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Exchanges of Identity in Prehistoric Anatolian Figurines

This paper examines exchange imagery and ideology of the human body manifested through figurines from prehistoric (7th–6th millennia BC) Anatolian contexts. These figurines document local, regional and inter-regional communication of identity, use of materials, ideologies and skills. Taking a new approach to understanding the assemblages, this paper suggests four key themes of analysis: materials and materiality; fractured bodies; gender spectrum; and ambiguities and relationships.

Introduction

Here we examine examples from 7th through 6th millennia (BC cal) in Anatolia, considering identity as communicated in figurine form, manufacture and use. We consider figurines as evidencing reciprocal exchange on regional, local and personal scales.

In this paper we review the landscape of prehistoric Anatolian figurines and suggest four themes of interpretation and analysis, which are then applied to two case studies, Çatalhöyük and Domuztepe. These are located on either side of the Taurus Mountains, in different landscapes and cultural zones, and situated chronologically on either side of the development of pottery. The figurines we are considering from Çatalhöyük were excavated from the 7th millennium pre-pottery settlement levels. The figurines we present from Domuztepe were excavated from the 6th millennium Halaf settlement levels. Our knowledge of the figurine assemblage from Çatalhöyük is derived from the many publications of the site.¹ Both authors have first-hand knowledge of the figurine assemblage from Domuztepe² as members of the excavation team and small find specialists.

1 For bibliography on the Çatalhöyük project, see www.catalhoyuk.com.

2 For bibliography on the Domuztepe project, see domuztepe.org.

We have recently conducted research into the full breadth and nature of the prehistoric corpus of Anatolian prehistoric figurines (Belcher/Croucher i. p.). Here we present a brief overview of the interpretations we developed in the course of our research, as well as preliminary considerations for a theoretical framework for analyzing identity and exchange of the wider world of prehistoric figurines. This framework represents a continuation of our work on body treatment and representation and the entangled relationships found in mortuary treatment (Croucher 2012) and art (Belcher 2014) in the wider prehistoric Ancient Near East. Consequently, this paper is more of a suggestion for future research than a presentation of fully formed results. We hope that this preliminary presentation of our research will prove helpful to those working with figurines, or other representational artifacts worldwide.

Context of Anatolian Prehistoric Figurines

The prehistoric Anatolian figurine landscape presents excavated assemblages found at sites across southern Anatolia. Distances between sites vary, and different sites had differential access to raw materials. All had access to clay and most had access to stone and a communal knowledge base to work and manufacture figurines from these materials. Across Anatolia, a spectrum of regionally shared and locally established figurine practices crossed regions and millennia, some which were long lasting, others short lived or experimental (**fig. 1**).

The influences and communications regarding prehistoric representation of the human body were not simply confined to the Anatolian region. Reciprocal communication and contact beyond the borders of Anatolia is well known. Anatolian figurine production was influenced by and influenced the wider prehistoric world surrounding these sites. These influences include Mesopotamia and Levant to the south and east; Balkans, Aegean cultures to the west and north as well as Central Asian cultures to the northeast. All of these cultures broadly share the same prehistoric, agricultural and technological developments, such as pottery manufacture or plaster-working, and our understandings of their relationships, chronology and regional contexts continue to be refined.

An Overview of Anatolian Figurines

While making overall generalisations is difficult and not advisable, we note that early figurines depict a range of representations, many remarkably well preserved. Throughout the long prehistoric period, both clay and stone were used. Stylistic similarities occur across assemblages, including rounded heads, flat featureless faces and elongated seated forms. However, there are many individual and local variations, and examples of unique forms,

Fig. 1. Map of Anatolia showing key sites of published prehistoric figurine data. Map by authors after open source map from d-maps.com.

which may have resulted from experimentation. Considered together, these figurine assemblages suggest that there was certainly communication about conventions in representation of the human form. It is important to remember that each figurine represents the individual choices of those that conceived, made, acquired, used, reused and discarded each and every figurine. Social and cultural practices are entangled within each of these choices, made by individuals or small groups.

