reproductive cycle – non-pregnant as well as women in the various stages of pregnancy – are depicted in most of the figurines, but, unique to this area, are the singular figurines interpreted as representations of the first and last stages of the female reproductive cycle: the crouching pose of 'presentation' for childbirth from Avdeevo [Fig. 27] and the post-partum pose from Kostienki. The sheer number, variety, and distribution of female figurines from the Kostienki and Avdeevo areas have created a distinct interest among scholars in interpreting these particular figurines as an aspect of a single culture.

Kostienki is an area in Russia just north of the Black Sea, on the right bank of the Don River, near the villages of Kostienki and Borshevo, that consists of about two dozen site locations dated to the Paleolithic [Fig. 28]. Since there are multiple sites in the area, the specific site location is denoted with Arabic

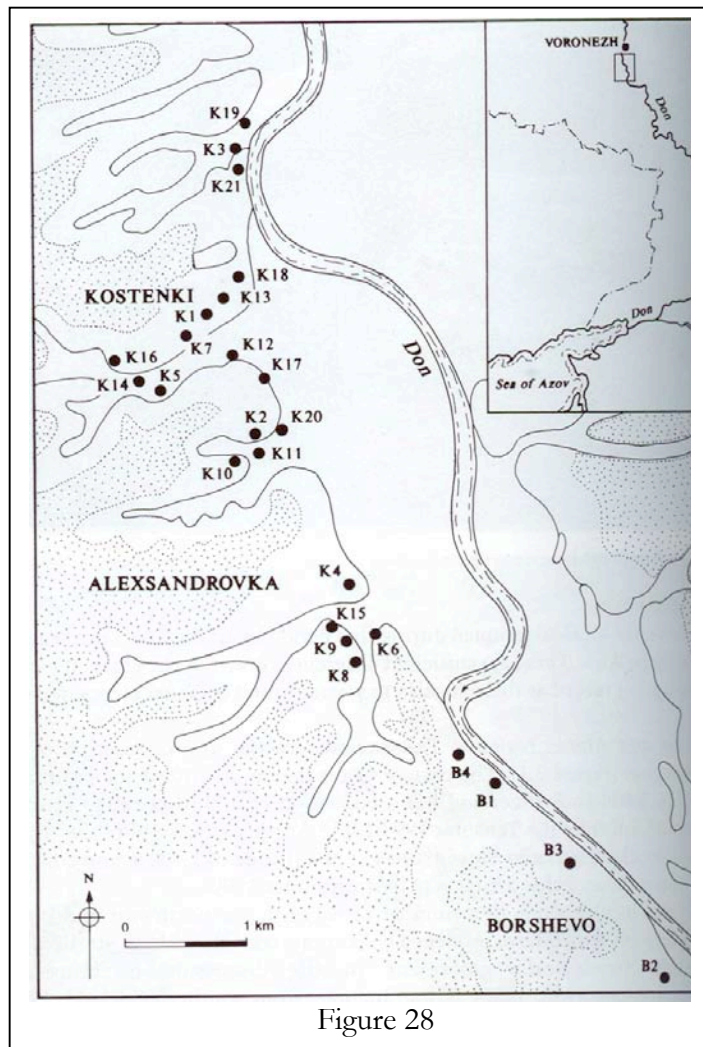
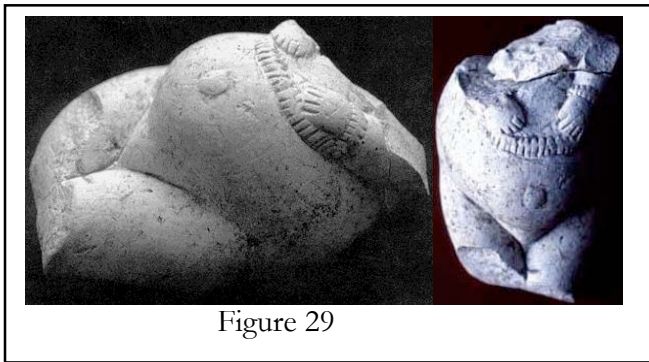


Figure 28

numbers and the cultural layer that site is associated with is denoted with Roman numerals (for example, Kostienki 12/III). Literally dozens of figurines have been found at these sites, showing remarkable similarities to one another as well as to the others across Europe.

One important element of the figurines from this area is the fact that they are less naked than many of those discovered elsewhere in Europe. The figurines that have been found at the Kostienki sites vary in their portrayal of clothing from those with interesting



articles and those that are completely naked [for more images see Appendix IV]. Depictions of clothing articles on many of these pieces has led to the idea that Paleolithic people may have already mastered a revolutionary skill

long thought to have arisen much later in human history: the ability to weave plant fibers into cloth, rope, nets and baskets (Angier 1999; Soffer et al. 2000). In 1988, a rather large (13.5 cm) limestone piece was discovered at Kostienki with a very prominent navel and bracelets on the wrists, which appear to be joined

together at the front like a pair of handcuffs [Fig. 29]. Another particular example of the depiction of an unknown type of clothing is the Venus of Kostienki [Fig. 30], a limestone, 10.2 cm tall figurine dated to 23,000-21,000 B.C.E. This relatively complete statuette has large breasts and abdomen and a faceless head that bends toward the chest while the arms are pressed to the body with



the hands on the belly. The head is covered with rows of tiny incisions indicating either a hat of some kind or hair. The figurine wears a breast ornament that ties up in the back and has bracelets on the arms which end in detailed fingers resting on the abdomen.

Also from Kostienki is an 11.4 cm tall mammoth ivory carving of a naked woman [Fig. 31]. The head of the figurine is covered with rows of shallow teeth cuts, depicting either a headdress or hair. There are engraved and relief lines on the chest and on the back that have yet to be interpreted. It was found in a 1936 excavation made by P.P. Efimenko who called it "one of the best creations of that period, known to us" (Hitchcock 2007). This figurine is starkly naked compared to the bands and bracelets on many of the other figurines found throughout this region.



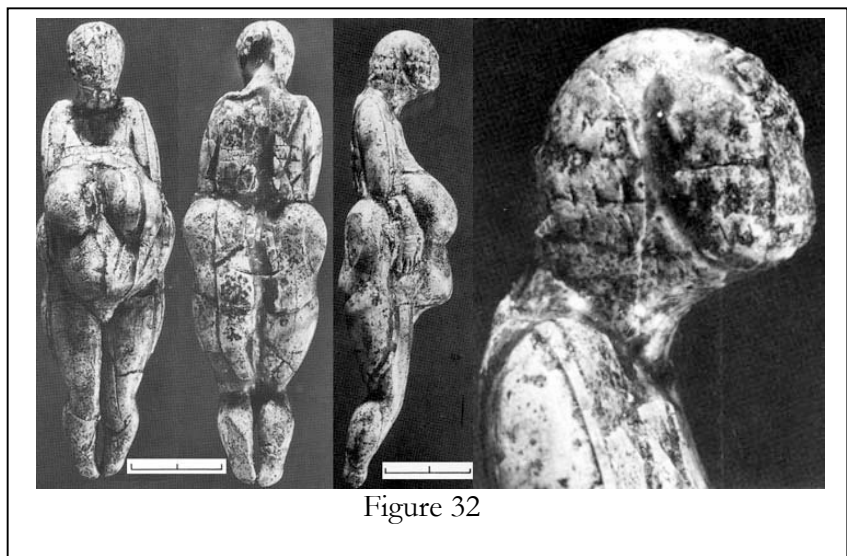
Figure 31

Avdeevo is a Paleolithic site located on the Sejma and Rogozna Rivers near the city of Kursk in Russia and very close to the Kostenki sites. The settlements here, which were occupied from around 23,000 B.C.E. to 20,000 B.C.E., were first discovered in 1941 and since have been excavated multiple times. What I call 'Avdeevo' here is actually made up of two separately researched sites. The site now known as Old Avdeevo was investigated first by M. V. Voevodskij from 1946 to 1948, and later by A. N. Rogachev in 1949. Old Avdeevo is made up of a main living floor with at least seven semi-subterranean "pit houses" along its edge. The excavation on what is now called New Avdeevo began in the 1970s and continues today. The excavation of this site began in 1974 with an expedition conducted by M. D. Gvozdozer, from the scientific-research institute and Museum of Anthropology of Moscow State University, and G.P. Grigor'ev, from the Leningrad department of the Institute of Archeology AN SSSR. New Avdeevo is located

about twenty meters to the east of the old one and is a bit larger settlement area. It also comprises a large oval living floor that is edged by at least ten semi-subterranean “pit houses”. Although the two living floors and the stratigraphic location of two sites are similar, researchers have so far found no conclusive evidence to determine whether these two dwellings existed simultaneously and formed one settlement or were the remnants of a dual occupation of the same place by the same kin-group. These sites yielded a large number of archaeological artifacts, including numerous figurines, but, because there have been so many figurines from these two sites, very few have individual names or descriptions.

