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The Goddess Diffracted

Thinking about the Figurines of Early Villages¹

by Richard G. Lesure

Small ceramic figurines representing predominantly human females are characteristic artifacts of many of the world's earliest settled villages. A long-standing interpretive tradition links these to "fertility cults" or "mother goddesses," but recent feminist scholarship suggests that such interpretations simply perpetuate our own society's preconceptions about gender, nature, and culture. Such critiques have stimulated a burgeoning literature on figurine traditions in early villages, with an emphasis on diversity in styles, representations, and meanings. But because general frameworks for interpreting figurines have been torn down, we lack analytical approaches for understanding the similarities between different cases or even evaluating different interpretations. This paper describes a new framework for comparative analysis in figurine studies and explores the question why figurines in the Neolithic Near East and Formative Mesoamerica seem to have been predominantly female.

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In many parts of the globe, small figurines of clay or stone are common finds at the sites of early agricultural villages. Human imagery generally predominates, although animals also often appear. More unusual are representations of human body parts, buildings, furniture, or other objects. Archaeologists have found figurines resting on the floors of collapsed buildings, buried in special deposits, or placed as accompaniments to the dead; however, the most common context of recovery is in general excavations, where figurines appear with common refuse. Some sites have yielded thousands of fragments. It would appear that in many early agricultural villages small clay figurines were common household objects. These traditions often disappeared as political organization became more centralized and villages developed into cities.

Archaeologists have long suspected that figurines might provide insight into the social and symbolic worlds of early villagers. Attention has focused on yet another general pattern: the prevalence of female imagery. Although the reality of that pattern is not beyond question (Ucko 1968:395–96, 417), its perception has led numerous investigators to link figurines to fertility cults or identify them as goddesses. Indeed, over the years, these interpretive moves have come to constitute a generalizing perspective. Female figurines have been seen as part of a "natural," ahistorical religion. Iconographic variation has been either ignored or lumped into all-encompassing concepts such as "mother goddess."

Recent feminist scholarship criticizes these as facile interpretations that perpetuate contemporary Western assumptions concerning gender, nature, and culture (Conkey and Tringham 1995, Meskell 1995, Talalay 1994, Tringham and Conkey 1998). This work brings a greater level of sophistication to figurine analysis by emphasizing diversity among the images and attempting to elucidate the meanings and uses of figurines in particular times and places. This has been productive, but it is not without problems. Because the kinds of representations that appear and the contexts in which they are found are similar from region to region, analysts routinely borrow interpretations from each other. Such borrowings are fundamentally comparative, but comparison is currently done almost covertly, under the banner of emphasizing local variation. The result is confusion. For instance, should divergent interpretations of assemblages that are formally similar be treated as competing models, complementary perspectives, or particularistic accounts that bear no relation to each other?

It is time to revisit comparative concerns. The point of departure, however, must be carefully chosen. An older generation of generalists started with the imagery itself, ignored difference in favor of similarity, and ended up with a universal mother goddess. I start, instead, not with the imagery but with the analyst—or, more precisely, with the analyst's engagement with imagery. My attention is directed toward patterns of difference rather than bald similarities. I look for patterns in the perspectives analysts employ, the problems they encounter, and the solutions they devise. These considerations provide

the basis for a rudimentary synthesis of the diverse ways in which archaeologists think about figurines. This is not proposed as an end in itself or as part of an attempt to shift attention from prehistory to the contemporary political implications of archaeological thought. Instead, it is my claim that thinking comparatively about the objects themselves requires attention to patterns of inference and rhetoric. The proposed framework may prove useful for investigations of widely varying scope and ambition; I illustrate its potential for thinking through large-scale issues by returning to the question why female figurines predominate in the Neolithic Near East and Formative Mesoamerica.

A Framework for Comparison

At issue is the “meaning” of figurines. This term can be understood in a variety of ways, but comparison is facilitated by choosing an expansive approach. Meanings are not fixed relations between objects and ideas but mobile products of the ongoing conversations and activities that constitute social life. They are negotiated, contested, and unstable. In addition, analysts studying meaning can ask a variety of questions. For instance, instead of *what* figurines mean we might ask *how* they mean (Bal and Bryson 1991:184).

Since figurine systems are often formally similar, different analysts face similar interpretive challenges and pitfalls, even though the objects they study “meant” different things. The first step toward comparison distinguishes several approaches and conceptualizes their interrelationships. A useful heuristic framework can be derived by identifying two important choices made by investigators concerning meanings. First, do meanings reside in surface phenomena explicitly recognized by social actors or in deep structures only imperfectly perceived by them? Second, should meanings be treated as autonomous systems of ideas to be understood in terms of their internal relationships or, alternatively, as social products that require study in terms of their relations with “external” (social) circumstances?

It is possible to consider the alternative responses to these questions as four cells of a matrix or, better, the “corners” of an analytical field (fig. 1). Studies in which meanings are taken to be surface phenomena explicitly formulated by social actors may treat ideas as either autonomous systems or social products. The former are iconographic studies that ask, “What do the images depict?” (fig. 1, A). Social-context approaches ask, instead, “What were the figurines used for?” (B). Studies of this latter sort consider figurines as objects deployed in social life for particular, often very practical, purposes. Two alternative perspectives view meanings as embedded in deep structures or generative principles. Here figurine analysis is no longer necessarily an end in itself. Instead, the representations are but symptoms of a set of abstract principles that form the true object of study. Again, however, studies differ according to whether they opt for an autonomous or a socially determined perspective on

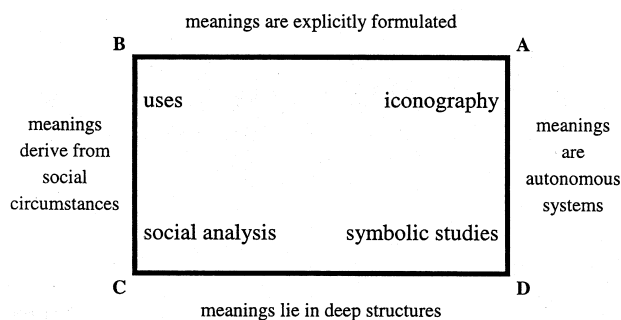


FIG. 1. Analytical perspectives used in figurine studies (in box) and their relationships to choices investigators make concerning the nature of meaning.

meanings. Among the former are attempts to characterize the abstract symbolism of figurine imagery (D). The latter include attempts to treat figurines as a window on society (C).

Meaning can be productively analyzed from all of these standpoints. Nevertheless, actual figurine studies vary considerably in the degree to which they range across this analytical field. Some weave all these perspectives together; others stick resolutely to one or another.

Four Perspectives on Figurine Meaning

To illustrate the proposed framework, I tour the “corners” of figure 1, identifying important research problems, routes taken towards their solution, and persistent analytical challenges. To characterize figurine research, I have tried to direct my attention to what analysts actually do rather than to what they claim they do—in other words, to the inferences and logic of passages in which analysts confront ancient objects instead of to abstract methodological prescriptions. There is no universally recognized language for the description of prehistoric figurines, though there are clearly widely used conventions specific to different regions. In reading figurine studies from the Near East, the eastern Mediterranean, Mesoamerica, Ecuador, the American Southwest, and Japan, I have not found differences of basic descriptive language much of a barrier. Probably the biggest concern at that level is conventional interpretations that masquerade as description, the identification of pregnant bellies being a common example. “This is a pregnant belly” is a significantly more ambitious claim than “This is a protruding belly,” but only rarely do investigators present specific arguments in support of it (see Cyphers 1993:213).

Ucko (1962:38) has identified the principal sources of evidence for the analysis of prehistoric figurines as the objects themselves, their archaeological contexts, later historical evidence from the areas in which they are found, and comparative ethnographic evidence on figurine use from other places. It is also sometimes useful

to distinguish two kinds of information resident in the objects, one associated with their imagery, the other with their status as objects. All of these sources of evidence are potentially relevant to each analytical perspective; the perspectives represent not so much different forms of evidence as different ways of thinking about meaning.

ICONOGRAPHY

Perhaps the most obvious question to ask is the iconographic one of what figurines were intended to represent. For complex representational systems, the tedious detective work involved in identifying the subject matter of images can so consume analysis that other dimensions of meaning are pushed to the sidelines. In the case of prehistoric figurines, however, a sophisticated iconographic analysis is often beyond reach. One seemingly insuperable obstacle is that archaeological contexts often fail to reveal much about whether figurines were used individually, in groups, or in relation to other objects. In contrast to a medium such as painting, figurine “compositions” were never fixed—they were continually subject to manipulation and change. Imagine cutting out all the individual human figures from, say, 17th-century Flemish paintings, detaching heads and limbs from torsos, mixing all the pieces up, and then trying to say something interesting about the original subject matter. It is not that the task is hopeless, just that we need to content ourselves with some rather crude assessments.

It is sometimes useful to distinguish a sequence of levels or stages of iconographic analysis (Panofsky 1955). Much archaeological work on figurines is concerned with what Panofsky would call preiconographical description: identifying elements of an image and assigning them to “natural” categories. This is a human hand; it is resting on a thigh. That is a human torso; it has a bird’s head. Of course, it is important to maintain a healthy skepticism concerning any putatively natural categories employed in interpretation (Knapp and Meskell 1997).

Many figurine studies halt somewhere in this preiconographic stage of interpretation and thus fall short of what I have in mind as falling into the upper right analytical field in figure 1. A full iconographic analysis seeks to identify conventional themes and probe their connotations (van Straten 1994:6–12). For prehistoric figurines, investigators typically attempt to characterize the subject matter in a general way. For instance, were the prototypes of the images understood to be deities, the characters of myths and legends, ancestors, or particular individuals—or were they more generic depictions of categories of people?

A range of formal and contextual clues can be brought to bear on the problem (see Renfrew 1985:22–24 on the specific problem of identifying images in sanctuaries). The first and most obvious step is to identify important *themes*. Given the fragmentary nature of many collections, even this can be a significant challenge, but investigators typically consider gender, age, somatic states such as fatness or pregnancy, posture, clothing, orna-

mentation, and activity. A careful attempt to assess the relative frequencies of different themes is helpful but frustratingly absent from many studies. In some cases a few particularly elaborate pieces may provide keys for understanding a collection. Other questions include what features have been ignored or subjected to special attention (Harlan 1987:261) and to what extent images can be identified as definitively imaginary (Renfrew 1985:23).

A second helpful line of inquiry asks not what specific subjects were represented but instead whether there is evidence of a *coding strategy* intended to facilitate identification of such subjects. Sometimes artists provide visual clues, or “attributes,” to encourage the recognition of specific subjects—St. Simon is distinguished by a saw, St. Perpetua by the cow standing at her side. Their use varies considerably (van Straten 1994:51–53), but the presence of such coding may be of help in characterizing the subject matter of images even when specific referents remain obscure (e.g., Westenholz 1998).

The *narrative specificity* of figurines is a third avenue for consideration in an attempt to move toward the identification of conventional subjects. Some figurines are represented as stiff, standing figures, with little attention to limbs and no indication of activity. Attention to clothing, gesture, posture, or specific activities suggests greater narrative specificity. It is important to bear in mind that narrative may have derived from the grouping of figurines, though individual figures from the complex scenes of West Mexico would point to high narrative specificity even if they were examined in isolation. We might not be able to go as far as Furst (1975) or the contributors to Townsend (1998) do toward the iconographic understanding of specific scenes, but we would at least be able to argue that such highly specifying scenes existed. In other words, we could make observations on the structure of the representational system.

Finally, *coexistence of multiple representational systems*—distinguished by media, scale, style, or subject matter—can provide important opportunities for contrastive analysis. A particularly dramatic case of variation in scale is the anthropomorphic imagery of Neolithic Malta, where figures range from a few centimeters to a couple of meters in height, with intriguing cross-cutting patterns of thematic variation (see Pace 1996, Zammit and Singer 1924).

