

The Figurines of Old Europe

Douglass W. Bailey

San Francisco State University



At the beginning of the fifth millennium BC, in a village in what is now northeastern Romania, near the modern town of Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, a woman (or a man, it is impossible to tell which) worked balls and slabs of soft clay into a series of small human shapes and tiny chairs. The resulting set of anthropomorphic figurines and furniture is one of the world's most extraordinary assemblages of prehistoric artifacts (fig. 5-1).¹ There are more than twenty figurines and more than a dozen chairs in the group. Twelve large and nine smaller figurines are included, though the term *large* is perhaps confusing as none of the objects is taller than 8.6 centimeters, and thus each of them sits very comfortably in one's hand.

The larger figures have both painted and incised decoration. The painted decoration is red and forms a range of different patterns covering each figure from its ankles up to the shoulders. On some the painted patterns form triangles on the thighs; on others they make up sets of parallel horizontal lines. On a few there is a band of parallel, diagonal lines running around the chest, leaving the rest of the torso empty; on others the entire upper body is covered with parallel lines and curvilinear forms.

Faces are marked simply with short horizontal incisions for the eyes, a pinch of clay for the nose, and a small horizontal incision for the mouth. Sets of incised lines delineate toes, and single incised lines separate the legs and mark the tops of the hips. The nine smaller figurines have little, if any, surface decoration: a few incisions to mark features on the face or to delineate the legs from each other. On all but one figurine, there are no arms modeled; the exception has its left arm raised against the body with the hand held against the side of the face, while the other arm is modeled horizontally across the throat and the hand supports the left elbow.

Cutting across all of this variation in size and surface treatment (with reference to which one could, if one wanted, suggest individual identities) is an overwhelming similarity in form. All of the figurines share a common body position and shape: Heads and necks are very thin; hips and thighs are wide and deep; bodies are bent at the waist (at less than ninety degrees) so that they can sit upright, but as a result they appear to be leaning backward. The inclusion of chairs in the Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru set is important. They are very plain, have no legs or surface decoration, and are made in two or maybe three variations (that is, with a square-shaped, open back, or with a two-pronged back). Under the broad backsides of the larger figurines, the chairs fit well but their sizes

Figurine. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Drăgușeni, 4050–3900 BC (Cucuteni A4), MJBT.



suggest that they were not intended for the smaller figurines in the set. It is not difficult to imagine the Pre-Cucuteni people of Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru placing these larger figurines onto the chairs, and perhaps arranging sets of seated figurines into one or several groups of miniature activities, perhaps with the smaller figurines at the feet or even on the laps of the larger, seated ones. There is a similar set of figurines from the site of Isaiia-Balta Popii, comprising twenty-one figurines (twelve large, eight small, and one tiny), thirteen chairs, and forty-two cylindrical or round clay beads (fig. 5-2).²

The Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru figurine set has been interpreted as a cult complex, and the most accessible English-language account calls it “The Council of the Goddess.”³ Similar terms and explanations are offered in the original Romanian reports. Within that primary interpretation, the two-pronged chair is described as a “horned throne of the fertility cult” (its prongs interpreted as symbols of the bull and thus the cult of fertility). This horned throne is assigned to the figurine with hands held to the face, who is designated as the “main goddess,” representing a

5-1. (opposite). Set of twenty-one figurines and thirteen chairs. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, 4900–4750 BC (Pre-Cucuteni II), CMJMPN.

5-2. (above). Set of twenty-one figurines, thirteen chairs, and askos. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Isaiia-Balta Popii, 4700–4500 BC (Pre-Cucuteni III), UAIC.



woman who is “dignified,” who has borne many children, and whose appearance suggests a “magic, ritual function.” Other figurines have been given identities based on particular features of their faces or bodies: One with protruding “firm” breasts, a small head, and a wide open mouth suggests “evil”; another, slimmer than the rest, also with “firm” breasts but with a round mouth, is called the “orant” (because its pose recalls gestures made during prayer). The argument runs that the other chairs are thrones as well, and their varying forms are linked to the particular characters represented by the specific figurines for whom the chairs were made. The excavators contend that the Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru set of figurines and chairs is part of the religious pantheon of the Pre-Cucuteni population.

