

EGYPTIAN PREDYNASTIC ANTHROPOMORPHIC OBJECTS

A study of their function and significance
in Predynastic burial customs

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Access Archaeology



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 778 4
ISBN 978 1 78491 779 1 (e-Pdf)

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Cover: Female Figure, ca. 3500-3400 B.C.E. Terracotta, pigment, 11 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 2 1/4 in. (29.2 x 14 x 5.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 07.447.505. Creative Commons-BY (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 07.447.505_SL1.jpg)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank the many people who made this work possible.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Ashten Warfe. With his help, inspiration, and unwavering interest in my work, he helped me stay motivated and enthusiastic, and get through the more difficult times. He provided encouragement, sound advice, good teaching and guidance, and a multitude of good ideas, and I am sincerely grateful to him for all his help.

I would also like to thank my secondary supervisor, Dr. Colin Hope, for sharing his wisdom and knowledge with me, and providing helpful insight and information. I am also grateful to the staff and fellow students at the Centre of Ancient Cultures at Monash University, for their advice and support.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for all their love and encouragement, and for their constant support and faith in me. Also, I would like to say a big thank you to Kristine for reading through my work and providing so many useful suggestions. And most of all I would like to thank my loving, supportive, encouraging, and patient partner Oliver, without whose faithful support during the most difficult stages, this work would never have been completed. Thank you.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND THE DATA

Representing the human image is one of the earliest compulsions of the human mind. The first attempts at art were made by humans more than 30,000 years ago, being one of the earliest indications of human cognition of both symbolic and abstract understanding (Conkey 1987, Halverston 1992, Morriss-Kay 2010). The famous 'Venus' figurines are some of the first and most commonly known human portable depictions, appearing in Upper Palaeolithic sites throughout Eurasia, and are thought to be strongly exaggerated representations of female fertility (Morris Kay 2010, 166). Such representations, in the form of a figurine are in themselves an attempt to depict some form of reality or to make a statement, contests the renowned figurine scholar Douglas Bailey (2013, 245). It is also commonly accepted that the motivation behind the making of such objects was for a particular function, which is usually thought to be empowering fertility (Rice 1981, 402). Interpretations such as these have remained very common for prehistoric female figurines, yet in recent years there has been an increase of interest and research in the topic, producing several new studies and many alternative theories and views (McDermott 1996, Volkova 2012).

In his study on prehistoric female figurines from various places, Lesure (2002, 587) notes that small figurines are a common find at archaeological sites of early villages - the figurines are predominantly of humans, and appear to be functioning primarily as household objects. Lesure (2002, 2011) also brings into prominence the relevance of female imagery in particular. The pattern is not entirely exclusive, but the frequency of it has led to it being linked with fertility cults or goddess interpretations, and evolved into a general assumption that figurines are usually part of a natural, primal religion common to all early cultures, such as a mother goddess cult (Lesure 2002, 587). These perpetuations of Western assumptions about symbolism of gender and fertility have recently been intensely criticised, especially from the feminist perspective (Lesure 2011, Talalay 1993, Meskell 1995). The current understanding of human figurines has now been extended well beyond the limitations of a mother-goddess interpretation, encompassing much deeper and more subtle details of the human psyche, and what it means to be both human and an individual (Bailey 2013, 261).

The Predynastic period was an extension of the Egyptian Neolithic, stretching approximately between 4500 BCE and 3000 BCE, with major settlements focused in Upper Egypt between Qena and Luxor, and Lower Egypt in the Nile Delta (Midant-Reyenes 2000, 169). Major cultural developments in Upper Egypt, which are the main focal point of this study, were located around the excavated settlements at El-Badari, Naqada, Abydos and Hierakonpolis, among many others, and Maadi and Buto in Lower Egypt. The earliest Badarian settlement sites at Hemamieh, first excavated by Gertrude Caton-Thompson and Guy Brunton, would have had an average of 50 to 200 people, occupying small hearth based dwellings (Midant-Reyenes 2000, 183). Larger, rectangular and more numerous and dense structures were found at the Hierakonpolis settlement, indicating an emergence of a more sophisticated Naqada I culture (Midant-Reyenes 2000, 185). The social organisation of these early societies was dominated by a dynamic iconography, with the addition of military, economic and political power developing probably due to increasing competition, both military and economic, between these different states (Andelkovic 2011, 27). This development of the imagery and iconography of political power is evident in many decorative elements of the material culture, including mace heads, knife handles, pottery, palettes and rock art (Andelkovic 2011, 28).