Even where they are not phrased in the manner described here, many studies assess the subject matter of figurine imagery. Much discussion in the Mediterranean either centers on the identification of figurines as deities or else attacks such identifications (Cauvin 2000, Gimbutas 1982, Mellaart 1967, Renfrew 1985, Talalay 1993, Ucko 1968, Voigt 2000). New World studies are more apt to treat figurines as fundamentally social (e.g., Di Capua 1994, Cyphers 1993, Lesure 1997, Marcus 1998). There are, of course, plenty of other possibilities beyond a simple human/supernatural division. Marcus (1998) identifies figurines from Oaxaca, Mexico, as depictions of ancestors, an interpretation considered by Talalay (1991) for Neolithic Greek figurines. The possibility that the

prototypes of figurines were human individuals is raised by Bailey (1994a), Knapp and Meskell (1997), and Grove and Gillespie (1984). The last of these studies presents the strongest iconographic argument, but it has been criticized by Cyphers (1993:214–16). Marcus (1998:17–19) makes the intriguing suggestion that rather generic human images might have been named as individuals in ritual contexts. Clearly, many studies wrestle with similar interpretive challenges; the structure and evidential basis for arguments characterizing the subject matter of figurine imagery constitutes fruitful ground for comparison.

USE

The next analytical mode considers how the figurines were used. Again, meanings are viewed as readily formulated by participants, but here they are considered to derive from manipulation of the figurines as objects. There are two main approaches. The first asserts that uses were probably multiple and circumstantially variable. It sets aside any hope of identifying them specifically in favor of an abstract characterization of the way they fit into social life. A second approach finds such abstractions frustrating and persists in attempting to uncover specific uses. Popular suggestions include toys, amulets, teaching aides, objects of worship, votive images, vehicles of magic, curing aides, and tokens of economic or social relationships. Abstract characterizations of use emphasize archaeological data over ethnographic analogy. The criteria for abstraction are couched in researchers' theories of social processes, but the questions asked end up being rather similar. Were figurines sacred or profane? Were they used in houses or temples? Who made them and used them, and what was the position of those people in society?

Various archaeological data have been brought to bear on these questions, as well as on the more specific considerations of use to be considered shortly. The figurines themselves can provide significant clues. It is often argued that subject matter is a direct reflection of use. For example, if people of different ages are represented, then the figures were used in rites marking life-cycle changes (Cyphers 1993, Di Capua 1994). This is an attractive argument but needs to be treated with care (see Layton 1991:27). The scale of the figures may reflect the size of social groups involved in their use—the smaller the figures, the fewer people involved (Broman Morales 1983, Lesure 1999, Voigt 1983). Special features such as holes for suspension can obviously also be of considerable help. Variation in skill of figurine execution may be helpful in characterizing figurine makers as a greater or more restricted subset of society. Direct evidence of manufacture is rarely reported (but see Thomas and King 1985: 721).

The objects themselves may bear traces of use. A great many studies claim that figurines were deliberately broken. Sometimes this is a mere assertion; in other cases patterns of breakage are presented as supporting evidence (Grove and Gillespie 1984, Haury 1976, Mitsukazu 1986,

Talalay 1987, Voigt 1983). I confess to being a skeptic about claims of deliberate breakage; in no case have I seen such a claim based on repeated discoveries of reconstructable fragments that might imply deliberate breakage and rapid deposition. Other skeptics include Di Capua (1994), Cyphers (1993), and Milojković (1990). Few studies consider use-wear other than catastrophic breakage (but see Goring 1991, Hamilton 1996, Voigt 1983).

Contextual considerations move beyond scrutiny of the objects themselves. Again important is whether figurines were deployed singly, in groups, or with other kinds of objects. Contextual analyses of figurine finds can sometimes provide a basis for choosing among these different possibilities (Gimbutas 1982:67–85; Goring 1991; Marcus 1996; Thomas and King 1985). Often investigators posit different uses for human and animal figurines. Such arguments are of course stronger when some sort of evidence of distinct use contexts can be produced (Lesure 2000, Thomas and King 1985).

What we are most interested in is the systemic or social context of figurines—who used them, where, how often, and under what circumstances. As Talalay (1993: 39) points out, many figurine studies carelessly treat archaeological context as a direct reflection of social context. She presents a well-balanced assessment of context-based claims linking figurines to worship in domestic or public cults (pp. 76–79). In most cases figurine fragments are ubiquitous across sites. While these find contexts are not as revealing as we might like, they do support the argument that figurines were common objects used in residences and were not treated differently from other household equipment. Long overdue but beyond the scope of this paper is a careful stratigraphic assessment of claims concerning primary refuse in floor assemblages and resulting arguments such as systemic associations between figurines and hearths (Cyphers 1993; Gimbutas 1989; Hodder 1990; Marcus 1998, 1999; Zeidler 1984).

Many analysts decide that figurines were used in multiple ways and propose some sort of abstract characterization such as my suggestion that figurines from Mazatán (Mexico) were “potential points of reference in the negotiation and reproduction of actual social relationships” (Lesure 1997:228). Such abstractions fall short of providing an account of use that mirrors original intentions, and other researchers understandably strive for more specific interpretations. Sometimes a persuasive case can be made purely with archaeological evidence (Goring 1991), but more typically claims for specific uses are based on historical or ethnographic analogies.

Many analogical arguments are devised pretty much in isolation, without any attempt to build up systematic procedures for assessing the relevance of particular comparative materials to archaeological cases. Studies concern themselves solely with championing a particular use or else take a shotgun approach, listing a variety of specific uses without attempting to evaluate them archaeologically. A few works from the Mediterranean, however, are an important exception to this pattern. Talalay (1993) and Voigt (1983, 2000) have been inspired by the pioneering work of Ucko (1962, 1968) to explore

the varied uses of figurines documented ethnographically.

Voigt takes on the task of identifying common ethnographic uses of figurines (as objects of worship, vehicles of magic, etc.) and searching for archaeological signatures that would allow identification of use in different cultural contexts. She considers material, form, context of deployment, and expected patterns of wear or damage (Voigt 1983: tables 28 and 29). Although her approach has its problems—the criteria for identifying different uses overlap, and there is potential for overly formulaic applications of the framework—Voigt's is perhaps the most promising recent work on this topic. It makes some important basic distinctions among uses and attempts to specify under what circumstances they might be considered acceptable or unacceptable interpretations of particular assemblages.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

The third analytical perspective again considers figurine meanings to be social products but seeks to delve beneath actors' conscious intentions to the structural determinants of meaning. This requires an analytical model of the society under investigation that may sometimes diverge markedly from actors' own understandings of what is going on around them. The shift in focus away from conscious intentions complicates a comparative agenda. For one thing, investigators choose from a variety of theories of social life, though such choices do not seem to have as radical an effect on the resultant figurine studies as one might expect.

Instead of tracing the effects of distinct social theories on the interpretation of figurines, I consider a more basic issue involving the object of analytical aspiration. Two seemingly opposite tendencies appear in figurine studies. One treats figurines as a mere tool for understanding some new dimension of the society that produced them. The other looks in the reverse direction, employing an understanding of the society to resolve dilemmas of figurine interpretation, typically in identifying either use or subject matter. The two approaches are not in reality as divergent as it might appear. Employing figurines as an analytical tool of course requires an understanding of the figurines themselves. Likewise, using social information to interpret figurines reflects back on understandings of the society. But there is a more subtle and problematic sense in which these two tendencies become intertwined in social analysis. After reviewing some of the ways investigators have gone about using figurines as analytical tools, I return to the thorny issue of directions of inference in social analysis.

Many studies attempt only modest social analyses of figurines. Probably most common is the assertion that figurines in archaeological contexts index ritual in systemic contexts. Thus, more figurines means more ritual (Chapman 1981:74; Drennan 1976:352–53; Whittle 1985:151).

Such accounts seem plausible, but they make use of none of the specificity of figurines, and analysts often

attempt something more ambitious. They draw on different sources of evidence. One possibility is to go to the results of work on other kinds of artifacts or features and put them all together to form a complete interpretive package (e.g., Marcus 1998, Renfrew 1985). The approach is surely highly desirable, though it is subject to problems of congruence between different lines of evidence (see below). Another approach uses some aspect of the figurines—their mere presence, their representational variability—as a justification for importing ethnographic information from another temporal or cultural context. For example, studies that identify figurines as objects used in initiation rituals go on to reason that the kinds of social practices associated with initiations in ethnographic cases characterized the archaeological one under examination (Cyphers 1993, Di Capua 1994). Such analogical arguments help investigators craft interpretations with a rich social content. Although there has been much debate about analogy in archaeology, Wylie (1985) argues persuasively that it is inescapable and in fact subject to a whole spectrum of procedures of evaluation.

A final approach, currently quite popular, is particularly sanguine concerning the potential of figurines themselves. It takes representational variability in an assemblage to be a sort of window on society (Cyphers 1993; Di Capua 1994; Gopher and Orrelle 1996; Hodder 1990; Kokkinidou and Nikolaidou 1997; Lesure 1997, 1999; Marcos and García de Manrique 1988). A premise of social analysis in these studies is that representational distinctions among figurines are clues to the content of discourses; images and themes point toward loci of social tensions and political struggle.

It would be wrong to infer from its current popularity that this interpretive trend is a theoretical breakthrough that supersedes other modes of social analysis. In fact, its effectiveness depends on the specifics of individual cases. For instance, the approach is more plausible where it can be shown that different images were used together, thereby inviting direct comparison (Lesure 1997:243–44). A more important issue that is not given sufficient attention in these recent studies, my own included, is their premise that a traditional iconographic approach (directed toward the naming of conventional subjects) is irrelevant to a social analysis of the imagery. Instead, the subjects of the images are considered to be idealized representations of "people," thus paving the way toward interpreting observed variability directly in social terms. By thus ignoring iconographic worries, recent studies have proposed some exciting new interpretations, but the practice needs to be subjected to more sustained empirical assessment on a case-by-case basis. Where iconographic analysis identifies specific, conventionalized subjects—or even where it suggests that such subjects would be identifiable if we understood more about the materials under examination—direct social analysis of the imagery will be on shaky ground. For instance, imagine repeatedly finding small images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Christ on the Cross. If we were to take these as generic images of woman and man and interpret them in social terms as, say, a direct reflection of gender ide-

ology, we might well be led far astray. The fact that we would have considerably more success in a similar analysis of Barbie and Ken reinforces my claim that the potential for this mode of analysis depends on the particulars of a given case. In my discussion of iconography I outlined some ways to begin addressing the crucial issue of subject matter.

Instead of detailing additional strategies of social analysis, I move to a larger set of interpretive issues. In some instances, investigators use something they feel they know about a society to explain its figurines. Elsewhere, they propose that the figurines illuminate the society. This wandering of analytical aspirations brings us to a reconsideration of context. There is more to the analysis of social context than a careful reading of archaeological context. Bryson's (1992) critique in art history highlights a consideration that is absent in most archaeological treatments: the extent to which context emerges from the engagement of analyst with artwork. Specifically, although (social) context is said to cause the artworks to look the way they do, what is taken to be "context" is actually suggested by the works themselves. Then, in a rhetorical maneuver, the causal arrow is reversed.

It is not hard to find such logic at work in social analyses of prehistoric figurines, but at first glance Bryson's argument might appear to be nothing more than a caution against circular reasoning. If analysis of figurines prompts us to impute a particular model of social relations to our archaeological case, then clearly we need to turn to other kinds of evidence when seeking to strengthen our interpretations. We cannot test our model with the same data we used to formulate it. But there is something more to Bryson's suggestions than a straightforward observation on circularity—a more subtle dimension that poses particular challenges for the comparative agenda of interest here.