The prehistory of Anatolian anthropomorphic imagery runs deep and broad beyond our two case studies. Early examples range in size from anthropomorphic pestles at Hallan Cemi (Rosenberg 1999) to stone steles at Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2012). Figurines in clay and stone include published assemblages from Mezraa Teleilat (Özdoğan 2003), Nevalı Çori (Morsch 2002), Gritille Höyük (Voigt 1985), Çayönü, (Browman-Morales 1990), Hacilar (Mellaart 1970). Later pottery producing Neolithic settlements yielding figurines include Aphrodisias (Joukowsky 1986), Höyücek (Duru 1999), Hacilar (Mellaart, 1970), Kuruçay (Duru 1994), Köşk Höyük (Siliştreli 1989), Canhasan (French, 2010), Domuztepe and Tell Kurdu (Belcher 2014). These represent a sample of the total corpus of figures, rather than a comprehensive account, which would include 10, 000s of examples (**table 1**).

Period	Approx. Date (BC cal)
Early Aceramic Neolithic <i>Key sites with figurines:</i> Göbekli Tepe (early), Hallan Çemi,	~10000–8550 BC (10 th –9 th millennia)
Late Aceramic Neolithic or PPNB <i>Key sites with figurines:</i> Çatalhöyük, Çayönü, Göbekli Tepe, Cafer Höyük, Hacilar, Gritille Höyük, Mezraa-Teleilat, Nevalı Çori	8550–6750 (9 th –8 th millennia)
Ceramic Neolithic <i>Key sites with figurines:</i> Hacilar IX–VI, Höyücek Höyük, Kuruçay Höyük, Mezraa-Teleilat	6750–6000/5900 (8 th –7 th millennia)
Halaf or Early–Middle Chalcolithic <i>Key sites with figurines:</i> Aphrodisias (Pekmez), Çatalhöyük West, Çavı Tarlası, Canhasan I, Domuztepe, Hacilar (VII–I), Köşk Höyük, Tell Kurdu	6000/5900–5200/5000 (6 th millennium)

Table 1. Chronology and periods of main sites with published figurine data.

Sources and Methods

A number of challenges face us in the comparative study of prehistoric figurines. Excavation reports, which are our primary and often only research materials, use different recording methodologies and languages. Much data, including archaeological context, is often unpublished and therefore unavailable to those without access to the original objects and archaeological archives. There are also different scales and budgets of excavation, with large-scale excavations such as Çatalhöyük dominating our understanding of prehistoric Anatolian figurines, with a prioritisation of some images from some sites over others. Sites with more modest funding and less publicity, such as Domuztepe, have yielded equally engaging figurine imagery, which remains less well-known. For example, a few striking examples have come to inaccurately represent a whole corpus of figurines, although in reality, these are isolated and rare examples which have skewed the way that figurines have been visualised in modern scholarly and public discourse. Most prominent is the so called ‘mother goddess’ flanked by leopards figurine from Çatalhöyük, now in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations (**fig. 2**).

The concept of a ‘Mother Goddess’, as a focus of a matriarchal society in the Neolithic (e.g. Gimbutas 1982, 1989), still holds some weight in popular culture (Meskell 1995, 1998; Goodison/Morris 1998; Eller 2000). Mother Goddess theories are often accompanied by romanticised and politicised ideas, and often used in binary opposition to ‘Male’ imagery of bulls and the use of bucrania (see Balter 2005). Moving away from the popular to the more academic perception of figurines, one of the most notable studies, which set a methodology for the study of these artefacts, was Peter Ucko’s work (Ucko 1970), which took a functional approach to categorising figurines according to their use as either cult images, vehicles of magic, initiation figures, or children’s toys (Ucko 1963). His work remains valuable,

Fig. 2. So-called 'Mother-goddess' figurine, flanked by leopards, Çatalhöyük, Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara (Photograph by Nevit Dilmen).

although we recognise that such functional frameworks can limit our understandings and interpretations.