Because of their absence from literature (in English, anyway), many of these figurines exist only as images, without modern commentary [see Appendix IV]. Some, like the figurine (Avd-N 76) from the New Avdeevo site whose carved head has been compared to those from Kostenki and Willendorf [Fig. 32], have become better known. The head is almost round with an undefined face that gives the impression of being turned forward, and this area is decorated with a wedge-shaped notching similar to that of other figurines. The

shoulders are narrow, the chest is flattened and elongated, and teardrop-shaped breasts descend to the abdomen from it. A band shown on the upper portion of the

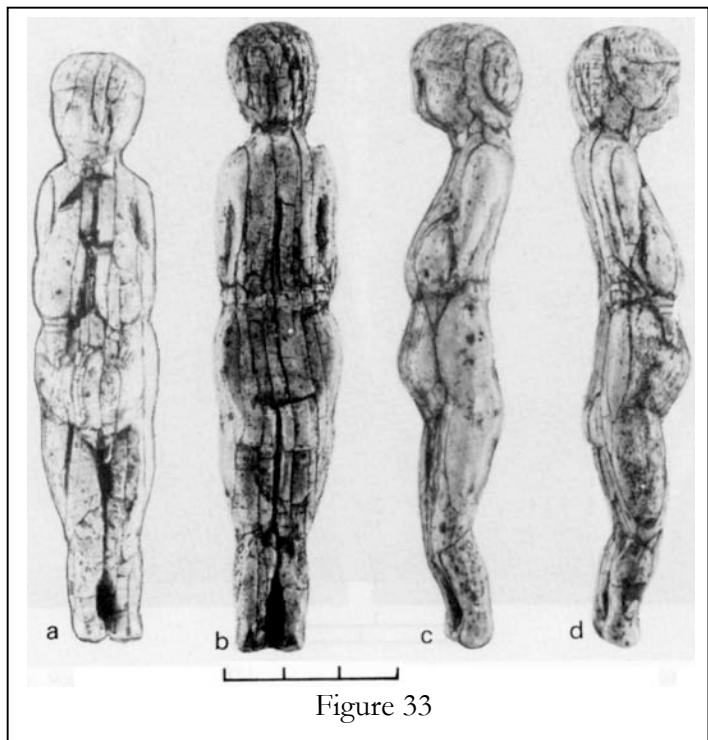


chest is decorated by a wedge-shaped notching with a staggered interval. The arms, although prominently rendered in the shoulder area, are almost graphic below the elbow. The

location of the forearms is asymmetrical -- the right forearm holds the abdomen from the side and the left forearm emerges from beneath the breasts with the hand on the lower, protruding portion of the abdomen. The pubic triangle is short and flat but prominent. The upper part of the legs is separated by a groove, while, the shins below the knees are separated by a cut through slot and the feet return together. The maximum width occurs in the upper portion of the pelvis and from the largely flattened lower back area where the fatty pads extend sideways. Researchers have interpreted the features of this figurine to be representative of “a mature (probably pregnant) woman with a typical contrast between a slim torso and legs and massive breasts and protruding abdomen” (Gvozdover 1995).

Another figurine from the New Avdevo site (Avd-N 77, N 1) [Fig. 33] was found in a pit together with the previously discussed figurine (Avd-N 76) and a few others. All these

figurines were located close together so that the assumption was made by archaeologists that they were purposefully placed together (in a position different from the one in which they were found) by their original owners. Except for a few damaged spots on the outer surface, this ivory figurine is generally well preserved. It is ten centimeters



long with an erect head which has a sculptured face that looks forward and is covered by hair or a hat that is very different from what is carved onto the previous figurine. The

shoulders are narrow, the chest is flattened, and the drop-shaped breasts lie slightly apart on top of the slightly prominent abdomen. The forearms are beneath the breasts, under which the hands appear to be holding the upper part of the abdomen. The fingers are emphasized, and there is a bracelet on one wrist. A band decorated by a wedge-shaped notching is similar to one on the previous figurine, but it is carved on the waist instead of above the breasts. The legs of this figurine are also very similar to the previous one: they are slightly bent at the knees, below which they separated by a bored hole. Again the toes are together with the heels apart. A flattened area around the tailbone of this figurine emphasizes the absence of fatty deposits that are so common on others from the area and specifically to the previous figurine, with which this one bears many similarities. A peculiarity of this figurine, unusual not only to Avdevo but also to all sites of the Kostienki culture, is the detailed carving of the facial features and the rather complicated hairstyle or hat. The face of the figurine looks forward and is oval shaped with a small slightly prominent forehead, rounded cheekbones, and a chin. A small straight nose is rendered in relief; the eye-sockets are marked by deepened semi-circles; and there is an almost invisible projection instead of a carved mouth. The youth shape of this figurine's head and body make it very different stylistically from others at these sites.

Another generally recognized figurine from this area is the Venus of Gagarino [Fig. 34]. During the excavation of a silo trench (between 1926 and 1929), workers led by Zamiatinine discovered a house



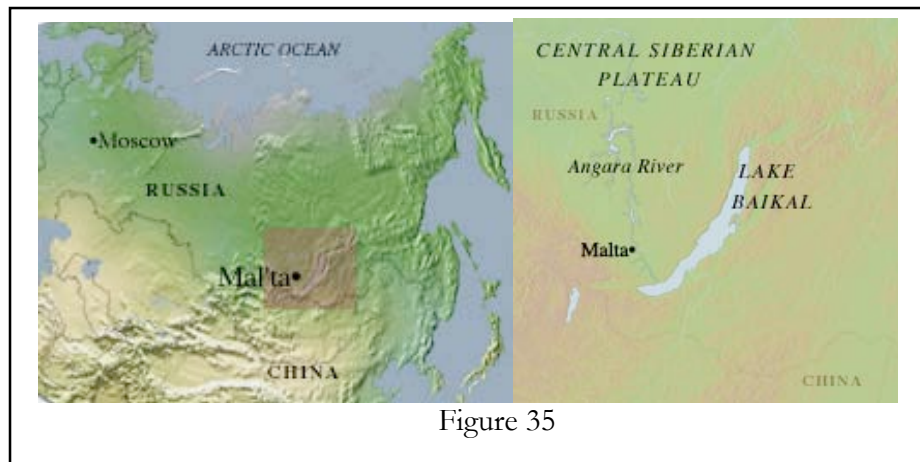
Figure 34

pit, but, unfortunately the damage from the trench cut through the centre of the pit along its major axis, presumably destroying the hearth and entrance. In addition to the Venus of Gagarino, other female figurines have been found at the site, all carved from indigenous stone. This 5.8 cm tall figurine has often been linked to the Venus of Willendorf due to its body proportions and the decoration of the head. The shoulders dwindle into thin arms that rest on the very large breasts which themselves rest on the almost circular abdomen. The head offers no facial features and is instead covered almost entirely with loosely patterned indentions.

Siberian Group

Despite many recently conducted excavations all over the territory of North and Central Asia, the prehistoric era of this region is still poorly understood. A few key sites from this area are dated to the Paleolithic: Mal'ta and Bouret'. These sites, located in the Angara River Valley near Lake Baikal in Siberia, were occupied by small groups of big-game hunters who most likely migrated into this region from lands to the south. They were confronted here by a harsh climate and long, dry winters. By about 20,000 B.C.E., the Mal'ta cultural tradition had developed in northeastern Asia and Siberia. The Mal'ta tradition is

known from numerous sites west of Lake Baikal and the Yenisey River and is named after the



individual site of Mal'ta, which dates to around 21,000 B.C.E. [Fig. 35]. The site is made up

of a series of large animal bone/reindeer antler subterranean houses which are thought to have been covered with animal skins and sod for protection from the severe weather. Expertly carved bone, ivory, and antler objects found at Mal'ta are most commonly figurines of birds and human females. In general, the female figurines from this area are considered to be geographically isolated (Absolon 1949:215) and stylistically very different from the figurines already discussed. These figurines defy the “typical” features of the Paleolithic Venuses. For example, whereas most Venuses are entirely or partially nude, these figurines are almost entirely clothed, and instead of faceless heads these have carefully carved faces, noses, eyes, mouths and hair decorations (Absolon 1949:215). Due to a lack of English literature on these Siberian figurines, I am forced to limit my discussion to only two, but the images of others from the area can be seen in Appendix V.

The Mal'ta Venus [Fig. 36] dates to around 21,000 B.C.E. and is carved from mammoth ivory, a common material in this area, and is depicted as wrapped in clothing that



also covers the head. The hood opens with a face that is broad with a flat nose, deep-set narrow eyes, and a mouth. Although the figurine appears to be wearing a hooded garment, her pubic triangle is deeply exaggerated and her thin breasts are carved in relief. The buttocks are raised and enlarged in the back while the legs thin and dwindle past the knees.

Since Mal'ta is the larger site and Bouret' is only about a two-hour walk away, researchers conjecture that the two sites are actually one unit left behind by one population. Currently researchers consider Mal'ta to be the main

settlement and the site of Bouret' to be a less established campsite that would have been inhabited in the winter when the rivers were frozen. Figurines from this area are extremely similar to those found at Mal'ta. One of the figurines found here is known commonly as the Bouret' Venus [Fig. 37]. It is made also of ivory, and it depicts a shroud similar to the one at Mal'ta. This time though, there are carvings all over the body of the figurine in a general pattern that perhaps is meant to emphasize the adornment of clothing. Again, the facial features of eyes, nose and mouth are clearly and delicately carved in the opening of the hood. The figurine lacks any indication of breasts, which could make it sexually ambiguous except for the emphasized pubic triangle and vaginal area. Below this the legs taper and connect into one but, in a contrast to the Mal'ta figurine, the arms are carved along the sides of the figurine.