The problem is that an instability of rhetorically fashioned arrows of causal determination between figurines and social context is woven more deeply into the texture of arguments than is apparent at first glance. The relation between figurines and what analysts perceive as their context is often a complicated inferential fabric. One challenge to placing figurines in social context concerns relations of determination between social processes as reconstructed in archaeological analysis and figurines. Is there congruence between the spatial and temporal scales at which social context is studied and the corresponding scales of processes that might reasonably be expected to determine a representational system? Talalay's (1993:46–48) invocation of a shift in herding practices to support her interpretation of the use of Neolithic Greek figures is a good example. She sees animal figurines as appearing rather "suddenly" in the Late Neolithic (4500–4000 b.c., uncalibrated) of southern Greece and continuing into the Final Neolithic (4000–3000 b.c.). Settlement and subsistence evidence suggests important economic changes in the region during these periods in comparison with the Early and Middle Neolithic. These changes, Talalay (1993:48) suggests, support the identification of animal figurines as items of sympathetic

magic, "since change, whether positive or negative, can provoke anxiety" that people might be expected to address through magical manipulation of figurines. The problem here is a marked incongruence of scale between an economic change resolvable only to 500- or 1,000-year blocks and individuals who are imagined as anxiously perceiving such changes. That the evidence of economic change is cast at a particular temporal scale is of course not Talalay's fault—our abilities to monitor economic processes may themselves be plagued by as many challenges as face the study of figurines.

Talalay's basic explanatory scenario for animal images—that people make figurines as a response to stress—is actually a common one. This popularity points to another problem with social contexts as reconstructed in archaeological analysis. They often take on a rather conventionalized character. Investigators gravitate toward explanatory scenarios that make only minimal evidentiary demands but are nonetheless widely regarded as convincing. Invoking stress as a cause for the appearance of some artifact is popular in archaeology far beyond figurine studies. It has a satisfying aura of functionalist plausibility and may be called into service whenever a stress can be identified, a case for its causal relation to the object in question devised, and some sort of spatio-temporal association between the two established.

Disciplinary conventions are thus a source for what is considered the social context of a figurine tradition, and the temptation to transpose a satisfying explanatory formula from one context to another is often strong. For instance, Gopher and Orrelle (1996:275), in a social analysis of Neolithic Yarmukian imagery (Levant, 6th millennium b.c.), repeatedly borrow arguments developed for previous stages of the Levantine sequence to bolster their interpretations of the Yarmukian case. A study ascribing the concentration of ritual objects in the Epipaleolithic Natufian to heightened ritualism in response to change helps justify a similar explanation for Yarmukian imagery. The researchers also, however, cite interpretations of the rich imagery of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) site of 'Ain Ghazal (Jordan) in building a "stress" argument. Ironically, the stresses in the Yarmukian case turn out to derive from the collapse of the very system (the PPNB interaction sphere) that was the source of some of the stresses at 'Ain Ghazal. My intent, again, is not to argue against all such transpositions of explanatory scenarios but rather to emphasize the complex and tentative nature of what analysts decide is the social context of figurines.

With the notion of social context cast in this rather problematic light, it may appear more plausible to suggest that Bryson's (1992) observations on the rhetorical reversal of inferential paths get at something more subtle than glaring circularities. Because of the tentativeness of analysts' understandings of both figurines and the social milieux in which figurines appeared, interpretations seem to be built up by a lot of back-and-forth inferential moves. For example, most Chalcolithic cruciform figures from Cyprus are not clearly sexed, though some more elaborate examples have breasts. An analysis of trait as-

sociations leads Campo (1994:134) to the tentative conclusion that all figurines were female. In addition, one of two interpretations of the figurines' distinctive posture identifies it as a birthing position, but again this is speculative (p. 142). So Campo turns to a consideration of social context. She chooses a very general analogical argument, suggesting that at this early period "the concerns of the people primarily centered on survival: shelter, cultivation and production of food, reproduction of food-resources and labor" (p. 162). But a few lines later this list of "basic human needs" is reduced to one: fertility. Indeed, "if symbolic artifacts were discovered at all in this kind of society they would presumably deal with this prime concern." This then provides Campo with grounds for choosing the birthing interpretation of the figurines. Even if we accept a concern with basic needs as the probable overriding orientation of social life in Chalcolithic Cyprus, there seems little justification for privileging fertility among other needs beyond the fact that figurines or, more accurately, long-standing interpretive discourses concerning figurines push us in that direction.

All this has serious implications for comparative analysis. Although social analyses appear to have one of two basic structures in that they aspire to argue either from figurines to society or from society to figurines, the details of particular arguments reveal a more complicated inferential relation between figurines and social context. My assessment of social analyses of figurines in fact converges on the hermeneutic structure Hodder (1992: 188–93) identifies in archaeological reasoning. Hermeneutic arguments can be assessed by evaluating the coherence with which they weave parts together into wholes; however, if arguments are to be compared, it is also important to scrutinize in detail the linkages between parts.

For instance, investigators sometimes find similar patterns but place them in structurally different positions in their inferential arguments. Take two patterns that often appear together in prehistoric figurine traditions: representations that are predominantly female appearing primarily in domestic contexts. In a brief passage discussing Vinča figurines (southeastern Europe), Chapman (1981:75) *assumes* that women made the images and *argues* from find contexts that domestic tasks fell to women. In a discussion of figurines from Chalcatzingo (Mexico), Cyphers (1993:220) makes the reverse argument. She *assumes* that domestic tasks were the domain of women and *argues* that "the combination of female preeminence in figurines along with household context leads me to believe that women were the social actors who used the figurines." In her recent studies of figurines from Oaxaca, Marcus (1996, 1998, 1999) uses the same pair of data patterns in an analytically more ambitious way. The arguments Chapman and Cyphers make with figurines (that women were associated with the domestic sphere and that they actually made the figurines), along with the further suggestion that figures represent ancestors, are in Marcus's account justified on the basis of comparative ethnographic evidence and other observa-

tions. Marcus then brings in the figurine patterns at a later stage in the argument. Female figurines in houses help support the idea that there was a spatial division between men's and women's ritual, with women preferentially propitiating their female ancestors in domestic contexts (see Marcus 1998:3–4, 21–22, 311–12; 1999:80). Clearly, comparative analysis will need to examine not simply the coherence of wholes but the linkages among parts, particularly the varying positions assigned to figurines, social information, and assumptions. Although this point emerges with particular salience in social analysis, it is actually a challenge for all attempts at comparison in figurine studies.

SYMBOLIC STUDIES

The final perspective in my framework continues the emphasis on structure but returns to the idea that meanings can be treated as autonomous systems to be analyzed in terms of their internal relationships. Figurines signified more than simply what they depicted; the subject matter referenced by the images itself referenced other, more abstract ideas. For Panofsky (1955:31), "the discovery and interpretation of these 'symbolical' values (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the object of what we may call 'iconology' as opposed to 'iconography.'" I choose the label "symbolic studies" (rather than "iconology") as more familiar to an anthropological audience.

Although investigators working on prehistoric figurines often express the idea that the images had a symbolic dimension, few tarry in this analytical mode. Those who do posit the existence of some sort of system of contrasts, metaphors, or symbols that would have been part of the worldview of the people who used the figurines, and they treat the figurines as a clue to or symptom of those more abstract ideas. As complete an iconographic analysis as possible is the place to begin such considerations. Nevertheless, since the whole point here is to go beyond what is depicted in the figurines, it is obviously essential that some sort of information besides the objects themselves be brought to the analysis. Apart from any claim of intuitive identification with ancient figurine users, there are three principal sources of evidence: indigenous commentary, archaeological context, and analogies.

Although I am concerned here specifically with prehistory, sometimes cases are made for using indigenous commentary from later periods to explore the symbolic dimensions of earlier images. For instance, Marcus (1998) argues that Formative figurines from Oaxaca depict ancestors. The (rare) instances of animal figures pose a dilemma for this interpretation, which Marcus (p. 22) addresses by turning to later ethnohistoric and ethnographic evidence from the region. She finds hints of symbolic associations between death, divination, and the animals most frequently represented in the earlier figurines. The main challenge to this approach is assessing

the validity of casting a particular set of symbolic associations back across time.

A second approach avoids this problem by sticking with archaeological information from the society under investigation. The associations of ideas that the first approach searches for in indigenous commentary are here derived from associations of objects in archaeological contexts. If images of women are found in houses, then “woman” and “house” were linked concepts. Thus, the material elaboration of houses and ovens in Neolithic southeastern Europe, together with the kinds of artifacts (including female figurines) deposited around these features, leads Hodder (1990:68) to identify, first, a set of symbolic associations between such things as women, pots, and ovens and, more ambitiously, a cultural theme of “woman as transformer of wild into domestic.” Studies making this sort of argument are often extraordinarily optimistic about the possibilities of moving directly from archaeological to systemic contexts (see Talalay 1993: 39). In addition, there is the worry that networks of associations reconstructed in this fashion could be skewed by formation processes and preservation biases.

The final approach, analogical arguments, would seem a particular challenge in the symbolic mode. Yet investigators often support symbolic interpretations of figurines by linking the case under investigation to a larger class of societies in which such symbolic associations would have been likely or even necessary. For instance, Kokkinidou and Nikolaidou (1997:93) suggest that “the very experiences, anxieties, and wishes of everyday life would have inspired the themes and aesthetics of Neolithic idoloplastic.” Further, “in early farming communities, reproduction and maternity could be metaphorically parallel to agriculture, both phenomena consisting in the dramatic transformation of natural elements into life by human . . . interference” (p. 96). Thus, their symbolic interpretations of Neolithic Greek figurines are supported by appealing both to general human characteristics and to more specific features supposedly entailed by a Neolithic existence.

Such arguments become more plausible and interesting to the extent that they (1) restrict the class of societies to which they putatively apply, (2) increase the specificity of the criteria which determine symbolic forms, and (3) justify the link between those criteria and the inferred symbolism. Serious studies generally weave together analogical claims at a number of different levels of inclusiveness. They appeal to human universals, to particular features of early agricultural villages, to the structural entailments of different kinds of social formation, and to particular ethnographies that provide glimpses of the symbolic richness of real systems. Haaland and Haaland’s (1995, 1996) readings of southeastern European Neolithic figurines are particularly nimble in this regard.

This sort of analogical argument is common in symbolic interpretations of figurines but appears as well in social analysis, investigations of use, and sometimes even iconographic attempts to characterize subject matter. All such arguments face considerable challenges in

their ability to deal with variability. They impute a set of features to a particular case on the basis of membership in a class of societies all (or most) of which are said to display such features. Typically, very little attempt is made to subject the expansive dimension of these claims to empirical evaluation. For instance, the categories to which appeal is made (“uncentralized farming communities,” etc.) are typically applicable not just to the site under investigation but to its contemporaries in a very large surrounding area. In addition, figurines usually appear throughout that area in traditions both similar to and divergent from the one under investigation. General analogical arguments become more believable when they consider and, ideally, even make sense of this regional variability.

My own 1997 study serves as an example. Although I am still partial to the interpretations made therein concerning Mazatán figurines, there is a significant potential problem with the way I linked a general analogical argument to empirical patterns. I borrowed a model of the social tensions and power struggles characteristic of sedentary, acephalous societies from Collier (1988). I then suggested that the model made sense of the contextual and formal properties of Mazatán figurines. It thus seemed possible to propose that those particular tensions and struggles were actually taking place in Early Formative communities of the Mazatán region. The problem here is that while Collier’s model is potentially applicable to figurine-making societies across much of Mesoamerica during the period in question, some of the empirical patterns to which I linked the model are very widespread (the predominance of female figurines) while some are restricted entirely to the Mazatán case (the presence of arms on seated, fat figures and their absence on standing females). What is missing in my paper is a careful assessment of the implications of regional variability for my specific claims concerning Mazatán. I will work on those issues on another occasion. What is important here is exemplifying the challenges of developing analogical arguments for figurine interpretation. Clearly, if regional syntheses of figurine meaning are to be formulated, reassessments of all analogical arguments made at a local level will prove necessary.

Using the Framework

One representational system can be looked at in a variety of ways, but another system may be examined in an analogous set of ways. The framework described above distinguishes four perspectives on meaning and charts their relationships to each other. It therefore provides a starting point for systematic attempts to pull apart and scrutinize existing arguments concerning prehistoric figurines. Two considerations dealt with at length in the foregoing discussion will loom particularly large when the framework is employed in this adjudicative mode: the variable ways in which investigators deploy distinct sorts of information in forging inferential arguments and the unexamined expansive implications of analogies.

