

Re-Presentations of Palaeolithic Visual Imagery: Simulacra and their Alternatives¹

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Introduction

A long-standing methodological and epistemological split within Palaeolithic archaeology has led to what is recognized today as an unrealistic and highly problematic reconstruction of prehistoric people. My discussion is intended to unravel some of the many threads that have been used to weave this simulacrum, this "identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (Jameson 1984:66; following Beaudrillard 1983). The reasons for taking critical stock of ourselves and our interpretations lies in the fact that we unknowingly bring a multitude of paradigmatic and personal biases to our research that often systematically color our methodologies, our epistemologies, and our interpretations. More importantly, however, these biases often go undetected precisely because they are so systematic and ubiquitous. Legitimation of the present by referencing simulacra standing as the past becomes an issue of concern once we recognize the subtle yet powerful ways the past is part of our present. This important point is developed in detail below.

It thus remains that we endeavor to be clear about what we say, and to consider long and hard the lines of reasoning we employ in reconstructing prehistoric life. In the spirit of constructive criticism then, this paper proposes to explore some of the sociopolitical and intellectual contexts in which the study of prehistoric visual imagery has taken place - and continues to take place even today. I seek to understand not only how these interpretations have been developed, but to consider their implications vis-à-vis the larger sociopolitical framework in which archaeology is practiced.

My general thesis, not all that new, is that an androcentric paradigm guides both archaeological research and the study of prehistoric imagery, as typified by the "Man The Hunter" model of prehistoric life. Over the past two decades feminist scholars have demonstrated the various ways androcentrism operates in social science research. They have analyzed the very manner in which research questions have been posed, the underlying premises guiding inquiry, the assumptions built into analytical categories, the style of presentation in scholarly journals (i.e., the forms of language involved), as well as the actual interpretations themselves. A very small sample of this enormous body of research includes: Bleier (1984; 1988); Conkey and Spector (1984); Gross and Averill (1983); Harding and O'Barr (1987); Hubbard (1983); Keller (1985); Leibowitz (1975); Longino and Doell (1987); Rosaldo (1980, 1983); Slocum (1975); see Wylie et. al. (1989) for a comprehensive bibliography. All too often the meaning of "androcentric" has itself gone largely undefined.² This explains, in part, why much of the archaeological community resists these critiques and labels. What precisely is the male-centered paradigm operating in the interpretation of

prehistoric visual imagery, and how specifically has it been articulated? Have the same set of biases operated over the past 150 years of research? If not, what has changed, and why?

My analysis is intended to highlight two specific dimensions of this androcentric paradigm as it has operated in archaeological research by critically assessing both early and current interpretations of prehistoric visual imagery. I consider this a historical and empirical question and will develop my argument accordingly. Through my analysis, and with reference to original data with which these simulacra have been articulated, I will make visible some of the implicit orientations and "taken-for-granted" with which reconstructions of prehistoric life have been developed. I then conclude with some brief suggestions for ways to restructure our inquiries.

Specifically, my discussion is intended to highlight the Eurocentric and heterocentric dimensions of the androcentric paradigm that has been employed in the study of prehistoric visual representations. I will make the case, moreover, that this paradigm carries with it a particularly devastating practice called presentism - a form of behavioral uniformitarianism in which we "bring alien cultural practices into line with our own [present] sensibilities" (Davis 1985:7; after Stocking 1968). We accomplish this most often by imposing modern understandings of behaviors and their motivations onto people and things of the past. Thus, while disclosing the androcentric nature of our discourse on prehistoric imagery, I will specifically highlight the totalizing way that ethnocentrism, heterocentrism, and our reconstru(ct)ing the past in our own image, have taken hold over the past several decades.

Setting the Stage: the late 19th Century

To accomplish this I must "begin at the beginning," by considering various 19th century ideas on evolution. Evolutionary theory was actually around in one form or another long before the writings of Charles Darwin in 1859. As far back as Classical Antiquity we know that people wondered and theorized about their ancestors, and they variously tried to account for their own existence as originating in some distant past (Osborn 1915:1). As Harris (1968:108-141) correctly points out, contemporary with (if not in fact predating) the concept of biological evolution as advanced through Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection, social theorists had advanced various ideas to account for cultural evolution, in what later came to be known as Spencerism, or alternatively, Social Darwinism (e.g., Engels 1942; Morgan 1877; Pitt-Rivers 1875; Spencer 1873, 1896). The "great law of nature" substantiated by Darwin's empirical observations reaffirmed the "lawfulness of nature, the inevitability of progress, and the justice of the system of struggle, without which progress cannot be achieved" (Harris 1968:117). In point of fact, then, "Darwin's principles were an application of social science concepts to biology" (Harris 1968:123).

The common themes underlying these theories included: first, adaptation to a physical environment; second, directional change from simple to complex; and third and most importantly, progress defined in Victorian terms. Certainly this is not the classic Darwinian definition of evolution (e.g., see discussions in Dunnell 1982, 1989), but it does characterize the application of Darwinian theory to the study of culture change. It is important to recall that this development in western intellectualism took place during a period of intense social, political, and economic upheaval: the industrialization of western Europe and the entrenchment of a newly structured class/gender system. Change, and how to make sense of it, was on everyone's mind.

