

**THEORETICAL ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP (TAG) SECOND ANNUAL MEETING
STANFORD UNIVERSITY, MAY 2009**

Abstracts

Saturday 2nd May

Morning sessions

(9am - 1pm)

Figurines in Action

John M. Matsunaga (University of California: Berkeley) & Peter Biehl (SUNY Buffalo)

Current figurine studies have attempted to understand the effects that figurines had on the perceptions, lived experiences, and daily practices of the people in the past that created and interacted with them. Traditional interpretations of figurines as mother-goddesses, fertility symbols, or as mere reflections of social and political organization have been replaced by interpretations of figurines as active forms of material culture that played an important role in shaping people's identities and social relationships. Key questions in this line of research include:

What effects did figurines have on people in the past?

What do figurines do and how do they do it? That is, how do they work?

This session seeks to address these questions and contribute to contemporary figurine studies by exploring the diversity of approaches to figurines that have developed in light of the recent trends in archaeological method and theory. In particular, special emphasis will be given to the study of materiality, especially in regards to aesthetics, semiotics, agency, embodiment, identity, personhood, and the biography of objects. It is desired that participants would not only explore at least one of these theoretical issues through a detailed case study, but also provide clear statements of the methods used to address them.

9:00-9:20am

Figurines in Action: An Introduction

John M. Matsunaga (University of California: Berkeley) and Peter Biehl (SUNY Buffalo)

9:20-9:40am

Thinking about Differential Body Part Emphasis on Prehistoric Figurines

Douglass Bailey (San Francisco State University)

The attention of figurine analysts and voyeurs has long focused on the different emphases that figurine makers placed on particular parts of figurine bodies: in some traditions, special treatment is directed to the breasts and buttocks; in others it is to the head and face. This paper addresses differential body part representation from two unrelated perspectives: the linguistic anthropology of

Stephen Levinson and his team of cross-cultural researchers, and the photographic work of Gary Schneider. The result aims to open up alternative ways of understanding representations of the human body such as those that were in common circulation during the European Neolithic.

9:40:-10:00am

Representing the Body: The Human Figure in the 7th-5th Millennium BC
Peter Biehl (SUNY Buffalo)

This paper discusses how studying visual representations of the human body (from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic in Southeastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East) can aid us in understanding identity and personhood in the past. The paper looks at anthropomorphism and miniaturization as well as at embodiment and entanglement. It will also scrutinize corporeal as well as ideational and symbolic attributes of the visual body in order to better understand the development of the human figure and to analyze its short-term and long-term changes both on a spatial micro- and macro-scale.

10:00-10:20am

Creating Bodies through Symbolic Commitment and Compromise: a Cucuteni-Tripolye Case Study

Raymond Whitlow (SUNY Buffalo)

The idea of a human body does not correspond to the total physical dimensions and qualities of the physical human body. Although people draw inspiration from a deep understanding of their own bodies, these representations possess communicative power only insofar as they are recognized by others. Figurines were a powerful tool for identity negotiation in the southeastern European Chalcolithic, but only if individuals 'bought-in' by negotiating a particular shared syntax of symbols for representing the body. Thus, communication through representation of the body necessitates a commitment to consistent symbolism rather than a variety of expression. Once embodied in material, the representation outlives the compromise between individual and shared concepts present at the moment of its creation. In this way a single representation of the body gains increasing agency as a conceptual marker for further buy-ins and rhetorical plays. Utilizing Chalcolithic figurines from Cucuteni-Tripolye sites, I argue the agentic power of representations is most manifest in these necessary symbolic commitments.

10:30-11:00am COFFEE BREAK

11:00-11:20am

Neolithic Materiality: The Technology and Daily Practice of Vinča Culture Anthropomorphic Figurine Production

John M. Matsunaga (University of California: Berkeley)

Recent developments in the study of figurines have challenged traditional approaches which view figurines as passive and static visual representations. Figurines are now considered by many to be active and dynamic forms of material culture, which has enhanced our understanding of the roles they played in past societies. While challenges to traditional approaches have broadened our current perspectives towards figurines, a continued focus on visual representation has inhibited the exploration of additional ways in which figurines can be analyzed and understood.