Both the Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru and the Isaiia-Balta Popii sets of figurines were discovered inside pottery vessels. At Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, the container was left in a building that the archaeologists have identified as a sanctuary destroyed by fire. In addition to the remarkably similar sets of figurines from these two sites, there are groups of similar figurines from other sites in the region. A house from the village site of Scânteia contained seventy-five figurines (fig. 5-3); a pit from the same site held twenty-four⁴; a bowl from Dumești held twelve (figs. 5-4a-b); a model house from Ghelăiești held seven (fig. 5-5); and one house, called a “temple,” from the site of Sabatinovka in Ukraine, produced thirty-two figurines. In addition there are other sites across southeastern Europe, such as at Ovcharovo in northeastern Bulgaria or Platia Magoula Zarkou in northern Greece, where sets of figurines, furniture, or buildings have been uncovered.

I am drawn to these figurines, those from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru as well as the others, and feel a deep connection with them, but I am not convinced that those long-accepted interpretations, so easily couched in ritual and ceremony, religion and divinity, are legitimate or acceptable in a modern archaeology of the prehistoric past. At a most basic level, these objects challenge me: I want to know what they were used for and what they meant to the people who saw them, who held them, who sat the little bodies on the little chairs. I want to know what roles the objects may have played in the particular day-to-day lives of the people who lived in the community (Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru,

for example) in which they were used. Finally, I want to know how they fit into the broader level of regional and transregional patterns of behavior.

Interpreting the Figurines

Drafting these questions is easier than providing any immediate and worthwhile answers. One could, of course, join the excavators of Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru and quickly find answers in the conventional understanding of prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines as goddesses and gods of cults and religions, or of ceremonies of fertility and fecundity. This indeed is how the late and widely followed scholar Marija Gimbutas scripted her responses to very similar questions. In a series of influential books, she laid out sweeping interpretations on a level that encompassed not only countries and continents, but even the very essence of being human.⁵ For Gimbutas the answers were clear: Figurines were representations of divinities or were objects used in special ceremonies of ritual significance, most likely focused on cults of reproduction and death (of plants, animals, and people). For example, flat white female figurines made of bone, with perforated ears perhaps for the attachment of copper rings, are frequently found in the remains of settlements of the Gumelnița culture in southern Romania (fig. 5-6); Gimbutas designated these figures as the White Goddess of Death.⁶ But there is no independent evidence suggesting that the figurines were involved in death rituals.

In large part, Gimbutas’ arguments were influential because they were appealing and easy to understand, because she held a significant position at a major research university (the University of California, Los Angeles), and because they appeared in large, glossy volumes produced by mainstream publishers. But as the basis for her arguments, Gimbutas offered little more than anecdotal stories of presumed Copper Age beliefs, based on broad analogies with the documented beliefs and rituals of quite different people who lived thousands of years after the Copper Age. To support her identification of the White Goddess of Death, for example, she invoked analogies with a death goddess from Lithuanian folklore. There was little logical, rational, or scientific reasoning for her conclusions, and independent evidence from the archaeological contexts of discovery did not in fact confirm them.

Over the past decade or so, intense research carried out by a number of scholars working independently has transformed the way in which figurines are studied and interpreted.⁷ Even before Gimbutas began to publish books on goddess rituals in Old Europe, some investigators questioned the reality of mother-goddess interpretations.⁸ Some of the most important more recent advances have resulted from highly detailed analyses of individual figurines and the patterns with which their body surfaces were decorated (fig. 5-7), such as the work on Bulgarian examples by Peter Biehl.⁹ His painstaking study suggested that figurines from the Sălcuța-Krividol culture were part of communities’ transformative acts, through which people transcended the experience and capabilities of being human. In a recent publication, I have examined the broader cognitive frame within which figurines operated, including the role that visual culture (such as representations of the body) plays in societies.¹⁰

At yet another level, new excavations and approaches have transformed our understanding of the prehistoric societies in which these types of objects were made, used, and discarded.¹¹ Rigorous syntheses and interpretive work have made important contributions based on multidisciplinary excavations of key sites such as Selevac and Opovo in Serbia¹² and Sitagroi in Greece.¹³ At Opovo, a settlement of the Vinča culture, a detailed analysis of the precise locations of figurines and figurine fragments under house foundations, on house floors, and in trash pits raised new questions about how figurines were used (fig. 5-8).¹⁴ The amount and quality of work over the past two decades are significant, and the consequences to our understanding of figurines are important.