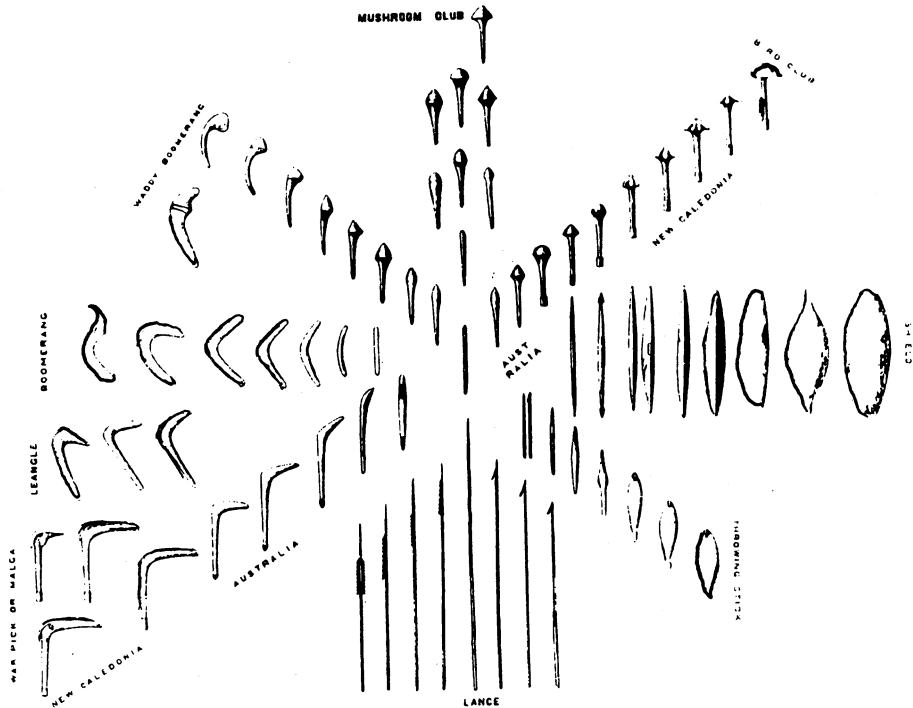


Figure 1: Typological Display Demonstrating the Evolution of Primitive Tool Forms, from a single "prototype" (Pitt-Rivers' *Principles of Classification*, 1874; reproduced with kind permission from Oxford University Press).

It is not surprising, then, that so much early attention focussed on the study of prehistoric tools and technology, for these were envisioned as the hallmarks of humanity - the "stuff" of progress. Typologies of various tool forms were often organized into hypothesized evolutionary stages (Figure 1) and became increasingly popular during the close of the 19th century. They also formed the basis for stylistic analyses at this time. General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers did more than anyone else to provide empirical evidence of cultural evolution, through his innovative and revolutionary re-conceptualization of prehistoric artifacts - thereby coining the term typology - and through his use of these typologies arranged in museum displays to demonstrate culture change (Pitt-Rivers 1874, 1891; discussion in Chapman 1985).

To anticipate my later arguments, unlike the last 40 or 50 years of archaeological research, 19th century social theorists were often explicitly motivated by their contemporary political and economic concerns. For example, a proponent of *laissez faire* economic policies, Spencer argued that state intervention into the condition of the poor ran counter to the principle of natural selection (Harris 1968:125-126). More illuminating still, according to Pitt-Rivers, the educational role of the museum, with its evolutionary/typological displays, was to demonstrate to the working class "the law that Nature makes no jumps [and to teach] the history of mechanical contrivances in such a way as at least to make men cautious how



Figure 2: Early French Diorama of Prehistoric Man Protecting His Mate, during the days when stories of Prehistoric Bear Cults were popular (French postcard still available for sale).

they listen to scatter-brained revolutionary suggestions" (from an 1891 publication, quoted in Chapman 1985:39).

The fourth point, as far as 19th century cultural evolutionists were concerned, is that the archaeological record, which bore empirical testimony to this gradual evolution, consisted of men's tools. We must remember that the 19th century witnessed the culmination of the "Age of Enlightenment." More important to this discussion is the point that highly specific gender ideologies were deeply embedded within both the paradigm of enlightenment (Keller 1985; Merchant 1989) and hidden within the operative metaphors of the Industrial Revolution. It is ironic that in proposing evolutionary scenarios of culture change - from savagery, to barbarism, to civilized cultures (Morgan 1877) - gender roles were presented as immutable and fixed. That is, prehistoric men and women looked curiously like those prevailing in the gender ideologies of 19th century western European art and literature (Figure 2). It is clear that the interpretive logic of evolutionary theory, as applied to the study of cultural change, was inherently unstable and inconsistent with its stated goals. I suggest that this first level of presentism, of uniformitarianism, was rooted in the implicit assumption that biological difference formed, forms, and will always form the basis of sex-differences (for a discussion of the important distinctions made between sex and gender, see Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Moore 1988:12-41; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; and Rubin 1975). Given this orientation it is not the least surprising that the prevailing scenario of prehistoric life centered on men, active men - making tools, killing animals, exchanging mates and, later on, making art.

Now it is certainly true that both Engels and Morgan hypothesized a period of matriarchal rule in the distant past, as had Bachofen in the 1850s (Bachofen 1861). Engels



Figure 3: Prehistoric British Man and Woman (close-up) based on early osteological evidence, circa 1910s. From an old diorama at the Field Museum of Natural History (Chicago), dismantled just this year. Photo: M-A. Dobres.

(1942) in particular hypothesized that the universal subordination of women found its origins concurrent with the development of private property, and was not, therefore, specifically rooted in their biology. However, their ideas on the subject were apparently not often incorporated into the ideas of contemporary French prehistorians who "cornered the archaeological market" at this time. Why this should be so certainly deserves scrutiny but cannot be explored here.

Thus, the first recognized prehistoric artifacts employed to demonstrate change through time were tools - men's tools, men's weapons. However, as other artifactual remains were discovered they too were accounted for within the prevailing explanatory paradigm. The archaeological record was understood to reflect prehistoric man's [sic] continual and overriding concern with hunting. Indeed, one could argue that this is a legacy still prevailing in archaeological research.

Interpretations of Prehistoric Visual Representation: the late 19th Century

It is within this general intellectual and sociopolitical climate that the first evidence of prehistoric visual imagery (aka prehistoric art) was discovered. As the legend goes, it was in 1879 that the 7-year old daughter of a Spanish nobleman, little "Maria", from her lower-to-the-ground vantage point, looked up in a cave (while everyone else was crouching down) and noticed the polychrome images of bison covering the vaulted ceiling at Altamira (Leroi-Gourhan 1965:26; Pfeiffer 1982:19-26). At first the leading prehistorians rejected the



Figure 4: Prehistoric Artists, lithograph dating to the turn of the century (from the archives of the Musée de l'Homme, reprinted with their kind permission).

possibility that prehistoric hunters could have been the artists. First, they argued that prehistoric men couldn't have had the time to produce such works - they were too busy hunting. Secondly, how could this art be the product of such primitive savages when it so clearly foreshadowed the aesthetic principles of later western art? After all, the living "survivals" of these prehistoric people, such as Tasmanians, Eskimos, and Australian Aborigines, had nothing comparable (Dawson 1887; Lubbock 1865; Sollas 1911). These images had to be fakes, recent scribblings.