A second use of the framework is as a guide to producing new interpretations. Each perspective can yield valuable insights. Nevertheless, analysts often choose narrower conceptions of meaning. The framework does not solve the problems inherent in thinking about meaning in prehistoric settings, but it holds out the hope that any narrowing of analytical vision might be pursued deliberately in response to the details of particular cases rather than through a priori claims concerning what “really” constitutes meaning. I illustrate the use of the framework in this productive mode by returning to the cross-cultural appearance of female figurines.

Why Female Figurines?

A new generalizing perspective must confront the century-old debate concerning the apparent femaleness of figurines in numerous Neolithic settings across the globe. The framework described above helps steer explanation away from some of the problems encountered by previous approaches. Although meaning may be productively considered from all four perspectives, it does not follow that they all provide equally good arenas for investigating specific problems. Instead, the potential of each perspective for explaining something like the prominence of female imagery depends on the particulars of a given case. Certain data patterns favor explanation in terms of use, while others favor symbolic study, and so forth. After characterizing idealized patterns favorable for iconographic, use-related, social, or symbolic analysis, I will attempt to identify such patterns in two specific settings: the Near East, including south-central Anatolia, in the late 8th millennium through mid-6th millennium b.c. (from the Middle PPNB through the first part of the ceramic Neolithic) and Mesoamerica from the mid-2d millennium through mid-1st millennium b.c. (from the Early through the Middle Formative).

Each of these periods is a time of settled village life preceding the rise of urban societies, and small clay figurines are regular finds in each area. They tend to be more common at Mesoamerican sites than at their counterparts in the Near East, though some sites in the latter area have yielded many hundreds of pieces. The Near Eastern figurines are also typically smaller, more poorly fired, and more schematic than those of Mesoamerica. Part of that difference may be technological: in Mesoamerica, the appearance of figurines corresponds with the advent of pottery production, whereas in the Near East figurines precede pottery by 2,000 years. But the simple, schematic character of Near Eastern figurines cannot be ascribed purely to technology. Some elaborate, naturalistic figures are known from preceramic times. Also, after the introduction of pottery, more elaborate figurine traditions appear in some areas, but highly schematic figures persist in others.

Any attempt to identify and compare female imagery needs to tread with care, since it is important not to imply thereby that gender categories are universal and outside of history (Knapp and Meskell 1997). If we insist

that gender is discursively constructed and context-dependent, we might well ask whether it is even possible to compare female imagery from different parts of the globe. There are certainly no universal criteria by which images of women can be recognized. Identification must instead proceed through careful local assessments of gender iconography (Lesure n.d.). Local cases for predominantly female imagery can be assembled across the Near East and Mesoamerica, but many of these are open to challenge. The claim is strongest in Mesoamerica, though around the end of the 2d millennium b.c. unsexed or male imagery seems to predominate in some areas. Schematization in the Near East complicates matters and leaves the identification of female imagery more uncertain (Ucko 1968:395–96, 417). Nevertheless, careful efforts to interpret schematic figures based on more naturalistic images are largely convincing (e.g., Broman Morales 1983, McAdam 1997). I accept claims that arguably female imagery predominates among small clay figurines across most of both regions during the time periods under consideration.

My goal is an assessment of the prospects for general explanation. For instance, if both cases seem appropriate for consideration in, say, social terms, then the analysis would simultaneously hold out hope for a general explanation and set some of the terms for future debate; however, if one case is most appropriate for explanation in social terms while the other is more amenable to an iconographic approach, then prospects for a unified explanation would be considerably dimmed.

PROBLEMS WITH PREVIOUS APPROACHES

Significant objections to previous explanations of the prevalence of female figurines have emerged from a self-consciously feminist archaeology (Conkey and Tringham 1995). Previous approaches ascribed the recurrence of female imagery to a generic feature of womanhood, typically some aspect of reproduction. They therefore tended to *essentialize* women, falling into the androcentric assumption that “women’s bodily functions . . . define entirely women’s capacities as social actors” (McNay 1992:20). Often in these accounts, women’s social identities are determined by their bodies while men’s are the result of a whole variety of other factors such as their personal achievements or their relations with other people. Feminist responses to essentialism are varied, but for my purposes here it seems sufficient to assert strong suspicion about claims to explain the prevalence of female figurines by identifying some fact of female biology (a female essence) and insisting that this would necessarily have been of central concern to Neolithic peoples everywhere.

This stand prompts concerns about the very attempt to frame “Why female figurines?” as a research question: is this an inescapably essentialist project? A standard approach is to generate a few direct responses—perhaps there was a universal cult of fertility or of motherhood; maybe women were in charge, or there was a prominent female deity—and debate them. But that approach tacitly

accepts the existence of a female essence and moves on to argue about what it is. Not surprising, then, but also problematic are radical responses which insist a priori that recurrent representations of women have nothing to do with each other. An alternative course would be to make the possibility of a general explanation itself the object of empirical investigation; that would go a long way toward addressing the charge of essentialism.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON FEMALE IMAGERY

It is instructive to imagine two sets of figurines from the same region and period. In both cases, female imagery predominates, and we wish to account for that similarity. How could that issue be explored from our four distinct perspectives on meaning? In the iconographic mode, we might well wonder whether the two sites shared a female deity. From the perspective of use, we could suggest that in both cases women made and used figurines to represent themselves and their own concerns; in other words, the figurines were by, for, and about women. From the social analytic perspective, it seems possible that women—their bodies or their labor—were in each instance the subjects of social and political struggle. Finally, a symbolic perspective might claim that femaleness or some aspect of it was a transcendent metaphor in each society.

It is important to admit that this simple four-way division ignores the variety of possible solutions within each analytical perspective. For example, from the perspective of use, an alternative to “by, for, and about women” is provided by Fewkes’s (1923) observation that Navajo children were making clay dolls depicting images drawn from their social world: a child’s world in which women were prominent explains the predominance of female figurines. Within each of the analytical perspectives, evaluating successes and failures in accounting for available evidence is relatively straightforward. But efforts in different analytical modes must themselves be brought into confrontation, and that is what I will experiment with here, ignoring as I do so the complexity within each one.

The question is, what sort of empirical cues might prompt us to select a particular analytical mode to explain the femaleness of figurines? Devising an answer is easiest for iconography and use, the two perspectives that view meanings as surface phenomena. One possible reason for the femaleness of figurines from our two sites is a sharing of conventional subjects—for example, the representation in both cases of a particular goddess. If a specific subject is the key, then we will want to choose iconography as our analytical mode. All the means described above for characterizing subjects—an analysis of themes, a search for attributes deployed as visual clues—can be brought to bear in making that choice. A second possibility is that the femaleness of figurines is a by-product of the way they were used—they were props, say, in female initiation ceremonies. In this case, specific subjects might vary, but we would expect a correspondence between our two sites in attributes asso-

ciated with use: size of figurines, degree of investment in manufacture, evidence of damage, disposal patterns.

Adding the perspectives that locate meaning in deep structures to this scheme is something of a challenge. Empirical patterns favorable for social analysis, in particular, seem likely to vary quite a bit, even at an abstract level, depending on the social explanation an analyst chooses. Nevertheless, my previous discussion of forms of social analysis provides a basis for headway. A common approach takes representational variability to be a window on the ongoing tensions of social relationships. I identified two empirical conditions favorable to social analysis in this mode. First, we would hope to find evidence that different images appeared together. Second, we would want the subject matter to have been people in a generic sense rather than specific deities or the characters of myths. By characterizing variability and subject matter, then, we can assess the potential of at least one important mode of social analysis.

Patterns favoring symbolic explanation are perhaps easier to identify. If femaleness was at both sites a key symbol deployed metaphorically in a variety of social contexts, then we might well find this theme expressed in multiple media in a variety of archaeological contexts. Media and contexts need not correspond very closely between our two cases; the key would be the multiplicity of contexts in which predominantly female imagery appeared within any given site.

The scheme can be simplified by arranging the four perspectives once again as corners of a box (fig. 1) and examining relations between opposing corners. When charting a strategy for explaining the femaleness of figurines, we pursue two basic problems. First, we try to characterize the subject matter. This may push us toward locating explanation either in iconography (when we find clues of a shared, specific subject) or in social analysis (when representations are varied and it seems possible to characterize the subjects generically as people). Second, we consider the figurines as objects in archaeological context, with attention to variation both within and between sites. This might push us either toward use (when we find a narrow range of variation in media, use-wear, and contexts within one site repeated at other sites) or symbolic study (when femaleness is associated with a wide range of variation in those criteria within each site). Clearly, this will not solve all our problems; it nevertheless seems a reasonable place to begin.

ANALYZING REGIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF MEANING

Before I turn to data from the two settings, it is important to consider problems of regional synthesis. A common approach privileges special assemblages with highly elaborate imagery—Çatalhöyük or Hacilar in Anatolia, Tlatilco or Las Bocas in Central Mexico. In some accounts, these assemblages stand in for entire regions; in others, they are said to provide interpretive keys for making sense of simpler cases. I do not want to underestimate the importance of special assemblages, but an explicit consideration of how we might expect meanings to be

manifested at a regional scale prompts a reorientation of common views concerning what it is that such assemblages tell us.

Meanings, we assure ourselves, are local. But where does “local” end? From one village to the next? One valley to the next? Several days’ walk? Clearly, any regional synthesis of “meaning” will need to confront variation at a range of scales. Ethnographic studies support the idea that, within a culture area or other regional symbolic tradition, we can expect a patchwork of continuities and divergences. In a regional analysis of variation in symbolic expression among the Mountain Ok (New Guinea), Barth (1987:5) notes that a key symbol in one community may, in another, be accorded an opposite semantic value or remain unelaborated. He finds particular volatility in the symbolic elaboration of sex and gender imagery (pp. 38–45). Goody (1997:62–63) describes marked variability in traditions of image making in West Africa. In this case, very different kinds of objects (only some of which are representations) are used in similar ways across the region.

It would be more consistent with the findings of ethnographers to treat flashy assemblages from special sites not as exemplifying symbolism that was everywhere present in less explicit form but instead as cases in which what was in fact everywhere present was built upon, elaborated, and taken in new directions. Thus, if we were to develop an iconographic argument identifying a specific goddess at, say, Çatalhöyük, any move to extrapolate that deity to a much larger region on the basis of minimal iconographic criteria (“these sites also have female figurines!”) should be treated skeptically. My method of regional analysis thus involves looking for both widespread similarities and patterns of local variation. Special assemblages do not stand for otherwise invisible regional patterns. Instead, they become intriguing cases of local divergence.

IMAGERY

I assess the potential of the different perspectives on meaning in two stages: first, by examining imagery to weigh iconography versus social analysis and then by scrutinizing objects and contexts to weigh use versus symbolic study. An initial question is whether within either or both of the world areas figurines might be female because they depict the same specific subject, such as a goddess.

Mesoamericanists set this possibility aside several decades ago. Widespread themes associated with female images in this area are a standing posture and detailed elaboration of the face and head. Assemblages are typically characterized by a variety of distinct head decorations, a pattern that suggests diversity rather than consistency of subject matter. In some assemblages, figures wearing elaborate garb with cosmological references do appear (Bradley and Joralemon 1993:pl. 1–3; Niederberger 1987: figs. 281–90). Interestingly, such figures are often deliberately depicted as humans wearing masks. In other words, supernatural imagery among figurines seems lo-

cated in society. Finally, in media where we really do seem to have purely supernatural images, the themes that appear are animal and human–animal combinations, with no hint of an anthropomorphic female deity (Joralemon 1976). In sum, figurine subject matter is social not supernatural, and there is no good iconographic support for a widely shared female subject.