In this paper, I draw on recent advances in figurine studies, materials science, the anthropology of technology, and theories of materiality, in an attempt to shift attention away from figurines as purely visual media and consider the social significance of their technology, production, and the nature of the materials that are used in their creation. Through an analysis of Vinča Culture

clay figurines from the Neolithic tell site of Vinča-Belo Brdo, I explore the varied social effects that figurine production and technological practice had on the people that created and consumed them. I argue that figurines are best understood as material agents whose efficacy and social significance arises not only through cultural practices associated with their consumption as finished forms, but also through the practices involved in all stages of their production. Furthermore, I emphasize that the nature of the materials from which figurines are fashioned should be taken into greater consideration when attempting to understand their overall significance in past societies.

11:20-11:40am

Figurines and Fragmentation: Implications of the Two Paradigms on Southeast Europe
Prehistoric Archaeology
Slobodan Mitrović (The Graduate Center, CUNY)

In 2000 two books appeared that strongly influenced future scholarship on the Neolithic of Southeast Europe – *Fragmentation in Archaeology* by J. Chapman and *Balkan Prehistory* by D. Bailey. The former in his volume established notions of accumulation /fragmentation and enchainment, and these concepts were further elaborated on in J. Chapman & B. Gaydarska 2007, where they were perhaps promoted to the level of proper theory. Bailey's short chapter on figurines in his 2000 volume was massively expanded in 2005 with *Prehistoric Figurines*, in which figurine scholarship gets full scrutiny and new ideas deepen, as well as intensify general material culture research.

Quite literally, this paper explores theoretical and methodological implications of figurines and fragmentation, as the two areas of inquiry that go hand in hand and perform considerable influence on understanding and production of the Balkan prehistoric archaeology. The pair is also interesting because it is formulated by researchers who are originally from the outside of the geographical area – but have worked in the locale for a long time, and have built on the local publications and assemblages – thereby opening up the Neolithic Southeast Europe to the Anglophone (and general) public, albeit through specific lenses.

11:40-12:00pm

Of Sickle and Axe Men: Burials and Figurines in the Late Neolithic Carpathian Basin
Dusan Borić, University of Cambridge

The paper starts from an empirical case-study with evident homologies between the iconic form of representation found in burials and a particular figurine iconography of the Late Neolithic Carpathian Basin around 4700-4600 cal. BC. In the only presently known intramural cemetery of the late Vinča culture at the site of Gomolava, one finds exclusively male burials of both adults and children, all placed in flexed positions on their left sides. By rule, adult burials were accompanied by ceramic vessels, stone axes and flint sickle inserts. The taphonomy of axes' and flint sickle inserts' positions in relation to the body indicates that these items were always placed over the right shoulder of the deceased. On the other hand, in the Tisza culture settlement of Szegvár-Túzköves, two clay figurines were found depicting male (?) individuals: one with a sickle and the other with an axe over their right shoulders.

Firstly, the significance and meanings of these particular figurines in this wider region are contextualized in relation to the mortuary data by identifying a particular type of male embodiment, possibly shared by these two neighbouring communities. The likely ground-ing of such a representational embodiment is examined on the basis of Ingold's concept of taskscape. Other instances of such gender-specific separations in different media of corporeal display during this period are explored. Secondly, possible constitutive elements of a shared belief system are identified in the appearance and utilization of a new visual-corporeal vocabulary with mythical and/or foreign elements, both in figurine depictions and the mortuary domain. It is suggested that such corporeal "citations" might have related to particular historical dynamics that affected both the Tisza and the Vinča culture groups in the terminal phases of the tell-based existence in this part of south-east Europe.

12:00-12:20pm

Archive Fever: Words, Images and Things in Neo-Assyrian Apotropaic Figurine Deposits
Carolyn Nakamura (Stanford University)

Figurine studies have not been immune to the disciplinary divide between words and things that pervades much of archaeological research. For practical reasons, this divide often falls down the line of historic vs. prehistoric, or indeed, Classical (including Ancient Near Eastern) vs. archaeological methods. Figurines are one of the more evocative material cultures found in prehistoric contexts, and researchers have turned to theories of embodiment, materiality, and ritual in order to offer compelling interpretations of such figurine worlds. Alternatively, figurines from historic contexts are commonly subjected to iconographic analyses that draw upon sophisticated theories of representation and text. Such perspectives offer different but equally thoughtful insights, and this paper seeks to bring these varied perspectives into considered cooperation in order to evoke a more multidimensional image of an ancient figurine practice.

Neo-Assyrian apotropaic figurine deposits (first millennium BC, now modern day Iraq) and their related texts provide a rare opportunity to examine the prescription and execution of a 'magical' ritual from ancient Mesopotamia. Commencing from Derrida's multiple notions of the archive, I discuss the various aspects of the figurine deposit assemblage as effective, ritual action. Drawing specifically from ideas of the archive as 'commencement and commandment', guardian, consignment and promise, I consider how words, images and figurines in Neo-Assyrian apotropaic deposits operated with an archival economy and thus articulated not simply a gesture, but an institution of protection.