It was impossible for prehistorians to imagine that the brutish, savage prehistoric men they had simulated (Figure 3) could have produced such fully "artistic" imagery. But as time passed more such imagery came to light. By 1895 opinion was divided, and in 1902 Emile Cartailhac, the foremost authority of the day, conceded and fully accepted the true antiquity of prehistoric art in his classic "Mea Culpa d'un sceptique."³

And art it was to these turn-of-the-century prehistorians (Figure 4). In keeping with the presentist methodology of explanation, the imagery was analyzed and interpreted within a frame of reference already well established in western thought. It should not be surprising that this visual imagery was called art and studied with the aesthetic strategies of analysis developed within a western art historical tradition (see discussion in Davis 1984).

For example, I quote the following diary entry penned in August, 1922 by Emile Sollas, a preeminent prehistorian and social theorist in the early decades of the 20th century. It was written just after his first visit to see the recently discovered clay bison sculptures from Tuc d'Audoubert, in the French Pyrenees.

My long pilgrimage is ended and I am content. I have seen *Les Trois Frères* and the *Tuc d'Audoubert*.. How wondrous has Nature prepared her underworld to receive the art of the ancient Hunters! What prodigious inventions. With what chaste splendor she has enriched her galleries! Fitting a hiding place for masterpieces which foreshadow the triumphs of Phideas or an Apelles.

Gazing upon the sculptured bisons and the living representations of the animate world we are conscious of a warm glow of sympathy and our admiration deepens with reverence.

Here in its infancy the greatest of man's mind is made manifest in his works, and looking across the ages we rejoice to discover that creative genius which is the best justification for the birth [of] our race [*Livre d'Or*, personal possession of R. Bégotien].

This passage shows only too clearly how the prevailing evolutionary paradigm of change and progress had become so easily merged with that of the western art historical tradition. The remainder of this essay will argue that this art historical/evolutionist legacy still prevails in most interpretations of prehistoric visual imagery.

A desire to delineate the diachronic and unilineal progression of prehistoric image-making led to various scenarios for the evolution of art and followed from both a long-term interest in taxonomy (faunal, artifactual, and cultural), as well as an art historical interest in periodization (Conkey 1989a, 1990; Sauerlander 1983; Schapiro 1953). Stylistic analysis, accomplished through an emphasis on the formal attributes of the object was thought to be the key to understanding chronology and the clue to meaning. As we shall see, this empiricist strategy still provides the primary methodological starting point in the analysis of prehistoric representation (e.g., as defended by Willcox 1978:61, 1983:539; but see an important rebuttal in Lewis-Williams 1984).

The other aspect of a Eurocentric artistic tradition that to this day impinges on the analysis and interpretation of prehistoric imagery, especially here the wall imagery, has been an emphasis on how the imagery is to be read, both figuratively and literally. We draw frames around these depictions based our notions of "art," and we typically envision them by western sensibilities. That is, we turn them into narratives depending on what we include or exclude within the boundaries we draw (Conkey 1982:121; Davis 1985:5). The point I am trying to make here is that how we have chosen to read these images has had everything to do with what we have read into them. I will take up this point in detail below.

As more and more evidence of art on a variety of other media (such as stone plaquettes, bone, antler, animal teeth and so forth) came to light it was necessary to incorporate this artistic behavior into the prevailing image of ancient life, as it was now beginning to take shape. Keep in mind that Social Darwinism was the prevailing explanatory paradigm and adaptation the guiding principle to interpretation. What better explanation for this ancient form of representation than "Sympathetic Hunting Magic," wherein animal art was explained as primitive ritual preparation for The Hunt - or equally as "Fertility Magic", meant to insure the abundance of next season's game (e.g., Breuil 1952; Reinach 1903). An explanation

incorporating this art, abounding as it was with representations of reindeer, bison, mammoth, horse, lions, ibex, and the like into a "hunting-by-men" lifestyle made perfect sense. It also permitted identification of the artists - men (Figure 4).

Furthermore, the use of analogy - the basic form of presentism very widely employed in developing explanatory models of the past - lent an air of empirical verifiability to the models proposed. Reference was often made to modern hunter/gatherer groups, who often do practice some form of ritual image-making in connection with hunting or fertility practices. It is informative to discover that many of these turn-of-the-century interpretations of prehistoric artifacts and forms of visual imagery included explicit reference to Lyell's *Principles of Uniformitarianism* (e.g., Klaatsch 1923; see discussions in Dunnell 1982:68-71; Harris 1968:108-114). Dawson's widely read *Fossil Men and Their Modern Representatives: An Attempt to Illustrate the Characters and Conditions of Pre-historic Men in Europe by Those of the American Races* stated:

Why then should not that method of reasoning from existing causes to explain ancient facts, by which geology has achieved its greatest triumphs, be applied to the extinct tribes of the old world [1887:3]?

And Sollas, best known for his explicit use of analogical reasoning, argued:

To commence a chapter on Pleistocene man by an account of a recent race might seem as willful anachronism; the Tasmanians, however, though recent, were at the same time a Palaeolithic or even, it has been asserted, an "eolithic" race; and they thus afford us the opportunity of interpreting the past by the present - a saving procedure in a subject where fantasy is only too likely to play a leading part [1911:70].

It need not be emphasized here that the entire domain of ethnoarchaeology (e.g., Binford 1977, 1978, 1980; Gould 1968; Gould and Watson 1982; Hayden 1978) is but the most recent version of reasoning by analogy, strongly underscored as it is by logical positivist premises (Wylie 1985). Reasoning by analogy and empiricist premises still ground the interpretations of prehistoric visual media, as will be demonstrated below.

It should make the reader uneasy to realize how all-inclusive these explanations were. They knowingly collapsed more than 20,000 years of imagery production, they lumped together both portable and immobile media, homogenizing a recognizably diverse set of artifacts and techniques acknowledged as such, within one monolithic scheme (Conkey 1987:69-71; 1991). In fact, early on it was known that carved and portable artifacts predated engravings on limestone blocks, perhaps occurring as early as 33,000 B.P., and that the so-called wall art - the first imagery to figure into behavioral reconstructions - only appears in the archaeological record towards the end of the last Ice Age, circa. 17,000 to 12,000 B.P. (Gamble 1982). To this day one can still read about both the diversity and homogeneity of prehistoric material culture in the same breath (e.g., Abramova 1967:81; Delporte 1979; Stoliar 1977/78:66).