Without question, it is no longer acceptable for us to reconstruct life in these early agricultural villages as a life-threatening struggle to survive and wrest an uncertain living from the soil and the farmyard. Indeed there is no longer any support for the idea that the Neolithic settled agricultural life, in which people planted wheat and barley and bred cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats, was easier than a lifestyle based on hunting, gathering, fishing, and foraging. As there was no need for these Neolithic farmers to appeal for divine assistance in gaining their livelihood from cultivation and animal breeding, we have recognized that

5-3. Figurine. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Scânteia, 4500–3900 BC (Cucuteni A), IAI.



5-4a. Set of twelve figurines. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Dumești, 4200–4050 bc (Cucuteni A3), MJSMVS.

5-4b. Figurine from the set.



5-5. Architectural model with seven figurines. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Ghelăiești, 3700–3500 BC (Cucuteni B1), CMJMPN.

5-6. Female figurine. Bone, Gumelnița, Vitănești, 4600–3900 BC, MJITR.

5-7. Female figurine. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Trușești, 4200–4050 BC (Cucuteni A3), MNIR.

5-8. Figurine. Fired clay, Vinča, Liubcova, 5000–4500 BC (Late Vinča), MBM.

there is no scientific support for the assumption that Neolithic and Copper Age religion was centered on cults of agricultural fertility. One of the most famous human images in European archaeology, a sitting ceramic figurine from the Hamangia culture popularly known as “The Thinker” (fig. 5-9), was dubbed a Vegetation God, but we have no independent archaeological evidence that this designation is even close to being accurate. In fact the figurine was found in a cemetery. As in any discipline, the more work that is carried out in a rigorous manner, the less persuasive are traditional ideals and interpretations. The study of Neolithic and Copper Age figurines is a prime example of this type of academic progress.

A New Understanding

It is one thing (and not an entirely brave or singularly worthwhile undertaking) to reveal the errors in traditional interpretations of Neolithic southeastern European figurines. It is quite another to produce a better understanding of those same objects. In a longer discussion presented elsewhere, I have offered one possibility.¹⁵ At the core of this new understanding, I redefined figurines in terms of what I recognize as their fundamental characteristics: They are miniature, they are representational, and they depict the human form. In this sense, I made no distinction among prehistoric, ancient, or modern miniature, anthropomorphic representations. I assumed (as is justified by our knowledge of human evolution) that the ability to make, use, and understand symbolic objects such as figurines is an ability that is shared by all modern humans and thus is a capability that connects you, me, Neolithic men, women, and children, and the Paleolithic painters of caves.

In my work on the figurines of southeastern Europe from the Neolithic and Copper Age (6500–3500 cal. BC), I sought to understand what it was about these objects that would have made them succeed in their past functions (regardless of whether they were used as votives, toys, portraits, or the representation of divinities). In addition, I tried to understand what made them attractive to us in the present as objects for sale at auction, as material appropriate for exhibition in a museum, or as subjects for an academic essay such as the one that you are reading. Investigating a wide range of modern and historical

objects that were miniature, I was intrigued to learn that contemporary psychological studies have shown that something very odd happens to the human mind when one handles or plays with miniature objects. Most simply put, when we focus our attention on miniature objects, we enter another world, one in which our perception of time is altered and in which our abilities of concentration are affected. In a well-known set of experiments, the psychologist Alton Delong showed that when human subjects were asked to imagine themselves in a world where everything was on a much smaller scale than everyday reality, or when they engaged in activities in smaller than normal environments, they thought that time had passed more quickly than in fact it had and they performed better in tasks requiring mental agility.¹⁶ Importantly, the subjects of these studies were not conscious of their altered experience of time or concentration.

By following this line of argument—in other words, that things made miniature affect the ways in which people experience the world—I began to see Neolithic figurines, like those from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, in a new light. When the people of that Pre-Cucuteni community looked at their figurines, and when they placed the little bodies onto the little chairs, arranging (and rearranging) them into different scenes and settings, they were entering other worlds. It is entirely possible that these other worlds were spiritual, though I am not convinced that they were of the type that either Gimbutas or the excavators of Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru imagined. It is much more probable that the people who held these objects in their hands, who touched and saw them in their daily activities, were affected in other ways, most likely at a deeper, subconscious level. To understand these interactions and the stimulations effected by the miniature representations of bodies, we need to understand the world in which these people lived.