Most of the recent research on these artifacts from Siberia focuses on their connection to the migration of peoples from this area into the Americas. Researchers point to connections in tools, techniques, and style between the Paleolithic sites in Siberia and the earliest sites in North America (Soffer and Praslov 1993). In her article,

Absolon notes that they are more similar to “the prehistoric carvings of the Eskimos than the Paleolithic sculptures” (Absolon 1949:215). These figurines are disconnected from those found in Europe both in geography and style. Despite this, researchers are finding ways to connect them to the Kostinki-Avdeevo culture, especially regarding the similarity of depictions of clothing and ornamentation.

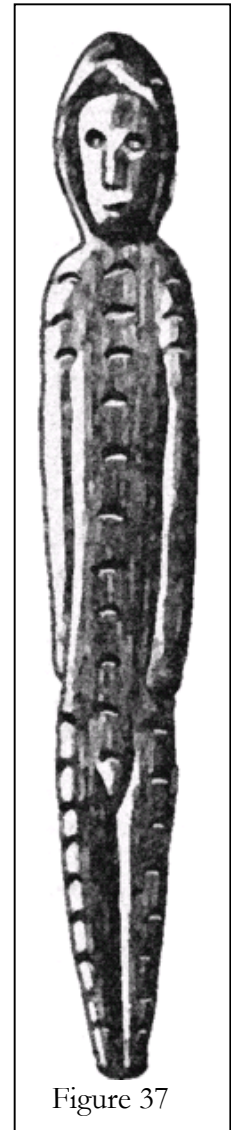


Figure 37

The Interpretations

In my research, I found marked similarities between groups of theories used to explain the above-described figurines. These connections have aided me in grouping the many different authors and ideas into three sections based essentially on date of publication. Although many of the connections are a result of common historical and socio-political foundations there remains extensive overlap. The first section includes the earliest theories developed by many of the figurines' discoverers. These interpretations date from the 1890s and the earliest part of the twentieth century and were written by and for men. They tend to emphasize racial stereotypes and gender roles. The second section includes responses to the racist and sexist 19th century ideas from a growing number of female scholars. With the feminist outcry against the male-dominated interpretations of Paleolithic culture came a new focus on the role of women in the creation and use of the figurines. The popularity of these theories carried into literature and evolved into a flood of pseudoscientific "goddess" texts. The third section includes some of the most recent interpretations, which use many overlapping theories from the previous sections. Responding to the earlier accusations of false evidence and pseudoscience, recent researchers have striven to be scientifically accurate, and they generally include disclaimers noting that their research has been very narrow and precise in an effort to avoid criticism of over-generalization.

Section One

The earliest theories about the figurines were developed by the male excavators and scholars of the late 19th century. It is perhaps understandable that these nude female representations had such an impact on the developing scientific community of the prudish Victorian age. Theories regarding their racial origin, use as erotic objects, or expression of fertility and reproduction were some of the first presented. The voluptuous body shape depicted in the first few figurines that were found, led scholars to the initial interpretation that they represented an African influence on Cro-Magnon culture. Edouard Piette



attributed the exaggerated features of the figurines to the presence of “two human races during the Eburnien” (Piette 1896 qtd in White 2006:227). In his 1902 work, Piette discusses his idea of “the Negroid race of Europe” (773) and the “unusual condition of steatopygia” (775) that may have afflicted these Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherers. Steatopygia, an “excessive development of fat on the buttocks” (Webster’s 1979:1130), especially affects females and is common among certain groups of African peoples. The condition was well-known at the time of the earliest excavations because of the

fame of Sartje Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus [Fig. 38], an African woman afflicted with steatopygia to an abnormal degree, and therefore used to defend this racial theory. The proportions of the figurines led Piette to the conclusion that there had been an African race of people in Europe during the Ice Age – alongside the Cro-Magnons – who

were prone to steatopygia. In a letter to Alexandre Bertrand, Piette gives an account of his 1894 excavation and the finds and says: “The existence of a steatopygous race and another race, living side by side, is confirmed” (Piette qtd in White 2006:273). Although Piette was absolutely certain of the truth of his interpretation, the “case for and against Paleolithic female steatopygia on the basis of the figurines was fiercely debated” (Russell 1998:263; see

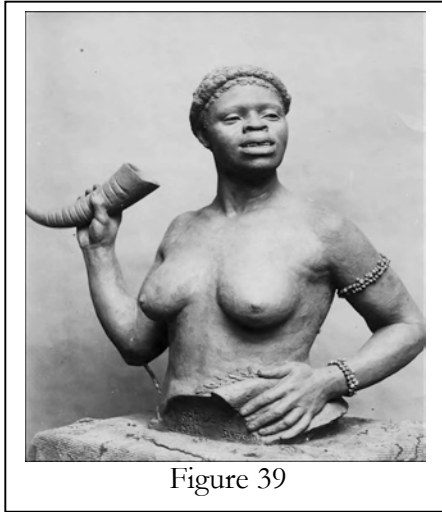


Figure 39

also Atgier 1912:711; Regnault 1912:35-36; Levy 1948:58). In addition to this anatomical connection with the peoples of Africa, Piette also saw the figurines as similar in appearance to Egyptian dolls (White 2006:273) or “uncontestably Egyptian in nature” (Piette qtd in White 2006 275). He found the “racial differences within the collection of figurines and the resemblance of some of them to African populations”

(White 2006:276) to be perplexing, but he was unwavering in his interpreting them as realistic. Piette made it very clear that his position on the figurines was that “they should be read literally as realistic depictions of human anatomy” (Piette qtd in White 2006:277) since the people of the period were “profound realists” who “represented themselves in engraving and sculpture” (Piette 1895:129-130).

This theory of Piette’s gained immense popularity since it supported European imperialists and their efforts at colonization. Others subsequently applied the “literal reading of the figurines as racial type” (White



Figure 40

2006:280) to the bas-reliefs at Laussel, producing full-blown artistic renditions of the “other” race in the Paleolithic. Figure 39 shows Louis Mascare’s 1914 clay sculpture of prehistorian Aime Rutot’s vision of the Venus of Laussel and on its base an inscription reads *Negroide de Laussel, Drodogne* (White 2006: 280). Another image [Fig. 40] shows part of the frieze sculpted by Constant Roux on the façade of the *Institut de Paleontologie Humaine* in Paris, erected in 1923 under the supervision of Breuil and showing an African San man sculpting the Venus of Laussel (White 2006:281). However, the African-influence theory proposed by Piette very quickly lost ground after World War I (White 2006:281) and was replaced by later theories that removed the racial aspect but retained the idea of realistic body portrayal.

An off-shoot from Piette’s realistic theory claimed that the figurines were actually erotic objects used by Paleolithic men (Luquet 1930:109-111). This interpretation of these figurines as Paleolithic pornography developed early in the twentieth century and has been redeveloped multiple times. This theory rested on what was seen as an emphasis on sexual characteristics that showed “a straight line from the ice-age to Rodin and the playboy bunnies of later days” (Kurten 1986:113-114). The idea that “the ‘Venuses’ were manufactured as erotic paraphernalia, providing pleasure to Paleolithic man during his meals” (Uko and Rosenfeld 1973:119), was a result of researchers’ focusing on only the enlarged sexual features. In his examination of many of the images, Karel Absolon claimed that “sex and hunger were the two motives which influenced the entire mental life of the mammoth hunters and their productive art” (1939:469). He observed that the artists used art to stress their “sexual libido” and the end result was “a diluvial plastic pornography” (1949:208). Onian’s speculations (Collins and Onians 1978) about the origins of art suggest that “the very earliest, pre-Solutrean representations -- female figurines, engraved vulvas, and animals -- are to be related to the strong physical desires of young men for food and sex

and provided direct tactile and visual satisfaction” (Halverson 1987:68). These interpretations focused on the position of the Paleolithic woman as subservient to the man; as simply another tool for his enjoyment.

This vision of women as subservient to man was also an aspect of the male scholar’s version of Paleolithic hunting and fertility magic. Carl Reinach introduced the interpretation of the figurines as objects used in fertility rites and rituals and considered them to have been created for use in promoting the fertility both of the people in a community and at the surrounding environment. He also suggested that they were used in rituals using sympathetic magic in which the people considered the carving of a pregnant woman a ritualistic way of ensuring that more women would become pregnant. Since it was commonly accepted that most of the figurines did depict pregnant women, this theory became rather popular and has continued to be a part of many recent interpretations. Stemming from the initial theorizing of Reinach in 1908, theories hypothesizing that these figurines are tools of fertility and hunting magic expanded to visualize the religion of the Ice Age as one that “centered around a cult of animal and human fertility” (Russell 1998:262).

A common interpretation of the figurines became seeing them as expressions of Paleolithic man’s concerns with “sexuality and fertility” (Wymer 1982:258). Enlarged breasts were seen as indicative of the milk-filled breasts of a pregnant woman, while other exaggerated features were considered to show “obesity and the physiological consequences of maternity” (Duhard 1993:87). Expressed in the figurines was the necessity to reproduce and “man’s obsessive need for women who would bear him lots of children” (Berenguer 1973:51-52). Described as symbols of “fertility, procreation and life” (Guilaine 1986:48), the statuettes were also thought to demonstrate the passivity of Paleolithic women. The “swelling wombs and ample curves” (Bowra 1962:10) of the figurines were to show that

these women were “essentially passive, child bearing nurturers...regarded as divine in terms of the cults of fertility that were then practiced” (Julien 1986:30). According to these theories, though, the divinity of these women stopped at their usefulness as reproducers, since art and religion “were seen as important aspects of Paleolithic life in which only the men participated” (Russell 1998:262). These ideas solidified the first prehistorians’ general view of women as simply domestic producers of children.