Moorey's flexible methodology has considered these objects as *Idols of the People* (2004), seeing figurines as records of a changeable and embodied participation in daily social practice. This has been expanded on by Meskell and Nakamura who discuss the concept of 'figurine worlds', which suggests that figurines are also «... *things* in themselves with their own spheres of interaction» (Meskell 2007: 137).

Most of the figurines are encountered in a fragmented state by archaeologists, recovered from their mixed and trashy matrices, having been unceremoniously discarded after the end of their use-lives (Belcher 2014). They then enter constructed ceremonial realms of museum display and popular culture, and have been used to illustrate the creation of modern politicised and feminised mythologies about the past (Goodison/Morris 1998; Conkey/Tringham 1998; Eller 2000).

New Interpretations for Prehistoric Figurines

We propose interpretations that follow four themes of analysis and study for prehistoric figurines, which consider differences and ambiguities rather than categorization and typology: Materials and Materiality; Fractured Bodies; Gender Spectrum; and Ambiguities and Relationships. These allow for consideration of figurines' full object biographies from making, to using, to discard, and discovery. These themes cannot stand alone, but are entangled with each other and with further theoretical and empirical considerations. We further acknowledge that these themes leave many questions remaining with regard to this enigmatic dataset. However, we feel that our approach to manufacture, materiality, ambiguity in use and categorisation, and contexts and relationships, uncovers embedded exchange of ideas and prehistoric identities that are not always directly seen in the archaeological record. We explore each of these themes below with the figurine assemblages in our two case studies, Catalhöyük and Domuztepe.

Theme One: Materials and Materiality

The choice of materials has a great effect on the making and use of the figurine. The final figurine form is dictated by the possibilities in the materials. The fragility, workability and use-life of a figurine as well as the ability to be handled and stand on its own are bound in a relationship to the chosen raw material. These material entanglements were known and expected by the figurine maker and user and influenced the choice between clays or stones. Utilizing materials and skills available in their communities, figurine makers expressed their conceptualization of the human form into the finished product, meaning the figurines are both representative and affective of the idea of the human in their creation and use.

Rosemary Joyce suggested that Meso-American figurines could be considered to emerge out of the clay or stone itself (Joyce 2003). Consider the physical, emotional processes of beginning with the acquisition of raw material through the creation, use and discard of each figurine. Belonging to the landscape, clay is plentiful and locally available and an easily

worked product. Stone is more challenging to work and available in lesser proportions, with great variety and potentially from great distances. In Anatolia it was more plentiful than in other areas of the Ancient Near East, and the prehistoric figurine assemblages reflect advanced skill in working with locally available stone.

The methods of working clay and stone differ greatly. Working with stone is a reductive process, requiring cutting, grinding and polishing away the materials. These actions would have required different tools and learning communities than those that worked with clay, which is a constructive and manipulative process, often undertaken with hands and simple tools. These finished objects would have had a different feel, texture and temperature compared to their clay counterparts, as well as being more enduring and robust. However, it is interesting to note that at Çatalhöyük and Domuztepe most figurines were excavated from similar trash contexts, mostly in unremarkable fill and undistinguishable middens alongside other small finds (Meskell et. al. 2008; Belcher 2014).

At Çatalhöyük, well crafted stone figurines were recovered from the same building fill as the only plastered skull found at the site, which Meskell et al. (2008: 148) attribute to potential biographies referenced through the disposal and burial acts, with <multigenerational duration> reinforcing <a concern for durability and memory>. However, stone figurines represent a minority of examples at Çatalhöyük. Excavators found clay figurines were created quickly with few tools and then were hardened near ovens and hearths or sun-baked, rather than intentionally fired (Meskell et al. 2007: 141).

At Domuztepe, the emphasis is on stone, and implications of body parts that are inferred from profiles, rather than actually represented. Materiality of the figurine may have agency in the finished product, perhaps dictated by observed possibilities in the materials. A phallic figurine from Domuztepe was only worked with a quick incision to accentuate the suggestive shape of the naturally occurring pebble (**fig. 3**).