Since the late 1950s an alternative and practically revolutionary approach to the interpretation of prehistoric imagery has been articulated through the pioneering work of Annette Laming-Emperaire (1962) and most forcefully by the late André Leroi-Gourhan (e.g., 1965, 1982). Briefly, the methodology of a structural analysis of Palaeolithic art, built upon premises articulated by Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1949, 1963a, b) changed the focus from a direct and literal reading of single prehistoric images to a relational concern with associations between and among images in their spatial configurations. "The structuralist method, in general,

brackets off content and focuses on form: it is the structure of relations that are scrutinized" (Conkey 1989b:139). On the one hand a structuralist orientation in Palaeolithic art has radically and fruitfully shifted the focus of attention away from objects *per se* to relations between objects, but in so doing it has elided concern with both historical specificity and the processes of imagery production as a potential source of meaning (which I discuss in my concluding remarks). We are left with an intriguing but frustrating approach that is incapable, by itself, of providing a processual understanding of imagery production. However, "as Leroi-Gourhan himself noted, the structuralist enterprise was only [meant as] the pursuit of a method that would lead to a better definition of the problems [in the study of Palaeolithic imagery]" (Conkey 1989b:150). Because structuralist approaches have remained relatively peripheral to the general study of Palaeolithic image-making (but see Vialou [1986] for a recent application), especially with the more recent advent of an eco/utilitarian orientation to prehistory in general, and in order to keep focused on the issue of presentism and presentation as re-presentation, I cannot further pursue this alternative orientation (however, see Conkey [1989b] for a most comprehensive and cogent discussion).

In recent years we have witnessed a revival of the adaptationist paradigm, with functional accounts of prehistoric (image-making) behaviors enjoying great popularity (e.g., Bahn 1984; Conkey 1980; Eaton 1978; Gamble 1982; Guthrie 1984; Henry 1989; Marshack 1972, 1989; Pfeiffer 1982; Sackett 1977, 1986; White 1985; discussion in Clark 1991). Thus, while today sympathetic hunting magic is considered by most as a simplistic and overly generalized account for the diversity of prehistoric imagery known to exist, current suggestions still follow age-old functionalist premises. This general line of reasoning stems in large part from Wobst's (1977) functionalist re-orientation that deflects interest away from prehistoric "style" as chronological marker, to that of style as culturally coded information (see discussion in Conkey 1989a, 1990). As far as prehistoric visual representation is concerned we now have what is called "information-exchange theory," wherein prehistoric imagery is thought to have been produced, implicitly by men, to 1) help plan hunts - I sometimes think of this as the "football-strategy on the blackboard" theory, 2) to teach (male) members of the group about the behaviors of those animals - perhaps during initiation rites (Pfeiffer 1982), 3) as a way to cope with hypothesized population pressures itself the result of large-scale climatic changes (Jochim 1983), or 4) to symbolize group identity in various ways (Conkey 1980; Davidson 1989; Gamble 1982).

It should be noted also that with the advent of processual archaeology in the late 1960s, prehistoric reconstructions have become practically devoid of an explicit consideration of people. Earlier accounts did not hesitate to engender the past, or at least to put sex in prehistory. Since the first few promising though problematic attempts to attribute prehistoric behaviors directly to people (e.g; Deetz 1968; Hill 1968; Winters 1968), an explicit focus on people has all but ceased. There are two general reasons that I believe account for this "depeopling" in prehistoric research: the first is that macroscale adaptationist perspectives are unconcerned with individual agency, the second is that the logical positivist methodology accompanying a processual archaeology has bracketed off "palaeopsychology" as an unknowable dimension of the past (e.g., Hawkes 1954). In addition to these reasons, however, I am strongly convinced that the particular language style associated with the scientific and processual archaeology of the last two decades has valorized objectivity and neutrality in archaeological explanations. In so doing, this methodology has lost an overt concern with interpretation, and thus with people (for the important distinction between explanation and

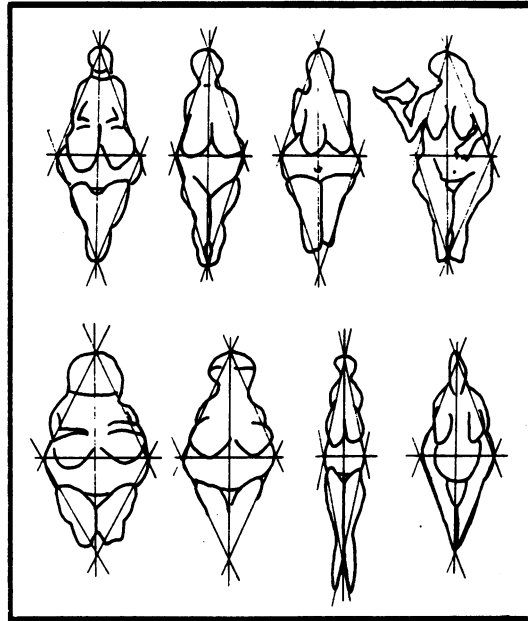


Figure 5: Stylistic Analysis of Venus Figurine Morphology (after Leroi-Gouran 1968:92). Top row: Lespugue, Kostenki, Dolni Vestonice, Laussel. Bottom row: Willendorf, Gagarino, Gagarino, Grimaldi.

Note that in order to substantiate Leroi-Gourhan's claim that Venus figurines "... are practically interchangeable" in their morphology (1968:96) he found it necessary to standardize size. It is important to realize, however, that the top right figure (from Laussel) was carved into the limestone wall of a cave and stands some 40cm high, while the figure just below it (from Grimaldi) is made of green steatite and is a mere 9cm tall. One should question the appropriateness of obliterating these empirical differences in order to claim stability of design. One could point out, and not without a trace of irony, that this "stability of design" is nothing more than a mere fact of human biological morphology. There is not necessarily anything mysterious or artistically meaningful in this particular "design feature." For the geographic distribution of these specimens, see Figure 6.

interpretation in social science research see Taylor 1987). To identify the androcentrism and heterocentrism prevailing in current archaeological reasoning requires a far more careful and rigorous analysis of the texts involved. The following sections attempt a closer reading of recent prehistoric interpretations, by asking where and how the operative metaphors of gender ideology may be operating.

Interpretations of Prehistoric Visual Representation: 1980

In this section I briefly trace out four different interpretations of a single class of prehistoric imagery: "Venus Figurines." The first three I see as variants of Model I, and are generally recognized to be problematic and biased in their formulation and conclusions. The fourth interpretation, Model II, is considered by most to be a well-constructed and anthropologically sound treatment of the archaeological record. My argument is that each account is androcentric, heterocentric, and presentist in structure. Moreover, all four are overly empiricist and positivist in their epistemological foundations, regardless of the fact that some analyses employ art historical premises while others work within the ecological and adaptationist framework of processual archaeology.