Life and Death in Old Europe

What do we know of how the people of Old Europe lived their lives? One clear inference that seems well supported by the evidence is that people had particular and strong ideas about community membership. It is apparent from the excavations of their sites that the inhabitants perceived discrete private and public areas, and identified who belonged where and with whom, and who did not belong.



5-9. “The Thinker” from Cernavodă and female figurine. Fired clay, Hamangia, Cernavodă, 5000–4600 BC, MNIR.

Ditches and banks marked out settlement spaces, villages were placed on terrace edges, and features of the natural topography were used to define places of the living. The intentional arrangement of houses and buildings into unambiguously bounded villages reinforced social divisions across the landscape that would have contributed to the emergence of distinctions among groups of people, to the reinforcement of a sense of group membership, and to an equivalent sense of social exclusion.

In some villages, buildings were constructed along obvious patterns, with structures aligned in rows or in circles; in others there was less concern for order or planning. Regardless of the details of building arrangement, one infers a sense of residential coherence at these sites, of living, working, sleeping, and eating within the physically bounded settlement in a shared place that was delineated from the surrounding natural and social worlds. At a reduced scale, within these settlements smaller groups of people lived and worked together and may well have associated more regularly with some groups (for example, within households) than with others.

While the record of Cucuteni settlement is manifest, there is little evidence for funeral rituals. Articulated skeletons are rarely found: Less than a dozen Cucuteni sites have produced full skeletons. Occasionally, individual crania and fragments of skulls were buried under house floors, but these finds are few in number and probably represent special rituals. The majority of human remains are isolated, disarticulated bones found scattered in villages, and even these cannot account for anything but a tiny proportion of the population. In other contemporary Neolithic and Copper Age communities in southeastern Europe, funerals and graves were much more in evidence, and differences in grave wealth allow archaeologists to draw inferences about social structure and status (see the article by Vladimir Slavchev in this volume), but in the Pre-Cucuteni and Cucuteni communities there simply is not enough material to support similar conclusions.

The absence of burials in the Cucuteni tradition is perplexing. One is left without a clear picture of social structure, information about relationships among people, evidence of social hierarchies, or other aspects of social

identity that an archaeologist often can gain from analyses of burials. Thus we are forced to search further for the role that might have been played by figurines in their (newly recognized) status as the main representations of human bodies within Pre-Cucuteni and Cucuteni society. The ways in which people perceive and depict the human form within different prehistoric cultures is of vital importance because the human body is one of the most potent components within a community's creation and manipulation of identity. Especially important are the ways in which the body (or more often, its representation, as in the form of a figurine) is part of the everyday activities of peoples' lives, from the special and ceremonial to the more frequent and more mundane. The repeated use of body representations is a central part of those subconscious processes through which a group establishes, slowly and over time, shared ideals of who belongs to one's group and who does not. The classic example from our modern western world is the way in which dolls such as Barbie have had an unintentional effect on how young women have understood their bodies and their positions within industrialized western societies.

The Meaning of Figurines

But how does any of this help us to understand objects like the figurines from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, Isaiia, and Dumești, or the thousands of other figurines from this period? To begin, let us recognize that these figures were everyday objects that people saw, handled, played with, worshipped, or cursed in their daily existence. From this perspective, it does not matter precisely how each figure (or an entire set) was used. Rather, the function of these objects is to be found at a deeper level of reality, upon which the community constructed and maintained a sense of who one was, what one should look like, and how one was distinct from others.

When we look again at the almost identical sets of figurines from Isaiia and Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, what do we see and what do we think? If we lived at these sites in Pre-Cucuteni times, and if we handled the figurines, touched them, and walked past them every day, how would their shape and decoration have affected our understanding of the world around us and our place within it? Most observers would accept that the roles played by figurines

in these societies were extraordinarily important. The objects were part of a world in which there were no special social performances centered on the burial of the deceased, and thus a world where there were none of the loud public statements of individual identities and group cohesion that funerals amplified in Neolithic southeastern Europe. How would these figurines and the many others like them have affected the ways that people perceived themselves and their relationships with the people with whom they lived, spoke, ate, and slept? What roles might figurines have played as base lines against which perceptions of others emerged and were consolidated? I contend that none of the thinking that was stimulated by these figurines and these little chairs six thousand years ago (and which is stimulated today) can be contained in the reconstruction of a specific cult or religion or pantheon or deity. Instead, the effects that these objects had were much more subtle, the result of long accumulations of visual and tactile stimulations—accumulations of experiences through which people perceived their appropriate appearance within their communities.