The working of locally available stones into human form at Domuztepe may relate to the makers and users' community belonging and connected them to their landscape. Of the Domuztepe figurines, one type dominates; a flat figurine carved from a variety of locally available soft stones (**fig. 5**). There are 10 such figurines found in late Halaf contexts, all representing standing figures in the same pose, in varying degrees of specificity. These were expertly carved, ground, polished, notched and incised in low relief, the silhouette of a front facing body is represented with bent arms, which imply hands clasped between and supporting breasts. Therefore the outline of the figurine ambiguously implies that these figurines might be gendered female.

Theme Two: Fractured Bodies

The figurine assemblage from Domuztepe is varied. As well as whole abstracted bodies (fig. 5–6), hand and feet figurine-seals, are represented (Belcher 2014; Denham 2013). It is notable that zoomorphic but not anthropomorphic head figurine-pendants are known from Domuztepe and other Halaf sites (e.g., Campbell 2005, 2011); perhaps we are seeing different spheres of appropriate depiction for different isolated body parts. From the figurine evidence, it seems there was a particular interest (and perhaps symbolism) in representing isolated phalluses, feet, and hands, whereas other body parts appear to need contextualisation on the full body, such as breasts, torsos and limbs. However, it is also true that these same body parts often become isolated fragments following breakage (Belcher 2014; for more on meaningful fragmentation see Chapman 2000).

Even though stone is a more durable material, complete figurines are rare in all materials. A study of Halaf figurines of all materials from Syria and Turkey found all were damaged in some way, and fifty percent were two-thirds complete, the majority missing their original heads (Belcher 2014). Apart from the figurines with detachable heads, missing heads are demonstrated by attachment scars at the vulnerable location of the neck, probably as a result of rough and frequent handling rather than any intentional or ritual activity. It is possible that the makers predicted heavy use, and there was intentionality in the figurine making to fragment through use.

At Çatalhöyük, head fragments were sometimes found along with the rest of the figurine, which could then be reconstructed. This is in opposition to Domuztepe where only one head fragment was found, which cannot be reconstructed with a known body (fig. 7), its deep-set eyes once held inlay. This suggests that masks may have enhanced ambiguity of the anthropomorphic form both on figurines and lived bodies.

Holes for insertion of a separate neck and head are a special feature in Anatolia. At Çatalhöyük, several figurines were found with holes in the neck/torso (i.e., Hodder 2001: 110; Meskell 2007: 143). Such features allowed for the insertion of a removable, interchangeable and potentially revolving head. These heads may have been made of perishable materials, perhaps wood, feathers, fibres and plant materials, potentially creating dramatic visual displays using mixed mediums. The performative aspects of the figurines' use is indicated, with changing identities. Rather than representing a static fully anthropomorphic <individual>, imaginative representations recorded in these figurines may demonstrate a lived possibility for intersectionality across genders, communities, or even between human, animal, plant and spiritual worlds. It has been suggested that the concept of removable and interchangeable heads suggests a shifting social identity or changing emotions (Hamilton 1996: 220–221). Interchangeable parts may also indicate changing lifecycles, as well as potential multiple uses for figurines (Talalay 2004: 145, 150; Meskell 2007; Verhoeven 2007).

Fig. 3. Sandstone phallus figurine (dt3591) Domuztepe, Kahramanmaraş museum. Photograph by Stuart Campbell.

Fig. 4. Ambiguous Figurine showing a skeletal back and fleshed front, Çatalhöyük. Photograph by Jason Quinlan, Çatalhöyük Research Project.

Fig. 5. Flat, stone figurines/pendants, (dt1793 and dt6560) Domuztepe, Kahramanmaraş Museum. Photographs by Stuart Campbell.

Theme Three: Gender Spectrum

We have already discussed the idea of the mother goddess, which has shaped our understandings of these figurines. However, such iconic figurines are rare. In reality there are figurines with varying degrees of evidence of <femaleness> or <maleness>. At Çatalhöyük, just three percent of the total figurine assemblage are clearly identifiable as female (Nakamura/Meskel 2009), with sex rarely shown or understated (Hamilton 2000, 2005). A handful of figurines display both male and female characteristics (Hamilton 2005: 212), suggesting that representations of gender may be fluid, or may represent the blurring of gendered binaries, possibly even suggesting a third gender. Overall, there are a greater number of figurines where there is little evidence of clear gender, however, these are less well published and rarely displayed.