These interpretations relating to fertility, reproduction, and sympathetic magic, although once very popular, have more recently been discredited for being too simplistic (Marshack 1972:282; Soffer et al. 2000:514). Many of the ideas in this group have, however, been absorbed into the larger theory that claims the figurines are proof of the existence of a wide-spread Mother Goddess or Great Goddess religion that prevailed in the later Neolithic period.

Section Two

Although the support for an ancient Mother Goddess religion is much stronger in Neolithic archaeology (see Gimbutas 1982; 1989; 1991; Mellaart 1967), theories that include the Upper Paleolithic figurines as cosmologically significant and ritualistic representations of an even older Mother Goddess emerge frequently. The various theories within this second section include the most popularized interpretations, and these are versions with which the layman is more likely to be familiar.

The widely popular *Earth’s Children Series* by Jean Auel, for example, is the chronicle of the life of a Paleolithic woman. The well-researched and detailed novels incorporate archaeological sites and artifacts into the main character’s – Ayla’s – travels among different settlements of people. For example, the area of Drodogne in France is the settlement of the Zeladonii, Jondalar’s people; the sites of Dolni Vestonice is the settlement

of the S'Armuni, a group of people under the tyrannical leadership of a crazed woman; and the Kostenki-Avdeevo sites are the settlements of the Mammoth Hunters. The artifacts, burials, artworks, and housing patterns found at each of these sites are also incorporated into her description of the people who lived there. Auel cleverly weaves both the archaeological data and the interpretations of her time into her narration of daily prehistoric life. In these novels she presents a fictionalized version of many of the theories about early human history including the still debated topics of the disappearance of the Neanderthals and the meaning and purpose of the Paleolithic female representations. The Cro-Magnons of her story worship a Mother Goddess, with variations by geographical group, and the figurines are given the name "donii" and considered by the Paleolithic people to be images of the Goddess. Auel's stories of a Paleolithic Mother Goddess sold well over twenty million copies worldwide, subsequently spreading the goddess-theory among the general public.

The earliest theory that identifies the figurines as representations of a prehistoric fertility goddess appeared in an 1856 lecture by Johann Bachofen. He proposed the existence of the cult of the female deity and powerful prehistoric matriarchies (Hays 1958:60-61; Lowie 1937:40-43; Russell 1998:262). Bachofen took the theories of his time that saw the goddess as simply a "faceless fertile being who would ensure a continuing supply of young humans and animals" (Russell 1998: 262) and transformed her into the "Earth-" or "Mother-Goddess". Although his ideas were not widespread or commonly accepted in his time, feminist scholars of the 1960s used his theory as the foundation for their own versions of a religion centered upon a Paleolithic Mother Goddess.

The feminist movement of the 1960s brought women into academia who began to question earlier research methods and conclusions regarding the female figurines. Citing Bachofen's lecture, they attacked the male chauvinism apparent in earlier research and

“emphasized [Bachofen’s] study of primeval matriarchies and his belief that ‘mother-right’ was important in early religion” (Russell 1998:263). Many scholars of this time, both male and female, envisioned the figurines as representative of some feminine aspect of Paleolithic religion. A few deserve independent examination.

In her 1948 study of the religious conceptions of the Stone Age, Gertrude Rachel Levy talks about the Paleolithic figurines as examples of the “cult of human fertility” (56). The goal of her investigation was to show how prehistoric religious, artistic, and social ideas underlie and affect modern European thought. In the chapter titled *The Mother Goddess and the Dead*, she discusses the statuettes as predecessors of the Neolithic goddess figurines and therefore “the first step in the establishment of relationship between the human group and the One [the goddess]” (Levy 1948:63). An interesting feature of her discussion of the figurines is her theory on why they lacked extremities. Other ethnographic and historic research has vaguely shown that there is a common association between an anthropomorphic figure of a specific person and the resulting power over that individual, for example, voodoo dolls. Levy relates this back to the Paleolithic carvings saying that “the general unimportance among the statues of face, hands, and feet may have originated in fears of magic dangers” (1948:57). Overall, her writing simply assumes that the figurines are representations of a Mother Goddess, without presenting any archaeological support for it.

In his first publication, *The Roots of Civilization*, Alexander Marshack introduces his “time-factored symbolism” theory (1972). He considers traditional theories of fertility magic to be an oversimplification and other previous theories to be “merely a specialized, storied aspect of a human recognition of sequence and process” (Marshack 1972:282). In his own theory, he contends that Upper Paleolithic peoples had brains similar to those of humans today, and, therefore, it should be assumed that our ancestors “would exhibit the same levels

of cognition and comparison, the same storied equations, and the same efforts at coherence and unification by story and of participation in story in relation to the primary processes and functions of women – including maturation, menstruation, copulation, pregnancy, birth, and lactation” (Marshack 1972:282). These storied and symbolized “time-factored processes and sequences” (Marshack 1972:282) are related to women who use “anthropomorphized or humanized ‘characters,’ [and who have] names and attributes” (Marshack 1972:283). He considers a carved female figurine to be an example of one of these named characters. As efforts are made to participate in these storied processes, a tradition of actions develops which can be called “religious” (Marshack 1972:283). A female goddess could develop to be used in “explaining and cohering stories about nature” (Marshack 1972:316) and in dealing with the female sequence that follows a girl as she “matures, develops breasts, develops pubic hairs, menstruates for the first time, and then sequentially or periodically changes her ‘personality’ or ‘character’, becomes accessible for mating, becomes pregnant but does not always deliver successfully, lactates or gives milk, cares for the infant, and eventually grows old” (Marshack 1972:282). Marshack repeatedly attributes the features of the figurines to different symbols related to this process and thereby concludes that they were utilized both for the understanding of and worship of a goddess-figure.

Marschack’s later writings reflect the influence of the writings of other scholars and of the general atmosphere of the time. Although he remains devoted to his “time-factored symbol” theory, his view of the figurines as some kind of goddess-figure becomes more concrete (Marshack 1991:24). He stresses that these images are only symbolic in their own time, culture, and community, an aspect of his theory expanded in later “Art for Art’s Sake” theories. To him, therefore, the female image was “a symbol and metaphor that encompassed a diverse range of meanings and possible uses” (Marshack 1991:29). Each

figurine, “within her culture and period, rather than within ours, was clearly richly and elaborately clothed in inference and meaning. She wore the fabric of her culture. She was, in fact, a referential library and a multivalent, multipurpose symbol” (Marshack 1991:29). This perception of the Venus figurines as symbolic of more than one idea has become a mainstay in more recent interpretations.

Seeing more than one symbol or purpose of the figurines fit well with the ideas of theorists that followed Marshack, but researchers used the idea differently. Those who were trying to get away from the goddess-theory used Marschak as their introduction or foundation, while the proponents of the goddess-theory incorporated his ideas into their ideas that the Paleolithic goddess herself had multiple purposes and meanings.

An example of this layering of ideas can be found in the writings of Richard Rudgley (1999) and Marija Gimbutas (1982, 1989, 1991). Rudgley states that “it is quite apparent that the female body was a symbol used to express numerous concerns in Paleolithic times” (1999:198). He then later says that the “female body was a symbol of cosmological significance” (Rudgley 1999:199) and rhetorically asks: “If the female body was one of the most widespread and elaborate images of the Old Stone Age, and a symbol for the various forces of nature and the various aspects of culture, would it really be so far from the mark to believe that the figurines actually embody aspects of the Paleolithic worship of a goddess?” (Rudgley 1999:200). His question harkens back to the writings of Marija Gimbutas from the 1980s, which very obviously influenced him, and her conclusion that the “early farming communities of Europe coexisted with each other and with nature in a largely peaceful fashion, worshipping a Great Goddess” (Gimbutas qtd in Rudgley 1999:16). According to her, “the religious life of Old Europe centered on the worship of a goddess who took many forms; the earth was revered as the embodiment of the goddess and death seen as a return to

the womb of the earth/goddess” (Gmbutas qtd in Rudgley 1999:17). Although most of her work focuses on artifacts from the Neolithic, she does claim the Paleolithic Venuses as predecessors to the worship of the Great Goddess in the Neolithic. Other theorists have also discussed a connection between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic female figurines (Gimbatus 1989, 1991; Mellaart 1967). In her book, Jacquetta Hawkes comments on “the relationship between the two periods, noting that Paleolithic female figurines ‘are extraordinarily like the Mother or Earth Goddesses of the agricultural peoples of Eurasia in the Neolithic Age and must be directly ancestral to them’” (Hawkes 1965 qtd. in Stone 1976:14). Feminist scholars have seized upon these theorists’ works as validation for their own theories of a Paleolithic Goddess.

The justification of the feminist view of the figurines can be found in the many “goddess” books published from the 1970s to the early 1990s (see, for example, Carmody 1981; Sjoon and Mor 1987; Farrar and Farrar 1987; Stone 1976, 1990; Baring and Cashford 1991; Markale 1999). Many of these books are not written by women qualified in archaeology or prehistory and, instead of combating the male biases of the 1980s, expose many of their own. Often these books veer off into the realm of the mystical, mixing thin scientific research and distorted archaeological evidence with cosmology, mythology, and astrology (Russell 1998:264). Through their interpretation of the figurines, they end up depicting prehistoric women as “some kind of super-beings revered by submissive males for their femaleness and their ability to produce children” (Russell 1998:264). According to Pamela Russell, “this feminist literature is based on the idea that the supreme deity, a female, was transformed into a male god by men for their own purposes, while she became merely the God’s wife or consort” (1998:264).