Human depiction is by no means unusual in the Egyptian Predynastic period, from approximately 4500 BCE to 3300 BCE (Hendrickx 2006). Art and iconography in this period play a significant role in the lead up to the formation state control in Egypt, and the institutionalising of iconography during the early Dynastic period. Predynastic depictions of the human form are incredibly diverse – they extend over many forms, including decorated pottery, rock art, tomb painting, painted linen and palettes from the period (Capart 1905, Petrie 1920, Scamuzzi 1965, Midant-Reyenes 2000, Garfinkel 2003, Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2012). A variety of three-dimensional objects shaped the in human image form a subset of this collection of Predynastic artefacts. These include human figurines, hippopotamus tusks carved with human heads and features, tag pendants and hair combs in human shape, and vessels shaped into a human form or with sculpted human figures prominently attached to their rims. The variety of these objects has drawn the attention of Egyptologists since their first discovery, and they have since been examined in several prominent studies (Capart 1905, Petrie 1920, Baumgartel 1960, Ucko 1968, Hassan 1992, Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011a). The materials from which these objects are made are diverse, ranging from clay to vegetable paste, ivory, and varieties of stone and other materials. Both males and females are represented, sometimes in elaborate detail and at other times abstractly and schematically.

These objects are extremely rare, appearing in less than 1% of the many thousands of burials excavated from the Predynastic period. A problem for the Predynastic studies is the fact that almost everything we know and understand about the culture of the period stems from the archaeological evidence found at the numerous cemeteries, excavated mainly in the early 20th century. Indeed, cemeteries and the bodies and objects that have been recovered there form the largest portion of evidence on which the study of Predynastic Egypt is based. The burials themselves are often disturbed or plundered, leaving us with no information about the sex of the occupant, the types of goods that were interred with them, and the original placement of these goods in the grave. However, a sufficient number of graves have remained intact to warrant a study of the possible patterns in which anthropomorphic objects were deposited. The particular focus of this study will be on the specific placements of the anthropomorphic objects themselves and their possible associations with other grave goods in order to ascertain if there are any patterns. The study will also focus on the sex of the bodies in relationship to the objects and the materials used to make the objects.

The focus of previous studies of the three-dimensional human image has most frequently been on iconography, examining the typology and the appearance of the objects in order to determine their possible function in the ritual and symbolic spheres (Baumgartel 1960, Ucko 1968). Little attention has been paid to the specific placement of such objects in the grave, and the relationships and significance indicated by such particular placements. Predynastic cemeteries are formidable repositories of material culture, with graves positively stacked with material things, surrounding the buried individual. Human three-dimensional depictions formed part of such assemblages, and yet it is not fully understood why. Were they representations of individuals, ancestor figures or deities? Did they have a specific role to play in the burial itself, perhaps of a protective nature? Were they functional every-day objects of value to the buried individual that were taken by them into the graves, perhaps to be used again in the next life? In addition to answering these questions, an attempt to understand the emotions and aesthetic considerations that may have played a part in determining the placement of anthropomorphic objects in the grave will be made in the course of this study. Such concepts have been previously introduced to the study of Predynastic burials by Stevenson (2007a, 2009a), and they will form a large part of the study's methodological framework. Finally, as the reason of why such objects were placed in Predynastic graves has not yet been fully ascertained, it will be the overarching aim of this work to offer further possible speculations and insights on this issue. The study will attempt to broaden the topic by introducing alternative views of the anthropomorphic objects' interpretations, such as the theories of material culture and mortuary analysis, as well as ethnography.