The situation is not so straightforward in the Near East, where figurines are often identified as depictions of one or more female deities. Such arguments tend to rely heavily on the spectacular assemblage from Çatalhöyük (Mellaart 1967), themes from which are reinforced in important ways at the later site of Hacilar (Mellaart 1970), both in southern Anatolia. Among the larger figurines, an obese female appears in a variety of stereotyped postures. Several images of women seated in association with what appear to be leopards suggest supernatural authority. Coding strategies and hints of narrative specificity demand just the sort of debate concerning the presence of female divinities or even “a goddess” that has characterized interpretations of the site (see Cauvin 2000, Hamilton 1996, Hodder 1990, Voigt 2000).

In some parts of the Near East, then, it is at least plausible that (some) female figurines referenced one or more specific deities. But do all female figurines illustrate that same subject? The iconographic attributes that most clearly bolster attempts to see female figurines at Çatalhöyük or Hacilar as illustrations of a particular subject are absent at most sites. Nevertheless, the cluster of themes shared widely in the Near East is distinct from that of Mesoamerica. Females tend to sit rather than stand, and there is an emphasis on overall bodily form with scant attention to the head. At some sites, a fullness of figure tending toward obesity may perhaps be linked to femaleness (Mellaart 1967), but it would appear more common for fleshiness or pregnancy to be a locus of variation among female images (Broman Morales 1983, McAdam 1997). Schematization is pervasive, but it also usually varies by degree within assemblages.

In general, Near Eastern figurines seem decidedly less “social” than their Mesoamerican counterparts. For one thing, exuberant attention to diversity in costume and ornament is largely absent, though it does appear by the later Neolithic in places like Tell es-Sawwan and Choga Mami (Oates 1966, 1969). Was a seated, fleshy, depersonalized woman a specific divine subject? Many have argued such a case (e.g., Cauvin 2000). Nevertheless, a quite different line of thinking also seems to accord with the evidence. What is most concretely shared among Near Eastern sites in the early period under consideration is a practice of representing an (arguably) female form in a very schematized way. Could it be that the shared component of figurine meaning was equally schematic, the representation of womanhood (e.g., Broman Morales 1990:19; Hamilton 1996:225–26; Voigt 2000: 288)?

These two views seem unresolvable if we focus on the figurines alone, but if we turn to other kinds of imagery with potential supernatural referents, the balance of ev-

idence tilts toward the second option. Relevant evidence includes stone reliefs and sculptures from southeastern Anatolia and plaster sculptures from the Levant (Contenson 1967, Hauptmann 1999, Rollefson 1983, Tubb and Grissom 1995, Voigt 2000). In sculpture, males, females, animals, and imaginary creatures are represented; there seems to be no evidence of a shared female deity. Furthermore, the pattern that emerges is one of significant diversity. Among these representations of larger scales, including true sculptures that might well have been props for collective rituals, there would appear to be if anything more variability from site to site than among the much smaller figurines. It seems likely that, despite widespread sharing of certain religious practices (Garfinkel 1994), the supernatural was imagined in a variety of ways across the Neolithic Near East. As in Mesoamerica, the femaleness of figurines does not derive from the sharing of a specific subject, and iconography is not the most promising arena for pursuing an explanation.

If iconography is not the answer, what about social analysis? Could it be that figurines were female because the status and powers of women in social relationships were the source of ongoing struggle? If something like this is the route to take, then figurine imagery in these cases must provide a window on society, and two conditions seem likely to be met. First, we expect evidence that different images were grouped and compared; second, it should be possible to characterize the subject matter as people in a generic sense.

There is variability in figurine imagery both within and between sites in each area under consideration. Thus, while a standing posture is most common for females in Mesoamerica, assemblages vary in terms of gesture, the rarer postures, clothing, and ornamentation (Cyphers 1993, Lesure 1997, Marcus 1998). Probable male figures are a minor but consistent part of assemblages in Central Mexico (Coe 1965:figs. 108, 109, 111), and unsexed figures are sometimes significant (Joyce 2000:29). Age differences may be more important than is generally recognized (Cyphers 1993; Joyce 2000:34–37). Animal figurines tend to be rare.

In the Near East, images are distinguished by variation in gesture and posture, though there is often only limited intrasite variability. Assemblages can be further differentiated by degree of schematization (Broman Morales 1983, Gopher and Orrelle 1996, Hamilton 1996, McAdam 1997) or clothing and ornamentation (e.g., Collet 1996, Schmidt 1988). Occasionally, standing figures predominate (Eygun 1992). There are often grounds to debate the identification of females, and in some assemblages male figures can be identified with confidence (Oates 1966, Perrot 1966). Animal figures often form a sizable proportion of assemblages.

It is notoriously difficult to prove that different images were routinely grouped together. Certainly, in both areas sets of figurines were occasionally deliberately buried (García Moll et al. 1991; Marcus 1998:177–81; McAdam 1997), and pieces of different images are commonly found in the same refuse deposits. Some sites have, however, yielded hints of divergent use contexts for different

images, especially for animal versus human images but occasionally for different human images as well (Hamilton 1996, Lesure 2000, McAdam 1997). One striking feature of early Near Eastern assemblages is the amount of effort that has gone into making each figure stable and freestanding, such a concern is certainly consistent with the idea that the figures were made to be displayed in groups.

Does the character of the variability indicate that the figurines represented people—that their subject matter was generically social? This seems possible in Mesoamerica, where variability in imagery plausibly reflects the sorts of social distinctions we expect in small-scale societies, including age, gender, status, and roles in public performance (Cyphers 1993, Joyce 2000a, Lesure 1997, Marcus 1998). Caution here is certainly warranted, since in some cases definitively imaginative representations such as women with two heads or two faces are known (Coe 1965:figs. 103–4) and it might be possible to identify subjects more specifically as, for instance, ancestors (Marcus 1998). Nevertheless, if we concede an overall social character to Mesoamerican figurines and also claim that figurines indexed relations between people, then the character of local variability prompts some further observations. A great variety of social relationships could have been referenced by figurines, but only a limited set actually was. Observed patterns of iconographic variability would be consistent with the suggestion that the set of social relations referenced through the deployment of figurines was partly—but only partly—shared from community to community. In particular times and places, the local web of social referents expanded greatly, yielding such spectacular archaeological manifestations as Tlatilco or Las Bocas.

A similar argument might be made for the Near East, but it seems rather less satisfying, especially when considered beside the Mesoamerican case. The question is whether the variability within Near Eastern assemblages, including gesture, posture, and degree of schematization, really would have had immediate social referents. An alternative would be to imagine Near Eastern figurines as referencing more abstract concepts than their Mesoamerican counterparts. Certainly people discussed and compared figurines, just as I am suggesting for Mesoamerica, but in the Near East the referents tended toward the abstract—concepts and values, perhaps, rather than specific statuses, rights, and obligations (e.g., Haaland and Haaland 1995). Of course, in some local settings, greater thematic variability emerged. It is noteworthy, though, that at least some cases of local elaboration such as Çatalhöyük or Hacilar have sparked vociferous debate over the identification of specific supernatural subjects, in particular a female deity. It seems possible that local symbolic innovations leading to the emergence and imaging of female divinities are more consistent with a subject matter that is abstract or conceptual (Near East) rather than concretely social (Mesoamerica). There is room for disquietude with my reading of the Near Eastern case, since, of course, schematic representations do not necessarily reference abstract con-

cepts, but it is not actually essential for the purposes of this paper that I be right in interpreting these differences. The important point here is that, while there appears to be potential for social analysis in the figurines-as-window-on-society mode in both the Near East and Mesoamerica, differences in patterning suggest that serious social analysis would lead in very different directions in the two cases.

OBJECTS AND CONTEXTS

I now turn to an examination of objects and contexts in an effort to assess the relative potential of use versus symbolic analysis for explaining the femaleness of figurines. This second stage of the analysis is more straightforward than the last, since patterns favorable to each perspective can be formulated in direct opposition to each other. Briefly, if femaleness is associated with objects used in similar ways, then analysis in terms of use would seem promising, but if femaleness is associated with different sorts of objects used in a variety of contexts, then symbolic analysis would be favored. I focus on a set of archaeological considerations that allow me to assess ranges of variability in use without identifying specific uses. Those considerations are media and size, use-wear or damage, and disposal contexts.

The overall pattern across the Near East suggests consistent and limited contexts for the appearance of predominantly female imagery. Femaleness predominates among small figurines, typically 2–12 cm in height, made of fire-hardened or sun-dried clay. They are widely distributed across sites and seem usually to have been used in domestic contexts rather than special buildings. Their fragility implies relatively rapid use and discard. I have already mentioned the absence of predominantly female imagery on large-scale sculptures. There are in addition sometimes figures of stone that are similar in size to the clay figurines, but these are usually rare or of material hardly different in cost from clay (Contenson 1981:54–57; Gopher and Orrelle 1996:257–61). In other instances, the imagery of small stone figures diverges significantly from that of clay figurines (Hauptmann 1999:77). The “mother-goddess” statuettes in alabaster from Tell es-Sawwan actually include male, female, and uncertainly sexed figures (Ippoltoni Strika 1976:35).

There are a few potential indications of more diverse contexts for female imagery. First, at some sites there may have been two sizes of clay figurine, one 2–5 cm in height, the other 8–15 cm (Broman Morales 1983, 1990; Collet 1996; McAdam 1997). In these cases, the smaller ones tend to be more schematic than the larger ones, but both arguably bear female imagery. They could have had distinct uses. Second, some investigators report essentially uniform distributions of figurines, while others identify patterning (Broman Morales 1983:370, 1990:19; McAdam 1997:136–37; Voigt 2000:262). Is this evidence of different uses at different sites, or is it an artifact of recovery practices and the perceptions of different investigators? Third, there are some potentially significant changes over time in Near Eastern figurines, especially

in the later Neolithic, after the appearance of ceramics. All these patterns might reflect diversity of use, but, on balance, they do not add up to a strong case for choosing the symbolic approach, especially when they are compared with evidence from Çatalhöyük (Voigt 2000), where female imagery does appear on objects used in a variety of ways in multiple contexts. It thus seems possible to recommend *use* as a promising arena for exploring the widespread femaleness of Near Eastern figurines, but only if we concede that some special cases appear to cry out for analysis in symbolic terms.

The physical features and archaeological contexts of Mesoamerican figurines also favor explanation in terms of use. Femaleness predominates among solid clay figurines typically 5–15 cm in height. Their fragmentary remains are widely distributed across sites, and evidence of deliberate burial is rare. I have already mentioned the lack of prominent femaleness in a variety of other media (Joralemon 1976), including large stone sculpture. Images of intermediate size appear most typically in the form of hollow ceramic figures 15–40+ cm in height.

Understandings of these are greatly hampered by a profusion of unproven materials in private collections and the fragmentary state of scientifically excavated assemblages. Many of these larger figurines seem to be unsexed (Blomster 1998:311; Marcus 1998:29), but in some places female imagery may have predominated on these uniformly larger, more complex, and more elaborate objects (e.g., Coe 1965:figs. 176–79). The question is which of these (predominantly unsexed versus predominantly female) should be considered the general pattern and which the local permutation; the issue is unresolved.

Other potential indications of greater diversity of contexts for female imagery include subtle variations in size of the solid figurines and the possibility that deliberate breakage was practiced at some sites but not others. Finally, there is a series of sites in Central Mexico dating to the early 1st millennium b.c. where small figurines appear as burial offerings as well as in settlement debris (e.g., García Moll et al. 1991). Perhaps not coincidentally, among these are the “special assemblages” of Tlatilco and Las Bocas that I have mentioned. Here we appear to have something of a local divergence from widespread patterns; a greater representational repertoire was deployed in an expanded number of contexts. It seems possible that here the theme of femaleness might prove amenable to analysis in the symbolic mode, though the prospects at Tlatilco seem somewhat less promising than those at, say, Çatalhöyük.