In their interpretations of the story, feminist writers see the first religion as the deification of the female (see, Carmody 1981; Sjoö and Mor 1987; Farrar and Farrar 1987; Stone 1976, 1990; Baring and Cashford 1991; Markale 1999). The reason for this reverence was early humankind's lack of knowledge about sex and reproduction. For example, one text reads:

It is plausible, though not certain, that the first humans were unaware of the exact role of the male in procreation, not having established a causal relationship between coitus and parturition. Thus, their attitude toward the female, apparently weaker than male, but mysteriously able to produce life, was ambiguous: a profound respect, if not veneration, and, at the same time, a kind of terror in the face of incomprehensible, even magic or divine, powers. The statuettes called 'Venus callipyges,' of the well-known Lespugue type, are a decisive argument in favor of this thesis, because, in these representations, a divine maternal power is undeniably probable that primitive humanity regarded divinity, whatever that was, as feminine in nature. (Markale 1999:4)

Another so-called goddess-book insists that most of the figurines "have the look of mothers, as though all that were female in them had been focused on the overwhelming mystery of birth" (Baring et al. 1991:6). The female figurines are non-naturalistic images communicating the mystery of life itself since "the mystery of the female body is the mystery of birth, which is also the mystery of the unmanifest becoming the manifest in the whole of nature" (Baring et al. 1991:8). The mystery surrounding birth is cited by these authors as the specific purpose of the deification of the female and the ultimate creation of numerous images of the powerful Goddess.

In contrast to the theories regarding the glorification of goddesses, fertility, and motherhood, many scholars of this same period took their interpretations another way. While some popularized the goddess-theory, other researchers attempted to look at the figurines more narrowly. These interpretations have remained scholarly reputable and have become the basis for a number of the most recent ideas that will be discussed in section three.

Removing the Mother Goddess from her interpretation, Patricia Rice (1981) considers the figurines to be images of women of all ages, and not exclusively mothers. Rice claims that “the Venuses represent the entire age spectrum of adult females, and therefore it is womanhood in general, not fertility exclusively, which is being symbolically recognized or honored” (1981:403). In her study, Rice looked at “each of the 188 extant Venuses” (1981:402) and separated them into four categories based on body attributes: 1) Prereproductive; 2) Reproductive, Pregnant; 3) Reproductive, Nonpregnant; and 4) Postreproductive (Rice 1981:405). She then compared the proportions of the figurines’ established age groups to data of age proportions of contemporary hunter-gatherers in order to establish that they were similar in distribution (Rice 1981:406-408). Rice then concludes that, “since the largest group of Venuses represents nonpregnant adult females” (1981:409) and since the largest percentage of hunter-gatherer women at any given time are nonpregnant adult females (1981:408), the Venus figurines must therefore represent all aspects of “womanhood, not just motherhood” (1981:409). Rice then attributes the numerous representations of women to the belief that women during the Paleolithic were linked to gathering as “the main source of food for their groups” (1981:410), were regarded as “keepers of the home base,...symbols of social solidarity” (1981:411), and were seen as “the givers of life” (1981:411). Although she doesn’t specify who made the statuettes, Rice

says that “prehistoric cultures may have been motivated to honor the contributors of these vital activities by sculpting Venuses, and in turn, the resultant statuettes may have functioned as reminders of the contributions of women to Paleolithic society as a whole” (Rice 1981:411). Although scholars evaluating her work have brought up the lack of stable criteria for her figurine groups, Rice does manage to incorporate the concept of the sacred into her interpretation without adhering to either simplistic fertility magic or the extreme goddess-theory.

After a brief overview of some of the past interpretations, including those of Rice, Bruce Dickson attributed the frequency of female figurines in the archaeological record to “a parallel increase in the significance of women...in the Upper Paleolithic spiritual realm” (Dickson 1990:214). He notes that it is during this time that women are for the first time found in burials “similar to [those] accorded to males,” which shows that women had attained “social status on par with men” (Dickson 1990:214). He goes on to propose that the art of this time is a reflection of “a ‘sacred canon’ which symbolically reproduces the societal processes of production and asserts that the duality and complementary of the sexes were essential to the social and economic persistence of the society” (Dickson 1990:214). His theory revolves around the social roles women have and their function in the Paleolithic conception of the spiritual world. Theories that relate the figurines with magical elements, but are less significant than the idea of a goddess, continued to develop alongside those that looked for practical, functional purposes of the images.

It appeared entirely logical to many of the scholars of the 20th century that the frequent female depictions throughout the Paleolithic did have some magical elements. Wymer (1982) considers the “engraved representations of genitalia” and the fact that “the Venus figurines are pregnant” to be evidence for such a magical element (258). Although

theories of fertility, magic, and ritual were typically very closely connected to views of the figurines as part of a complex religion, others during the same period criticized this association. In his book, Secrets of the Ice Age: The World of the Cave Artists, Evan Hadingham considers the Mother Goddess theories to be too extreme and unfounded. He suggests instead that a more likely interpretation could be “some other, lesser meaning in terms of casual superstition or folk belief” (Hadingham 1979:224), for example “amulets to bring good luck” (225). Other interpretations, like Hadingham’s, reject ideas of fertility, obesity, and a goddess are those that identify the figurines as initiation figures (Ucko 1968:425), puppets (Zamiatnine qtd in Nougier 1984:281), priestesses (Delporte 1979:276,290), witches (Ronen 1976:57), or figures for protection/to scare away strangers (Waechter 1976:124; Von Koenigswald 1972:137 in Rice 1981:402). Still others have proposed that they were used by women to prevent difficulties in childbirth (Augusta 1960:34), by children as dolls (Ucko 1968:422), or by men as a worry-stone (Russell 1998:267). These views take the interpretation of the figurines away from the Mother Goddess theory and examine their basic, practical purpose in Paleolithic society.

Also in opposition to the Mother Goddess theory is John Halverson’s theory of “Art for Art’s Sake.” In 1987, *Current Anthropology* published an article by Halverson in which he proposed that Paleolithic art “has no ‘meaning’ in any ordinary sense of the word, no religious, mythic, or metaphysical reference, no magical or practical purpose” (Halverson 1987:63). Instead, he says, these artifacts should be understood as a “reflection of an early stage of cognitive development, the beginnings of abstraction in the form of re-presented images” (Halverson 1987:63). Instead of being created for some unknown symbolic purpose, the activity of making these items would have been “autotelic, a kind of play, specifically a free play of signifiers” (Halverson 1987:63). Therefore, the items ordinarily

termed as Paleolithic art might have actually been simply “art for art’s sake” (Halverson 1987:63). On the first page of his article, Halverson presents a theory that opposes what most others researchers have said. In Halverson’s view, the figurines do not represent an array of symbols of fertility, womanhood, power, etc.; they actually mean nothing, being examples only of Paleolithic experimentation with the technique of carving.

Halverson sees the “immemorial practice of stone-knapping” (1987:66) as the precursor to carving. The development of a technique of carving was the initial form of figural representation since our “earliest works of ‘art’ are three-dimensional sculptures in the round” (Halverson 1987:66). From carving, the next steps would have been “high and low relief, engraving, and finally painting” (Halverson 1987:66). The sequence that he presents here suggests the “coevolution of technique and cognition” (Halverson 1987:66).

Halverson discusses the history of human consciousness as it applies to his theory on the origin of Paleolithic art, saying that these people had a “‘primal mind’, human consciousness in the process of growth” (Halverson 1987:69). He thinks that the earliest representational images “would first of all have signified the animals depicted” and “only later would their meaning have been extended or transferred to other objects” (Halverson 1987:69). He discredits theories subscribing to symbolism, magic, and religion as they skip over what he considers to be a crucial step in the development of human thought, the enjoyment of these earliest images “for their own sake, both in making them and in seeing them” (Halverson 1987:69). Although this theory took academia by surprise – subjecting itself to ferocious criticism – Halverson must be credited with taking the research on Paleolithic art, and especially the female figurines, in a new direction. His effort to remove all symbolic and religious interpretations from the figurines has given more recent theories a

complicated, wide-ranging, mosaic backdrop in front of which to place their own original ideas.

Section Three

It is in this last section, which includes some of the most recent ideas about the figurines, that we find modern research methods and techniques being used emphatically. Archaeology has advanced its implementation of technology significantly since the discovery of the first figurine, and the most recent researchers proudly support their theories with what they consider new, superior data. Although they use cutting-edge techniques, these newer researchers mostly build their theories on the foundations of those that came before them. For example, although the idea of realistic observation was first presented in the 1890s and lost ground in the 20th century, it has recently been revamped to take on many new facets of interpretation. Similarly, recent theories that emphasize the Paleolithic woman's involvement in the creation of the figurines use new kinds of investigation but are still reminiscent of the 1970s feminist scholars' discussion of feminine power and prestige symbolized in the figurines. In this new research, realistic observation and depiction have been considered often, with one of the earliest studies focusing on the "enlarged or hypertrophic breasts" (Harding 1976) of many of the figurines. Others have considered the figurines to be medical teaching tools for Paleolithic gynecology and obstetrics (Duhard 1993). Even more recently, researchers have investigated the methods of the figurines' creation (White 1997, 2006), the creator's viewing perspective (McDermott 1996), and less emphasized features of the figurines, such as their clothing (Soffer, et al. 2000; Gvozdover 1985). These theories each present something old in a new and updated way.