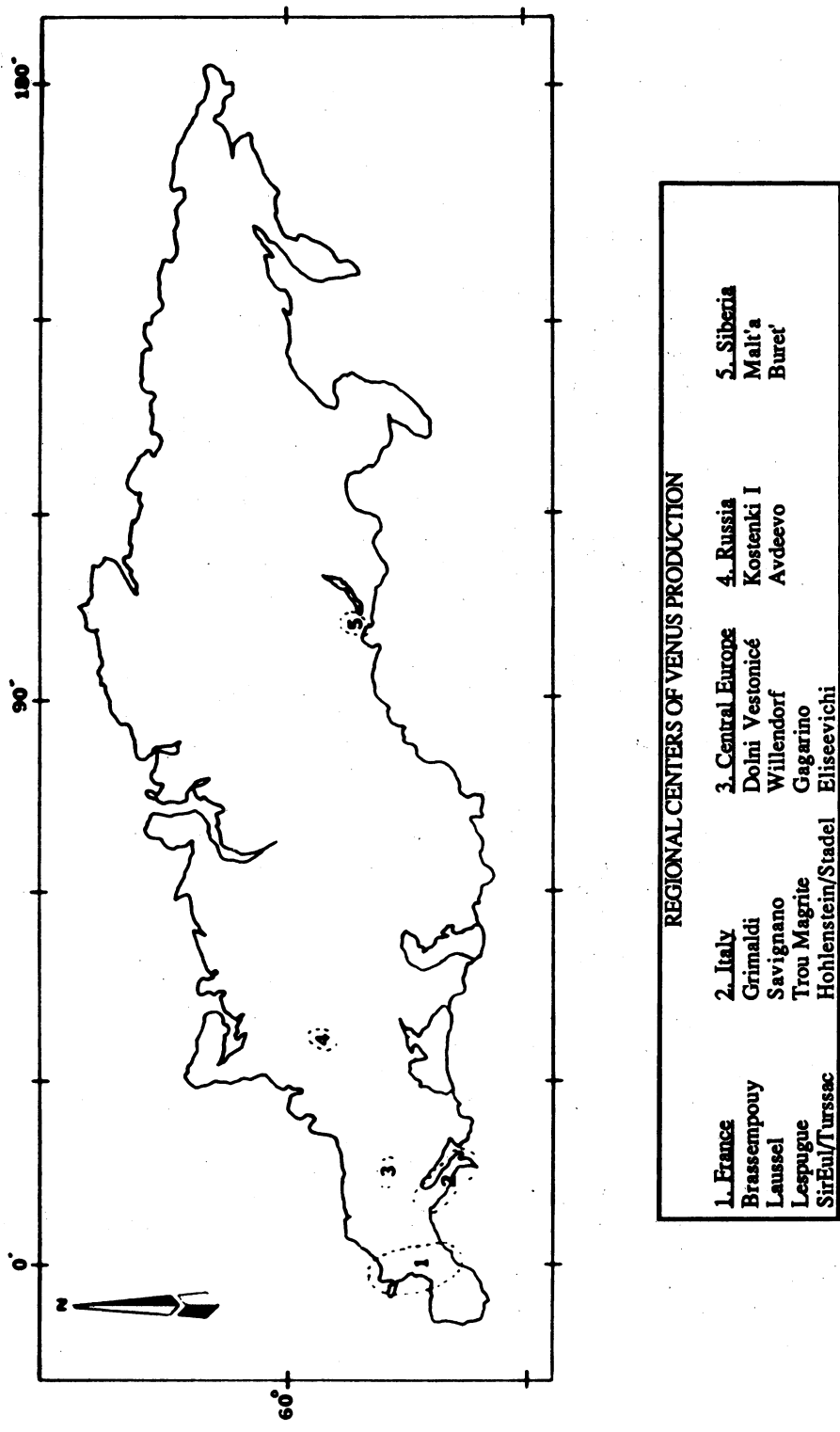


Figure 6: Geographic Map of Venus Figurine Distribution, circa. 28,000 - 25,000 BP.

"Venus" figurines form a class of objects typically described as representations of females. All researchers studying these artifacts begin by pointing out three distinct "facts." First, these prehistoric representations are stylistically similar in design, with sexual attributes emphasized, apparently at the expense of hands, feet, and facial features (Figure 5). Second, they appear in the archaeological record for a relatively brief period of time, confined primarily to the early Upper Palaeolithic, circa. 29,000 to 23,000 B.P. (Delporte 1979). And third, they have an extremely broad east-west geographic distribution, extending from southwestern France all the way into European Russia and Siberia (Figure 6).

MODEL # 1: Prehistoric Barbie Dolls

A) In 1978 Desmond Collins and John Onians proposed that these figurines were, in essence, representations of female biology for the sake of male pleasure and education (Collins and Onians 1978). In describing the material nature of these artifacts the authors state: "The whole figures are shown in the round or in high relief and so respond to the palm of the hand in much the same way as would the buttocks or breasts of a real woman" (Collins and Onians 1978:43). Stressing the sensuous nature of the imagery the authors (one an archaeologist, the other an art historian) concluded that the objects must have been made by men.

After proposing a literal reading of the imagery based on a "direct reality for the sense of touch" (Collins and Onians 1978:13), they attempt to move from interpretation to the identification of the artists (*sic*). They suggest that knowing who made these objects helps us to understand why they were made. As with their explanation for the meaning of the animals representations, Collins and Onians propose that the echoes of the hunt and of love-making both point in the direction of adolescent, or adult, males. The pursuit of game animals is usually the business chiefly of that group and *clearly no other group would have such an interest in the female body* (Collins and Onians 1978:14, emphasis mine).

They close their analysis with these thoughts:

This enables us to understand how our ancestors 30,000 years ago may have imagined female genitals warming to their fingertips as they touched pieces of limestone ... [Collins and Onians 1978:17].

B) A second interpretation, quite similar in fact to that of Collins and Onians, suggests that:

the bulging Venus figurines with enormous buttocks and pendulous breasts, along with vulva drawn on the cave walls were undoubtedly male art creations, for themselves or for other men ... the drawing or carvings were made, touched, carved, and fondled by men [Guthrie 1984:62-63].