To summarize, in both the Near East and Mesoamerica, an examination of objects and contexts favors *use* as a perspective from which to explore the femaleness of figurines. The pattern at most sites is for prominent female imagery to be associated with a limited range of objects having a circumscribed set of uses. The specific pattern is, in each area, consistent across multiple sites. However, in both cases there are also important local divergences from widespread patterns, cases in which femaleness may be associated with multiple media used in a variety of contexts. These cases demand

scrutiny from a symbolic perspective, but observed patterns suggest that such studies might be most appropriately cast at small scales.

By recommending use as a promising arena for explaining the femaleness of figurines in both the Near East and Mesoamerica, it is not my intention to claim that these objects were used in exactly the same ways in the two cases. The two areas seem similar in terms of certain figurine parameters (approximate size, domestic contexts, range of skills in manufacture) but divergent in others (schematization, durability, details of size). If we were to consider the most common pattern in each area in relation to the proposed archaeological correlates of potential uses distinguished by Voigt (2000:table 4), we would probably conclude that Near Eastern figurines were vehicles of magic whereas Mesoamerican figurines were toys. However, I am uncomfortable with that result for two reasons: first, the outcome for Mesoamerica does not fit well with existing interpretations of figurines from the region, and second, the different results would be based primarily on the greater durability and complexity of the Mesoamerican figurines, attributes that need to be carefully examined in relation to the appearance of pottery in the two areas. Instead of anointing particular uses, I would propose instead that some very general dimension of use was behind the recurrence of femaleness in these two world areas. For instance, maybe figurines were female because in each area these objects were by, for, and about women.

FEMALE FIGURINES: DISCUSSION

A problem with previous approaches to explaining the predominance of female imagery among Neolithic figurines is that they have not made the possibility of a general explanation itself the object of empirical investigation. Significant headway in such an endeavor can be made using the framework developed here. I have distinguished idealized patterns (in imagery, objects, and contexts) favorable for analysis from each perspective on meaning. It was then possible to examine the full suite of features associated with female imagery in two world areas and attempt to match them to the four idealized patterns. The idea was that if different matches were achieved in each area, the prospects for a general explanation would be diminished, but if patterning seemed to match it would be possible to specify a particular analytical route that efforts toward general explanation should take. This second possibility has been borne out, but it needs some qualifications relating to scale of analysis.

Neither iconography nor symbolic analysis seems an appropriate perspective for investigating the widespread occurrence of predominantly female imagery. The closest correspondence between the Near Eastern and Mesoamerican cases appears in their appropriateness for analysis in terms of use, with social analysis a more difficult second choice.

The results raise the possibility that the Near East and Mesoamerica both have female figurines for the rather

simple reason that in each area these happened to be objects generally made and used by women. The recurrence of female imagery in these two world areas might thus tell us very little about the nature of early village societies in a general sense—though if we decided that women made small figurines for their own use in domestic settings in both the Neolithic Near East and Formative Mesoamerica, we could perhaps go on to debate the idea that there was an analogously gendered division between public and domestic activity in the two areas.

Nevertheless, if use is the key to a general explanation, then any insights we might draw from the similarities between the two world areas will be limited unless we simultaneously think about the problem on a variety of other scales. A social analysis that treats figurines as a window on society would appear a promising perspective from which to consider the predominant femaleness of figurines across Early-through-Middle Formative Mesoamerica (see Joyce 2000 for interesting suggestions). That might also be the case in the Near East (e.g., Hamilton 1996:226), though the results of such an analysis would probably diverge markedly from that for Mesoamerica. At particular times and places in the Neolithic of the Near East, femaleness may have become a prominent source of metaphor. Symbolic analysis will therefore prove helpful at appropriately delimited scales. Finally, it is important not to ignore iconography; analysis in this mode will not explain the recurrence of femaleness across the whole of the Near East or of Mesoamerica, but there are hints that specific subject matter might have been depicted across sizable areas (e.g., Blomster 1998; Lohof 1989).

Conclusions

Particularistic and generalizing impulses in archaeology have often been taken up by opposing camps in debates concerning the authority of archaeological knowledge, the proper conduct of archaeological reasoning, and the degree to which analysts can be considered neutral observers of the past. Over the past decade, however, there has been growing interest in attempts at rapprochement (Wylie 2000), and, indeed, much of the divisive invective that characterized debates even a decade ago has been set aside. Nevertheless, accumulated antagonisms cannot be shrugged off easily. For instance, an interest in the meaning of objects may seem irreconcilable with comparison and generalization. If meaning is unstable, contextual, and open to investigation from a variety of perspectives, is it impossible to generalize about meanings? I have argued that not only is it possible to generalize about meanings but it is essential.

This need has become apparent in the study of prehistoric figurines, where a simplistic generalizing perspective has been decisively overturned and particularism, with its emphasis on the variability of individual collections, currently reigns. The problem is that covert comparison and even generalization is going on all the time but outside of any explicitly recognized theoretical

structure. I have tried to sketch the outlines of such a structure, located somewhere between the extremes of narrow particularism and simplistic generalization. Two basic ideas lie behind my efforts: first, that a comparative perspective needs to look beyond superficial similarities to consider patterns of variation at different scales and, second, that it is useful to begin by scrutinizing arguments presented in figurine studies and attempting to synthesize the diverse ways in which analysts think about meaning. The result is a comparative framework poised uncomfortably between a theory of the dimensionality of meaning and a representation of analysts' thinking about meaning.

My claim is that this kind of deliberate ambiguity proves useful in negotiating the shoals of comparison. One recurring dilemma is how to deal with different interpretations of figurines that are formally similar—or, for that matter, similar interpretations of figurines that are seemingly quite different. It is helpful to consider how observers position themselves on an analytical field framed by some important questions about meaning: Are meanings located in surface phenomena or in deep structures? Should they be treated as autonomous systems or as the products of social life? From the intersection of these two questions, I have derived four important perspectives on the meaning of figurines. In addition, I have identified two other concerns that attempts at comparison must confront. First, investigators build inferential arguments in very different ways, and it will be important to assess the detailed structure of their arguments. Second, analogies to living societies or historical cases are common, but they are often applicable to a great many cases in the area and epoch of interest; comparative studies need to examine these expansive implications of analogy.

Using the framework instead as a theory of the dimensionality of meaning prompts us to avoid deciding in advance that the "meaning" of figurines must be of a particular kind (iconographic, symbolic, etc.). It is instead possible to select analytical perspectives appropriate to particular questions or particular assemblages. I have illustrated potential uses of the framework in this mode by considering the cross-cultural prevalence of female figurines in Neolithic societies. My conclusion is that in any ambitious synthesis of figurines, the four perspectives on meaning will vary in prominence and potential at different geographical scales. One implication is that analysts working at any particular scale should consider possible distributions of perspectives by scale as they chart their own strategies of investigation. On the one hand, comparison at the grandest scale may explain very little of what interests us in figurines, but, on the other hand, it is counterproductive to explain site-by-site, in widely varying ways, patterns that might be convincingly addressed at some larger scale. That is why it is so important to view particularism and generalization not as opposing camps but in terms of an ongoing and salubrious tension.

Comments

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Figurine studies have come a long way in the past few decades. By way of illustration, few of today's scholars cite Spinden's century-old claim that the spatial distribution of female terracotta images reflects the spread of agriculture in the Western Hemisphere. His idea, perhaps innovative at the time, now seems irrelevant to contemporary archaeological discussions. The simplistic and encompassing "fertility cult" explanations inevitably crashed because they failed to satisfy increasingly profound questions about ancient societies. Nevertheless, because old ideas die hard, we are still far from understanding the ancient worldviews that motivated figurine manufacture and how their uses reflect social mechanisms on a regional scale.

Lesure's article is an important step toward creating a new awareness in the study of these remarkable artifacts. Discussion of previous perspectives on figurines, the analysts' processes of inference, and the features involved in these studies leads him to test his analytical framework for comparative analysis on the female theme in early Mesoamerica and the Near East. The exercise, resulting in generalizing archaeological interpretation, explicitly sacrifices analytical complexity in order to contrast the different modes of analysis. I agree with Lesure that grand comparisons of figurines may have little utility and that varying approaches on a small scale create comparative difficulties on both interregional and cross-cultural levels. Attempts to standardize analyses have not always met with success. Problems of this nature are common because numerous site-specific chronologies supported by different classifications tend to make the ascending path to generalization a rocky one. Detailed data reporting and explicit methods and inference are prerequisites for attaining the summit in any study, whatever the route taken.

In Lesure's elegant reconciliation of particularism and generalization, archaeologists do not have to feel swamped by thousands of figurine fragments with no visible means of escape to richer levels of interpretation. His broad, clear analytical framework, which considers the pivotal role of meaning with regard to variability, similarity, and scale, provides the kind of flexible outline that can guide future figurine studies.

FIGURE 1
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Lesure's paper is challenging: it has the great merit of attempting a comprehensive approach to and an updated synthesis of figurine studies, starting from the analysts' attitudes and summarizing the various scholarly perspectives. Also interesting is the attempt at including figurines from such different archaeological contexts as the Near East and Mesoamerica in an all-inclusive new framework. Although I do not agree that figurines in the Near East seem to have been predominantly female, I believe that Lesure's paper offers a very useful tool for rethinking the ideas and devices that we tend to employ in our studies without examining the reasons we do so. In a way, however, the richness of its scholarly approach is also a limitation of the paper, since it seems to be summary of a larger work and its reasoning is therefore sometimes difficult to follow. It reminds me of the Latin poet's "Brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio" (I try to be brief, I get obscure).

Indeed, any prehistorian who sets out to sail the sea of anthropomorphic figurines is faced with the difficulty of matching such diverse issues as his case study, comparative analyses, the weight of traditional mother-goddess-biased studies, and recent attempts, somewhat biased by preconceptions, at criticizing that tradition. I have long been concerned with Near Eastern prehistoric figurines and statuettes and must limit my observations to this field, though I believe that my ideas can easily be extended to, for example, the Old European figurines that seem to have been hyperinterpreted by Gimbutas. I find that the ideological approach, however useful it may be for penetrating the silence of a preliterate society, always involves some kind of bias, while a strict analysis of the imagery is a good start. As far as the Near Eastern literature is concerned, I would point out that beyond a series of case studies (some of them cited by Lesure) we have only two key synthetic works, those of Dales (1960) and Ucko (1962, 1965). In fact Ucko not only attempted to place possible interpretations in a broader perspective, clearly questioning the traditional mother-goddess-biased approach, but began with an iconographic-stylistic analysis which may be considered a point of departure for any further study. In Ucko's evaluations we may find practically all the categories examined in Lesure's proposed framework, and it has to be pointed out that unfortunately Ucko's work is constantly cited but rarely followed.

The gender issue is a crucial one because of its implications for the study of iconography, meaning, use, and social value. Notwithstanding the recent feminist issues and the declared intention of evaluating the figurines as individuals, we are still far from a cold, structuralist analysis, free of preconceptions, of the renderings of the human body. Such an analysis would question the very purpose of Lesure's paper, which is to explore why figurines seem to have been predominantly female in the

Near East and Mesoamerica. This seems to me a false problem as far as the Near Eastern figurines are concerned. I tried to point out in my study of the Near Eastern anthropomorphic figurines from Sawwan and Çatal Hüyük (1975, 1976, 1983, 1998, 2000a, b) that the label "male/female" has often been arbitrarily applied. Many identifications of supposed "females" from other Near Eastern and Old European sites can also be questioned. The human body is characterized by primary and secondary sexual features: where clear primary ones are absent, none of the other features, including steatopygia, prominent bellies, and of course breasts ("maternal" or not), can be considered definite sexual indicators. Several anthropological studies have pointed to the contingency of sexual perspectives and fashions. The same is true of elaborate hairdos, necklaces, bands, and belts, which are again not exclusive indicators of femininity. We need rather an internal analysis of site imageries, bearing in mind that a culturally/politically central site such as Sawwan, Çatal Hüyük, or Ain Ghazal is usually able to give us much more explicit contexts than a simpler one.