A short article written in 1976 by J.R. Harding presents the Venus figurines as realistic exhibitions of the "pathological condition known as massive hypertrophy of the

breasts” (Harding 1976:271). His claim is that the figurines, two in particular, demonstrate a medical condition that “arises from excessive mammary development which, in a comparatively short time, results in enormous and grotesque-looking breasts” (Harding 1976:271). Some of the features of the figurines are paralleled to breast hypertrophy in African women. This theory is very closely related to Piette’s, but the main difference is that Harding never infers a past cultural or racial relationship between Africans and the Gravettians. He does consider the markings that are evident on the breasts of some of the figurines to be comparable to the incision marks on the breasts of a Zambian woman with the condition. The hospital that she went to for treatment noted that “the breasts showed incision marks made by a tribal healer to whom the patient had first gone for treatment” (Harding 1976:271). Harding uses this as ethnographical evidence that the markings on some of the figurines represent “the incisions made by a Gravettian-Solutrian medicine man, either on the living subject which the image represents, or both subject and image, or on the image only for the cure of his patient through sympathetic magic” (Harding 1976:272). In his theory, Harding includes both the idea that the figurines are accurate images of real people and the interpretation of them as magical or ritualistic tools, but he removes any inference of race, thereby increasing the contemporary appeal of the realistic observation theory.

Another revamped version of realistic observation is Jean-Pierre Duhard’s interpretation of the figurines as medical teaching tools for Paleolithic gynecologists. Duhard, a gynecologist by training, finds that, the shapes of the carved female figurines seem to be “very similar to the morphology of modern women (1991:552). He includes in his analysis studies of skeletal remains which introduce his supposition that “there was hardly any morphological difference between the Gravettians and ourselves” (Duhard 1991:552).

This information combined with his study of the figurines, reassures him of the “close resemblance between Gravettian and modern women” (Duhard 199:553). One aspect that Duhard focuses on is the adiposity, the location of fatty deposits, of the Venus figurines. He focuses on these fatty deposits because they have “specific sex-related functions, which obviously have not changed since that period, and undergo identical changes in physical appearance following the same laws of physiology” (Duhard 1991:552). Therefore, Duhard’s efforts are aimed at discovering whether the “same clinical forms of adiposity would be observed,” despite different climactic conditions, way of life, and food resources (1991:552).

Following his examination of twenty-three of the figurines from the Gravettian sites of Southwestern France, Duhard concludes that all of them “realistically reproduce different types of adiposity, known to us, corresponding so exactly to modern human subjects that we can deduce the existence of morphological and functional consistency in humans over more than 20,000 years” (1991:559). His association with these figurines as obstetrician tools comes from his belief that studying and understanding adiposity can “only be made by morphological comparison with living models,” therefore, the carvers of these images must have been medically inclined. The shapes of the figurines, aligned so closely with the shapes of modern women, also differ among the figurines; each one is unique. Because of this observation, Duhard supposes that the figurines are the “first portraits of individuals” (1991:559). These realistic representations can be considered to be “humans of both sexes and all ages, with an apparent under-representation of men and children” (Duhard 1993:90). From these numerous and realistic representations of women, Duhard deduces that Paleolithic women must have been “privileged” as a result of the “importance of their physiological role, since they combined the functions of mothers, sexual partners and social

partners” (1993:90). His study of the figurines, albeit from a non-anthropologist view, reveals the modern era’s emphasis on tying the figurines to science rather than religion.

The newfound emphasis on representational techniques has been approached from different angles and the recent work by Randall White (2006) has produced new information about some of the figurines. In his article, White narrows his analysis to include only the artifacts from Brassempouy, France, and introduces them and the “tortured history” (White 2006:252) surrounding their excavation by Piette in the 1890s. With new technological and microscopic methods, he examines the figurines and interprets from his results a “context of figurine fabrication and the abandonment of unsuccessful sculpting attempts” (White 2006:253). After a lengthy discussion of the excavation history and the archaeological and stratigraphic context in which the figurines were found, White proceeds to illustrate his own research on the figurines.

Through microscopic examinations he finds that the figurines all bear tool traces which include “hacking, pecking, gouging, scraping, incising, abrading and polishing, and are entirely consistent with the use of various flint tools and mineral abrasives” (White 2006:287). He describes in detail how specific features on the pieces were carved and with what utensil. In addition to offering these details, White notes that virtually all the Brassempouy figurines “were broken during fabrication” (2006:290) because, although done by someone skilled with in the process of carving and sculpting, these pieces were made by someone “with little experience with ivory” (White 2006:289). Another implication of the many broken pieces is that, instead of using fresh mammoth tusks, the artist was “working with partially dessicated tusks, where the collagen binding the lamina together had been compromised” (White 2006:290). From this discovery, White was able to make another astounding realization: that two of the figurines previously considered by most researchers to

be independent objects actually shared “a common fracture surface along a laminar interface” (White 2006:291). White also managed to solve the mystery surrounding the *Dame a la capuche* [Fig. 5]. Since the discovery of the little head in the 1890s, there has been a general assumption that it was simply a fragment of a broken figurine and it once had a corresponding body. Using a microscope on the fracture surface, White discovered that “its surface bore the distinctive marks of stone burins” (White 2006:293). That is, the head may have initially had a body, but, more likely, it had fractured in the process of being sculpted as a self-standing head. Or, in White’s words: “after the fracture, an attempt had apparently been made to recover by re-working the fracture itself” (2006:293-294). The most intriguing aspect of White’s analysis is his conclusion that, since “we are left mostly pieces broken during fabrication” (2006:294-295), this area must have been some kind of center for ivory sculpting. Those pieces that were successfully carved into figurines without massive breakage “may have been carried away by their makers” (White 2006:295).



Figure 41

In addition to his new discoveries on the actual fabrication techniques employed by the Gravettians, White answers a few questions surrounding the gender represented in some of the figurines, especially *La figurine a la ceinture*. He finds that “in all cases where pubic anatomy is well preserved, women are represented” (White 2006:298), but there is one figurine from the area that has constantly been under debate [Fig. 41]. White outlines the dispute:

Piette (Piette 1894; Piette 1895; Chollot 1964) vacillated between interpreting the pubic area as that of a man with a cod piece and that of a woman with a pronounced *mons venus*, finally preferring the former view. His reading is shared by Duhard (1993), while Dobras (1992) sees it as ambiguous at best. Before analyzing it microscopically, I too thought it was probably a male. (White 2006:299)

When White microscopically analyzed the figurine he observed “a classic pubic triangle with vulva...*La figurine a la ceinture* has a vulva situated on what seems to be a protruding *mons venus*” (2006:299). The techniques White uses to examine this assemblage of figurines from Brassempouy reveal fascinating aspects of the figurines and answer long asked questions about authenticity, creation techniques, and gender.

In 1996, Leroy McDermott published a theory with Catherine Hodge McCoid titled “Self-Representation in Upper Paleolithic Female Figurines.” According to their research, the exaggerated features seen in these figurines are indicative of self-inspection artistry. They build upon Leroi-Gourhan’s concept of the “lozenge composition” in making their argument. A certain group of the Venus figurines – what McDermott and McCoid refer to as Pavlovian-Kostenkian-Gravettian or PKG-style figurines – adhere to the “lozenge composition” in that their center is on the torso, breasts, thighs, and abdomen; the “greatest width and vertical midpoint are unnaturally elevated to the navel; and the rest of the body above and below dwindles away” (McDermott 1996:228-229). Their reference to a PKG-style infers a cultural relationship between the makers of the figurines of Europe (they neglect the Siberian figurines), which many other scholars disagree on (see comments on McDermott 1996). They selected a particular group of the Paleolithic figurines to

demonstrate the connection between the un-anatomically correct features and the artist's particular perspective.

McDermott and McCoid consider the images of females from the Upper Paleolithic to conform to “those viewpoints needed by a woman to see her own body” (1996:237). Their evidence includes the comparison of photos taken of the Venus of Willendorf or the Venus of Lespugue from different angles to photographic simulations of what the view of a modern pregnant woman would be from each of the same angles [Fig. 42]. Multiple

questions about the common features of the figurines are answered according to female self-inspection. Faceless heads, for example, are logically explained because “the objective appearance of the head and face is simply not visible from a self-viewing perspective” (McDermott 1996:237). In order to explain the pendulous breasts and general voluptuousness of the