The importance of these objects, therefore, is the way in which they contributed to a shared understanding of group identity; they stated without words, but in always present visual and tactile expression, “this is us.” While these figurines were powerful objects, that power rested not in any specific reference to the divine, but rather in their condition as miniature objects, and the ways that miniature objects open up the minds of the people who hold and see them, facilitating deep-seated understandings of what is appropriate in terms of body appearance and membership within a group. Played out across the wider contemporary cultural landscapes of other regions in southeastern and central Europe, one of the most striking impressions created by the figurines of this period is the diversity of representations of the body—the ways in which bodies appear differently in each distinct regional (or chronologically successive) group. Each group maintained an internal coherence in body shape or decoration; each group was distinct from the others.



Notes

- 1 Mantu, C.-M., and G. Dumitroaia, "Catalogue," in *Cucuteni: The Last Great Chalcolithic Civilization of Europe*, ed. Mantu, Dumitroaia, and A. Tsaravopoulos (Thessaloniki: Athena, 1997): 179–81.
- 2 Ursulescu, N., V. Merlan, and F. Tencariu, "Isaiia, com. Răducăneni, jud. Iași," in *Cronica Cercetărilor Arheologice, Campania 2000* (București: CIMeC–Institutul de Memorie Culturală, 2001): 110–11; Ursulescu, N., "Dovezi ale unei simbolistici a numerelor în cultura Pre-Cucuteni," *Memoria Antiquitatis* 22 (2001): 51–69; Ursulescu, N., V. Merlan, F. Tencariu, and M. Văleanu, "Isaiia, com. Răducăneni, jud. Iași," in *Cronica Cercetărilor Arheologice, Campania 2002* (București: CIMeC–Institutul de Memorie Culturală, 2003): 158–59.
- 3 Mantu and Dumitroaia, "Catalogue" (1997).
- 4 Mantu, C.-M., "Plastica antropomorfă a așezării Cucuteni A3 de la Șcințea," *Arheologia Moldovei* 16 (1993): 51–67.
- 5 Gimbutas, M., *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: Myths and Cult Images* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982); Gimbutas, M., *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Gimbutas, M., and M.R. Dexter, *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 6 Gimbutas, *Civilization of the Goddess* (1991): 240.
- 7 Tringham, R., and M. Conkey, "Rethinking Figurines: A Critical View from Archaeology of Gimbutas, the 'Goddess' and Popular Culture," in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*, ed. L. Goodison and C. Morris (London: British Museum Press, 1998): 22–45; Bailey, D.W., *Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 8 Ucko, P., *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete with Comparative Material from the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece* (London: Szmidla, 1968).
- 9 Biehl, P., "Symbolic Communication Systems: Symbols on Anthropomorphic Figurines in Neolithic and Chalcolithic Southeast Europe," *Journal of European Archaeology* 4 (1996): 153–76; Biehl, P., *Studien zum Symbolgut des Neolithikums und der Kupferzeit in Südosteuropa* (Saarbrücken: Rudolf Habelt, 2003).
- 10 Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines* (2005).
- 11 Whittle, A., *Europe in the Neolithic: The Creation of New Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bailey, D.W., A. Whittle, and V. Cummings, eds., *(Un)settling the Neolithic* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2005); Bailey, D.W., A. Whittle, and D. Hofmann, eds., *Living Well Together: Sedentism and Mobility in the Balkan Neolithic* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008).
- 12 Tringham, R., and D. Krstic, eds., *Selevac: A Neolithic Village in Yugoslavia* (Los Angeles: Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 1990).

13 Renfrew, C., M. Gimbutas, and E. Elster, eds., *Excavations at Sitagroi, a Prehistoric Village in Northeast Greece*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 1986); Elster, E., and C. Renfrew, eds., *The Final Report*, vol. 2, *Prehistoric Sitagroi: Excavations in Northeast Greece, 1968–1970* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2003).

14 Tringham and Conkey, "Rethinking Figurines" (1998).

15 Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines* (2005).

16 Delong, A.J., "Phenomenological Space-Time: Toward an Experiential Relativity," *Science* 213, no. 4508 (August 7, 1981): 681–82; Delong, A.J., "Spatial Scale, Temporal Experience and Information Processing: An Empirical Examination of Experiential Reality," *Man-Environment Systems* 13 (1983): 77–86.

5-10. Back view of figurine from page 112.