Of importance to my discussion are the various lines of reasoning employed in developing this unusually explicit account. Figure 7 is taken from the front of the Institute de Paléontologie Humaine in Paris, built between 1915 and 1920, and re-presents a most curious simulacrum. It depicts a twentieth century !Kung San man "creating" the Venus of Lausseau! But more problematically still, Figure 8 quite graphically illustrates a major source of inspiration for Guthrie's 1984 analysis, quoted above. Note well the sources from which the modern drawings originate - Playboy magazine!

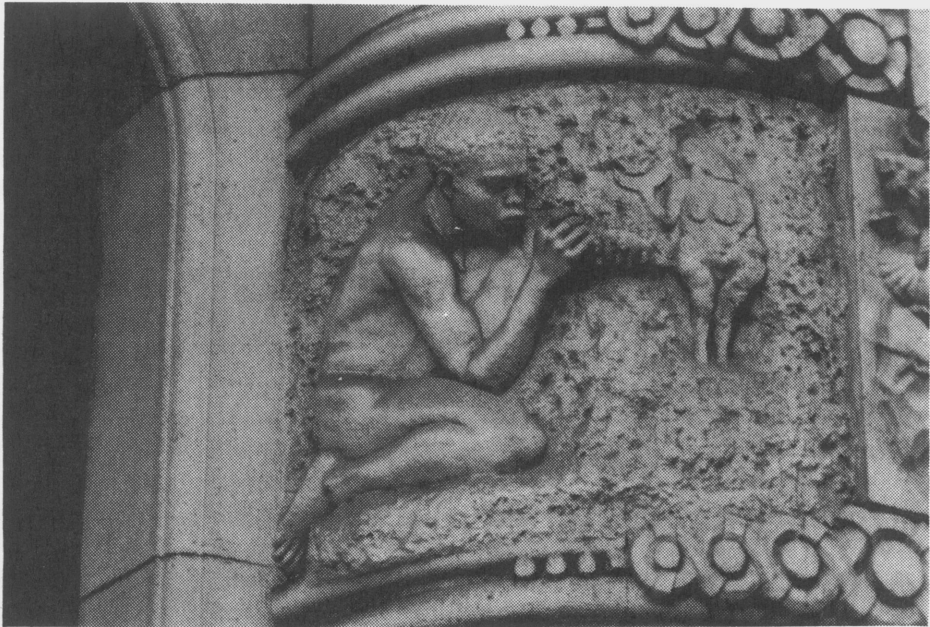


Figure 7: Taking Simulacra a Little Too Far? A 20th century !Kung San "artist" creating the prehistoric Venus of Laussel. From the edifice of the Institute de Paléontologie Humaine in Paris, circa. 1920. Photo: M-A Dobres.

C) Along similar lines, Eaton (1978, 1979) has suggested that these representations of females were actually trophies depicting acts of rape, kidnap, or possibly murder. "Whether the females were raped, stolen, or killed, they appear to represent brave [sic] acts among males of a group and would qualify them as trophies." The account goes on to suggest that trophy-hoarding behavior among males could also explain the origins of rape. The sociobiological explanation Eaton conjures up to account for these practices - that by brandishing trophies among one's peers a male could gain social prestige and thereby confer upon himself some sort of adaptive advantage (with the very same females who were subject to these "brave" acts) - strains the limits of tolerance.

Model #2: Barbie Dolls as Political Pawns

In contrast to the above literal readings of the imagery in question, Gamble (1982) proposed a far more palatable account — palatable in part because of its more neutral language and more distanced and scientifically detached treatment of the imagery in question. Gamble "contextualizes" his analysis explicitly in terms of a behavioral response to a stressful period of significant climatic change occurring across the Eurasian continent during this time period. Gamble's analysis commences with a basic adaptationist premise that "art appeared in times of upheaval" (Pfeiffer 1982:40; see also Jochim 1983). He argues that these stylistically similar figurines are best seen as part of a "system of portable visual display items" that contained symbolic information concerning group identity. As such, he argues that they "somehow" figured into exchange and mating alliances conducted over vast geographic distances. "The elaboration of material culture as a system of information exchange permitted prehistoric