1.2 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

The focus of this work is the study of Egyptian anthropomorphic objects dating from approximately 3700 BCE to 3300 BCE, which comprises late Naqada I to Naqada II cultural periods in Predynastic Egypt. The body of data analysed will include a specific set of objects related to the human form: figurines, tusks, tags, combs, vessels and fragments.

The aim of the analysis will be to identify patterns of placement, and connections between the sex of the body and the object. The study will analyse all Predynastic anthropomorphic objects that have been found in graves in their original burial context. The aim of such an analysis will be to understand the meaning and significance of the objects in the burials they were placed in, especially in regards to their possible association or relationship to the deceased.

The work will ask why anthropomorphic three-dimensional objects were placed in Predynastic graves and formed part of the grave assemblage, and what does their placement tell us about Predynastic burial customs. The aim is to provide patterns for which there are good grounds, and then to speculate on the results, rather than to determine the exact meaning or function of the objects themselves. Answering this question of placement will require considering whether the anthropomorphic element held particular significance or value in Predynastic culture, and whether the objects themselves were of essentially ritual, social or practical nature in their burial context. The initial response that can be formulated at the commencement of this study, based on previous suggestions and interpretations from Predynastic research, such as Ucko (1968) and Stevenson (2013), is that these objects held a particular value in a social, personal and ritual way. A further discussion of the literature that has been produced on this topic, as well as on mortuary theory, has been included in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will then present the methodological approach of the project, dwelling in detail on the mortuary and material culture theories and ideas that will be used to interpret the data, as well as on the construction of the database itself, and on the ways the objects have been sorted and catalogued. In the course of the analysis in Chapter 4, the hypothesis of the placement of objects signifying importance and function will be tested through a search for patterns in the placement of these objects in the grave, as well as any evident connections made with the contents of the grave itself (such as any particular association with another object, or between the sex of the object and the grave occupant). Finally, in Chapter 5, this hypothesis will be tested and discussed, together with the results accumulated in the process of the analysis, in an attempt to produce reasons for the objects' presence in Predynastic graves.

1.3 THE ISSUE OF STATUS

This is a specific question related to the main research question that will be touched on briefly. It is the frequently discussed question of whether anthropomorphic objects, and figurines especially, are predominantly found in more elaborate and 'wealthy' burials (Bard 1994). Such an enquiry is complicated for several reasons: firstly, the number of surviving intact graves is very small, which necessarily complicates attempts at speculation on this issue. However, this point is frequently touched upon in the studies of figurines and other anthropomorphic objects from the Predynastic. For example, Ucko (1968, 181) states, in his well-known work on Predynastic figurines:

'It is necessary to consider Baumgartel's (1951, pp. 56-8) contention that figurines are found in tombs of exceptionally rich and important people. This contention cannot be accepted. It is not assuming too much to presume that had the tomb been especially rich in tomb goods the excavator concerned would have published some account of them. The tombs mentioned above which contained figurines, but whose funerary goods have never received adequate

publication shows that splendour of grave goods and the presence of figurines do not necessarily go together. . . Figurines, therefore, were occasionally placed in tombs where they belonged to the rich or the poor.'

Likewise, Midant-Reynes (2000, 175) states:

'The analysis of the other grave goods shows that the burials containing figurines were not particularly 'rich' in other respects, and in fact such sculpted figures might sometimes be the only funerary offering in the tomb.'

This assumption that anthropomorphic objects are predominantly found in more elaborate, wealthy graves has been perpetuated in the discussion of Predynastic figurines since the reports of their discovery began to be published in the early 20th century. Yet this assumption has not been supported by any conclusive evidence, since a thorough analysis of the figurines' context has not been attempted until now. One of the analytical enquiries of this project will be to conduct such a data analysis, and to form a conclusion about whether these objects are predominantly found in 'wealthier' graves with luxury items, or whether there is, in fact, no clear correlation with the wealth of the burial. A discussion of whether such an analysis is necessary when interpreting this group of objects as a whole will be entered into in the subsequent chapters.