There are ambiguities in biological markers in the Domuztepe figurine assemblage, as well as examples where gender is clearly male or female, for instance, the large pubic incised triangle and a piercing hole at the vulva for one of the figurine pendants (**fig. 5**), and the incised enhancements to a naturally-occurring phallic sandstone (**fig. 3**). For Halaf figurines in general, over fifty percent of the known examples do not display any biologically identifiable gendered features (Belcher 2014). This is common in figurine assemblages. As Joyce (2002: 603) observes when analyzing Meso-American figurines, if we do not try to constrain our categorization to our modern concepts of gender and binary opposites, then a clear ambiguity can be witnessed in the figurine record. Furthermore, Lesure (2011) argues that we may simply not have adequate understandings of gender categories. He uses the example of signs on public toilet doors; if found in isolation, a male sign might be considered to be sex-less, yet we know that in opposition to the female sign, it is a highly sexed in its symbolic meaning.

A further factor may simply lie in the speculation that gender was simply not an important aspect in the figurine manufacture (Hamilton 1996; 2000); rather, it is our modern analytical categories, which prioritize gender assignation, revealing more about modern perspectives of gender than those of the past.

Theme Four: Ambiguities and Relationships

In addition to ambiguities in gender, figurines also show ambiguities in form, and between the human, animal, and spiritual worlds. Figurines do not always represent humans in ways we recognize. It may be that ideas beyond the physical anthropomorphic body are represented. As mentioned above, some ambiguity is rooted in the properties and possibilities of the raw materials. In addition, the intersectionality of the objects themselves are

Fig. 6. Anthropomorphic vessel, (dt4174) Domuztepe, Kahramanmaraş Museum. Photographs by Stuart Campbell.

Fig. 7. Clay figurine head fragment (dt4753) Domuztepe, Kahramanmaraş Museum. Photographs by Stuart Campbell.

demonstrated, as with figurines examples from Domuztepe, which could be used for other purposes such as figurine/seal/pendants (**fig. 5**) or figurine/vessels (**fig. 6**). These double and triple duty objects can employ considerations of all of our stated interpretations: gender, ambiguity, materiality and fragmentation, all incorporated into individual objects.

At Çatalhöyük, a unique figurine shows ambiguity in its creation, with a rounded female on the front with a skeletal spine on the back (**fig. 4**). The figurine suggests the representation of themes of life and death, perhaps life/death cycles. Ambiguities and fluid identities are also seen through the incorporation of various human/animal elements at Çatalhöyük, such as a clay vessel depicting the merging of human face and bucrania, or the representation of a bear with the human feature of a naval (Nakamura/Meskel 2009).

The example of a figurine vessel from Domuztepe (**fig. 6**), probably made to hold liquids, shows fluidity between identity and our four interpretative themes. There is an obvious human engagement with the object; wear shows that it was held on the sides and that it was frequently picked up and put down on its feet, on which it solidly stands, but gives the impression of walking. While standing figurine vessels have been found elsewhere in Anatolia (Naumov 2008) each is created in a unique form, suggesting the idea but not the exact form probably travelled over great distances. Such figurine vessels incorporate aspects of all four of our themes, displaying choices in materiality, fractured bodies, missing their heads, gendered identities, as well as ambiguities in their categorization, as both figurines and vessels.

Conclusion

The above discussion has highlighted some key themes and challenges in the interpretation of Anatolian prehistoric figurines. These include the challenges of typology and categorization, and the need to recognise and discuss ambiguities in the archaeological material we excavate. Such ambiguities problematize binary sex and gender oppositions, as well as demonstrate merged and blurred identities in representations. Our aim here has been to demonstrate a more nuanced interpretative approach that enables the ambiguities in the material to be noted, and problematizes straightforward interpretations which are founded in our contemporary expectations rather than past material culture.

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