12:20-12:40pm

Figuring it Out: Figurines and the Body in the Neolithic Near East
Karina Croucher (University of Manchester) & Aurelie Daems (Ghent University)

Figurines remain intriguing, in part due to their likeness to the human body. This paper investigates relationships between figurines and the lived body, examining how figurine evidence may provide further insight into bodily treatment and manipulation. Using as a starting point evidence for artificial cranial modification, we investigate the role that figurines can play in providing evidence of body modification in the Neolithic of Southwest Asia.

12:40-1:00pm

General Discussion

Saturday 2nd May

Afternoon sessions

(1pm-6pm)

Figurines in Action (cont)

John M. Matsunaga (University of California: Berkeley) & Peter Biehl (SUNY Buffalo)

2:00-2:20pm

The Materiality and Performativity of Classic Maya Figurines

Christina Halperin (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Classic period (AD 300-900) Maya curated and cached figural objects are frequently considered as non-human agents whose magical and supernatural essences complicated human/subject - material/object dichotomies. These capacities are linked with their mimetic properties in addition to their archaeological recovery in caches and burials. In drawing on recent materiality and performance theory, this paper expands on the active role of curated or cached objects to consider Classic Maya figurine-ocarinas, many of which are found archaeologically within middens. While earlier Maya figurine studies have often focused on semiotic interpretations, I include in this investigation an examination of their social contexts of disposal and use, their scale, and their musical or noise-making capacities in order to highlight their affective and animating roles. I underscore objectification processes between humans and the material world and discursive relations between different social actors in the constitution of ancient performances.

2:20-2:40pm

Ancient Mementos: Life Histories of Collected and Curated Figurines from Central Mexico

Lisa Overholtzer (Northwestern University)

This paper reconstructs the life histories of ancient figurines that were collected and curated at Postclassic Xaltocan, Mexico in order to study their materiality, i.e. the mutually constitutive relationships between people and objects. A life history approach also allows us to study the production of Xaltocan as a place as it is structured by the movement of these figurines on the roads leading into the site. To do so, I incorporate chemical provenance analysis of the figurines and stratigraphic evidence of their discard and build upon previous research on their embodied household ritual use. What emerges from this reconstruction is a view of Xaltocan as connected to or enchainned to a network of ancient people, specifically people from Classic period Teotihuacan, through the collection and curation of artifacts or "pieces of places" from the already ancient site.

2:40-3:00pm

Person, Practice and Superego: The Function of Figurines in Ancient Teotihuacan, Mexico

Warren Barbour (SUNY Buffalo)

When the ancient Teotihuacan state collapsed whole categories of figurines disappeared while others were modified or continued relatively unchanged. Examining groups of Teotihuacan figurines and their trajectories after the collapse reveals what functions they may have served within the state and how they may have changed function in domestic and public religious practice from the city's beginnings to the creation of myth and memories of the ancient city hundred of years later.

3:00-3:20pm

No More Figurines: Questioning Homologies Between Present and Past
Rosemary Joyce (University of California: Berkeley)

What is a figurine? By now, the term is so naturalized within archaeology that it carries with it a plethora of givens: figurines are relatively small (less than life scale, certainly, and perhaps necessarily small enough to hold in the hand); in many contexts, figurines are archetypally fired clay objects (so that other small anthropomorphic sculptures demand a qualifier, "bone figurine", but the unqualified/unmarked form unambiguously means "[ceramic] figurine"); they are understood to focus on human subjects (again the unmarked subject "figurine", against the marked "animal figurine"). Yet many recent studies have profitably worked across the lines between figurines and other things, asking such questions as, "when does an anthropomorphic image become large enough to be called a sculpture and not be eligible to be described as a 'figurine'?" "how can we abstract human subjects from a wider array of depicted things and animals?"; and "does the medium matter, and if so, what do different media do?"

In this paper, I take these kinds of arguments - my own previous work included - one step further, and ask whether we need to dismiss "figurines" entirely as a subject-- while retaining contemporary figurine studies. What might we do, if we did not take for granted that when we abstract a subset of material things in the present based on scale, medium, and subject matter, we are reproducing a meaningful category of the past? What is a figurine if it is not, in fact, an object of past contemplation?

3:20-3:50pm

Discussant

Lynn Meskell (Stanford University)

3:50-4:20pm

General discussion