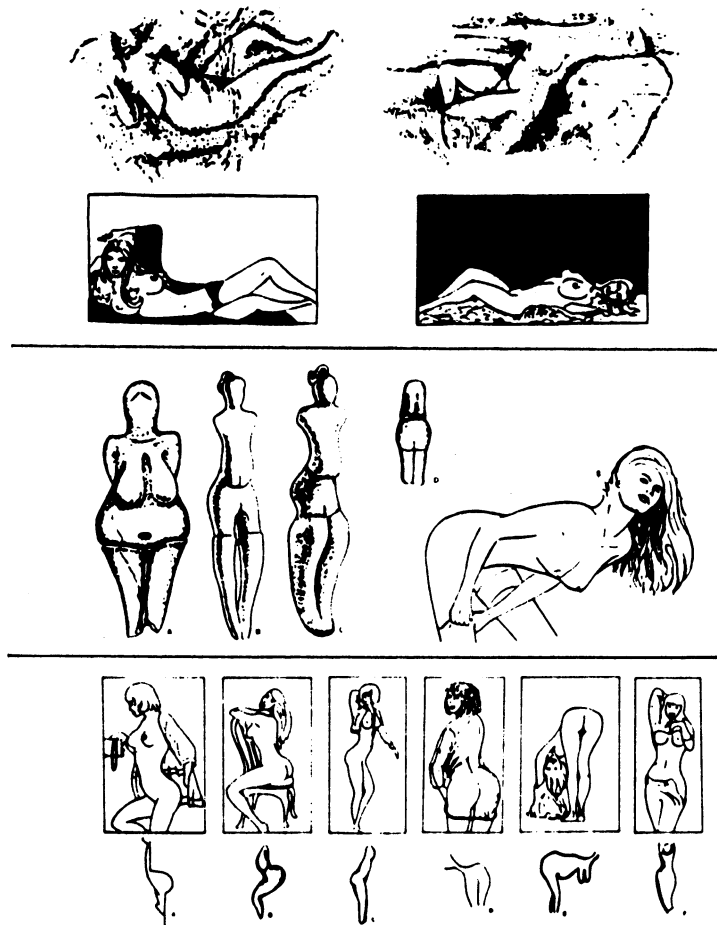


Figure 8: Why the Source of Inspiration for Interpretive Theories Matters. Guthrie's 1984 analysis of the style and possible functions of prehistoric renderings of female imagery. The top comparison includes the following description: "Two reclining female figurines from La Madelaine compared to two reclining spread-leg erotic postures assumed by models in Playboy magazine." The middle comparison is explained this way: "Partially dressed women play an important part in erotic art. The boots or stockings on a nude figure are seen from several different times and distant cultures." The figure "A" on the left is from Dolni Vestonice, the one far to the right is from Playboy. And the bottom comparison is considered thus, "When compared with erotica postures assumed by models in erotic art publications like Playboy, the women in Palaeolithic art seem to be quite similar." (Reproduced with the kind permission of the author: Guthrie, R.D. [1984] "Ethological Observations from Palaeolithic Art." *La Contribution de la Zoologie et de l'Ethologie à l'Interprétation de l'Art des Peuples Chasseurs Préhistoriques*, edited by H-G. Bandi, W. Huber, M-R. Sauter, and B. Sitter. pp. 35-74. Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse: Saint-Paul Fribourg Suisse.)

hunter/gatherer groups to remain in areas that previously they would have had to abandon because of the difficulty of maintaining population at sufficient densities to allow successful interaction to take place" (Gamble 1982:103).

While Barbie Doll models characteristically have an answer for everything: what the imagery meant, who made it, and why, Gamble never satisfactorily addresses what the symbolically-encoded information might have been, who might have been involved in manufacturing the objects, or under what social circumstance they were "used."

Discussion

Having now broadly outlined the main points of each account I should like to highlight what I identify as some unstated themes common to them, and consider why these commonalities appear in each and every account.

In each case the figurines are treated as objects, devoid of spatial and cultural specificity. In classic inductivist methodology each account begins with the objects themselves, works through their material patterning, and then moves on to explain their possible prehistoric significance vis-à-vis some larger explanatory framework. The most obvious cases, of course, are the interpretations that focus on the formal aesthetic attributes involved - the sexual traits - assuming, once again, that form is the key to accessing original meaning and function. Gamble, on the other hand distances himself from this material dimension - that they appear to be depictions of naked females. I suggest, however, that his continual reference to mating alliances implies something albeit nebulous along the same lines. His use of detached and abstract concepts, such as "mating alliances," "symbolically encoded information," and "successful interaction" deflects us from asking why he believes it is this imagery that related to exchange and mating alliances, and not some other forms of cultural representation.

I suggest that it is neither coincidence nor simply the appeal of these figurines as a "limited data set" that draws researchers to treat female imagery as object. Feminist scholars and feminist activists have long claimed that the objectification of women in our own society is fundamental to prevailing western gender ideology. Central to their case is that the conceptualization of woman as biology, as body parts, and as passive object (that is, the inseparability of signifier and signified) is directly tied to both the devaluation of women in general, and violence perpetuated against them, in particular (Pollock 1987; for another interesting "take" on this issue, see Brooke-Rose 1986).

Why should we assume that these images were meant to be viewed and leered at as in some art gallery or peep show? *Why* should we feel comfortable with the idea of female-astroph? *Why* should we accept that they were there to be "fondled" like prehistoric Barbie dolls with anatomically correct parts? *Why* should we assume that this fondling, this viewing, this production, was by men and for men (Bahn 1989)?⁴ Furthermore, *why* should female figurines be the key item exchanged to forge prehistoric social alliances if not for the implicit and taken-for-granted assumption that not just figurines, but what they represent - women - were being exchanged as well? An orientation that focuses on women as cultural commodities has been around a long time and forms the basis of traditional anthropological theory concerned with kinship systems and primitive exchange (as discussed in Goody 1976; Lévi-Strauss 1949; Mauss 1924; Meillassoux 1981). My point is that Gamble's assumptions and the anthropological theory upon which he premises his account is itself male-centered (e.g., Etienne and Leacock 1980; Hartmann 1981; Leacock 1972; among others), in very much the

same way as the other more offensive accounts proposed by Collins and Onians, Guthrie, and Eaton.

What indeed compels us to accept that female/woman is actually represented at all, much less that "she" signifies one thing - biological sex (e.g., see Rice 1981)?⁵

More than being male-centered, these reconstructions of prehistoric life are disturbingly presentist and overtly heterocentric in orientation. As such they covertly mask the ways that modern western gender constructs are imposed onto the deep past. Through the articulation of these models the present, our present, looks inevitable - natural - because the past has been simulated into some sort of direct precedent for modern conditions (after Leone 1982:750; see also Conkey and Williams 1991). *Re-constru-(ct)ing* the past in this way has the effect of legitimating prevailing gender relations and gender ideologies, especially those most insidious and dangerous to society as a whole - such as a tolerance for rape and other forms of violence against women. *Post hoc* argumentation of this kind lends an air of "inherent naturalism" to the treatment of women-as-objects of men's pleasure and men's power because in effect it says: "Hey, this is natural, this is the way it has always been, it's in our blood. It's our adaptive destiny." The teleological reasoning involved here is, of course, the pernicious dimension of sociobiology that feminist scholars find so problematic and dangerous (as for example in Lovejoy 1981; Symons 1980; for a cogent feminist critique of sociobiology see Bleier 1984, 1988, and Hrdy 1988, among others).

But even if one has sound anthropological reasons for believing that heterosexuality was the prevailing or only form of gender relations during this period of prehistory - and just because heterosexual sex produces offspring does not necessitate heterosexual behavior in all things - that still does not account for the active:passive dichotomy built into both the prehistoric Barbie Doll model and Gamble's exchange-alliance model. The passive role played by female imagery in these simulacra - as objects representing women for men's use - replicates the active:passive duality of most theories concerning prehistoric men and women. One need only browse through *Time Life Books* and *National Geographic*, with which most of us grew up, to see a curious pattern. Although some 100,000 years of human evolution is depicted, men are re-presented "in the act," they are characteristically presented standing, lifting, hunting, leading - while women invariably sit, sew, and tend children. One could also point out in these reconstructions that as one approaches "Us" in time, skin color noticeably lightens (see especially the *enlightening* discussion by Conkey and Williams 1991). Once again, some things change - others do not.

Conclusion

I have chosen these particular explanations of Venus figurines to make a point, and I will not belabor it further. Instead, I should like to take these last few paragraphs to conclude with some brief suggestions for modifying the nature of our interpretive discourse, and to suggest ways we might confront what I hope you will agree is problematic about research as it now stands.