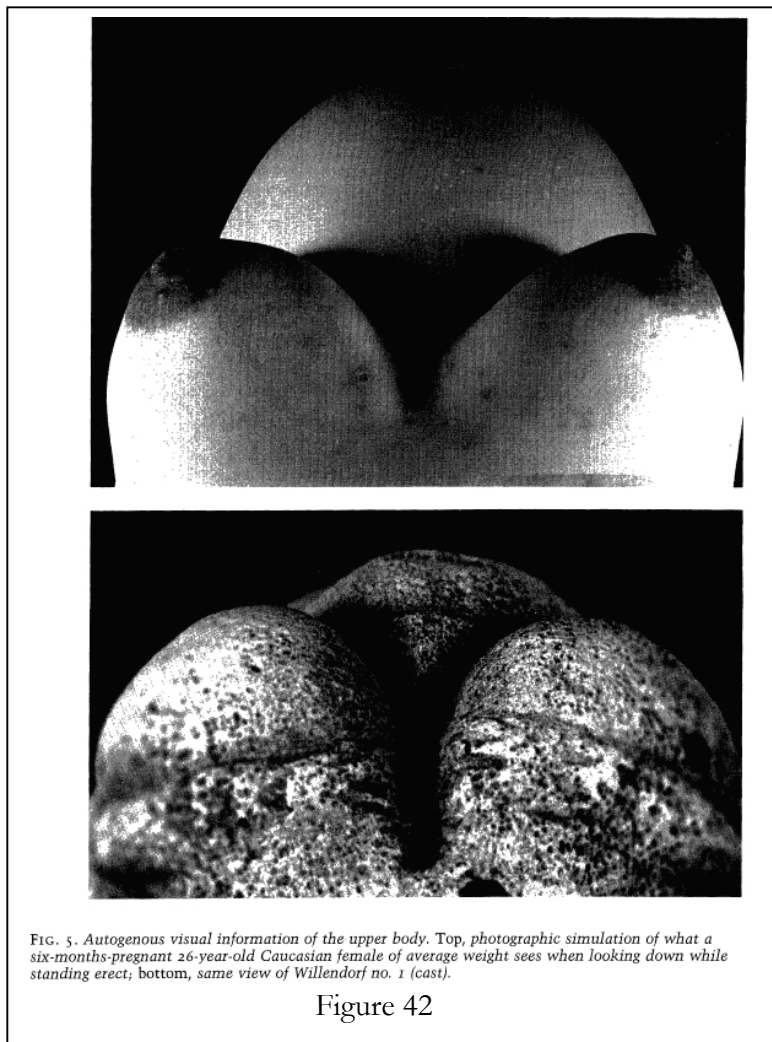


FIG. 5. Autogenous visual information of the upper body. Top, photographic simulation of what a six-months-pregnant 26-year-old Caucasian female of average weight sees when looking down while standing erect; bottom, same view of Willendorf no. 1 (cast).

Figure 42

figurines, they claim that when a woman stands with her head down, what she sees is a “strongly foreshortened view of the upper frontal surface of the thorax and abdomen, while

the breasts, being close to the eyes, will loom large in the visual field” (McDermott 1996:239). In order to view the front of her body’s lower half, a pregnant woman must bend over creating the false dissection of the body at the navel instead of the anatomical reality of the hips. Without bending, a pregnant woman’s view of her lower extremities is blocked by her expanded abdomen and it would appear that her “true height had been depressed” (McDermott 1996:242). The lack of extremities – feet and arms – is explained by their not being visible to the woman since they are “often being occluded by the intervening body” (McDermott 1996:242).

The figurines are interpreted to “deviate from ordinary anatomical reality for some symbolic or psychological purpose” and vague “societal values” are symbolized in the accentuation of “the parts of the female body involved in reproductive or erotic activities” (McDermott 1996:234). They then speculate that women were the creators of these figurines “as accurate representational images of the female body at different stages of development” and they were used to store and preserve “information about biological processes unique to the lives of women” (McDermott 1996:247). Crucial to their theory is the interpretation of these figurines as women’s things, objects made by and for women to use for different things. In addition to noticing the exclusion of many pieces, one of the main critiques of this theory lies in its direct association with women since it is just as “sexist to claim that all these images were made by women as it is to assume that they were all produced by men” (Bahn’s comments on McDermott 1996:248). It seems implausible that all of these figurines were made by “upright pregnant women who were only interested in the photographically accurate reproduction of certain parts of their bodies as seen from particular angles” (Bahn’s comments on McDermott 1996:249). Other researchers considered his theory about the figurines to be “fundamentally speculative” (Bisson’s

comments on McDermott 1996:249) since self-viewing cannot “satisfactorily account for all their qualities” (Cook’s comments on McDermott 1996:250). In spite of strong criticisms, McDermott and McCoid’s theory is called “innovative” (Duhard’s comments on McDermott 1996:254), “intriguing” (Davis’ comments on McDermott 1996:251), and “original” (Delporte’s comments on McDermott 1996:252), and most researchers value the new ideas that he has brought to the study of these images.

One of the most recent writings on the figurines was written by three researchers who have written on them previously, though only briefly. In their 2000 article, Olga Soffer, J.M. Adovasio, and D.C. Hyland discuss their theory about the figurines that shifts the long time focus on their nudity to those images that depict items of clothing and ornamentation. Their theory expounds the idea that these images include important evidence that the Paleolithic people understood “the weaving of textiles and the plaiting and coiling of baskets” (Soffer et al. 2000:512). In addition, they argue that these skills were developed by women and that the items they produced were “sufficiently valued to be immortalized in fired clay, ivory, and stone” (Soffer et al. 2000:512). Their evidence of textiles and cordage comes mainly from the female statuettes, but they also include evidence from burials and tools (Soffer et al. 2000:514), focusing on those pieces that are “clad” with clothing and ornamentation like hats, belts, skirts, and bracelets. They contend that these items were at least as important in their rendition as the prominent sexual features: “when the female images are depicted as decorated or clad, as much attention is paid to the detailing of the items of clothing as to the depiction of their primary and secondary sexual characteristics” (Soffer et al. 2000:517). It is because of this attention and detailing that they interpret these images as prestige items of female labor.

The exquisite and labor-intensive detailing employed in the depiction of the woven garments worn by one group of Venuses clearly shows that weaving and basket-making skills and their products were valued enough to be transformed into transcendent cultural facts carved into stone, ivory, and bone. (Soffer et al. 2000:524)

Although the authors claim that the articles of clothing are realistic, they do not consider the figurines to be “taken at face value as a faithful reflection of clothing worn in daily life” (Soffer et al. 2000:522). Their argument is based on a significant amount of ethnographic evidence and only the Paleolithic figurines that appear to be less naked than the rest. Their interpretation of what constitutes clothing in some instances is highly speculative, since many of the images are either highly abstracted or broken at key spots (Soffer et al. 2000:521). Their comparison of these images to the products of modern hunter-gatherers leads them to interpret the Paleolithic textiles to be created exclusively by women. The use of ethnographic evidence to explain Paleolithic people, however, is generally discredited as too speculative (see comments on Soffer et al. 2000:525-531), which leaves their theory based solely on the iconographic evidence of a select number of figurines. Although their consideration of the figurines as female “symbols of achievement” (Soffer et al. 2000:524) is weak, their analysis of the textile and basketry of the Paleolithic remains intriguing. Additional theories based on the ornamentation of the figurines, as opposed to their nudity, will surely continue to develop.

Conclusion

The Venus figurines of the Upper Paleolithic are an extremely heterogeneous class of artifacts, mirrored in the heterogeneity of the many explanatory theories about them. In popular culture these figurines are often thought of as small, stone statuettes of voluptuous

or pregnant nude women with no faces, arms, or legs. Actually, although this description is accurate for the Venus of Willendorf, it is not representative of the class as a whole. They range from sizes between two centimeters to over forty and consist of both portable and fixed art. Instead of simply being obese or pregnant, many of the figurines appear to be young, pre-pubescent women/girls who have very small or no breasts and diminutive fatty deposits. As opposed to being carved only from stone, many of these artifacts are made from ivory, bone, and even clay. And, perhaps the most significant difference, the ages of the figurines, which span over a twenty thousand year period. The unrealistic portrayal of females in the Paleolithic without extremities or clothing has been repeatedly cited as proof of the Venus figurines' symbolic purpose, but the existence of many clothed and "whole" images is a challenge for this theory. Although discussion has been limited to the representations of females in the Gravettian they are by no means the only anthropomorphic images from the time period. Feminine images do outnumber other categories, but depictions of animals, men, and other anthropomorphs have been found. Perhaps more is said about the analysts than the artifacts in allowing such a heterogeneous class of artifacts to be represented by the most voluptuous examples. For the Venus figurines, this preference betrays the extraordinary diversity in morphology, raw materials, technologies of production, and archaeological contexts through time and space.

The various theories describing and explaining the purpose and meaning of the Venus figurines are just as diverse as the figurines themselves. They range from the 1890s to the present day and scholars are still unable to reach any kind of agreement. Each interpretation is tied both to the individual worldview of the researcher as well as to the historical and socio-political forces of their time. Support for racialism was rampant in the scientific community of the nineteenth century and it translated into viewing the figurines as

realistic depictions of an African race in Europe during the last Ice Age. The male scholars of the early 1900s saw the images as either erotica or fertility symbols utilized by Paleolithic man. With the woman's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s female scholars took the reins and worked to overturn the racist and sexist theories made by the earlier generation of men.

These shifted the focus of the Venus figurines into the female sphere of creation and use and paraded them as "poster children" of the feminist movement. Hailed as the Mother Goddess of the Paleolithic and precursor to the usurper male God, the figurines became images of deep ritual significance. Although the goddess theory triumphed in popular culture, the scientific arena was unconvinced and continued to produce a wide variety of theories spanning from "art for art's sake" to dolls to symbols of fertility and female power. In more recent times, researchers have narrowed their selection of artifacts and upgraded the technology of their methods. They use these new techniques to approach the interpretation of the figurines, generally overlaying their ideas with earlier ones.