In particular, I suggest an evaluation of the figurines' various features in terms of the stylistic "language" of each site—considering, site by site, the size of the breasts, the attitudes, and general outlook of the figurines and then comparing them when possible with those of clearly sexed figures from the same site or from culturally and iconographically close areas. This will allow us to identify types, since we can check that apart from the male/female distinction there are hints at age and status differentiation, possibly including a third "cultural" sex for gods and leaders. Such an approach is likely to produce amazingly different results with regard to gender, since the predominance of females will be much reduced. At the same time, a structural analysis of the anthropomorphic rendering may help in revisiting comparative concerns and avoiding the "confusion" that, as Lesure suggests, may give rise to different interpretations of similar assemblages.

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This ambitious attempt to provide a model for figurine studies usefully directs our attention to differences among analyses that may prove helpful in avoiding unproductive debates rooted in differences in basic assumptions. If I am in the end less persuaded of the utility of the framework for understanding the case study, that can be attributed to the fact that, despite attempting to capture the diversity of perspectives among analysts, the model does not engage two other dimensions of difference among figurine analysts. Since I find these other dimensions more fundamental in understanding what researchers are doing, my own comparative framework for analysis would have to be configured somewhat differently. Whether that means that the present effort has

failed depends on whether one actually subscribes to the desire for a single comprehensive approach that will cover all early farming village figurine traditions.

I want to raise three questions about the project. First, are figurines really a coherent, bounded body of phenomena? I think the answer is no. We need to acknowledge, as Lesure does here in practice, that other media in which the human form is represented will affect how figurines work. In my own research I begin with the assumption that representations at different scales and in different media interact (Joyce 1993). Ideally we would look at human representation as a practice, not at an arbitrary segment of objects delimited by archaeological classifications.

Second, I would question whether all figurine analyses are actually concerned with “meaning.” As Lesure notes, we might ask not *what* figurines mean but *how* they mean. My own work is concerned with the phenomenological question of how the practice of shaping malleable material (clay) into representational form served to embed particular senses of the human body as culturally shaped in those making and using figurines (Joyce 1998). I do not see such questions as situated within the proposed analytic model.

Finally, I am uneasy with framing the case study in terms of a prevalence of female representation in early agricultural villages. Taking sex as the primary feature for classification predetermines the kinds of answers we can arrive at. The conclusion reached, that “the Near East and Mesoamerica both have female figurines for the very simple reason that in each area these happened to be objects generally made and used by women,” only defers the explanatory problem. Why didn’t men make figurines?

More fundamental, slippage from a preference for a particular representational subject to identification of the makers and users of specific works with that represented subject is problematic in light of contemporary theories of visual representation. In my work on Formative Honduran figurines, I identified elders as likely social agents for the objectification of younger members of the social group, as Lesure (1997) did in his figurine studies. I cannot presume that elders were all women or that because the figurines seem primarily to represent female subjects they were used by women. What I can argue is that the bodily and social identities of young female subjects were of interest to members of the society who underwrote the production of these images.

The general comparative conclusion I draw from studies of Formative Mesoamerican figurines by myself and others (Lesure 1997, Cyphers 1993) is that they more consistently represent identifiable age statuses than gender statuses. Because it is part of the Western European intellectual heritage to see gender as a first principle for social discrimination, as analysts we look for signs of sex and separate our figurines into two groups. In the process, we assign figurines lacking signs of sex to an unmarked category. Unless some extremely obtrusive characteristic forces classification of a figurine as male, we deem it female. When I evaluate figurines without this di-

chotomizing assumption, I identify a group that are not clearly female or male, a fact that I relate to distinctive Mesoamerican views on the development of gender over the life span (Joyce 2000b).

My approach, I gather, assigns me to the left side of Lesure’s analytic framework, perhaps the lower left corner. But I do not think I am conducting a social analysis of deep structures of meaning, and the question I am asking is not why figurines are predominantly female. We could stretch the topology into other dimensions and create a cubic space within which I would be comfortable, but I would continue to be uncertain of the utility of such an exercise. What is undoubtedly useful, however, is the work of consciously identifying the kinds of questions we ask and the kinds of evidence that could bear on those questions. Here Lesure, in this and previous work, has made a lasting contribution, and if in the end I decline to adopt his approach I do not by that choice deny the productivity of the questions he raises.

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It is all too easy to exploit the evident meaningfulness of prehistoric art in constructing untestable interpretations, but the archaeology of art will never gain respectability until its methods are put in order. The construction of a general framework for comparative analysis which allows the analyst to assess the relative probability of alternative interpretations is very helpful.

It is good to see Ucko’s pioneering efforts to introduce method into the study of figurines cited, and Lesure’s paper is a further experiment in method. He does attempt to offer some guidance to the probability that his interpretations are accurate, but this could be taken farther through a judicial analogy. The sex of figurines can sometimes be established beyond reasonable doubt. The context of use (secular or ritual) can never be established beyond a balance of probabilities, while the reconstruction of specific cultural values remains mere possibility. The referential aspect of cell A is the easiest to achieve, while that of cell D is the most difficult.

Many of the issues identified by Lesure reappear in the study of prehistoric rock art. Conventional interpretations that masquerade as description are a recurrent problem (Layton 2000a). Differences in contexts of use and in the frequency of particular subjects also distinguish portable from rock art in the European Upper Paleolithic. The hypothesis that different cultural systems leave distinctive “archaeological signatures” (cf. Gould 1980) is as useful in the study of rock art as it is in the study of figurines (see Layton 2000b). Geometric “signs” and animal silhouettes may have signified different cultural subsystems. The problem of matching interpretations to archaeologically measurable time scales and of deciding how far to generalize in time and space are important issues. The paintings in the early Upper Paleo-

lithic cave of Chauvet, for example, are startlingly similar in style to cave art painted over 15,000 years later, but an interesting change in the frequency of animal themes occurs over this long period (Clottes 1998, Clottes, Gély, and Le Guillou 1999).

My principal, though minor, criticism of Lesure's paper is his all-purpose use of the word "meaning." Cell A ("what the images depict") encompasses both reference and signification; images refer to objects and signify ideas (see Layton 2000c:329–30). Panofsky (1955:55) used "iconography" to label the study of elements of images that removed ambiguity about their signification by identifying first details of representation (i.e., iconic references)—the knife, the lily—and then, drawing on one's knowledge of the culture, what these details signify (the bearer as St. Bartholomew or the Virgin Mary). As Lesure comments, the extent to which an art/figurine tradition differentiates iconic details may be a symptom of the richness of the semantic system it expressed (compare the large and small silhouette traditions in Australian rock art). Whether a generalized figure is representative of a broad social category remains, however, an open question (see, e.g., Lawal 1985 and Morphy 1991).

Lesure's cell B ("uses") designates the ways images were deployed. This is a question of politics, of the control and use of knowledge, rather than of meaning (signification). (On the deceptive ease of appealing to ritual, see Brück 1999.) Lesure is right to stress the circularity of many archaeological interpretations that move between context of use and inferred signification, but it is worth noting that in Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus practice and signification are interdependent. The habitus is not a collective consciousness, because people carry their own variants in their heads. Habitus is expressed or made apparent only in action. Adults act out their interpretations, and children construe them. To ask whether signification or practice came first is a chicken-and-egg question. Cell C ("social analysis") stands to "use" as "symbolism" stands to "iconography."

With regard to cell D ("symbolic studies"), it is important to note that Peirce and Saussure used the term "symbol" in completely opposed ways. According to Peirce (1995:102–3), a symbol is arbitrarily associated with the object it refers to (spoken words, mathematical symbols). Lesure's use of "symbol" is closer to but not identical with the Saussurian sense—"the subject matter [of] the images itself referenced other, more abstract, ideas" (cf. Saussure 1959:68). As Lesure notes, his use corresponds more closely with Panofsky's definition of iconology ("I conceive of iconology as an iconography turned interpretative" [Panofsky 1955:58]). Notwithstanding his hesitation, I suggest that "iconology" is a less ambiguous label for Lesure's cell D. Can we tell when a female figurine is a portrait of an individual and when it is an allegory of womanhood? Panofsky discusses this problem in the art of historical periods. Lesure argues that context of use gives us clues to the opening up or shutting down of potential allegories, a phenomenon that Eco (1990) termed the problem of un-

limited semiosis. Here prehistoric archaeology becomes most tenuous.

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The essence of Lesure's approach is correct, but he weakens his argument first by basing it on selected assemblages and then by testing it in two distinct geographic entities, the Near East and Mesoamerica. The fact that the cultural processes in the two regions eventually ended in similar social structures has, understandably, stimulated social scientists to seek in them a pattern that might contribute to the construction of a global model. However, it is often forgotten that the processes were not as similar as the end products. Moreover, the Neolithic of the semi-arid regions of the Near East is strikingly different from those of the Anatolian highlands, the Aegean littoral, and Southeastern Europe. Taking the Neolithic of the Near East as a single block and as chronologically "flat" makes it possible to find items that can be used in defence of any model.

Lesure's examples from the Near East are all correct, but other examples can be found to contradict them. Likewise, his basic assumption that "in many early agricultural villages small clay figurines were common household objects. These traditions often disappeared as political organization became more centralized and villages developed into cities" is true for some cultural horizons in certain parts of the Near East but not all of them. For example, at Aşıklı there are hardly any clay figurines, and although Fikirtepe (more or less contemporary with Çatal Höyük) is known from six excavated sites only two figurines have been recovered. In the Linear Pottery cultures of Central and Western Europe there are almost no figurines. Clay figures are therefore not an essential component of early village assemblages, and the question must be why.

That figurines were part of the households of the early farming communities is, again, true only for certain cultures. In 38 years of work at Neolithic sites, recovering more than a thousand figurines, I recall finding hardly any in a house context. However, at sites such as Çatal Höyük and Höyücek figurines are a part of the household.

That the figurines disappeared with the beginning of centralized systems is also a dubious generalization. The transition from a village economy to one of towns and cities takes place in Anatolia by the Late Chalcolithic period, roughly around the end of the 4th millennium B.C. However, most of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Anatolian sites have revealed a rich variety of figurines. Although in some areas, including the Aegean coast, the figurines are of stone, it is worth discussing whether stone idols are conceptually any different from clay ones.

One of the most speculative aspects of the discussion

is gender (Bailey 1994*b*, Meskell 1998). Although Lesure begins with an excellent overview of this discussion, he cautiously accepts the predominance of female representation in the world of figurines. This, again, is true for some cultures or cultural stages but not others. As he notes, "iconographic variation has been either ignored or lumped into all-encompassing concepts such as 'mother-goddess.'" Especially in the case of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic assemblages of Anatolia, figurines of indeterminate sex have usually been considered females. Here again, the question is why. Up to the middle of the so-called Pre-Pottery Neolithic B there are almost no female representations that can be associated with temple-like cult buildings (Özdoğan 2001). In contrast, animals, birds, fishes, and reptiles (most of them not hunted species) are extensively represented (Hauptmann 1999, Schmidt 1998), and the human representations are exclusively male. At Göbekli Tepe, dated to the late Pre-Pottery Neolithic A and early B, the only female found in the context of these buildings is an old woman represented in a rather degrading posture not at all to be associated with the concept of the mother-goddess. In the same sites, the female figurines are usually found in domestic areas, implying that the "official" belief system was male-dominated. The female figurines seem to be part of a "personal" or domestic belief system. At Çatal Höyük, the site that inspired the "mother-goddess" theories, there are indeed clear female figurines represented in a dominating posture, but there are also a fair number of male figurines that tend to be overlooked.

Yet another interesting issue is the transformation of the steatopygic female representations of the Pottery Neolithic period to the slim ones of the Chalcolithic, and here again one should ask why.

Lesure expresses skepticism about the possibility of some figurines' having been deliberately broken, and here again he is both correct and not. In most cultural assemblages the figurines were only accidentally broken, but in the Middle Neolithic of Thrace it is clear that almost all figurines were made to be broken—even the expected line of fracture having been marked during their fabrication (Bánffy 1988).