Predynastic figurines are usually treated as a separate group of objects from tusks, tags or combs; however it was decided that for the purposes of this study the other three-dimensional anthropomorphic data will also be included and examined. This is due to the database of provenanced figurines being too small for an extensive analysis, and therefore tusks, tags and other anthropomorphic objects will form a useful point of comparison in conducting the analysis of their function. The data used will be presented in a catalogue including every grave that contained anthropomorphic objects dating between the late Naqada I and Naqada II, with a total of 59 graves analysed. The time parameters that have been chosen are a means of limiting the date of the objects within a relatively restricted time period, rather than allowing for over a thousand years of artistic, cultural, iconographical and symbolic development of the whole Predynastic period to serve as an impediment for as unbiased an analysis as possible. The graves are organised according to the cemetery locations – these include, in catalogue order, El-Badari, Qau, Mostagedda, El-Mahasna, El-Amrah, Abadiya, Ballas, Naqada, El-Ma'mariya, Abydos and Hierakonpolis (for Map, see Figure 1). The catalogue consists of categories that include: tomb number, date, number of objects, sex of object, condition of object (broken or whole), object material (clay, ivory, etc), object's position in the grave, tomb condition (Plundered/Disturbed/Intact) and sex of the body.

A total of 118 anthropomorphic objects have been recorded in this analysis. The objects included in this database came only from graves, and as the aims of the work do not include a typological analysis, or an analysis of the object's appearance and design, it will not include any purchased or unprovenanced objects. The objects are found in graves of men, women and children, buried with a diverse range of grave goods, the numbers of which range from only a few to a vast quantity. The number and type of objects also varies from grave to grave and from a single up to 16 objects in one grave.

All the figurines and some tags were sexed based on the appearance of genitalia (breasts, pubic triangle, or penis sheath), or in their absence, on waist to hip ratio (Nowak 2004, Brovarski 2005, Patch 2011). It appears to be a standard feature for most Predynastic female figurines to have a narrow waist and full hips. A further detailed discussion on the determination of the sex of the object forms part of the studies' methodology and can be found in Chapter 3.

1.4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Smaller lines of enquiry will form part of the larger over-arching research question of this study. These will examine whether the objects are predominantly found in graves of men, women, or children whether the sex of the object (if possible to determine) and the sex of the deceased individual deposited in the burial correspond, and if there are any repeating patterns in the manner in which the figurines were deposited in the grave (i.e. their position relative to the body and other grave goods, and their condition).

The final discussion will focus on how much it is possible to speculate, using the results of the grave analysis, on the nature of the function of anthropomorphic objects. Discussion points will include ascertaining whether the objects may have been ritual items or highly personal items related to the individual buried in the grave, and whether more evidence may be required to reach a substantial conclusion about their function. These objects undoubtedly played an important role in burial practices and customs of Predynastic Egyptians, as they are usually given a prominent place in the burial itself. For example, the 4 ivory figurines from the intact grave 271 at Naqada were inserted into an area of clean sand in the grave, parallel to the body (Petrie 1895, 32), (Figure 97). This ostentatious positioning of human figurines is unique and most prominent in the grave, and seems to indicate their special importance in this particular burial. Human figures and depictions, however, occur extremely rarely in graves in general. They do not appear in every Predynastic cemetery; therefore it could be assumed that the practice of burying human images with the dead varied locally. In addition, many graves have been plundered and disturbed, leaving their original contents and positions of the goods in the grave unknown. It is hard to overcome such a gap in information, and undoubtedly it poses a significant problem to this study. However, the intention here is to form an analysis based on what is available to us today, in order to construct a sound interpretation of this material and its burial context. The resulting conclusions may point to the contrary, and there is a possibility that there will not be enough prominent patterns in the objects deposition and placement, or simply not enough intact evidence. Whatever the outcome of this study is, it will nonetheless make an attempt to bring all the available evidence together from various sources in order to determine exactly how much the context can tell us about the function of anthropomorphic imagery in the Predynastic mortuary realm.