It is obvious that the correct interpretation of the Venus figurines may never reveal itself and we will instead be left to wade through the various suppositions that have been presented and will, undoubtedly, continue to be made. But it may in fact be that, as Marcia-Anne Dobres says:

No better argument could be made for the polysemic nature of prehistoric visual imagery than to inventory the number of interpretations proposed over the past century for the meaning and/or function of the archaeological materials dubiously called the Venus figurines. (Dobres in comments on McDermott 1996:253)

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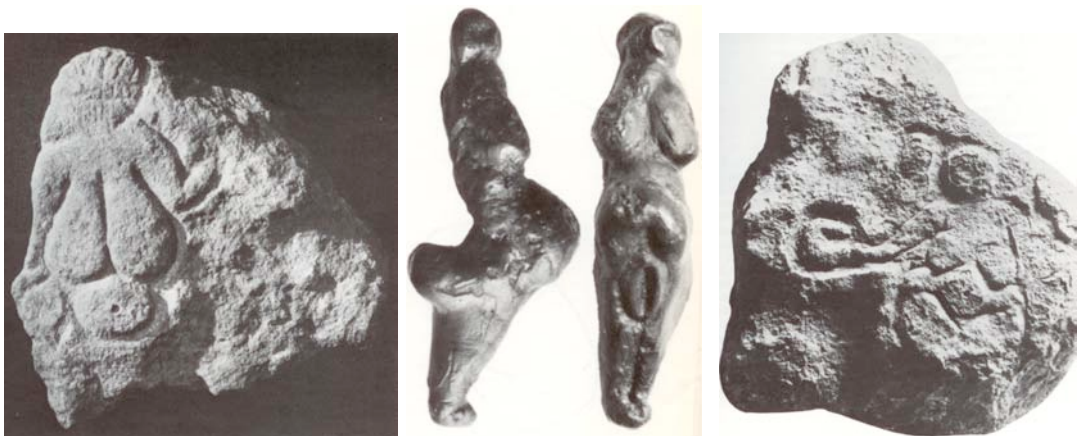
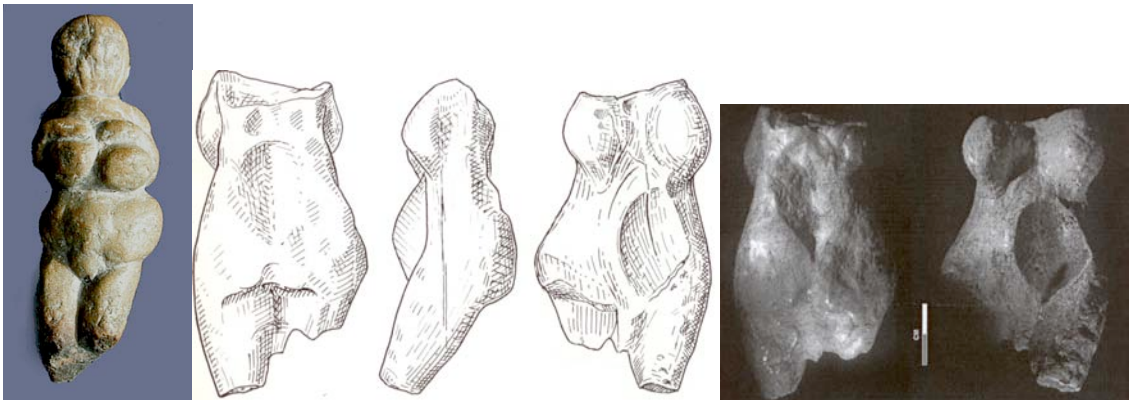
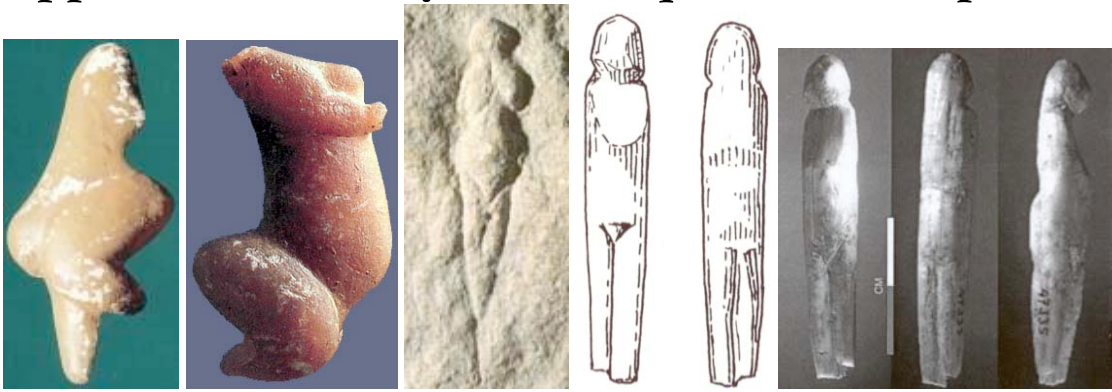
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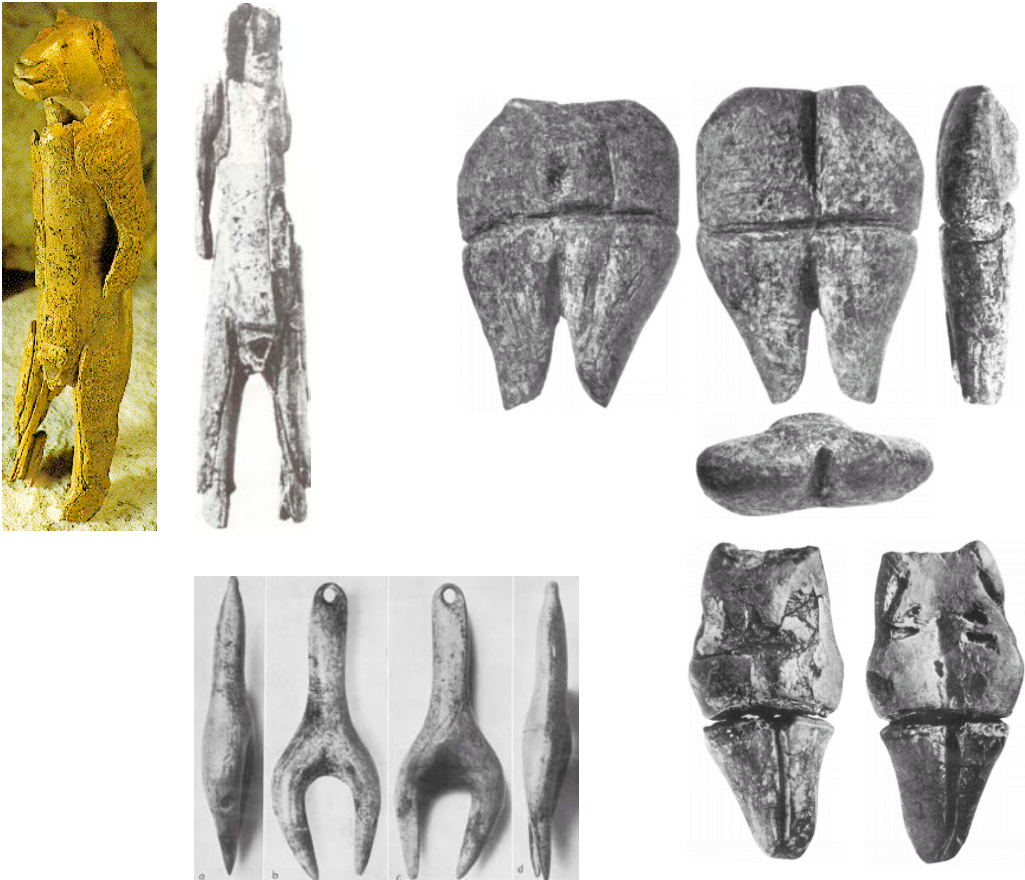
Appendix I: The Pyrenees-Aquitaine Group



Appendix II: The Mediterranean Group



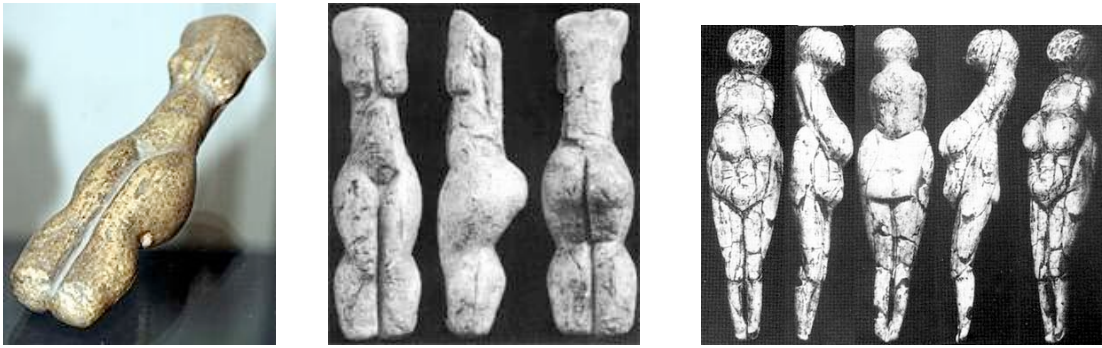
Appendix III: The Rhine-Danube Group

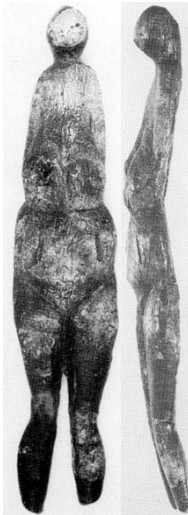


Two Males:



Appendix IV: The Russian Group





Appendix V: The Siberian Group