Remembering that a fundamental approach has entailed focusing on the imagery as an object in isolation, we would do well to recall that prehistoric images painted on cave walls, etched into stone, shaped out of antler, carved into bone, and incised on teeth, were part of an entire cultural repertoire of actions and meanings. To separate these objects from their meaningful prehistoric social contexts and to consider them by what we believe are universal aesthetic principles - to call them art in the first place - is to strip away any possibility of

approximating the polysemic dimensions these images may have evoked for their makers (Davis 1984:18-19, 1985:7; Moore 1986:73-90).

In this view I take my departure from social theorists Ricoeur (1971) and Bourdieu (1977), anthropologists Geertz (1973) and Moore (1986), and archaeologists Hodder (1982, 1986) and Conkey (1982, 1983, 1989a). To paraphrase their combined view and apply it to material dimensions of social behavior, objects do not have inherent meanings divorced from their historically specific contexts of production and use. Bourdieu (1984:2) most succinctly makes the point when he argues that "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possess the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded." I suggest that the abstract study of form, shape, texture, "composition," and style cannot by itself provide us this code (Davis 1989:186; Lewis-Williams 1984). Material culture takes on its meanings in and through social action - praxis. If we hope to access prehistoric cultural logic, and there are methodologies available for doing so, we need to approach prehistoric imagery not as art nor solely as objects. These were cultural representations, material dimensions of social action and interaction, and it was only in and through social practice that they came to be meaningful, that is, to be full of meaning. This point has, in fact, been argued time and time again. To put it in more general terms, an understanding of material cultural representations can come only from the particular contexts of time, space, and social action (Hodder 1986, *in passim*) and not from abstract notions of adaptation, reproductive success, or other broad behavioral sociocultural phenomena (Conkey 1983, 1990:12-13).

For example, if we were to reference the site-specific behavioral and cultural contexts in which the social labor that produced these images took place, we would be in a better position to consider artifacts not as end-products nor solely as functional objects related to macroscale adaptive behaviors. Instead, we could consider them as material dimensions of strategies of social relations, and engendered social relations at that. We can begin to approximate prehistoric thought and intention through a relational understanding, that is, by focusing on material production as social strategy undertaken as it was by women and men, young and old, and not by focusing sole attention on the objects themselves. I therefore propose that to access prehistoric signification we begin our inquiry with a materialist focus, one that highlights the meanings of objects as contingent on the social relations of production involved in their manufacture and use (Marx and Engels [1970:42], or more recently in the ideas put forth by Johnson [1990], Lemmonier [1983, 1990], and Davis [1984:28, 1985:7], among many others).⁶

Yet even this is not enough. This perspective necessitates that we develop and employ a critical and sensitive awareness of the subtle ways in which our own gender constructs, embedded as they are within a broader Euro-American "world view," become embedded in our texts. Fundamental ideological constructs such as gender serve a purpose in establishing the first-stage parameters of analysis. They should not, however, remain immune to critical inquiry. Only through self-reflection, such as the one presented here, can we continue to legitimately and fruitfully propose interpretations of prehistoric social life.

If texts along with metaphors serve as cultural ideology (Preziosi 1982), then my critical reading of these simulacra serves to expose the mask of Western gender ideology that has operated in re-constru(ct)ing prehistoric life. In doing so I hope it has been possible to inaugurate a new set of questions, as one way to avoid long-existing paradigmatic biases that have been shown to be inherently exclusionary. Instead of asking "what did it mean? how was it used? who used it?", we might try asking "how did the social production of this object

contribute to its meanings and uses?"; "how were these full-of-meaning objects part of the way in which people made sense of and organized their lives?"; "what other activities were taking place where these images were found that can inform us as to social contexts?" Posing the questions in this way permits us a more dialectical methodology, and one that keeps both the specific contexts of social action and material production foregrounded (after Moore 1986).

For the time being I reserve labeling this outline of a perspective but suggest that as a methodology for accessing prehistoric thought and prehistoric intention, it can provide at least one possible path out of the current construction of self-fulfilling and self-legitimizing simulacra.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Berkeley Symposium: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Visual Imagery, March 3-4, 1990, University of California-Berkeley. I wish to thank Rainer Mack for his many hours of discussion and help in clarifying that presentation. Since that time I have benefited from fruitful conversations with Meg Conkey and Kathleen Bolen as well as with various participants of "The Goddess" seminar, for which I am grateful. Justin Hyland was particularly helpful in converting the oral version to its present written form. However, the particular configuration of ideas presented here, and therefore any faults, remain mine alone.
2. In an earlier consideration of operative paradigms in current archaeological research (Dobres 1988) I tried to demonstrate that the initial gynocentric (i.e., "remedial") response to male-centered models of prehistory, in fact, unknowingly reproduced many of the same fundamental premises I discuss here as explicitly male-centered. In point of fact, a more accurate label for this phenomenon might be "sexist," thereby encompassing the commonalities underlying both androcentric and gynocentric interpretations, and leaving room for the analysis of the various different threads of sexist story-telling in archaeology. Clearly, replacing one bias with another is no solution to the problems discussed here.
3. For an extended analysis of the reasons for so long resisting the true antiquity of prehistoric image-making see Bahn (in press).
4. A fascinating follow-up question could be posed: Why is it when we find those rare phallic-like prehistoric representations (e.g., Abramova 1967) we immediately think of social significance - that the meanings and power supposedly residing in these monuments of maleness were invoked at the societal level? Why is it never seriously proposed that these objects were made by and for women (or more unthinkable still, by and for men)? Evolutionary scenarios do not provide room for homosexual social expression except in the most peripheral and excruciatingly complex and implausible ways.
5. For an especially cogent discussion of the ways that modern so-called "simple societies" construct "Woman" see Collier and Rosaldo (1981). They make it clear that while "woman" comes to mean several related things in brideservice societies, the one thing NOT signified is Woman-as-biology, Woman-as-body parts, as in industrial societies such as our own.
6. Since submitting this paper for publication I have further explored the methodological and epistemological problems historically entailed in the study of Venus figurines (Dobres in press), by specifically outlining arguments that I think compel us to focus on the technological activities involved in their production, rather than studying them solely as end-products. My basic argument in that essay is that material production activities are an important locus of (prehistoric) cultural meaning and intention. By focusing our attention on the generative processes involved in Venus figurine production we may better come to

understand how they came to be meaningful, while at the same time avoiding at least some of the interpretive pitfalls discussed in these pages.

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