To conclude, in generalizing it is important not to forget either time or cultural variation.

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I applaud Lesure's attempt to place the study of prehistoric figurines in comparative perspective. However, I wonder whether the contrast that he suggests between comparative generalization and myopic particularism isn't a little overdrawn. Comparison can be used, after all, as a means of identifying just what is specific and contingent about a particular context. We can have a comparative approach that emphasizes contrast and dif-

ference rather than needing to homogenize the past in search of generalizations. For this reason, I am a little concerned by Lesure's implicit suggestion that figurines occur within a "class of societies." The reference to "Neolithic" or "early village" communities in different parts of the world carries with it a hint that figurines are the type-fossil of a particular stage in social evolution. Instances such as that of Jomon Japan argue against such a view, but the comparison between Mesoamerica and the Near East implies that this is the case that Lesure is trying to make. That the contexts in which figurines occur are inherently comparable is an aspect of the argument that I would have liked to see more explicitly evaluated.

Lesure's focus on the different ways in which archaeologists address figurines is most welcome, and the methodology that he derives from this is innovative and helpful. However, I wonder whether a diagram like his figure 1 gives an impression of closure that may be misleading. The diagram is structured around the opposition between "explicit" and "deep" meaning and that between autonomy and contingency of meaning. Hence, the central issue that distinguishes different approaches appears to be one of where meaning resides. The four corners of the chart emphasize iconography, use, social analysis, and symbolic studies, and for the sake of argument we might broadly (if not exclusively) equate these with art-historic, processual, Marxist, and structuralist modes of analysis. Yet there are ways of investigating material culture that are quite different from these and that might be quite difficult to accommodate in Lesure's diagram. For instance, a poststructuralist analysis might reject the notion that meaning was to be found either on the surface of the figurine or in a deep structure underlying its form and decoration. Instead, meaning might be understood as being produced in the encounter between the figurine and its audience (e.g., Barthes 1981). This would mean that the work of interpretation that the modern analyst conducts upon the figurine is equivalent to or parallel with that of the past community, even if it can probably never coincide with it.

Such a perspective might encourage us to ask different questions of the material. We might consider how figurines have operated as a technology for the production of meaning, both in the past and in the present. This in turn would mean that we would want to know what interpretive resources past communities would have brought to bear on the figurines. It follows that figurines may have been polyvalent and have been understood in different ways by different members of these societies. Thus the "femaleness" of particular figures may have had different significance to persons of different gender or status. Furthermore, different aspects of their meaning may have been elicited by different contexts, different events or performances, and juxtaposition with other particular artefacts.

I am, then, highly sympathetic to what Lesure has attempted to achieve here but wonder whether it could

be broadened to accommodate a more protean conception of meaning.

Reply

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Categories and their relationships. Joyce, Özdoğan, and Thomas wonder whether “figurines” and “early villages” are acceptable categories for elaborate theorizing. I would insist only that from *certain* perspectives they are useful tools for thinking about prehistory (and archaeologists’ accounts of it). When my framework is used in adjudicative mode (to make sense of the efforts of different investigators), similarities of form and context seem sufficient to allow designation of “figurine” as a category. To interpret their finds, archeologists look at what previous investigators have done with similar finds. In this way, interpretive activities create and perpetuate the designation “figurine.” For that reason alone, it becomes a relevant category for comparative reflection. Indeed, the framework provides an apparatus for reaching the conclusion that what are labeled figurines in two cases were very different social phenomena.

Using the framework also in productive mode (to generate new interpretations) is more ambitious, and I risk reifying an arbitrary classificatory term. Joyce recommends instead comparing representations across scales and media. Such an approach is obviously a sound one, but while it solves some problems it raises others. Readings of total systems are formulated at a level removed from individual classes of evidence. Relying on figurines for a limited purpose in the context of a larger argument, they constitute these objects as evidence in variable ways. As a result, competing readings can prove difficult to weigh against each other. This is one issue I seek to address by scrutinizing a class of material evidence united at a low interpretive level. In practice, it proves useful to juggle questions framed at different levels. Indeed, as Joyce points out, that is what I did in my case study.

By using the term “early villages” I certainly display an interest in comparing segments of histories from different world areas, looking for commonalities and differences (cf. Özdoğan, Thomas). In other words, I have inherited something of processual archaeology’s old-fashioned attention to cross-cultural similarities. Clearly, there are other possible ways of conceptualizing histories and comparing them.

Were figurines associated with early villages? As Özdoğan notes, no necessary connection existed. There appears to me to be enough of an association in several parts of the world that archaeologists will continue to make implicit reference to some kind of very general causal connection as they craft interpretations of particular cases—they will write about folk religions before

the emergence of a professional priesthood or the regulation of social relationships in sedentary, prestate societies. For this reason, it is worthwhile to reflect explicitly on such issues at a variety of scales, including the most general. There are often debates over whether particular early figurine traditions disappeared or developed into later sculptural styles; Özdoğan is right that I overprivileged one scenario (disappearance with rising complexity) in my introductory paragraph.

The framework and its deficiencies. Both Thomas and Joyce suggest that recent theoretical positions and their associated analytical mode(s) are ignored in my comparative framework. This charge is, I think, partially correct and partially misplaced. One problem is that both reviewers try to relegate rather high-order theoretical positions to particular corners in figure 1. Thomas does so explicitly, drawing analogies between corners A through D and art history, processual archaeology, Marxism, and structuralism, respectively. He then finds no place for poststructuralism. I would instead see the four positions on “meaning” and their associated analytical modes as crosscutting disciplines or paradigms. Art history might favour the right side in the figure (A, D) and anthropology the left (B, C), yet symbolic anthropology has a particular interest in D and art historians I have consulted claim all four modes as their own. If, at gunpoint, I were forced to choose a single corner for processual archaeology, I would place it in C rather than Thomas’s B. In fact, however, even that tradition occasionally ranges across much of the field (see Roosevelt 1988). Joyce does not find her own concerns adequately characterized in my depiction of corner C, to which she suspects I would assign her work. Again, however, I would argue that individual investigators, like disciplines and paradigms, range across analytical modes. Thus, I would identify Joyce’s work (1998, 2000) as particularly concerned with C (social analysis) but also with A (iconography) and D (symbolic studies). One implication of my scheme is that theoreticians who are quite uncomfortable with each other might find their efforts glossed here as, for instance, “social analysis.”

Joyce and Thomas (see also Layton) identify a significant absence in the dimensions of “meaning” listed outside the frame in figure 1. Investigators sometimes think of meanings as neither autonomous nor located in society but embodied—in senses, dispositions, skills, and performances. Is that dimension of meaning associated with its own analytical mode(s) in the fashion of those charted in the figure? Further, are the missing analytical modes actually lodged in or derived from new theoretical positions such as poststructuralism or performance theories of gender? If I understand them correctly, that is what Thomas and (less explicitly) Joyce are suggesting.

I wrestled with that problem as I worked on the proposed framework. Obviously, theories raise innovative questions and order the world in novel ways. But how often do they also contribute new modes of analysis at lower interpretive levels? Are they more apt simply to reinvigorate long-standing interpretive concerns? Given my inclination to disassociate theoretical paradigm and

analytical mode, it is perhaps not surprising that I gravitate toward the latter option.

For example, one major analytical mode that is missing in the framework but central to Joyce's work on figurines is, I believe, a familiar one: stylistic analysis. Obviously, I am conceiving of style far more broadly than is common in archaeology. The proper goal of stylistic analysis is to explore how the making of one object affects the making of another. Analysis begins with the observation that objects which could easily have been different are instead similar. Those similarities are ascribed to the maker's choices concerning form. But such "choices" are not purely deliberative. They are also skillful and to a significant degree nondiscursive. When the imagery's subject matter is the human body, it would appear that by pursuing "style" we have reached the brink of Joyce's interests in the two materialities (of figurine and body) and their relations to culturally constructed body senses. To go a step farther, when Joyce (2000:176) analyzes imagery to explore a "Mesoamerican way of becoming and being," I see her as entering into long-standing discussions of the relation of style and culture. Her readings of total systems of representations recall Gell's (1998:163) observation that artworks "co-operate synergically with one another, and the basis of their synergic action is style." Thus, I suggest that, if stylistic analysis (broadly conceived) could be added, my framework might be able to make sense of much of Joyce's analytical effort and to identify where it intersects with those of other investigators.

The framework does not cover all of the questions investigators ask or all of the analytical modes they pursue. Style and history seem to me to be the biggest topics I have ignored, as Özdoğan notes. Nevertheless, the analytical modes I identify seem to crosscut theoretical positions. To address the deficiencies of the framework, it may be productive to add to them rather than discard them. I agree with Joyce that cubing the framework is unlikely to be helpful (but see Kubler 1985 for an intriguing hexagon).

The case study. Four issues relating to my case study are whether Neolithic figurines of the Near East are predominantly female, whether the femaleness of figurines is actually the wrong question, what should be made of my conclusions concerning women as makers of figurines, and whether variation in the Near East invalidates my arguments. The claim that Neolithic figurines of the Near East are predominantly female is, as I pointed out, very much open to contest, and both Ippolitoni Strika and Özdoğan are skeptical. It is fruitless to attempt to resolve this issue in these short comments; Ippolitoni Strika's analytical suggestions on how to proceed seem entirely reasonable.

Both Ippolitoni Strika and Joyce wonder whether "Why female figurines?" is the wrong question to ask. I do not intend to suggest that the femaleness of figurines is the most important question or one that should organize all others. I was led to it as I compared my own work concerning Formative Mexican figurines with that of other investigators. We had each explained a pattern

that was very common in terms of features specific to our own assemblages. How, I wondered, did these very different interpretations of broadly similar objects relate to each other? What was the boundary between the specific and the general? I therefore asked "Why female figurines?" because investigators who had studied figurines had repeatedly asked that question. Joyce would see other issues as central, but it is worth noting that she provides here her own answer to my question ("the bodily and social identities of young female subjects were of interest to members of the society who underwrote the production of these images"). Her answer seems quite plausible for Formative Mesoamerica, but one of the things I have shown is that a similar answer is unlikely to work at a general level in the Near East.

I agree with Joyce that we should not presume that female figurines were made by women. I left off my analysis at a point where that appeared as a *possible* conclusion; what I would hold to more strongly is the claim that *use* seems to be a promising arena for exploring the appearance of female imagery in *both* Mesoamerica and the Near East. If my suggestion has merit at that large scale, it will not mean that only women made figurines. Women need just have been the predominant makers, and, indeed, following the regional patterns of variation in image making observed by Goody (1997), I would expect plenty of local deviations and even inverse instances in which the makers were mainly men. Further, such a large-scale and coarse-grained explanation would only be a very partial answer to the question and should be pursued in conjunction with smaller-scale explanations in different analytical modes. Separate social analyses of Near Eastern and Mesoamerican figurines would add richly to the response; to be compatible with my suggested cross-cultural explanation they would need to intersect only in the provision that mainly women made figurines.

Özdoğan's comments concerning my lack of attention to history and style in the Near Eastern case are, as mentioned above, well taken. As the framework stands, I have treated such variation across space and time as a matter to be dealt with in a late stage of comparative analysis, when investigation has reached a fine grain of detail—one would then investigate how, through particular histories, local traditions reflected or diverged from broad patterns. (See, however, the last section on important *general* issues related to stylistic analysis.) One point raised by Özdoğan that is clearly central to the analysis as it stands is variation in the context of figurines. Were figurines broadly household objects (with some local deviations), or is this a major point of variability? This is a tricky question, because some things that are stored in houses are not used there (basketballs, motorcycle helmets), while objects used at home every day may be discarded elsewhere and rarely discovered "in household context" by archaeologists. Özdoğan's statistic (a few out of 1,000+ figurines in houses) is dramatic. What I would wonder is what kinds of contextual patterns he observed among the remaining figurines.

In conclusion, I wish to thank all the commentators.

I have not been able to respond to every point they raise but have certainly learned a great deal in thinking through their comments.

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